

THE LEGEND OF TAARNA

Adapted by Adam W. Smith



For Gabrielle

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Foreword

To answer the obvious question: why have I written a lengthy story, and developed a web site (<http://www.taarna.net>) about a 35-minute sequence in an animated movie released over twenty years ago? The short answer: love; a deep-felt love, difficult to explain and perhaps irrational. The long answer? Read on.

Heavy Metal was originally released on August 7, 1981, and in several respects was a groundbreaking piece of animation. The movie consists of eight stories linked together by the "Loc-Nar," a glowing sphere, unbounded by time or space, which represents "the sum of all evils." In each story the Loc-Nar demonstrates its capacity for evil, and its malevolent influence and manipulation of human affairs.

Taarna captivated me when I first saw *Heavy Metal* at the impressionable age of seventeen. To some, and perhaps to the majority of those who have reviewed the movie, she is merely an overly endowed sex object in a dominatrix outfit. This conclusion could easily be justified if one considered only the undeniably male, adolescent orientation of *Heavy Metal*, with its liberal dosage of sex, drug use, and rock music. I feel, however, that Taarna cannot fairly be bound to this shallow image. In her I perceive certain qualities which, in my opinion, cause her tale to eclipse all of the others, and make her character

worthy of praise. Hence, perhaps being a lone voice in the wilderness, I have constructed this encomium to Taarna, and herein set out the elements which shape my views.

First, *The Legend of Taarna* was dramatically juxtaposed against the other stories in the film. The humorous aspects of earlier segments, such as "Den," "Captain Sternn," and "So Beautiful, So Dangerous" vanished, and the movie got down to business in a savage conflict between good and evil. The sequence's lack of frivolity dovetailed well with the somber attitude of its main character.

The Loc-Nar's seemingly unstoppable trail of death and destruction climaxed with the devastation of a peaceful city at the beginning of the sequence. By the time this was over, I was primed to see someone who would finally defeat the Loc-Nar. Taarna was the proffered challenger, but her identity was at first concealed.

Initially, all that is seen is a cloaked, human figure riding a bird-like creature across a barren and ever-shifting landscape. This was the second thing that grabbed my attention; the flight sequence, which ends in a spectral, underground temple, simply blew me away. In 1981, no one had ever done anything like it in animation.

Furthermore, Elmer Bernstein's score during this portion of the story is awesomely uplifting. To me, it was spine-tingling, a piece of music that makes you shiver from head to toe. This is most particularly

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true of the driving chorus as Taarna passes through a gargantuan maze of pipes to reach her hidden destination. The images and music combined to evoke an incipient power of goodness and light, promising the advent of something triumphant and unconquerable.

Taarna herself was the third element to which I responded, and was everything that the flight sequence had promised. Emerging from the shadows, the Defender was at last revealed to be not a hero, but a *heroine*. And she was no ordinary heroine, but rather, possessed of a unique kind of upright and noble bearing which is hard to define, and even harder, one might think, to be conveyed through the medium of animation. In looking for parallels one might consider apt Milton's opening description of Adam and Eve from *Paradise Lost*:

Two of far nobler shape erect and tall,
Godlike erect, with native honour clad
In naked majesty seemed lords of all,
And worthy seemed, for in the looks divine
The image of their glorious maker shone,
Truth, Wisdom, sanctitude severe and pure,
Severe but in true filial freedom placed;
Whence true authority in men.

Much of the commentary about *Heavy Metal* has focused on its negative portrayal of women, and rightly so; but Taarna must be set apart from the rest. In marked contrast to the promiscuity of female characters in earlier vignettes, she was portrayed with dignity.

The nobility of Taarna's character did not entail, however, the denial of her femininity. To the contrary, she was quite distinctly a *woman*, and this quality achieved nearly mystical dimensions in the "rotation sequence," the controversial, rotoscoped brainchild of John Bruno. Furthermore, while her beauty could easily have been reduced to prurience, it was instead, in a way that perhaps could only have been achieved through animation, elevated to art by a silent and serious demeanor set to a crystalline, hauntingly evocative soundtrack. The images of Taarna in this part of the sequence are not lustful, but rather provoke, like a fine piece of sculpture, a powerful appreciation for the aesthetic beauty of the human body. While not a connoisseur of animation, I have never seen anything like it, before or since.

This leads to the fourth and most complex element, the one which struck me most powerfully: Taarna's heroism and pathos. Here, at last, stepped forth a solitary individual with a relentless, single-minded determination to destroy the Loc-Nar. She was courageous and not to be trifled with—deadly and possessing a silent, steely resolve. Her intentionality brings to mind a high velocity bullet spinning in a flat trajectory toward its target.

For centuries, men and women alike have been fascinated by the woman warrior. The social and cultural reasons for this merit consideration. Several excellent books have explored the subject, and detailed the lives of women who have fought their way through the pages of history since the time of the

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Amazons. David E. Jones' work, *Women Warriors--A History* is a good example; Antonia Fraser's *The Warrior Queens* is another. What explains the enduring interest in such women? I will hazard a guess.

It seems to be a facet of man's nature to seek domination and control over his environment and other persons. Yet, paradoxically, man will often respect and declare beautiful precisely that which he cannot bring under his power. We are fascinated by sharks: streamlined and powerful, deadly yet beautiful, superior in their watery domain. Or, think of a thoroughbred, muscular and magnificent, galloping through a meadow: we stand in awe; the horse, by its very form, commands love and admiration. Creatures such as these serve to remind us that we are not the measure of all things, and kindle in the contemplative heart an appreciation of the fact that there are immaculate beings in the world which originate from something transcendent; from a Mind which knows and can create Beauty in its most perfect sense. As written by Dio Chrysostom, "For he is indeed the first and most perfect artificer, who has taken as his coadjutor in his art . . . the entire material of the entire universe."

So, in a mysterious but even more wonderful way, it can be with women when spiritual freedom and beauty merge. A woman who is self-assured and independent from a firm grounding in Faith and Love can be infinitely compelling. A man will respect and adore such a woman because he sees in her heart the noble spirit of Man at its most primal and powerful;

perhaps even at its most beautiful. Theseus' love of Antiope in Steven Pressfield's *Last of the Amazons* grasps at this powerful feeling, so strongly felt, yet so hard to define. The Greeks of this story both love and are repulsed by the warrioresses whom Pressfield describes so vividly. "She held, as in a dream, mounted upon Daybreak. I could see the horse's breastplate of ox-hide lapped with bronze. Selene wore no helmet. Feathers of eagle and osprey adorned her hair; her face was painted vermilion and black. She came on the run. My bride, I thought. I longed only to fly to her arms. I saw her elevated axe and heard her war cry. The blood drained to my soles."

As a parochial, midwestern teenager, I was unaware (with the exception of Joan of Arc) of the martial history of women when I saw *The Legend of Taarna*, and had not given much thought to such matters. All I knew was that I saw a woman who was focused entirely on defeating evil, and to accomplish it, died.

This, finally is Taarna's pathos. Her mortality raised her above a mere Amazon and all other heroines of popular culture, for Taarna was not a superhero--far from it. She was touchingly, painfully human, and what occurred to her was not childish or comical: captivity, suffering, wounding, and torture. Finally, she offered herself up for sacrifice, willingly and without hesitation. Stated simply, I found her martyrdom heart-breaking; in it there was something both terrible and beautiful to which I responded. Her unwavering procession to death is why she remains emblazoned on my memory.

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The melding of these qualities into a single, beautiful female remains unique. So powerful was the combination to me that it overbore the fact that Taarna was animated, that she was dressed in a completely unbecoming outfit, and that the Loc-Nar was an obvious linking device. While I know that evil does not manifest itself in the form of glowing green spheres, and that in our own lives the struggle with evil is much more subtle and complex, I remain impressed with Taarna's peculiar blend of virtues. With boldness and courage of heart she took a stand for something, raising in my mind a question well worth reflection: for whom or what would I lay down *my* life? When push comes to shove, do we truly stand firm against Evil?

Some say that *Heavy Metal* caters to a misogynist mindset. I believe that to the contrary, Taarna can only engender an admiration for women, or for any person with the personal qualities which make her character redeemable. In a way, she reaffirms the importance of cultivating beauty not merely on the surface, but within one's own self. As Marcus Aurelius wrote some 18 centuries ago, "If you find in human life anything better than justice, truth, temperance, [and] fortitude, . . . turn to it with all your soul, and enjoy that which you have found to be best. But if nothing appears to you better than the divinity planted within you, . . . give way to nothing else." Thus, although she is only an idea, because of what Taarna stands for--the beauty of the human spirit in the courageous pursuit of justice, and persevering in the face of extreme adversity--she

holds a very special place in my heart. Herein, at the risk of much personal embarrassment, I openly declare my love for her.

Like many things in life, one's view of Taarna will be a product of one's age, experience, and personal perspective. I invite you to look beneath the animator's larger-than-life story of vengeance, forget the skimpy outfit, and see instead a human spirit endowed with the admirable qualities of selflessness and devotion to duty. The story which emerges is timeless, one whose historical antecedents are very real and extend down through the centuries to the present day: the power of *one person*, committed in faith and love, to change the world. Perhaps it is foolish to ascribe importance to a 30-minute animated sequence in *Heavy Metal*. But in this age of darkness and nihilism, I believe virtue and beauty should be credited wherever found, even in the most unusual places. In St. Paul's words, "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." PHILIPPIANS 4:8. I find this a fitting description for Taarna, and I hope that you will find her story edifying, uplifting, and a source of inspiration as I did 27 years ago, and still do today.

“Her face was beauty beyond beauty. The embodiment of truth as beauty. And it was human. So human it made the heart break with love and reverence and awe. I perceived without words that this alone was real which I beheld now, not the world we see beneath the sun. And more: that this beauty existed here, about us at every hour. Our eyes were just too blind to see it.

“I understood that our role as humans was to embody here, upon this shadowed and sorrow-bound side of the Veil, those qualities which arise from beyond and are the same on both sides, ever-sustaining, eternal and divine. . . . Courage, selflessness, compassion and love.”

- Steven Pressfield, *Gates of Fire*

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Chapter 1

Night

Brilliant stars set in a field of jet illuminated the bedchamber. Their cold light shone down through an oculus in the ceiling, bathing a slab-like rectangle directly below in a shaft of silvery, bluish light. On the narrow bed, Taarna dreamed.

The periphery of the circular room was steeped in shadows. Hidden in the gloom at intervals between four oval windows were the accouterments of a Spartan life: a chest; a washstand; a tall, cylindrical wardrobe; and a small altar, built into a niche in the wall. The stone walls were blue-green in color, plain and smooth.

The still silence of the bedchamber was broken by a low rumbling sound which grew louder and changed in pitch. For a brief moment an eerie green light swept through the room from the ceiling windows, making a shining track across the walls and floor as an object moved through the night sky overhead. Taarna stirred, but did not awaken. On her face, half hidden by a sheet, a frown briefly darkened her tranquil features.

Chapter 11

Barbarians

The nomad tribe had stopped for the night. Their fires were burning low, and most of them, exhausted from the day's march, had bedded down to sleep. Some remained awake: sentries, and others who tended to the animals or squatted about the fires, conversing in low voices.

They were a moderately sized army, perhaps close to twenty-five hundred in number, and their van stretched out almost a half a mile. For the last forty-five days they had traveled steadily up from the south over the rugged, pitiless land, driven by the iron will of their leader, sustaining themselves after the first few weeks from whatever food and water they could find on the journey. Those unfortunate enough to encounter them had been either killed or enslaved. The captives were forced to assist with the baggage train without water or rest; when they expired from exhaustion, their bodies were left where they fell.

The barbarian leader emerged from the largest tent. He was tall and heavy-set, his face weathered and cruel. He wore a stylized helmet which hung below his jaw line; it did not completely conceal his head, and a thick tangle of black hair protruded on either side of a central metal strap which ran from forehead to occiput. His right arm was missing from the mid-forearm, and in its place a sophisticated

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prosthetic hand had been fitted with three large fingers and an opposable thumb. A circular silver amulet with a distinctive reverse-Z symbol hung from his neck. It flashed brightly against his black undershirt.

He adjusted the belt which secured his red, black-trimmed cloak. The gruesome trophies hanging from it swung to and fro--grotesque reptile heads, faces shriveled, eyes slit-like.

In the south, in the lands of his birth, he had at one time been the head of a single clan. Over time, however, through a skillful mixture of force, artifice, and leadership, he had united seven tribes under his rule. He now led a picked army of his united nation.

As he surveyed the camp, an enormous sphere, glowing green in the night, appeared on the horizon and streaked across the starry sky. It was not uniform in color; the many shades of green on its luminous surface seemed to shift and change in a flickering, malevolent fashion.

With a thunderous *whoosh* it passed directly over the barbarians' camp. The wash of displaced air blew like a strong, warm wind over the field, fanning the fires and rattling the tents. Sparks flew and spun briefly in the agitated currents. Some of the animals reared or cowered in fright. Everyone was immediately awakened, some emerging from under tent or blanket, blinking the sleep out of their eyes and staring upward in awe.

The barbarian chieftain watched the sphere with a mixture of curiosity and fear. It continued in a linear path, growing smaller as it approached the opposite horizon, and then disappeared. They heard, and felt through the soles of their feet, a monumental explosion somewhere behind the ridge of mountains which lay in that direction.

He turned and spoke to one of his lieutenants in a low voice. In response, the man ran to another tent in the encampment, and shortly thereafter, returned to the chieftain accompanied by a short, huffing, wizened man in a nightshirt. His wispy, white hair hung about his wrinkled forehead in tangled corkscrews. His ice blue eyes betrayed a man wildly frightened by what everyone had just witnessed, and by being abruptly summoned to his master. In his gnarled and arthritic hands he held a thick, leather-bound book. Together they re-entered the chieftain's tent, and gathered about a rough-hewn, circular wooden table.

"What is the meaning of this prodigy?" demanded the chieftain. "Does Scripture speak of it?"

The old man rested his hands on the book and was still for a moment, his eyes closed. He then opened them, and began to flip through the tome. "In the Book of the Sibyl Rikiva . . . I believe there is a passage . . . let me see . . ." Bent closely over the book in the poor light, he scanned down the closely written text with his finger. "Ahhh . . . here it is . . ."

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“A shadow shall fall over the universe. Evil will grow in its path. Death will come from the skies.”

The chieftain leaned back in his chair, and inclined his head to stare at the ceiling. He thought for some time without speaking. Then, he brusquely gave orders to his officers to strike the camp. They would follow the object immediately.

Inwardly, he was simultaneously fearful of the sphere, yet powerfully attracted to it. He had experienced dreams of bringing his tribes north in a journey of conquest and expansion, to destroy or enslave the weaker peoples thought to inhabit the northern territories. Now, seeing the sphere, he had an odd sense that he had been here before, had seen it before. For the first time, he realized that the sphere, too, had been a part of his dreams. It had been calling to him, had been driving him on, and was calling him now. He would respond, and bring his people to it. The thought filled him with excitement, and he felt an alluring taste of foreknowledge that great power and glory would soon be his.

Chapter 111

Corruption

What a freak, then, is man! What a novelty! What a monster, what a chaos, what a contradiction, what a prodigy! Judge of all things, imbecile worm of the earth; depositary of truth, a sink of uncertainty and error; the pride and refuse of the universe!

--Blaise Pascal, PENSEES

Shortly before dawn they reached the mountain where the sphere had come to rest. It had broad shoulders and before the sphere's arrival had been the tallest, most imposing mountain in the range. Upon impact the sphere had destroyed the summit, producing a tremendous cloud of dust and smoke which, carried by the wind, billowed upward and stretched over many miles before dissipating in the morning sunlight. Before the dawn they had seen the greenish glow illuminating the base of the cloud from a far distance. Like a beacon in the night it had beckoned them, drawing on their curiosity. As they neared the top and began to appreciate the circumference of the crater rim, they were amazed by its vast size.

His lieutenants sensed the barbarian leader's excitement as they struggled up the final yards of the mountain's steep, barren face. Although hardened by lifetimes of killing and pillage, they were uneasy in

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the presence of this gigantic, mysterious object, whose origin and purpose were unknown. At the same time, they recognized that their leader felt oddly bound to it, and this added complexity heightened their anxiety and bewilderment. But years of campaigning under his hard discipline made them quell their fear and follow him without question. Besides, no one in his highly competitive inner circle wanted to be the first to question his judgment. Faces dusty and grimly determined, they did their best to conceal their fear.

They were almost to the rim when the earth shook violently beneath them. Their eyes widened in terror as enormous founts of steaming, sulfurous green lava were suddenly ejected from the crater above them and swept down the mountainside in inescapable waves.

At this, the barbarian leader was suddenly cast into confusion. He was struck by a powerful blow of fear and betrayal. He had interpreted his dreams and the sphere's presentation to him and his people as a sign that he had been chosen, selected to serve as its agent. He had thought that his encounter with the sphere would be a personal exchange on a parity that would acknowledge his power, intelligence and importance. Approaching the summit, he had known that he would do what it asked, certainly; however, he had believed that he would have the choice to serve. Now he realized that whatever happened would be completely the result of its will, not his, and that he would have no say or decision-making authority. Worse, he was frightened at the sudden realization that he was in the presence of an

overwhelmingly malignant being who, playing on his pride, had easily tricked him; trapped his people; and whose evil made his rapacious deeds, and those of his tribe, seem trivial and insignificant. He was, in short, terror-stricken. An animal instinct for survival, and the tiny remnant of his psyche that, although long suppressed, still loved the good, made him turn and flee. But there was no escape.

In a matter of seconds, the entire tribe was completely engulfed and overwhelmed by the green miasma, which swept them down the face of the mountain like tiny insects washed away by a cloudburst. Under its reeking surface, a corporal degeneration rapidly occurred.

He arose from the stinking mire as it dissipated onto the surrounding plains. The morning sun still shown on the horizon, but to him it would never look the same again. He raised his head and gazed at his followers. His eyes no longer looked human at all; instead, they were yellow, with white cataracts where his irises and pupils had been. His incisors had grown long and sharp. His skin, like that of his tribesmen, had taken on a repulsive, greenish-yellow hue.

"Death," he uttered in a low, powerful voice. Then he cried at the top of his lungs, "*Death! Death to all who oppose us!*" His people responded with a resounding roar of approval. He was now the sphere's High Priest, its Chosen One. And although the motives underlying its plans had not been

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revealed to him, he would do its bidding and bring destruction to the inhabitants of the North.

Chapter IV

Solitude

Time is like a river made up of events that happen, and a violent stream; for as soon as a thing has appeared, it is carried away, and another comes in its place; and this will be carried away too.

-Marcus Aurelius, MEDITATIONS IV:43

As night passed into day the sky lightened and the stars began to fade. Taarna arose when the first rays of light crept over the horizon and filled the room through the window. The rising sun slowly illuminated the altar on the opposite wall in an ever-lowering line. She stood in the middle of the chamber and stretched. An ivory-colored gown, delicately embroidered at the neck and hem, hung to mid-calf, concealing a tall, powerful frame. A breeze slipped through the windows, stealing away the vestigial warmth of her slumber.

Expressionless, she glanced out the window at the arid landscape in the valley far below. The sun glinted off a network of rotting pipes which snaked across the parched, coarse surface, their pathways occasionally conjoined by small, decrepit pumping stations. At the time of her birth, the system of stations and pipes through which vital water flowed had been well-maintained. Now they were corroded and weather-beaten, bent and broken in places, and

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water was much more scarce. She saw a bleak, desolate land that was slowly declining into ruin.

She shrugged mentally as she looked out at the barren wasteland. A numb, weary feeling crept over her. Another day was upon her--a day to be spent alone, like the day before, and before that, in a seemingly endless series spiraling backwards into her past. She felt deeply isolated, fundamentally separated by who she was, and uncertain about who she would be in the future.

Moving to the washstand, she poured a small amount of water into the bowl from a ruby-colored vessel resting beneath. A pair of tired green eyes stared back at her from the rippling, reflective surface.

After washing her face, she turned habitually toward the altar. Many times in the past she had knelt in silent prayer, but not today. She had recently become neglectful of her prayer life. A growing anger and bitterness had gradually eroded the frank self-examination of conscience and humble request for intercessions which had routinely marked her mornings. The hardening of her heart had begun as whispered thoughts of distraction. They had increased from day to day, driving out focused attention, until she had been engaged only in an affectation of prayer. Finally, one day she had simply not bothered to try. She turned away from the altar, deliberately ignoring the twinge of guilt. This, too, had become easier with the passage of days.

Already she sensed the increasing heat of the day as the sun continued to rise into the pale, lavender sky. She dressed, slipping a lightweight blouse over her head, and pulling on a pair of tan-colored pants with a seat and inner thighs made of leather. She quickly pulled onto her forearms a pair of boiled leather wrist gauntlets, scuffed and worn from years of use.

Before taking the stairs down to the lower level, she paused briefly in the hall outside another bedchamber. Reluctantly, she found herself halting beside the closed door. Through a not inconsiderable act of will, she had been able to avoid looking at it for several months, but today, by happenstance, it had caught her from the edge of her vision. Despite the irritation that she felt with herself at her looming self-pity, she grasped the knob, and heaving a sigh, swung open the door.

The room was square, and smaller than the uppermost turret of the home. It was gloomy, the single window on the opposite wall being shuttered, and dust motes floated in the slender shafts of sunlight which found their way through the louvers. The walls had been painted in soft pastels. A child's bed, neatly made, was in the far corner.

On an adjacent nightstand, the framed likeness of a very young girl smiled at her. Cynane, her only daughter, taken from her by an occult heart infection at three years of age. She stared at the image briefly, then turned away. Head downcast, hands holding the doorjamb tightly, she closed her eyes at the

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powerful sorrow and loss which gripped her, and she struggled--still, after so many years--with the thoughts which inevitably entered her mind. Cynane, her child; her only daughter, the last of her family. How keenly she missed her, missed loving her. All that could have been, all that she wanted for her, wanted to do for her, wanted her to be; now, nevermore.

After a moment, she carefully shut the door.

Chapter V

Taarakian

*With all the clarity of a dream
The sky so blue, the grass so green;
The rank and file and navy blue,
The deep and strong, the straight and true...*

- Dire Straits, Iron Hand

After breakfast Taarna traversed a modest, barren courtyard which separated the house from a stable. To her left rose the steep face of the mountain upon which the home had been constructed. To her right was a high stone wall, divided by a gate in which stood two sturdy metal doors, bolted from the inside. On the other side of the wall the mountain fell steeply away, and a narrow path wound down its face to the valley below.

She smiled upon seeing Alata. Her bird thrust his head out of the top half of the large stable door to greet her. Including his crest, he was taller than her by about a foot. His large green eyes watched her intently. He shook his head and bucked against the lower door, head and beak bobbing excitedly, eager for release. She stroked the creature's head, then unlatched the gate and led him by the halter out of the stall. Alata stretched his tan-colored wings gratefully, revealing an impressive wingspan of forty to fifty feet. The wind blew the small puffs of dust stirred by his formidable talons across the ground.

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She tied him to a post standing in the middle of the courtyard, and he bent his head low and drank from an adjacent trough, dark tongue darting rapidly out from his half-open beak to lap up the water.

Fondly petting the animal's neck and admiring his sleek lines, Taarna briefly reflected on her childhood experience with her first bird. Her parents had given her one when she was seven years old. It had been a mature, well-trained female, light gray in color. She had already been receiving lessons, and her mother had concluded that she was ready to ride every day and assume the responsibility of caring for her own bird.

Her grandfather had passed away in the same season. When she had asked her mother where he had gone, her mother had come to her, taken her hand, and pointed up to the cloud-filled sky. "He is up there, with God now," she had responded solemnly. Taarna did not say anything—congenital paralysis of the vocal cords had left her mute from birth—but she had shielded her eyes and scanned the heavens, searching fruitlessly for some sign. Finding none, she had decided to look for her grandfather when she became confident riding her bird alone. She had urged it to climb higher and higher into the sky, above the cloud layers, higher than she had ever gone before. She flew so high that it became cold despite the heat at the ground, and she could no longer see the details of any objects below; high enough that there was nothing above her but the sun. The bird tried gamely to follow her lead, but eventually, no matter how hard it tried, it could gain

no further height, and she feared that it was becoming exhausted. So she had reluctantly permitted it to descend. In her childish way she had been disappointed to find neither God nor her grandfather.

Taarna went into the stable to replenish the bird's food and replace his bedding. A passageway ran across the front length of the stable, which had been divided into thirds: two stalls at either end, and another room for equipment and supplies in the middle. The far stall was empty and swept clean, its door to the courtyard locked. Two saddles rested in racks in the middle room. One was covered with a dusty tarp.

After completing the stable chores, she returned to the house and entered the largest chamber, which was open to the courtyard through three tall, adjacent arches. Its ceiling disappeared into the shadows twenty feet above the floor. It was approximately fifty feet long and thirty feet wide. At one end of the room a large circle had been carved into the stone floor. A pell stood in the middle of the other end of the room, a lonesome pillar heavily scarred from years of use.

She was a Taarakian warrior. Since the age of five she had been trained in the martial skills which were the hallmark of the Taarakian race and the cornerstone of its culture. This room was the heart of her home and life. Numerous weapons and armor--swords, axes, halberds, bills, pikes, pole-axes, spears, bows, maces, helmets, and shields--hung from the far

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wall. After stretches and a warm up, she selected a sword from a rack and proceeded to the pell.

For centuries, since the time of Taarak himself, the Taarakians had flourished through the consummation of pacts with city-states. The pacts bound them to defend their clients in times of attack in exchange for food, land, and social status. These arrangements afforded the municipalities the ability to develop economically and politically without the burdens of raising, training, and maintaining large, expensive standing armies.

For the Taarakians, the duty to defend was not an arm's length contract. It was a moral obligation which undergirded the entire fabric of their religion, society and culture. It was, quite simply, a way of life. Defensive warfare was their sole purpose, the *sine qua non* of their existence.

The Taarakians eventually became a powerful warrior caste, honored and revered for their fighting qualities and strict adherence to duty. They never became sufficiently prolific, however, to safeguard large, politically unified territorial regions. Even if they had, political and territorial rivalry among the city-states prevented the establishment of a larger political order.

Eventually, the ranks of the Taarakians dwindled. A series of decade-long droughts triggered population shifts which disrupted the fragile political balance. As the availability of water diminished and caused the migrations of thousands

of people, the cities began to fight among themselves over territorial claims to the most fertile lands, using forces raised from their own citizenry. This, in turn, broke the socio-economic order of the Taarakians as the feuding cities called upon them for help. A devastating downward spiral of social and economic strife and disease ensued as the cities, weakened by the fighting among themselves, also became increasingly vulnerable to the attacks of nomad peoples trying to find lands to sustain themselves. The Taarakian race splintered and withered, unable to withstand these manifold pressures. As a consequence of the capricious processes of fate, over time Taarna found herself--to her unfolding disbelief and bewilderment--in the unenviable position of being the last of her race.

The ignominious end of the long, painful decline had come on an rainy, overcast winter day when the last organized Taarakian force was defending the Hespian outpost at Cherook from the Lyssanians, a fierce tribe of foot soldiers from the wooded Deilant highlands. They were an old enemy, who for more than a generation had made infrequent forays into neighboring lands for slaves and booty. Taarna had learned from her father that the Taarakians had soundly defeated the Lyssanians in a campaign when he was a young man. But because the Taarakians restricted themselves to defensive warfare, a remnant of the Lyssanians had escaped destruction and returned to their forest home, there to increase their numbers and rebuild their strength.

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The third and final day of battle at Cherook had unfolded with a solitary Taarakian regiment at half strength, aided by a small band of ill-trained, poorly-equipped Hespians. Versinger, who was acting as the Taarakian chieftain since the death of Cyanthes two days earlier, had chosen to post the bulk of his heavy infantry not at the outpost itself, but at a narrow gorge about half a mile to the southeast, through which the Lyssanians were expected to attempt passage based on reports of their whereabouts after the previous day's fighting.

Versinger had reached his decision after a long, contentious council of war with the remaining officer corps. The debate over whether to stand or retreat had continued well into the wee hours of the morning. The courageous decision to stay and fight was reached on the belief that the chosen ground would provide the best defense. Unfortunately, it was also based on the incorrect assumption that the Lyssanians lacked reinforcements.

Taarna had been riding Alata as part of the Taarakian cavalry. She wore her leather armor and a polished metal helmet with a silver vizor that concealed her face. Using her bow, she had spent the morning supporting the footmen in their breastworks.

For the lightly armored, winged cavalry it was deadly work, because the weather had proved adverse to flight. Fog, drizzle, and low-hanging clouds forced Taarna and her compatriots to attack from very low altitudes. This increased their exposure to Lyssanian bowmen, neutralizing the

advantage the Taarakians enjoyed with their more powerful bows. Taarakian cavalry were brought down with alarming regularity.

Taarna had shot her last arrow into the neck of a burly Lyssanian sergeant and had brought Alata up into a rapid climb, seeking refuge in the clouds so they could fly down the gorge and back to Cherook to rearm. A view of the thin Taarakian line through her vizor had not inspired confidence: there were no reinforcements, the Hespian volunteers were wavering, and the Lyssanian soldiers were on the verge of breaching the hastily cut breastworks in several places. There the fighting was fiercest: Lyssanians clambering like ants over the fallen timber and hand-to-hand melees with soldiers swirling and slipping in the mud, all to the cacophonous din war.

The mist had almost obscured her vision when she felt a sharp, jolting pain in her left arm, just above her leather gauntlet. A black-feathered arrow had completely pierced her forearm, passing through the muscle between her radius and ulna. The metal tip lodged in her leather jerkin, pinning her arm to her side but not injuring her thorax.

She continued on, slipping into the safety of the clouds and navigating briefly on her memory and orientation to the terrain. When the sound of battle faded, she brought Alata back down and flew hard and fast for the outpost. But to her surprise and dismay, she made a devastating discovery: the Lyssanians had split their forces, made a forced march during the night, and under cover of darkness

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had found an undefended path to Cherook. The palisades had been breached, and the lopsided contest between the masses of enemy troops and the few allies manning the fort was nearly over. Portions of the structure were burning, and she could only see six or seven Taarakian archers in the tower at the center. For them, the end was quite obviously near; the Lyssanians were setting fire to its base.

The enemy skirmish line outside the fort spied her almost at the same time that she saw them. Half a dozen or more archers quickly fired a hail of arrows at her. They were out of range, but clearly she could not get closer. She circled for a moment, angry and confused, before deciding that at least she could return to the mountain pass and warn Versinger so what remained of the regiment might be saved. But she had ridden for only a minute or two before encountering Taanis, a cavalry officer, headed for Cherook with an arrow in his stomach. He weakly signalled the terrible news: the line at the pass had collapsed; the fight was over.

Thus, through a combination of dwindling forces, bad weather, and poor intelligence, the last of the Taarakians were outmaneuvered, outgeneraled, and destroyed at Cherook. Nearly five centuries of Taarakian primacy had been brought to a close.

Since she had buried Taanis, despair had been her companion with increasingly frequency. More and more often, she had considered repudiating her oath, learning some marketable trade, and entering an obscure life among the urbanites. She knew that she

was the only surviving member of a dead caste, and as such, her personal abilities seemed of little importance. Kraan, with whom the Taarakians had enjoyed their oldest ties, was the only city which continued to pay her a small stipend—she suspected more out of pity than anything else. Thus marginalized, Taarna sustained herself in an unhappy and tenuous fashion by hunting and hiring herself out to provide protection to local provincials, patrolling their property lines for interlopers. Trading with rustics for her basic necessities, she increasingly avoided going into the city precincts she had once enjoyed, and eventually stopped altogether.

In addition to despondency, confusion, and a sense of worthlessness, anger increasingly flared up within her. She was angry with God, had come to hate him for stripping away everything she had loved—her husband, her daughter, her race! Why? And why *her*? Her survival at Cherook had become a curse. What had she done to deserve being the last of her kind? There was no answer.

The anger fed on itself, she discovered, in a maddening kind of vicious circle as she blamed God for her ever-growing unhappiness and self-loathing. The bitter sense of betrayal spilled over to create a smoldering hostility toward the citizens of Kraan, an irrational belief that they were somehow to blame for her loss. There then followed a sense of shame for feeling this way about the people she was sworn to serve and defend.

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Perhaps if she had merely been a hired mercenary, it would have been easy to simply walk away, but like her ancestors, Taarna's concept of self was rooted in a deeply engrained sense of duty. Consequently, after these periods of self-doubt, she had, with nagging uncertainty, re-embraced the only life she knew. Although she realized that it was almost ludicrous to continue thinking of herself as a warrior, she had a harder time imagining herself doing anything else.

Weapon in hand, she stood before the pell, relaxed, and assumed a high guard stance. She began to practice, as she had for years, striking blows in rapid succession, her movements fluid and flawless. In this, at least, she found solace. She and the sword became one in the grace and power of her exertions, and for a time--for a brief, blessed interval--she did not think about her troubles, did not dwell on the fact that she was alone in this house. Drilling by herself, a pale, flashing, solitary figure in the dim sparring chamber, she was at once both fearsome and wonderful to behold.

Chapter VI

Slaughter

*No beast so fierce but knows some touch of pity.
But I know none, and therefore am no beast.*

- William Shakespeare, RICHARD III

The barbarians had established themselves in an abandoned pumping station which was situated in a valley a mile or so from the mountain. From there a contingent began the march to Kraan. The chieftain's knowledge of the city and its whereabouts were the first fruits of his new-found servility to the sphere. The city's reduction would be the first step in his subjugation of the northern territories.

The few people they encountered were captured for intelligence, or shot down so that their approach would not be disclosed. The cavalymen were ordered to dismount their huge bats and walk for the last leg of the journey, so as not to reveal the army's presence.

They approached the city near dawn of the following day. Falling out of column, they formed a line of battle, hidden from view by the range of low hills which separated the city from the plains they had traversed. Scouts took up concealed positions to observe.

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The city was situated in a shallow, spacious valley. It was protected by a high wall on all four sides, with a large, elaborately designed gate centered on one. The portal stood open, the townsfolk unaware of the impending attack. It was still morning and it was not a work day, so there was little activity.

The city was laid out in a grid-like network of wide streets. There being little wood available in the surrounding wastelands, the buildings had been constructed largely of stone. Many of the them were cylindrical in shape. Their smooth, rounded, stuccoed exteriors were painted in pastels of green, violet, peach and blue. They had highly ornamented windows and entranceways possessing simple, geometrical order.

Dominating the city, and easily visible from the surrounding hills, was the council chambers, an imposing, highly stylized domed structure with ornate and decorative elements. A broad avenue led from it directly to the main gate.

The citizens of Kraan possessed a highly developed culture which they had preserved with great effort in the post-technological era of decline. The city's sometimes faltering economy was sustained by a middle class of tradesmen and merchants. A council of seven, elected for life terms, governed the city and oversaw the various governmental departments.

The barbarian leader ranged up and down the rank and file, giving orders to his lieutenants and quietly exhorting his soldiers, preparing them for the assault.

His elite regiments were armed with sophisticated weapons capable of firing steel bolts at high speed. Magazines could be quickly loaded and gravity fed through the firing chamber. They also used four-barreled weapons which fired large, barbed steel arrows with considerable accuracy. A handful of demolition units were equipped with flame-throwers and high explosives. The regular troops brandished a variety of bows, swords, and spears. Siege engines, hauled in pieces by pack animals for many miles, were assembled by teams detailed for the task.

At last he mounted his beast, swung a battle ax high over his head, and shouted, "To the Council Chambers!"

A wild melee of whooping and shouting broke the still morning air as the troops poured over the hills and ran down towards the city gates. Simultaneously, the men mounted on bats took to flight and descended upon the upper terrace of the main gatehouse, killing or scattering the handful of guards posted there. Some of the barbarian cavalry also flew across the city and seized the smaller gate on the far wall to prevent any escape. This was easily accomplished, and within minutes the barbarians were flooding into the city. Supported by the cavalry, they commenced a merciless slaughter.

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The attack caught the citizens completely by surprise. Chaos reigned as people in the streets scattered and ran. Those indoors, hearing the commotion, came to their windows or doorways, then hid in terror or fled from their dwellings. Crowds of panicked citizens were encircled and shot down from the ground and from the bats circling above. The few who were able to take to the air were relentlessly pursued and killed. Mutilated bodies, their limbs askew, began to fill the streets, singly or in random heaps. The air was filled with shouting, shrieking, and the moaning of the wounded.

The demolition units followed shortly behind the main body of troopers, setting fires and destroying important structures with explosives. The flame-throwers were directed to the buildings in which large numbers of the populace had sought refuge, and began spraying the burning liquid in through the windows. The stench of burning flesh, and thick columns of greasy smoke soon filled the air.

Chapter VII

Besieged

Of the seven council members, only four and the Elder had reached the council chambers. The gigantic inner doors of the structure were closed behind them, and they quickly ascended a delicate, freestanding spiral walkway. It led to a dais which floated free in space in the uppermost reaches of the chamber.

The Elder mounted the topmost position on the globe-like platform, and turned to address the councilmen. He wore an ivory robe and carried a staff. He was a septuagenarian, and his gray hair was thinning on top. A carefully trimmed beard and moustache lent him a distinguished appearance.

"They're killing everyone . . . we must escape," announced the shortest councilman.

"The city is burning!" exclaimed another.

"Elder . . . we must arm ourselves. We must *fight!*" said the youngest man. He had black hair, graying at the temples.

"*Silence!*" replied the Elder, striking the floor with his staff for emphasis. "We are not a race of warriors! We are statesmen and scientists! From our very beginning it was ordained that the warrior race

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of Taarak the Defender would aid us in times of need. This was the Pact!"

The youngest councilman smirked. "Hah. Taarak the Defender? His race is dead! They cannot defend anyone!"

Another robed, somewhat portly councilman with brown eyes solemnly spoke up. "Some say that the race is not dead. That one still lives."

The young man turned to look at them, raising his hands incredulously. "*One?* What good is *one?*"

"One of Taarak's blood could do much," retorted the Elder.

From far below, the fear-stricken voice of a pageboy floated up to them. "Elder! They're in the halls!"

"Well, who is this last Defender?" inquired another councilman. "How can he be summoned?"

"It is Taarna, of the blood of Taarak the Defender," replied the Elder. "The last of the race! And she must be summoned as my forefathers summoned Taarak himself . . . from within."

"But will this Defender answer?" asked the fourth councilman.

"A Taarakian has no choice, they must answer," said the Elder. "It is in their blood!"

A heavy *thud* suddenly filled the air. "*They're at the door! They're here!*" The pageboy's voice was now full of abject terror.

This development sparked a round of panicky remarks at the dais. The Elder cut them off. Holding up his staff, he shouted, "Bar the door!"

The pageboy turned and ran towards the door. The councilmen could barely hear the patter of his retreating feet.

"We will summon the Defender together," declared the Elder solemnly. Heads bowed and eyes closed, they began the ritual.

"Taarna . . .

"Taarna . . .

"Taarna"

Slowly, the dais began to spin, the rhythmic pounding of blows on the heavy door making an eerie counterpoint to their low, trancelike voices.

The pageboy was gasping for breath by the time he skidded to a stop at the barring mechanism built into the floor. He lifted a small panel and began manipulating the controls. Nothing happened; too many years of disuse and neglect had apparently taken their toll on the device. In frustration, the pageboy stood and began stamping on the controls

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with his foot. This frantic effort had the desired effect, for a large, T-shaped portion of the floor began to rise up and angle towards the door, lifted by a hydraulic ram.

Just as the brace approached the vertical the doors burst open, the scarred end of an enormous, studded battering ram appearing in the gap. The lower edge of the doors struck the brace, shattering it. Great flat chunks of stone fell back into the pit from which the brace had risen. Bits of stone from the edges of the heavily damaged doors skittered across the polished mosaic floor.

At this, the pageboy threw up his arms and fell backwards, landing on the seat of his pants. He scrambled quickly to his feet as the doors swung wide, and he goggled at the size of the battering ram. It was rapidly withdrawn, and into the room stepped the barbarian leader, flanked by two of his lieutenants.

The chieftain grinned cruelly as the three of them raised their weapons. The pageboy saw the guns emit small puffs of smoke and suddenly he was writhing on the floor in agony, five bolts protruding from his body, one of them dividing his bow tie and puncturing his trachea, another tearing a hole into his heart. Three other missiles passed completely through him. Blood frothing from his mouth and nose, he died within seconds as the troopers ran past.

Chapter VIII

Summoned

Whoso hearkeneth unto me shall dwell safely, and shall be quiet from fear of evil.

-- PROVERBS 1:33

It was almost mid-morning when Taarna finished her practice. She was hot, sweaty and tired.

She returned her weapon to the rack and paused, her gaze coming to rest upon another sword in a sheath next to hers. Slowly, respectfully, she withdrew it from its scabbard and held it before her. To preserve a memory she had kept it clean and polished, and its dull, silver finish glimmered coldly in the half-light. Excepting length and weight, it matched hers exactly.

The sword had belonged to Kanei, her husband. His parents had given the paired weapons to them as a wedding gift. They had been skillfully hand-crafted, the steel blades carefully tempered and flexible, the cross-guards polished silver, the grips wrapped in black leather.

Studying the weapon, her mind drifted back to thoughts of her husband, and their short but happy marriage: soaring high on their birds, flying closely together with skill and precision; hunting in the

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outlands for wild game; sparring together here, in this chamber, for endless hours; long walks together in the city streets; occasional swims at the public baths; family gatherings on feast days and holidays, with music and dancing; the joy they had felt when their daughter was born. In a period when unsettling changes were taking place among their people, yet they had been happy times, the happiest times that she could remember.

He had died after they had been called upon to help local stockmen who had been preyed upon by brigands. Some of the stockmen had agreed to act as lures, and the Taarakians had set up an ambush to capture or kill the robbers. The brigands took the bait, and in the ensuing struggle Kanei had received a glancing blow to the neck with a mace.

At the time no one had given the injury a second thought. A bruise developed, but it did not appear serious. Then, four days after the skirmish, he had been descending the stairs when he suddenly fell. He was dead by the time she reached his side. The physicians in the city told her that he had probably suffered an injury to a blood vessel, and that a clot had developed which had broken off and traveled to the brain, killing him.

His death had been a terrible shock, the first of many that were to come. Her grief was a black shroud which for a time had blotted out the life within her, transforming her into a shell of her former self. She was unable to focus or function, barely able to care for her daughter.

Slowly, however, the pieces of her life had begun to coalesce, the merciful passage of time blunting her distress. She realized that as Cynane's only parent, she would have to be strong for her. So one morning, she awoke with a firm resolve to regain control over her life and move forward, for her daughter's sake as well as her own.

As she returned to the courtyard to saddle the bird, a sickening sensation overcame her. She stopped and bent over, clutching her stomach. A pounding began inside her skull, causing her to fall to her knees. She put out her arms and fell forward on all fours, head lowered, breathing rapidly. The throbbing in her head continued relentlessly, its tempo slowly increasing and intensifying. She grimaced and fell prostrate, clasping the back of her head with both hands, waiting for it to stop. The metallic taste of bile filled her mouth.

She knew that she was being summoned, for it had happened to her several times in the distant past. But knowing this did not relieve the nausea in her gut which crept ever higher up her throat. She panted rapidly, eyes shut, enduring the pain and awaiting the vision. Slowly, with the seconds seeming to drag into minutes, it began: the thudding lessened, the nausea relented, and her breathing slowed and became deeper. She slipped into unconsciousness, and collapsed onto the dusty ground.

The vision came: her mind's eye opened. She was looking out through the half-closed eyes of

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another person. She knew of him--the Elder of Kraan; and after a brief moment of disorientation, she knew where he was--spinning slowly on a floating dais in Kraan's vast council chambers. The airy place was brilliantly lit by rays of sunlight pouring down through an opening in the ceiling. She could hear him and the other councilmen rhythmically repeating her name, and beneath that, an ominous, steady booming coming somewhere from the floor below. Faintly in the background she also heard a multitude of frantic shouting and shrieking. There was a palpable aura of terror hanging over the men.

Abruptly, the vision ended. There was no remnant of the pounding headache, or of the sickening sensation in her abdomen. Taarna stood up quickly, agitated and alarmed. The day she had dreaded had finally come: a Summons to her--her alone.

A prickly sensation arose in the back of her neck, and fear of the unknown gripped her. It was a feeling of something going horribly wrong, of an overwhelmingly malevolent force tearing the world asunder. She had experienced apprehension from being summoned in the past--it was an expected reaction when exposed to a new threat--but this was different. It stirred in her mind a blurred memory, a dream, perhaps--of fleeing from an enormous, terrifying object--unreasoning, unstoppable and bent on her destruction. Its cold weight made her want to withdraw into her home, to shrink away in confusion and fear. In her heart she sensed that she was facing an overwhelmingly difficult, solitary challenge

against an enemy more dangerous than any she had encountered.

For a moment she was immobilized with panic, her mind flooded with scattered thoughts running in every direction. But she fought hard to control this dangerous emotion, and aided by her discipline and training, she was able to bring herself under control. Yet, she was torn by indecision. The citizens of Kraan were in grave peril *now*, and a part of her felt that leaving straight for the city was the only course of action. But the strong call for instant action was undercut by an uneasy feeling that to leave immediately, without preparation, would be a mistake. Keenly aware that she was now the only Taarakian Defender alive, she was frightened by the fact that the attack on Kraan involved a numerous enemy.

Given that she was going to be one against many, Taarna followed her instincts: she would first try to retrieve the Sword of Taarak before flying to Kraan. The important decision to do so made her take a deep breath and expel the air slowly from her lungs. It helped her to focus and clear her thoughts.

The mystical Sword of Taarak was steeped in legend, its origins shrouded in mystery. It was thought to have been given by God to Taarak when his race was founded. It was believed to possess special powers which would ensure a victory if used to lead the Taarakians into battle. Under Taarakian law, however, it was to be drawn only in times of great need or peril.

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Taarna had seen the sword only once, many years ago, and then only from afar. It was shortly after she had completed her training and had been initiated into the ranks as a full warrior, before the dark times which had signaled the dissolution of her race. The chieftain at that time had determined to use the weapon to lead them into battle against a sizable force of northern marauders threatening the borders of a client municipality. Taarna had been on foot in the conflict, assigned to the left wing of the Taarakian forces arrayed for battle. As a gesture intended to boost morale and kindle their fighting spirit, the chieftain had swooped low past their lines on her bird with the sword drawn. Taarna could still recall the tingling down her spine and the sense of awe that she felt upon seeing the weapon raised high by the powerful arm, its sharp point glinting in the sun, as her leader winged past to the responding shouts and yells of the troops.

The battle, a three-hour engagement, *had* gone very well for them that day. The mounted units had sought out and overwhelmed the opponents' cavalry. They then attacked the flanks and rear of the enemy's ground troops, who were pinned down by the Taarakians' main column and right wing. The left wing had delivered the final assault. It broke the enemy lines, causing a panic among the less disciplined soldiers and producing a rout.

Taarna had acquitted herself well in her first taste of actual combat. With shield and single-handed sword, she had lived in a blur from second to second,

and did not immediately recall all that had occurred, or how many she had killed. It had been all fighting and savagery, accompanied by the din of combat: shouts, screams, grunts, and groans; the ring and thud of sword on shield, shield on breastplate, armor on armor. Her mind had quickly been overcome by a fierce, white anger--not hatred, but simply primal action and reaction, from one moment to the next--the anger necessary to kill without hesitation and not be killed. In fact, she had been surprised at the quantity of blood she had washed from her exhausted, trembling body afterwards. Her bright white hair had been splashed, dotted, and tangled with bits of gore. Plunging her arms into a bucket of cold water effaced into crimson clouds splattered, lunatic patterns of rusty red. Vertical streaks of red-tinged pink had made strange art of her sweaty midriff and thighs.

Later that night she was still not relaxed. Lying on the ground, staring at the darkened roof of her tent, the most dramatic and violent details had come to her . . . parrying an oncomer's blow with her shield, then thrusting her sword so sharply into his stomach that its tip burst from his lower back. Landing a blow on the hand of another, amputating his fingers and causing his sword to fly to the ground; then cleaving off his arm with a vertical sweep and producing a red, pulsating spray. Seeing one of her youthful female companions shot down with a crossbow bolt which punctured her throat with an obscene *thwop* and emerged--a grotesque, glistening, black splinter--from the back of her neck. Feinting a horizontal blow and turning her blade downwards at

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the last moment below the defensive parry of a hulking opponent's sword, amputating his leg between the knee and the top of his boot; then hacking the right cheek, lower jaw and tongue off his surprised face.

Yet, as violent and terrifying as the experience had been, fear had not been the only overriding emotion. Instead, in a way that she had not anticipated, the experience had been strangely liberating. For, in the midst of the carnage she had never felt more vital, more *alive*. It was as if death, being so perilously close, had removed everything that was unimportant and secondary to living in its purest sense. The enemy sword had cut away the cultural crust of life, those social contours which men create for themselves and find most comfortable and familiar. Petty rivalries, jealousy, and day-to-day burdens and disappointments all seemed trivial while she grappled with a soldier in the dust, trying to keep his blade from her throat, and thrust hers into his.

She pondered how this strange mixture of death and life had changed her. She would never be the same person she had been before today. She had taken human life and at the same time had, in a sense, taken the measure of her *own* life. And while her killing was the culmination—in fact, the goal—of years of training and preparation, it still troubled her. The justification was simple: her foes had been the aggressors, invading a client state to plunder and subjugate. Still, staring into the blackness, she silently grieved not for the enemy soldiers, but for her heart, made a stone so she could become a remorseless

destroyer of other human beings. She did not sleep well that night despite her exhaustion.

Since then, the ebb and flow of Taarna's life had followed the development of conflict and concomitant Taarakian call to arms. During peacetime, life would fall into a routine of training, drilling, and practice. Times of war were marked by an even stricter regimen of conduct. She quickly grasped the importance of the discipline and obedience which had been engrained into her character, for in the life or death struggles which followed her first exposure to combat, following orders often meant the difference between victory or defeat. Success on the battlefield, she would learn, could not be gained by the autonomous, uncoordinated fighting of an individual soldier, no matter how courageous he or she might be. She was part of a cohesive whole, and teamwork was just as important as personal bravery.

She also developed a strong personal loyalty to her officers and to the other warriors in her unit. No one wanted to be the person who made a mistake, to become a weak link in the chain--not when it might result in the death or injury of a brother or sister in arms. Disappointing a fellow soldier was feared more than death itself. Particularly in the heat of battle, it was the bond shared with the soldiers beside her that proved more important to remaining steady and giving her all than any lofty, conceptual loyalty to Taarakian protectorates.

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In time, Taarna earned a reputation as a tough and agile fighter. In combat she was not bloodthirsty, for she did not derive pleasure from killing. Instead, she developed a sustained dexterity, and an uncanny ability to quickly and accurately size up her opponents. She rapidly matured into a highly skilled technician in the art of war.

Decision made, her training took over. She returned rapidly to her bedchamber and stripped. She withdrew a brown, floor-length cloak from the back of her wardrobe. Religious doctrine required a warrior entering the Taarakian Sanctuary to do so with great humility, and the plain, ceremonial robe was meant to be an outward sign of a contrite inner spirit. It had been years, however, since she had last worn it; and slipping it on, she felt like an impostor. She had become a stranger to it. It seemed to belong to an earlier Taarna, a woman from her past she no longer knew, someone who had not yet forsaken God. But with a sense of hypocritical unease, she put it on nevertheless.

She ran down the stairs, taking the steps in two's, and trotted through the courtyard and into the stable. Alata, sensing her excitement, uttered a high-pitched screech as Taarna fastened the saddle upon his back. She cinched it on with a practiced hand, then filled her canteen and made sure it and her other supplies were secure. For a moment she paused to consider whether to take her weapon, but she quickly decided that to do so would, somehow, betray her commitment to retrieve the Sword of Taarak. So she threw the hood of her cloak up over her head,

climbed into the saddle, and with her heels in the stirrups, gave the bird a command.

The bird issued another cry, and after a few brief steps they were suddenly aloft, pulled into the air by the raw power of his beating wings. The air made a rushing, roaring sound over their leathery surface. Her preoccupation and feeling of urgency were briefly lost to the exhilaration she always experienced at the glorious moment when they escaped the ground together, soaring into the freedom of flight.

Taarna brought Alata about, and they climbed in a slow spiral ever higher above her home. When their altitude was sufficient to clear the mountain's summit, she signaled the bird for level flight. Gaining speed, they flew due west. When the mountain was behind them, she urged her mount into a shallow dive, trading altitude for speed. The animal willingly obliged, and soon they were flying low and fast over the rugged, barren surface.

As was her habit, she allowed Alata freedom to chose a vertical flight path. At times the bird passed close beneath high-ranging pipes suspended between peaks; at other times he dipped down into canyons, gaining momentary respite with a downward zoom, then beating his wings rapidly to clear the lip of the far wall. He periodically vocalized his pleasure with a throaty squawk.

The wind blew and dark gray clouds scudded across the crimson sky. The warm air felt good on her

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face. In addition to the miles of pipes, the landscape was infrequently studded with reminders of earlier, more prosperous times: moldering hulks and stripped shells of tracked and wheeled vehicles lay broken and bleached in the sun. They passed over dry riverbeds zigzagging across the landscape.

Occasionally they passed small birds wheeling in flight, or feathered carrion eaters circling above some half seen, unfortunate creature. Initially on the journey, she caught other glimpses of life. A few times she saw men riding bizarre, two- and four-legged beasts down dusty roads, sometimes pulling wagons. But soon, as their flight continued, no persons could be seen at all. Eventually, the land below flattened out into a broad, yellowish-tan plain, pocked with canyons of a reddish hue, and utterly devoid of life.

Glimmering in the distant haze, a monumental shape began to emerge on the horizon: a massive skeleton, impossibly huge. Its gigantic backbone, supported by equally enormous, curved ribs, soared hundreds of feet into the air, arching above a monolithic, sprawling pumping station. Its spine terminated at one end into a skull of incredible dimensions which rested on its upper jaw. Its teeth, each one bigger than her bird, were planted firmly into the hard plateau.

Seeing this from afar triggered an intense emotional response in her. Her breathing quickened, and her heart beat faster. She was rapidly approaching the Sanctuary of her race.

Chapter IX

Sword

I do my duty. Other things do not trouble me, for they are either things without life, or things without reason, or things that have wandered and know not the way.

-Marcus Aurelius, MEDITATIONS VI:22

Approaching the monumental structure, Taarna and her bird appeared tiny and insignificant, slipping through the skull's colossal orbits and fenestra. As they passed into the station, she prepared to descend vertically, claspng the reins tightly and hugging Alata with her legs. Deep into the bowels of the enormous structure they flew, spiraling through an extensive, complex network of pipes, ductwork, and tiered platforms. They frequently dove in an exhilarating rush directly down huge vertical shafts lit from the bright sun above. The air howled in the narrower passages, beating against them like a powerful fan. She was excited and elated by these surroundings. Her emotions were intensified by the tireless rhythm of her bird's muscles under her, and the abrupt changes in pitch and direction he made to complete their journey.

Moving swiftly through this inviolate space, Taarna also felt a strong sense of peace and security.

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Its staggering dimensions and stark interplay of light and shadow brought a palpable feeling of being in God's presence, in His sacred dwelling. It seemed to be a place where no evil could venture, where His goodness had always, and would always, prevail. Having pushed God out of her life, she did not consider herself worthy to participate in this feeling, but she clung to it nonetheless, seeking comfort in anything that provided relief from the oppressive, malignant sensation she had earlier experienced.

At last she passed through an elaborately decorated portal, and landed at one end of a vast chamber. As she dismounted, the bird hooted his pleasure at being permitted to rest.

The room looked exactly as she remembered it. In the gloom far above, she could barely discern the ceiling. Its broad expanse was largely concealed by an intricacy of pipes. An extremely large, deep pool of clear, still water stretched before her. It extended from one wall to the other. Its opposite side was over three hundred feet distant. An angled shaft of sunlight shone down and provided the sole source of illumination. Its brilliance contrasted with the darkness in the far reaches of the chamber. As an occasional cloud passed by in the sky somewhere high above, the intensity of the light waxed and waned, and the water's surface glimmered responsively. The effect was magical and breathtaking.

She emerged from the shadows and approached the pool with great reverence,

unfastening her robe. With a soft whisper it slipped to the floor unnoticed, for she was enraptured by the object on the far side which dominated the chamber.

Kneeling upon a broad, tiered foundation was an enormous, pale statue of a Taarakian warrior, her outstretched arms holding a sword upright in front of her. Its dimensions were portentous; including the sword, it exceeded one hundred and fifty feet in height. Its face looked much like Taarna's--impassive and grim, with forbidding eyes and a solemn mouth. It was flanked by gigantic, sculptured likenesses of the birds which the Taarakians had bred and flown for centuries. The statue symbolized and combined three critical elements of the Taarakian warrior race and their fundamental relationship with God. These were the bird, the sword, and Woman. Deemed co-equal with men, women were highly revered in Taarakian culture.

She stopped at the edge of the sparkling pool. In her mind she recited by rote the short prayer required of any Taarakian seeking to undergo ablution and cross the sacred water. She did not feel purified, but without hesitating further, she dove in and began swimming toward the opposite side. She was unaccustomed to being in such a large volume of water, and opening her eyes was unable to see the bottom somewhere deep below her. Swimming unclothed through its coolness, she felt wonderfully refreshed and alive. The dust and sweat of the morning were washed away, and she was reinvigorated.

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Water ran off the smooth, angular contours of her shoulders as Taarna arose from the pool. Standing erect on a broad, sloped pedestal which greeted the water's edge, she was beautiful, her body lean, muscular, and largely unscarred despite many engagements.

Never before had she stood on this side of the pool with the intention of possessing the Sword of Taarak hidden in the dais above, and the thought of it made her anxious. She had always served as a soldier in the rank and file, not as an officer, and prior to now, had no reason to consider what she was contemplating.

As she stood on the pedestal, naked and alone in the stark, cavernous chamber, she heard the whistling of the wind through vents high above where light entered the temple. It was a lonely, haunting sound--the only sound in the vast room--and she paused to listen. As she looked about, her previous elation was mocked by the emptiness which greeted her. The thought that she was the only surviving Taarakian abruptly loomed large, and her anxiety rapidly degenerated into powerful feelings of self-doubt, sorrow, and loneliness. The world suddenly felt odd and disjointed.

How could it be that after these many years, she was the only Taarakian left standing in this enormous room, contemplating the defense of an *entire city* against an invading army? When she had last been here for an initiation ceremony years ago, there had been many of her race, standing rank after

rank, weapons and armor glittering, the enormous braziers on either side of the ramp burning high. Now, through some unimaginable working of fate, her family, friends, and companions--every Taarakian save her--were gone, and the braziers were dark and cold in an empty room.

This realization, she now confessed to herself, was precisely why she had stayed away for so long--because to come back would have been a piercingly painful confirmation of her solitude and loneliness. It had been far simpler to pray in the comfortable surroundings of her home rather than to return to this place of public worship, where the stark reality of her race's destruction was so palpable. Yet, she realized that she had paid a price for this avoidance. It now struck her just how much she had missed the majesty of this chamber; how much it had meant to be here so many times, and how much she had missed the feeling of solidarity, community, and identity with her brethren which participation in worship here had brought. The experiences here, heaped one upon another over a quarter century, had become an integral part of her. And it was a part that had been severed and lost.

She had not anticipated the jumble of emotions that returning to the Sanctuary would bring. Being here again was a paradox: she felt closer to God, yet terribly, terribly *alone*. And the brutal emptiness made the notion of her single-handedly attempting a defense appear silly and ridiculous, the judgment to leave her home seem ill-advised and impulsive. A

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strong urge to flee came over her; to return, cringing, to the shell of a life she had been leading.

I am a sham, she thought. I stand here before you, my God, seeking something I do not deserve. In this place, at this moment, her anger toward God seemed small-minded and foolish. Her mind clouded, it seemed impossible to believe that the Sword would appear for one so unfaithful, and she berated herself for believing that it would.

Taarna paused in confusion, her thoughts conflicted, her heart downcast. Absentmindedly, she felt the water from her thick hair trickle down the middle of her back, thence descend in thin cool lines down her inner thighs to puddle beneath the arches of her feet. The eerie whistle of air continued, fluctuating softer and louder: the seeming whispers and sighs of the dead.

She looked at the floor for a moment, then slowly raised her head to the statue looming above her. The stone face glowered down at her, its features immovable, inscrutable. Staring at it, she felt as though she was looking into a mirror, and questions began to surface in her mind.

To ignore a Summons to defend was the gravest offense. If she turned now and left, who would she be? Alive, perhaps, but for what?

Memories flickered fleetingly through her mind, the faces and voices of those who had been closest to her. A glance exchanged with Chanmar:

captain, expert swordsman, and source of inspiration to everyone in her unit, seconds before they arose from a trench to face the archers of the Narrosynthians, whose army outnumbered theirs three to one. Their eyes had met for only a second, but the bond they shared had been reaffirmed, and had given her courage to face the grim odds.

The pale, ashen face of her best friend Alyssa, whom she had held in her blood-soaked arms, trying desperately, futilely to staunch the flow from a deep stab wound in the armpit. Lacking a voice, she had only been able to nod in response to her mumbled, dying question: "*Taarna, did we win?*" The affirmation had been a lie, but Taarna could not have beared to see the reaction in Alyssa's rapidly unfocusing eyes if she had revealed the truth, saw no point in crushing a once indomitable spirit.

Finally Kanei, speaking to her on the battlefield after their victory over the Jaspenites, a fight in which Taarna had slain the enemy's second-in-command. She could still picture his face like it was yesterday, framed by the sun shining behind him in a bright blue sky, wind tousling his short, black hair, when he told her how proud he was to be her husband; how falling in love with her had been the best thing that had ever happened to him.

She snapped out of these memories with an almost physical jerk, her features twisted with disgust and self-loathing as she flung off the notion of flying back to safety. She would not be a coward, a disgrace. She would go forward with this endeavor

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come what may, regardless of the consequences. To do anything else meant no longer being a Taarakian; meant, in fact, being nothing less than a traitor to herself, her husband, and her people. She would betray everything that she believed in, everything that she stood for. So she hardened her face, squared her shoulders, and strode up the long ramp to the top.

There, inlaid upon the floor, she found a large, circular disc of rose-colored stone which was circumscribed by an intricate pattern of green and red triangles. She walked carefully around this and stood before a rectangle cut into the floor which was centered directly between the thighs of the statue. When she stepped upon the stone before it, the rectangular slab rose from the floor and slid back to reveal a small cavity beneath.

She gazed into the small space with curiosity, her thoughts again doubling back to the day that she had seen her chieftain ride past with the Sword held high. The warrior chieftain's dress lay inside, a carefully folded set of black and red garments. She looked doubtfully at the skimpy outfit. The Taarakians had long believed that the presence of women in battle elevated the fighting spirit of the males. The battle gear of the female commander was designed with this in mind; it was fashioned to accentuate and display the female form. It could be worn with relatively little risk when directing the fight from behind the front line, protected by a phalanx of guards. But Taarna did not have any retainers, and she was uneasy at the thought of

wearing something with virtually no armor. But at this point, she had no choice.

She slipped on the outfit, which fit her surprisingly well: black stockings interwoven with steel thread which came to mid-thigh; a black choker with straps which descended down the midline of her back and front, coming together at the groin; slips of reinforced black fabric which covered her breasts and pubis; a black leather belt from which hung a red scabbard; a single red metal pauldron for the right shoulder; red leather boots and greaves, slightly oversized, secured behind the knees; and a red leather glove for the sword hand. Fully dressed, she found its light weight and freedom of movement remarkable. It afforded almost no protection, however, against arrow or sword. She felt uncomfortably vulnerable in it, and thought ruefully about the armor she had left at home.

And yet, as she grew accustomed to its look and feel, she found that her perception of the outfit began to shift. Fueled by vivid memories of those who had gone into battle before her in this dress, her disappointment and trepidation were replaced by a powerful feeling of pride and identification with her long-dead comrades, and more significantly, with the past leaders of her race. A bold ripple of courage quickened her heart. There would be no refuge within a metal shell now; everything that she was, virtually every part of her, was proudly proclaimed--open and on display. *In this, she thought, I am truly a Taarakian.*

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Taarna turned toward the rose-colored circle and bowed her head. The time for her reconciliation had come. Time to obtain a blessed release—to relinquish the tight constriction in her heart, to extinguish the smoldering embers of anger that she had stoked for years. She closed her eyes and the prayer came shooting up from deep within her, free of distraction.

Lord, I am sorry. Sorry that I blamed you for Kanei's and Cynane's death; sorry that I condemned you for the loss of my kinsmen. I know that you are love, and that from you no evil can come. I was a fool to think otherwise, wrong to have abandoned my faith in you. I disown what I have said to you in my heart. I know that your ways are not my ways; that there must be some meaning to all of this that I cannot perceive. I was wrong to have cut myself off from you. How I missed you. I need you now more than ever. You are all that I have. You are all that I ever had, and in my blindness and pain I did not remember that. I do not know what will happen to me, but please, give me your grace; grant me your strength.

A great emotional burden left her. Silently she wept.

Taarna opened her eyes to a voice, deep and sonorous, which filled the chamber. She trembled at the sound of it. "To defend . . . this is the Pact. But

when life loses its value, and is taken for naught, then the Pact is . . . to *avenge*."

The circle mysteriously changed from dull stone to a bright, bluish white light, making her breath catch in her throat. Glowing on the floor before her, its strange surface seemed to become liquid, and rapidly changed to a deep, rich blue. Abruptly the surface was broken by the emerging pommel of a sword which, with a grating sound, rose slowly upwards. It possessed a perfectly straight, sharp blade. Ripples flowed outwards from it, and silver webs of fluid dripped from its curved cross-guard.

Eyes wide and heart pounding, her mouth a thin grim line, Taarna knelt on one knee and grasped the Sword of Taarak. To her pull the blade came free with a thrilling *zing* of tempered steel. Standing, she held the hilt with both hands and raised it slowly above her head, as ritual demanded. Above her, unseen, the statue glowed. She sensed something behind her, a terrifying gathering of force which made the hair on her body rise in a prickling sensation.

Lightning sprang from the statue's sword to the tip of hers, causing the blade glow with blue-white light, and a tremendous pulse of energy strummed through the weapon. Her body shuddered and her legs flexed. A corona of light appeared around the blade. The room turned white and she snapped her eyes closed, but still light pervaded her vision. Simultaneously the silence was shattered by a

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deafening thunderclap. The sword became an enormous tuning fork in her hands, throbbing and alive. She felt her hair lift from her shoulders and swirl violently about her head. Across the hall, Alata turned his head away in fear.

The thunderclap became a continuous roar. She opened her mouth and tried to breathe, but found it impossible; the air was being sucked out of her lungs.

The event crescendoed to a climax. She hardly thought it possible, but the light grew brighter and the sound increased to an almost unbearable level. Taarna felt as if she was being gripped by a giant, invisible hand, pulled stiff and taut by the sword. At a point when she feared she might simply fly apart, the energy suddenly departed in an expanding, wave-like burst. The sound reverberated through the air and then ceased, her hair fluttered back, and the room grew dark, once again illuminated solely by the shafts of natural sunlight. The floor before her was again plain stone. But the agitated ripples on the pool's surface silently attested to the power that had just been infused into the weapon now in her hands.

Taarna lowered the sword unsteadily and took a deep breath to regain control of her respiration. White circles lingered in her retinas. Her ears were ringing, her hands and forearms tingled fiercely, and her legs felt weak. For a brief time she thought she might faint, but the moment passed.

Taarna's heart leapt with joy. *The Sword had risen!* She scarcely believed it, yet it had happened: the proof was in her hands. And what had just occurred--in the entire history of the Taarakian race, such an event had never been recorded. She did not understand it, but it did not matter--she accepted it on the strength of her faith. She fell to her knees in utter obeisance.

She held the sword before her and looked at it with amazement. It was like a dream, to be holding the weapon that had been wielded centuries ago by the founder of her race. The sword was quite plain, with a smooth metal hilt, and a simple, golden crossguard. The blade was flawless--perfectly balanced and weighted, razor-sharp. There was not a nick or a scratch on it. It fit into its scabbard like a hand fits a glove.

Suddenly Alata was with her, alighting on the pedestal, opening his beak and emitting a loud screech. He behaved like Taarna now felt: spiritually renewed, full of life and energy; courageous. With a quick movement she was into the saddle, and without direction the animal turned and launched himself into flight. He skimmed a few feet over the broad ramp she had ascended only a few minutes, but now what seemed like hours, ago. Together they flew rapidly over the water, slipped through the portal, and the bird pulled them strongly up, up toward the sun far above.

Chapter X

Destruction

Rising columns of smoke signaled the devastation of Kraan long before the city could be seen over the horizon. She had ridden straight from the Sanctuary toward Kraan, climbing to a height she considered proof against missiles. Her heart sank at the sight of the large, billowing black smudges, and her apprehension and dismay grew stronger as she approached the settlement.

Flying over the city on the upwind side, her anxiety became alarm at the extent of the destruction. Whole buildings which she had known for years had been reduced to smoking piles of rubble. Fires raged uncontrollably in many residential areas; fanned by the wind, they greedily consumed the small homes. The complete stillness made the situation even more disturbing; she detected no movement on the streets below. From the number of broken and bloody bodies that littered the ground she concluded that everyone had been killed. She had been too late to save the life of even one person. She felt hollow and cold.

The spectacular architectural beauty of the Council Chambers had not escaped destruction. The top of the dome, which had once been its most impressive feature, was now entirely gone. She was easily able to guide Alata into the gigantic, roofless chamber.

Only the floor and portions of the walls were now recognizable as the bird touched down. The beautiful spiral stairway, and the spectacular dais to which it had led, had been reduced to broken shards of stone, scattered across the floor. The richly detailed supports around the circumference of the chamber were now jagged fingers pointing mindlessly into the sky.

She walked silently among the ruins, her mind reeling, her gut churning. Not a single soul had survived. The council members had been repeatedly stabbed. From their slumped and bloody forms protruded almost every imaginable form of weapon. The brutality was staggering, even to her. She felt flushed and nauseated, not only by the level of violence, but by her utter failure to protect any of them.

At last she found the Elder's remains. Her eyes widened and her mouth fell open at the deliberate cruelties that had been inflicted upon him. The bloody stains contrasted sharply with the whiteness of his robe. His severed head lay several feet from his supine body, intermittent smears and pools of dark red on the floor appearing to connect the two.

The sight of this final indignity was devastating, and she suddenly wished herself dead. Her stomach conceded defeat, and with a painful spasm she abruptly vomited the contents of her breakfast onto the dusty floor. She stood doubled over with hands on hips, eyes watering, and was

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racked by a violent series of dry heaves. When the episode finally passed she spit, wiped her mouth, and availed herself of her canteen before returning to the desecrated corpse.

Looking more carefully at his body, she saw something glinting in his hand. She stooped down and observed a medallion, its leather strap clutched in his stiffening fingers. Frowning, she pulled it free and studied it closely. It was heavy, and made of base metal plated with nickel. It had been stamped with a strange reverse-Z symbol. She reflected on her extensive knowledge of local cultures, but did not recognize it.

Seething with rage, she stood, clasped the amulet close to her breast, and looked up at the sky through the jagged ruins of the dome. Her duty was clear. Face set like flint, she mounted the bird, and they were off to begin the search.

Chapter XI

Confrontation

Reason more effectively opposes evil when anger ministers at her side.

--Gregory the Great, MORALIA IN JOB

The bartender watched the three men with concern out of the corner of his eye. They had been in the bar for over two hours, and were quite drunk. Their bats, tied up outside, occasionally made grunts and low snarling sounds.

He was a heavy set man in his late fifties. His waist, covered by a graying apron, protruded over his beltline, the product of years of excessive consumption and little exercise. His salt and pepper hair was shaved from the back and sides of his head. His neck was hidden under the wattles of fat which hung below his chin. His eyes were deeply set in his fleshy face.

He had been the proprietor of the frontier bar for almost ten years. Many strange people had walked through the door, and from time to time, dangerous, violent men had frequented his establishment. But these three were particularly disturbing. They were big-boned, muscular and tall, and wore high leather boots, gauntlets, and leather

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armor. One of them, whom he took to be of higher rank, had a steel cuirass and a single metal couter. All of them had green-tinted skin and filmy, yellowish cataracts in their eyes. They seemed sociopathic; he felt they would just as soon kill him as give him the time of day.

From the snippets of conversation, they were cavalrymen from a roving band of nomads who had come up somewhere from the south. It sounded as though the rest of the group were occupying a dilapidated transfer station near a ridge of mountains to the west. From some of the locals he had heard talk of strange things going on in the mountains, stories of a greenish light which had appeared a few nights ago.

Curiously, the troopers had seemingly limitless amounts of money. After coming in they had not wasted time in taking some prostitutes into the back rooms. But when they were finished, the women, for reasons unknown, had not returned to the bar.

The afternoon crowd gradually increased as people trickled in from work. A group of regulars sat playing cards a few feet from the stage where the band was playing. An usurer, universally despised by everyone in the village, sat on a stool at the bar nursing a drink, and a grizzled herdsman lounged in the far corner beneath a boar's head mounted on the wall.

The barroom sported garish decor, with green walls and red and orange fixtures. Over the bar itself,

tasteless and gauche, was the sculpted body of a woman, feet merging into the frame surrounding the mirror on the wall, arms becoming posts which ran down to the countertop.

As the band grew louder, one of the three troopers grabbed a patron sitting on a stool to his left and threw him out the swinging doors and onto the stoop. He swaggered out after the smaller man, delivered a kick to his ribs, then straddled him and began pummeling his face. The bartender kept drying his glasses, wisely deciding not to interfere.

Abruptly, the beating ceased. The patron's head thunked onto the steps as the distracted trooper relinquished his grasp. He appeared to be leering at someone.

The batwing doors were suddenly thrust open, and a woman stepped into the room. The bartender did not change his studied aplomb, but he watched her with interest. Others, who had had more to drink, unabashedly turned their heads to stare.

She was strikingly beautiful, with a well-proportioned body barely concealed beneath an outlandish red and black outfit. The trooper loomed in the doorway behind her, grinning and staring. There were a few catcalls and whistles, to which she paid no attention.

As she approached, the other two troopers jumped the usurer sitting between them. The three of

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them fell to the floor behind the far side of the bar, grunting and struggling.

The woman turned and stood directly before the bartender. For the first time, he realized how tall she was and caught her grim expression, which was marked by a downturned mouth and furrowed brow. Her direct, unfriendly gaze contrasted oddly with her revealing costume, creating in him an unsettling mixture of apprehension and lust. He wanted to let his eyes drift down to her chest, and even further, but he checked himself. She said nothing but only signaled with three fingers, and he promptly set out a mug and flask.

Taarna sat down at a table and poured herself a drink. It had been easy to determine who the bat riders were; the ornamentation on their saddlebags had matched the medallion. She studied them carefully, looking for weapons and gauging their strength and armor. They all appeared drunk, and she could not see that they bore arms.

Having finished with the usurer, the leader of the group nudged his companion and grinned. "Hey . . . a new one," he said in a gravelly voice, looking at Taarna. The three of them drifted over to congregate around her table.

"Where you from, baby?" he asked. She said nothing in reply, merely raising her glass to drain it. But her left hand slipped beneath the table to unfasten the strap which secured her sword in its scabbard.

"Doesn't talk much, does she?" remarked one of the three.

"She doesn't have to talk for what I want to do with her," responded the leader. "Com'on, baby, let's see what's under there."

As he reached over to pull down the fabric covering her breast, Taarna swung her heavy glass around and struck the leader squarely in the nose. He uttered a surprised grunt and fell backwards. The music came to a discordant halt and the musicians and patrons, now quite nervous, turned to watch..

The leader sat up, touching the blood running from his shattered nose with surprise. "Hey . . . she's tough," he said thickly as he regained his feet.

"Maybe she wants to fight!" said the tallest one, cracking his knuckles in anticipation.

At this, Taarna was on her feet, arms out, hands flexed. A cold, familiar mantle of objectivity settled over her; in an instant she became sharply focused, poised to confront and destroy. The trooper who had followed her in replied in a low, dangerous voice, "Maybe she wants to take us all on." And with that, he grabbed the edge of the table and threw it aside with a crash.

The bartender stood frozen behind the bar, shot glass and towel forgotten in his hands. He watched with alarm as the leader and the tall trooper advanced, towering over the woman and blocking his

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view. When they were very close, he heard the sound of metal drawing on metal and saw a silver blur.

Suddenly, shockingly, the mens' heads were no longer attached to their bodies. The action had been perfectly executed: in one motion the woman had withdrawn the blade from its scabbard and swung at the precise height required to shear through the necks of both men. Their heads spun and fell to the floor to the horrified gasps of the onlookers. From the stumps ghastly fountains of arterial blood spouted into the air. Shoulders and chests soaked in red, the twitching, decapitated bodies rapidly slumped to the floor in an expanding puddle of blood.

The last trooper was immobilized with shock. He stood, idiotically staring at the woman with his mouth open. Drunkenly he raised his hand in a defensive gesture. As the bartender watched, he at last saw the blade; in an arc it snapped almost instantaneously from behind the woman's head around to the front. Four fingers departed the trooper's left hand and his decapitated head struck the floor with a sickening thud, rolled, and came to rest beneath a barstool, eyes staring vacantly at the ceiling.

There was complete silence in the room. In the sudden, frozen stillness, all eyes were upon her.

Taarna wiped her sword clean on the back of the last trooper, then returned it to her scabbard. She was not excited or breathing hard. Without a backward glance, she stepped over the bodies and

approached the bartender. As she drew near and fixed her gaze on the barkeep, he found himself involuntarily backing up.

With a quick gesture she silently threw the medallion down onto the counter, and at the same time grabbed him roughly by the shoulder, pulling his face down forcefully until it almost touched the table. Shaken and pale, he leaned back to find himself face to face with an angry Taarakian warrior. At last things had clicked in his mind; he understood who she was, and what she wanted. He was amazed, since he had thought the Taarakians had died out long ago.

He did not hesitate to tell her what he knew. "You'll find them over there, beyond the oasis," he croaked. "Towards the green glow."

Silently, she took the medallion and walked rapidly out the double doors, which squeaked shut behind her. The bartender turned and watched out the side window as she quickly tied the sheathed sword to her saddle, mounted her bird, and took off. From the Taarakian's abrupt and violent visit, he had a feeling in his gut that something out there had gone terribly, terribly wrong.

Chapter XII

Uncertainty

As they climbed high into the afternoon sky and headed towards the oasis, Taarna turned the bartender's words over in her mind. "Towards the green glow," he had said. What green glow? Was the enemy setting a fire? If so, what would burn to make such a light?

Studying the horizon, additional thoughts occurred to her. Why had the men looked so strange? Their yellowed eyes, their greenish skin . . . where were they from, and what had happened to them? Was there some association between their deathly appearance and the green glow?

These ponderings were subsumed by the more immediate question of how she was going to accomplish her mission. It was a dilemma she had been struggling with since she had been summoned.

If she found the barbarians, she could not simply fly in and start swinging. She could kill a handful of them, perhaps, but she would surely be overwhelmed and slain within a few minutes. Was this what was being asked of her? Such an approach would take courage, but it seemed clumsy and simple-minded.

But what were the alternatives? She could try to locate their camp surreptitiously and begin a campaign of stealth to kill them in one's or two's, but this also presented problems.

First, it was not easy to locate an opposing army without being detected by scouts or sentries. Anyone with even a rudimentary military mind would post pickets, and these barbarians also had bat-riding cavalry. They would make scouting with Alata very difficult.

Second, although the Sword of Taarak was extraordinary, it still required closure with an opponent. Limiting her attacks to one or two men at a time, however, would present few fruitful opportunities. And if she was unfortunate enough to encounter three or more men at one time, the odds against her would increase dramatically; she would likely be brought down by a crossbow or other missile.

Third, even if she successfully commenced such a campaign, the longer it went on, the more difficult it would be to sustain. She was by now far, far from her home. She lacked the supplies needed to sustain herself and her bird in the wilderness for an extended period. The enemy would heighten their security and consolidate their forces, making sniping attacks harder. They would also post scouts or pay spies to maintain watch at the local settlements, where she would likely go for food, water, and supplies. She would probably be able to keep attacks

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up for a few weeks or even a month, but eventually she would be caught and killed.

Thinking the problem over, she began to conclude that the only way to deal an effective blow to this enemy would be to get close to their commander and slay him. She was confident that this band had a leader; the systematic and total devastation of Kraan and its citizens almost certainly reflected the will of a single man. If she could identify the opposing chieftain and kill him, it might effectively disband the group. Perhaps this was the key.

Whether she attempted a direct, open attack or used stealth, however, it was unlikely that she would be able to identify the leader and get close to him while armed. An open assault precluded identification. An approach under concealment might make identification possible, but presented few chances of getting at the leader with a sword.

The futility of trying to solve this insolvable problem at last caused her to face a thought that had been lingering in the back of her mind: it was very likely that she would not survive this effort. She was probably going to die, plain and simple. She had not wanted to contemplate it; indeed, had avoided thinking about it. But any way that she looked at it, to find and destroy the barbarian chieftain by herself was such an imposing task that it almost certainly would entail her own death.

Confronting the notion of her own death upset her greatly. She would not swerve from her duty, but she considered herself young and had a strong instinct for survival, having struggled through more than her share of war and death. She wanted to live.

The impotency Taarna felt from her inability to discern a suitable course of action, combined with the seemingly inescapable conclusion of her death, caused tears of frustration to well up in her eyes. Her vision doubled, then blurred, and her eyes stung in the wind. She wiped the tears away angrily, despising the feeling of weakness, but she knew she was not in the right frame of mind to do anything. So, frustrated and discouraged, she abruptly urged Alata down. They landed in a narrow, rocky ravine. The bird looked at her uncomprehendingly as she tied him to a withered tree root.

Feeling desperately alone and in need of help, she angrily drew the Sword from its scabbard and thrust it sharply into the parched earth. Kneeling before it, she carefully grasped the blade and rested her forehead on the crossguard. She closed her eyes to the soothing coolness of the steel.

Facing the most serious challenge of her life, Taarna prayed fervently. Tears continued to run down her cheeks, but she ignored them. She asked many questions: I understand my duty, but how? Who is this enemy, and how can I defeat him? What do You want of me? How can I know and accomplish Your will? What happened in the Sanctuary? Why did I receive this weapon? Am I going to die?

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After a time, Taarna's questioning ended. The tears from her closed eyes ceased; her throat no longer felt swollen and hot; her breathing became slow and regular. The wind blew softly through the faded rushes and her hair rustled about her face, comforting her. Her mind grew quiet and still. Motionless she drifted, listening in silence and searching for her faith. And finally, in the dark center of her innermost being, an answer came:

Daughter, I love you; I claim you as my favored one.

Do not be fearful or discouraged, for I shall be with you; I shall not fail or forsake you.

Be strong, be resolute, and a path shall be there; unto you it shall be a straight way.

You will know when to use the gift I have given you; for my light within you will dispel the darkness, and you will glorify my name.

Taarna rested, contemplating these words in the depths of her heart. After a time, she stood and resheathed the sword. Be resolute and choose a straight path, he had said. *So be it.*

Chapter XIII

Capture

When a man who has set his will neither on dying nor upon living at any cost, comes into the presence of the tyrant, what is there to prevent him from being without fear? Nothing.

-- Epictetus, DISCOURSES

As Taarna approached the oasis on her bird, she saw it at last. The peak of the highest mountain on the range beyond the oasis had been destroyed. In its place a glowing, green sphere was lodged deep within the rock. Although only a portion of the object was visible above the craggy precipice, it clearly had monumental dimensions.

She experienced a piercing instant of heart-stopping recognition. It was a moment unlike any she had ever known; a moment when one's nightmare, never thought to be possible, is suddenly realized. She sensed innately that this Thing—this thought turned reality--was immeasurably ancient and evil, and that it had been the author of Kraan's annihilation.

Some of her questions, about what had occurred in the Sanctuary and why, were now answered. This was no longer about her destruction of mere men, but about a confrontation with Evil

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itself—the Adversary, *her* Adversary. Her deepening awareness of the prodigal task laid before her caused a visceral shiver to run down her spine.

Her distress, which had the power to overmaster and emasculate her resolve, did not last. Taarna found her emotions transformed instead, as if by some mysterious act of grace, into an immense, pitiless anger. The sphere had been responsible for the destruction of thousands of innocent lives, lives that she had sworn to protect, and was now bound to avenge. It was an object to be hated, despised, and somehow, defeated. She held onto her anger, welcoming it; for the familiar, frozen deadness it created in her heart, as when killing work was at hand, was infinitely preferable to the incapacitating terror only a razor's edge away.

As she passed beneath a natural arch which spanned the pass, a large net suddenly descended from above. It was cleverly weighted, and although she attempted to turn Alata from his path, it was too late. They flew squarely into it, and within seconds the corners were drawn up, trapping them.

Alata squawked forlornly as they swung back and forth, the energy of their forward momentum rapidly dissipating. Taarna was pressed tightly between his body and the rough cords, and found it hard to draw a breath. She looked up and saw a dozen men working the ropes and pulleys, lowering them down.

She breathed easier when Alata's weight was transferred to the ground. Surrounding her were more men who shared their appearance with the troopers in the bar. One of them, who had a beard and wore torn clothing, grabbed her hair roughly and pulled it up to reveal her neck. She knew what he was looking for and grimaced in pain. A look of incredulity came over his face. He turned and ran from her. The others circled around, looking at her with curiosity.

The barbarian chieftain had seen the capture from a distance and was conferring with one of his captains about it when the man rushed up to him. "A Taarakian! We have captured a Taarakian!" he announced.

The leader was surprised at this, but did not let his reaction show. Instead, he reached out and seized the man by the neck with his mechanical arm, forcing him to his knees. He glared at him and sneered. "But the Taarakian race is dead . . . *extinct*," he replied.

With some difficulty, the man choked out, "But she had the marks, your Holiness . . . I saw them." He clasped his hands together, begging for release, clawing at the leader's lapels.

Taarna did bear the bilateral marks of her race, red stylized swords behind her jaw and below the ear. She had received them upon her initiation as a full-fledged warrior.

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The barbarian leader was silent for a moment. Then he released the man, who fell prostrate, rubbing his neck.

"Have her bound, and washed. Then . . . bring her to me," he ordered, a grin creeping over his face. He turned and began to walk away.

"But what of the bird?" the man inquired.

The leader turned and looked at him flatly. "Kill it."

Chapter XIV

Rack

*Watch ye, stand fast in the faith, quit you like men,
be strong.*

-- I CORINTHIANS 16:13

Taarna had never been captured before, and the next few hours were to be the most degrading and humiliating of her life. The soldiers cautiously opened the net and threw ropes first about Alata's neck, then around hers. Several men held the bird and bound his legs while she was dragged out of the net and thrown to the ground. The rough cord cinched tight around her gorge, nearly choking her. A man sat on her back and held her while another bound her wrists. Then she was unceremoniously stripped and shoved, stumbling, through an annular passageway to a small, dank room. Like the rest of the complex, it was dark and decrepit.

A massive, foreboding rack awaited her. It squatted in the middle of the room, an ancient abomination of torture realized in stone, wood and iron. By a handwheel bolted to a vertical screw, its height could be adjusted to apply relentless tension. Four large, metal eyelets were affixed to its front. Blackish brown bloodstains--mute testimony to the anguish of past victims--dotted its heavy beams.

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She was led to it, turned, and pulled spread-eagle as each of her limbs was tightly bound to the iron loops. The rope around her neck was then removed, and she gasped in great, ragged breaths.

At first her arms and legs were slack. But then one of the men disappeared behind her, and with a rusty, grinding sound, the rack was slowly raised and she was pulled taut. The strain of the rack and the weight of her body quickly made her wrists ache, and her hands began to tingle and go numb. She tried to maintain the circulation by opening and closing them. Pain blossomed in her feet and ankles as the sinewy fibers bit down into her skin.

Another soldier lugged in a large pail of cloudy, brackish water. He stopped before her and heaved the entire bucket into her face. As she coughed and gagged he withdrew a rag from his pocket and began wiping her down, wrenching her hair as he wrung the water from it. With obvious relish he lingered at her breasts and pubis as the others stood by, leering. Yet, perhaps fearing punishment by his master, the man went no further.

They left the room, and for a period of time she was by herself, alone with her pain. She looked around at the disgusting surroundings. From cracks in the walls water leached down the broken, vertical surfaces. Moss and mildew grew in the corners, and here and there climbed toward the ceiling. There was a steady drip, drip of water. Insects crawled secretly along the musty surfaces. She heard the distant shouts and activities of the soldiers. The wind blew

through the adjoining passageway, making a low moaning sound.

She tried to think of something, anything other than where she was and what horrors awaited her, but could not blot out the bleak surroundings and her wretched situation. She felt abandoned.

She opened her eyes at the sound of approaching footsteps. Two large, burly men entered the chamber. The smaller of the two—he had a scar across his right cheek which terminated in a shriveled, empty eye socket—motioned to the other, who clambered up to the handwheel on top.

“He heard that she was too comfortable,” the maimed one announced to his companion, a sly, knowing grin touching his lips. He reached up and tugged on the rope which bound her left arm, but was unable to move it; it was as rigid as steel. “Yes, much too slack.” Smiling, he gave the nod.

Slowly, the rack exceeded what Taarna had mistakenly thought were the limits of her capacity to stretch. In her lower back she felt her spine unload and straighten, the vertebrae decompressing from one another. She could only utter a *huh-huh-huh* sound—a fear-filled panting noise—as her mind tried to deny what was happening. She mouthed a moan, but no sound came out, and she cursed her impotence of voice in the presence of an overwhelming need to scream.

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The rusty wail continued at regular intervals as the hands grasped and turned, grasped and turned. The muscles in her legs and arms cried out in agony. *Oh my God please no more please—*

She felt and heard a *pop* of cartilage in her left shoulder, the one she had dislocated over ten years ago. The maimed one must have heard it too, for he gestured to the other to stop.

He leaned forward and feigned interest in her contorted features. "That's just about right," he proclaimed. "Can't have her *too* damaged." He leaned even closer, and she smelled the foulness of his breath. His eye crawled over her. "Too bad you're so pretty. Well . . . that will change."

The other climbed down, and together they grabbed hold of the rack. With grunts and complaints at the excessive weight of the device, they wheeled her from the room and down the hallway.

Like a trophy Taarna was brought into a large hall before the barbarian chieftain, who sat in a chair on the far wall. He was flanked by two large, feral, rat-like creatures which made guttural growling sounds as the rack creaked to a stop. He scratched the head of one absent-mindedly while watching Taarna with interest. A half dozen or so guards stood at intervals around the chamber, and off to the side in the shadows stood one of his lieutenants, feet apart, arms crossed, watching emotionlessly.

He stood and approached her, his heavy boots clanking on the plate metal floor. She managed to glare at him, but given her vulnerability and utter helplessness, he merely found this amusing. Yet, part of him secretly feared her gaze; clearly, given the slightest opportunity she would have leapt upon him and torn his eyes out with her bare hands. His enormous arrogance, however, allowed him to easily squelch this unsettling notion.

"So *this* is the Taarakian," he announced at last with a chuckle, hands on hips. Quite a prize, he thought to himself. He reached out and grabbed her cheek. Carefully avoiding her mouth, he forcibly turned her head to examine her neck and confirm her marks. "Somehow, I thought it would be more . . . *difficult* to capture a Taarakian," he said contemptuously.

He expected her to reply, but she said nothing, and her expression did not change. Her defiant attitude angered him, but he was not surprised by it—the Taarakians, after all, were legendary warriors from the northern country, renowned for their steely resolve.

It was the fact that she was a woman, coupled with his pride and sadistic nature, that led him to the mistake of not killing her.

"My whips," he said softly. He would break her silent defiance, crush her loathsome spirit. When he was through with her, she would look at him with nothing but fear, and his perverse desire to see that

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fear was worth keeping her alive--for awhile. His lieutenant dutifully stepped forward, and the heavy weight of a whip dropped into his raised hand.

Taarna's hands felt leaden as the barbarian stood before her; there was no more feeling left in them. Her entire body was a throbbing mass of pain. She tried gamely to take his measure, but she did not find much comfort in that--he would obviously be a formidable opponent in combat, assuming she ever had the chance to fight him.

She had guessed that she would probably be flogged, or worse, but imagining it and actually seeing the long, thick whip in his hands, with its several tails, were very different things. Her breath caught in her throat as she waited for the first lash, the dreadful knowledge of her utter inability to twist, turn, or somehow escape bearing down upon her.

The flogging began.

The pain was astounding, traveling from her fingertips to her toes. From top to bottom her body quivered in every nerve. Where the whips stuck she felt as though she was being impaled with a knife or spear. The time between each stroke seemed interminable, yet the next blow came too soon. She was unable to scream, but in her extremis she bit her tongue, and soon her own blood filled her mouth, choking her. She could feel the sticky wetness of her blood on her abdomen and legs, and the ever-increasing icily painful spots where her skin was being flayed open.

The whipping was not over quickly; after thirty-five lashes, she lost count. The time since the punishment had begun seemed like the only period of her life. She felt as if she had always lived in pain and torture, and that her lifetime before this awful day was a dream long past. Despite every effort it became impossible for her to think of anything except the next blow.

Between lashes, with an inner voice, she began to beseech her god in terrified and broken fragments.

God you are not with me I am forsaken--

*--I cannot continue, I--I cannot be strong for
You any more--*

*--No more no more no more, please let this end,
let me die O kill me now--*

The barbarian leader grew increasingly frustrated at her silence, and began to whip her harder and faster. *Beg, scream, say something, you Taarkanian whore! Why did you come here when you've no chance of doing anything!?* At last, he could no longer restrain himself. Chest heaving, he threw down the whip, wrenched off his helmet, and struck her with it. The heavy metal connected solidly with her skull and her head reeled back, then flopped sideways to her chest.

Taarna's body hung limply as a guard finally lowered the rack. The barbarian chieftain looked on

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with pleasure, gratified with his handiwork. What had been preserved in beauty over the lifetime of a young woman he had laid to waste in forty-five minutes. His boots and pants were flecked with blood, and thin strips of flesh lay about his feet. He grabbed her by the hair and lifted up her head to stare into her unconscious face, but she did not stir. Blood and spit rimmed her lips and ran down her chin from the corners of her mouth.

He remained impressed by the fact that she had neither screamed nor cried out. He could recall no previous victim of his torture who had stayed completely silent throughout the brutal experience. Lips pursed, with a dismissive gesture he yanked her head down roughly and relinquished his grasp.

When your arms and legs are yanked out you will scream, he said to her silently. *I will make you.*

Chapter XV

Escape

Taarna awoke lying prone on a rocky prominence in a large, dim pit. Head hanging over the side, she could see more ledges below her, but the bottom was veiled in deep shadows.

Her head throbbed mightily, and her tongue was swollen and dry inside her mouth. The copper taste of her blood lingered in the recesses around her teeth and gums. She longed for water.

Her body hurt so much that at first she was incapable of movement. For some interminable period she tried to remain frozen and breathe as little as possible. At last she found the willpower to pull herself to her hands and knees.

It was then that she realized the extent of her injuries. Her breasts, abdomen, and thighs were smeared with dried blood and dirt. Her wrists and ankles were severely abraded from the ropes which had bound her so tightly. She had a large, misshapen bruise over the left side of her torso from her fall into the pit. Breathing was painful, and after gingerly feeling the area she realized that her ninth rib was broken.

The pit was filled with a powerful, almost overwhelming smell of death and corruption. The closest source of the stench was a moldering pile of

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bodies on the ledge near the pit's wall. She estimated that there were twelve to fifteen of them, festering in varying states of decomposition. It appeared that most of them had been killed by arrows or crossbow bolts and then dumped over the edge. The sweet, sickening miasma brought back memories of battlefield carnage that she had witnessed, bodies of enemy dead bloating in the sun.

The ledge was thirty feet from the top of the pit, the rim of which was studded with large spikes. Above them she saw a handful of soldiers gazing down at her. As she looked up, one of the men dropped her clothes over the side. They landed in a tangle beside her.

From the shallow angle of the light slanting into the hole, she guessed that it was now quite late in the afternoon. She was very hungry, and sitting down for her morning meal seemed an eternity ago.

The palpable atmosphere of despair settled over her like a gray, smothering blanket. There was no possibility of climbing to the opening above. Even if she climbed atop the corpses, she would still be more than twenty feet from the top. The moist, slippery walls of the pit offered few projections to scale them, assuming the unlikely possibility that she could do so undetected. The nearest ledge below her was much farther down, and there was no promise of an exit below.

The walls of her prison were not uniformly solid. Rather, they were pocked with innumerable

holes and caves of varying size and depth. An abundance of dank, foul water ran from many of them, trickling quietly in weird, irregular courses down into the darkness. As she grew accustomed to the silence, she noticed that infrequently she could detect sounds of unseen life, slithering in the network of caves.

I am lost; this is the end, she thought hopelessly. *How stupid I was to fly straight into capture. I deserve to die here, in secret.* This way, she thought, no one would know how the last Taarakian had disgraced herself and her people.

Taarna heard footsteps and scuffling above. She looked up and saw a man being hoisted over the precipice. He was deliberately thrown out into the pit so that he would miss her ledge. In a shocking instant he tumbled past her, screaming, his arms flailing. There was neither time nor opportunity to act. Eyes wide, she watched him fall out of sight, then heard the chilling impacts as he struck unseen obstacles far below. She was filled with pity and horror. A chorus of jeers and laughter followed from above, and the barbarians smirked down at her.

Witnessing this cruel and senseless death banished all feelings of self-pity and drove her to action. *I'm still alive*, she thought. *That has to be worth something.* Slowly, stiffly, she began to put on her gear. Doing so was exquisitely painful, but she bent her will to the process and tried to master the pain. Her mental and physical conditioning helped her to

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regain movement. As she dressed, she heard a familiar sound: the screech of her bird.

Some distance away, the barbarians were having a difficult time putting the animal down. Three men were trying to hold him with ropes, while two others prepared to kill him with a large, bolt-firing weapon.

"Hold it still and I'll put an arrow through it's head!" shouted the gunner. He looked through his sights and found his target. He squeezed the trigger and fired, but he was premature--his companions did not yet have control. Beating his wings furiously, Alata jerked to the side, and at the last instant one of the soldiers was pulled into the path of the missile. It struck him squarely in the back.

With only two holding the ropes, the bird was able to break free. He rushed at the gunner and his helper, knocking them down before they could fire again. Soaring into the air, he pulled the last two men along behind. They continued to hang onto the ropes until Alata flew low over a sturdy pipe. They struck it forcefully and were flung to the ground.

Taarna had just finished pulling on her boots when to her surprise, Alata suddenly appeared over the pit, into which he dove with a loud, courageous cry.

In an act remarkably agile for someone so battered, Taarna leapt off the edge. She relied entirely on instinct, having no time to gauge time or distance.

For a heart-stopping instant she was suspended in space, her body out over the pit. She strained for the horn of the saddle, and then suddenly she *had* it, and she fell into the seat as the bird passed. The sudden jolt caused pain to shoot through her from the broken rib. She was able to find the reins, however, and at her signal Alata powered his way upwards to freedom.

The chieftain heard the commotion with the bird, and turning, saw Taarna and her mount climb into the sky. He was shocked at her escape, and he sensed the displeasure of his new master at this unanticipated development. His consternation quickly turned to rage. "Mount the bats!" he screamed. "I want her dead!"

The cavalymen scrambled to their mounts, and shortly thereafter an explosion of red and brown bats filled the evening sky, their hideous screeches and squeals ringing through the air.

Taarna was relieved to see that the sword was still sheathed on the saddle; the fools had not bothered to seize it. Her instincts told her to head for the mountain with the green sphere. Its glow pulsed against the evening sky.

The bat riders climbed rapidly, and soon were directly behind her. She saw them coming and urged Alata to fly faster, and she pulled the animal up and from side to side evasively. But no abrupt turns were possible because her pursuers would be able to cut across her arc and get even closer.

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The maneuvers proved of no avail; in less than a minute from her escape from the pit, her pursuers were within range. Taarna heard popping sounds, and suddenly heavy bolts were flying past her. One at last found its mark, striking the bird in the neck at a shallow angle, piercing its trachea. Alata faltered and went down, shrieking pitifully.

They plummeted into a small, rocky canyon situated on an elevated plain near the base of the mountain. The bird struck and glanced off the canyon wall, no longer flying but falling, and Taarna was dismounted. They both slammed violently into the ground, narrowly avoiding giant shards of green volcanic glass which ringed the canyon floor. The impact knocked her unconscious. Her liver and spleen ruptured, and blood began to flow into her abdomen. She fell behind her bird and was motionless.

After a few moments, she regained her senses. Her vision doubled and the world spun sickeningly. The bird lay cast over upon his side, breathing heavily, pink frothy fluid oozing from his mouth. The bolt was still deeply imbedded in the animal's neck, and it twitched as the bird struggled to breathe. She angrily pulled it out and threw it away.

Chapter XVI

Fight

Fortitude presupposes vulnerability; without vulnerability there is no possibility of fortitude. To be brave actually means to be able to suffer injury. Because man is by nature vulnerable, he can be brave.

-- Josef Pieper, THE FOUR CARDINAL VIRTUES

Taarna looked up to the sound of air rushing over wings. The barbarian chieftain swooped into the canyon on a large, brown bat, his red cloak flapping about him.

As he dismounted, hundreds of his soldiers appeared on the rim of the canyon high above. Taarna glanced up at them. They thronged around brandishing their weapons, making her feel trapped and helpless. Watching avidly and confident in their warlord, they anticipated a short, one-sided spectacle. The Taarakian woman had been whipped and shot down from the air; she would now meet a quick, bloody end.

Taarna struggled to her feet. She was relieved that none of her limbs were broken. Something inside her had been seriously injured, however, because there was an exquisitely tender, swollen area just above her pelvis. The broken rib continued to make breathing difficult and painful.

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She retrieved the sword from where it had fallen, several yards from the bird. Watching her opponent, she tried to ignore the disheartening crowd ringing the canyon and concentrate for the coming fight.

The barbarian leader turned away from her briefly and bent over. When he swung about, she saw that he had changed his prosthetic hand. The fingers and thumb had been replaced by thin, hooked slivers of metal. He flicked his arm quickly at the elbow, producing the high whine of an electric motor. The metal slivers clicked and whirred into life, spinning so rapidly that they could no longer be seen.

The chieftain swung his arm at a vertical pipe attached to pumping equipment near the canyon wall. There was a metallic *ching* as the blades cut it cleanly in two. He grinned at her malignantly and advanced.

As they circled each other warily, Taarna assumed a middle guard stance, holding her sword with both hands. The barbarian was large and powerful, and was using a weapon which would be lethal if he got in close. He did not appear particularly agile, however, and he had no shield. She would have to rely on quick footwork to keep him at an effective distance.

Unfortunately, she felt increasingly sluggish. The depletion of blood into her abdominal cavity began to make her dizzy, and she shook her head,

trying to stay alert. She knew that if she did not kill him quickly, she would lose the ability to fight. If that happened, she would most certainly die. Will galvanized by a raw instinct for survival, she gathered her strength and focused all attention on her opponent.

A familiar, timeless minuet of death began. Taarna took the offensive, trying to strike, but the barbarian, also unencumbered by armor, proved more nimble than she had anticipated, avoiding her blows with rapid side steps or passes backward. At times he even dared to pass forward when she attacked, forcing her to evade his whirling blades. The seconds slipped by, accompanied only by the sounds of their mortal struggle: the shuffling of their boots on the hard-packed surface; the quiet swipe and whistle of the sword; the droning of the mechanical blades; and the labored breathing of their deadly exertions, the barbarian's occasionally broken by grunts and forceful exhalations.

He continued to find her utter silence unnerving, and he was surprised by her agile and ferocious attacks. Knowing the brutal punishment she had suffered at his hands, he had not expected her to use the sword so skillfully; even in her weakened condition she could have dispatched the best of his warriors. She connected with his forearm, but it was a rising slice made weakly from her elbow, and the shallow cut inflicted little injury. At one point, he was alarmed by a rapid swordthrust which pierced his shoulder. It would have wounded him deeply, had he not instantly leapt back.

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Taarna panted heavily through clenched teeth, the stabbing pain from her broken rib continuing to plague her. She could feel her heart beating faster and faster in her chest. Her body, caked with dirt and sweat, throbbed with pain from the whipping and the falls, and her hair hung matted and damp. She sensed that she was rapidly tapping the last of her reserves. The chieftain, however, showed little sign of fatigue, and as the fight continued her strength ebbed, her precision waned, and the initiative slipped from her grasp.

Finally, as she brought her sword down in an overhead cut, the barbarian leader sidestepped in and around and struck her on the right arm. The pauldron flew off, its strap severed, and the attack left a gash across her upper arm. Blood quickly welled up in the wound and ran down toward her elbow. She could no longer raise her arm out from her body.

In the brief moment that her attention was drawn to the injury, the chieftain struck again, the spinning blades carving a deep trench through her left flank with a wet ripping sound. She gasped harshly in surprise and fell down heavily on one knee. The cut gaped open, and from the severed renal artery a powerful freshet of bright red blood spurted out, drenching her upper thigh and splashing onto the rocky soil. Instinctively she clamped her left hand against her side, trying to staunch the flow. Sounds of approval echoed off the canyon walls from the onlookers.

The barbarian leader paused as she looked up at him with a grimace. He smiled viciously. The Taarakian had proven quite formidable, but she was slowing down and losing control, and now he had seriously wounded her. He sensed that he stood on the threshold of victory; her end was near.

He brought his deadly weapon down, intending to slice off her sword arm at the shoulder, but she parried the blow, and the rotating scythes clattered harmlessly off the shoulder of her blade. To his surprise, in the same instant she lunged up and swung her sword around and over in a diagonal cut, hips and shoulders twisting to lend force to the blow. Without thinking, he parried with his mechanical hand.

The power of her strike sent a shock through his arm as the sword connected squarely with the prosthesis in a flurry of sparks. But as Taarna tried to draw back, she found her blade it firmly entrapped. She pulled hard, but the sword could not be freed. Seizing the advantage, the barbarian struck her in the face. Defenseless with her hands on the hilt of her sword, she thudded to the ground onto her stomach.

The chieftain removed Taarna's sword from his prosthesis and threw it over his shoulder. End over end it spun away. High on the mountaintop, the green sphere suddenly glowed brightly, accompanied by the soldiers' shouts and hoots of approval.

Taarna lay prostrate, her world gray and hazy. She was spent; she couldn't regain her feet. Her left

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waist was wet and exposed; her right arm was slick with blood. Suddenly, the barbarian seized her wounded arm, sending a stabbing bolt of agony through her shoulder girdle. His fingers dug in and he pulled her roughly onto her back. He kneeled and flicked his forearm, bringing the lethal device to life once more. Seizing her neck, he prepared to slice open her throat. Face a twisted mask of evil, he hissed, "*This time you die, Taarakian bitch!*"

At that instant the chieftain threw his head back and screamed. Pulling herself up on her elbows, Taarna saw that Alata had saved her life: he had bitten the leader's lower leg and was dragging him away.

The chieftain struggled to right himself and lashed out at the bird, cutting him repeatedly. The animal cried out in pain and terror and released him. Grabbing his wounded leg, he groaned and staggered to his feet. The bones below his knee were crushed; his foot dangled at an impossible angle.

The barbarian leader glanced up. He was startled to see the Taarakian standing before him with the pipe that he had cut off the pump. Before he could react, she struck him squarely on the side of the head, shattering his skull. Then she grabbed his prosthetic arm and with a sharp thrust, drove it into his chest. The silver amulet went flying as the razor-like blades cut through the sternum and into his heart, their circular motion slowing as Taarna forced them deeper.

The barbarian leader gagged grotesquely and slumped to his knees. His defeat had occurred so suddenly and completely that his dying mind could not grasp it. Her legs rigidly locked in a wide stance, Taarna stood over him, glaring. She released his arm and angrily cast aside his helmet. The last thing the chieftain saw was the Taarakian grimly draw her gloved fist back and strike him squarely in the face.

Taarna hit the chieftain with all of her remaining strength. His nasal bones shattered and were driven upwards into his brain. He flopped forward, lifeless, onto his face. His followers gasped in surprise, then murmured in consternation and wonder.

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Chapter XVII

Triumph

The Lord has made of me a sharp-edged sword and concealed me in the shadow of his arm; He made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me. You are my servant, he said to me, through whom I show my glory.

--Isaiah 49:2-3

Taarna stood alone in the canyon. An alarmingly copious amount of blood streaked down her left hip and thigh. It saturated her stocking and puddled in her boot. She tried to keep pressure on the flank wound to stop the bleeding, but the blood continued to ooze between her fingers. The area of unnatural cold expanded with her exsanguination, spreading icy fingers throughout her torso. Her breathing was labored, and waves of weakness and nausea washed over her.

She had defeated the barbarian chieftain, but this did not bring joy. Instead, she felt a dull emptiness, the physiological consequence of blood loss and impending shock. No emotions stirred within her at the sight of his fallen body; it now appeared as limp and harmless as some rags strewn on the ground.

Her legs felt weak and rubbery as she stumbled, bent over, toward the bird. Her exhaustion made her yearn to lie down next to him, but she feared that if she did so she would be unable to regain her feet, and the opportunity which now presented itself would pass unfulfilled.

Alata had retrieved her sword and was holding it in his mouth. Managing a small half-smile at his faithfulness, she took the sword. Then she stripped the saddle from his back; it no longer served any purpose, and the crippled animal could do without the weight.

She paused to look at the mountain and frowned. The warm air reverberated with its rumbling. The sphere glowed malignantly, and spasms of green lava were ejected from the crater in which it had come to rest. She looked down at the sword, grasped in her trembling hand. "My light within you will dispel the darkness," he had told her. Through the long travails of this day--which she now accepted as her last--she had come to understand what his words meant. She had reached the final point, and there was no looking back.

With some difficulty Taarna mounted the bird. She drew comfort from his warmth beneath her. Together they soared aloft into the darkening sky. As the animal painfully struggled to climb, she felt weary, yet oddly at peace. Nothing mattered now; there was no more self-doubt. She had fulfilled her duty, had been true to herself, and having done so,

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was now free. She was, and forever would be, a Taarakian warrior.

Doubled over on Alata, she held the sword and reins with her right hand and clutched her bloody waist with her left. She began to feel detached from herself, and her consciousness faded in and out, intermittently broken by darkness. The sword grew heavy in her hand, and it became harder to maintain her balance with her legs. As the weakness increased and her control slipped away, her head and shoulders bowed low, resting almost completely on Alata's neck.

Through the thickening veil of her faltering mind, the realization of her impending death finally struck home: *I am dying*. And notwithstanding the inner peace that she had felt moments before, with this thought she became deeply, viscerally fearful. She felt piercingly lonely, and afraid of her approaching oblivion; frightened of an impending blackness, the preordained destruction of her self; of her own *das Nichtige*, her unavoidable extinction. The end of her life arose at last--Death in the form of a terrifying, black void coming to consume her. She tried to overcome her terror, her hope of salvation a candle flame fluttering in a dark night's icy gale.

As they passed over the rim of the crater, the vast expanse of the green sphere was everywhere below them. It bathed them in its vivid emerald glow. "Taarna," it called to her at last. "Do not sacrifice yourself. You cannot . . . destroy . . . *me*." But now, Taarna barely heard its frightened, impotent

pleading. Dying, she sensed that she was crossing a final threshold, slipping beyond her life and into another, and the sphere's voice seemed faint and irrelevant. Its evil seemed small and petty, its words distant and unimportant to what was approaching for her.

Like a drowning swimmer's last struggle to keep head above water, with a spasmodic motion Taarna sat bolt upright, her head extended, back arched, mouth gasping. She swung the sword over her head and seized it with her left hand. The sharp blade bit deeply into her clenched fist. Alata, also plunging over the precipice of exhaustion, sensed her shift of weight and strained upward. Her last thought was only a partial one, broken by the unleashed power which consumed her: *Ah God, your will--*

On the ground far below, the barbarians looked up, startled. Above the mountain, a new star silently burst upon the night sky, an expanding wave of silver heralding its appearance. Far outshining the others, it glowed with a fierce white light, and descended toward the mountain. They heard the sphere's frightened denial and were struck with terror. Their master, whose power they had believed limitless, lay broken and prostrate, its designs overturned and dashed into ruins. The fiery, brilliant starburst fell implacably into the sphere, obliterating its surface in white.

* * *

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A period of blackness; then Taarna looked up. A brilliant sun shone down from a crystal clear, azure sky, brighter than the sun she could remember in her former life. She could feel the Sun in her mind. It was full of a great Love, and its rays, warm and inviting, ran straight through her.

She was astride Alata; the wind blew softly through her hair. When she looked down there was nothing but clouds as far as she could see, a thick blanket of puffy white which extended from horizon to horizon. But she knew that they were not real clouds, just as the Sun was not a real sun.

She noticed her forearms and hands. They were strangely colored, a pale ivory; and then she observed that her entire body was likewise gleamingly white and perfect, without mark or injury. No longer did she experience any pain, suffering, or loss, and no longer could she remember those things.

Looking about, she saw another bird descend from above to fly alongside in perfect formation with hers. Its body had also been glorified. Riding upon it, Kanei and Cynane smiled back at her. Together, they heeded the beckoning, golden rays and flew higher and higher, into the Sun.

*“Men’s curiosity searches past and future
And clings to that dimension. But to apprehend
The point of the intersection of the timeless
With time, is the occupation for the saint—
No occupation either, but something given
And taken, in a lifetime’s death in love,*

Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender."

– T. S. Eliot, *The Dry Salvages* (1941)

THE END