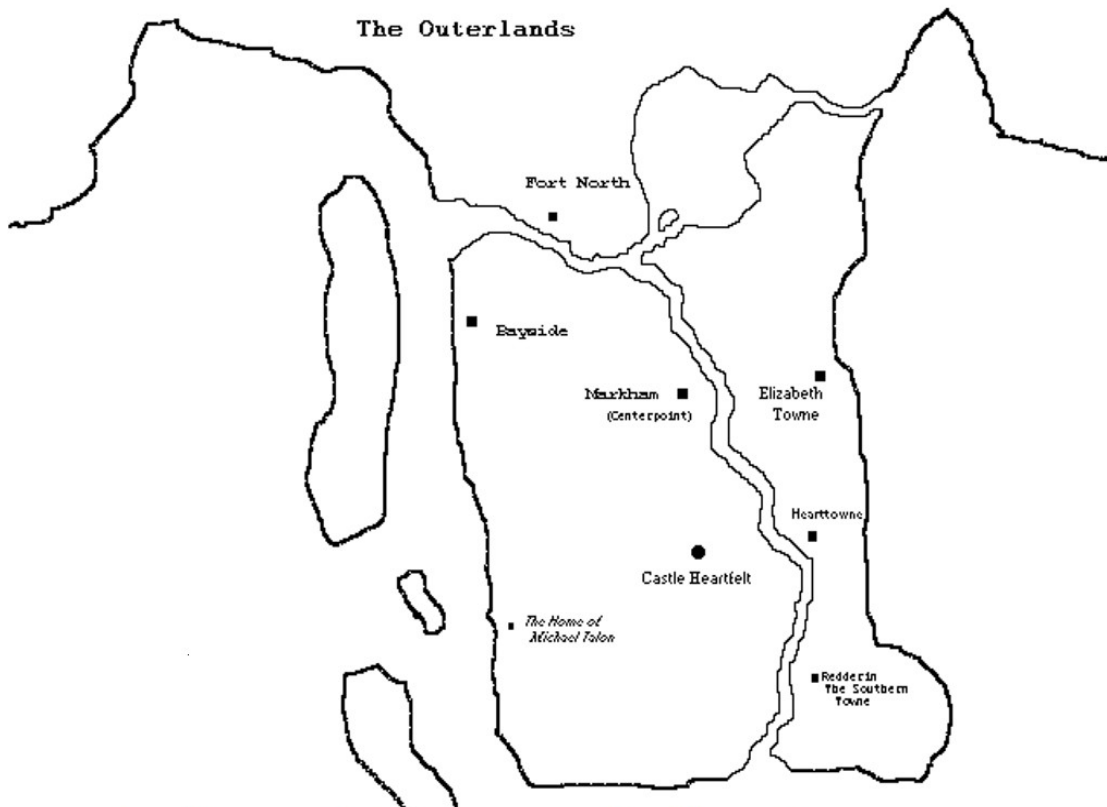


The Heartfelt Saga  
By Dustin De Felice  
Copyright 2011 Dustin De Felice  
Smashwords Edition, License Notes

Thank you for downloading this free ebook. Although this edition is a free book, it remains the copyrighted property of the author and may not be reproduced, copied and distributed for commercial or non-commercial purposes. If you enjoyed this book, please encourage your family, friends and others to download their own copy at [Smashwords.com](http://Smashwords.com) where they can also discover other works. Feel free to contact the author at [dustindefelice@yahoo.com](mailto:dustindefelice@yahoo.com) for more information and thank you for your support.



# The Heartfelt Saga

By Dustin De Felice

## Chapter 1

### Book 1: Prologue

*Many, many years ago, a small tribe embarked on a treacherous journey over the mountain ranges to the south of their village. For these people, crossing the mountain was not only dangerous; it was sacrilegious. But, the choice was not theirs.*

*Michael Heartfelt and his family were a small part of that expedition who took to the mountains in search of a new land, a new beginning. This family, the Heartfelts, was to forever change the land beyond the mountains.*

*Over the course of two centuries, this family united the vast land of Valerica under its vision. By the year 768, this young monarchy is ready to have its loyalty tested, its people pushed, and its ideals challenged.*

### **June 4th, 768; Moments before the end of the War of Occupation in Castle Heartfelt.**

“Sire.”

Sir Stamos turned upon hearing the voice and faced the running messenger. “Yes.”

The messenger slid to a stop and bowed to one knee. “I bring word from the Redderin Townesmen.” He presented a scroll in his outstretched hand with his head down.

Sir Stamos reached down and retrieved the scroll. He gently fingered the wax seal of the Redderin imprint and silently thanked the heavens. “Rise. We must bring this to the King!”

The messenger followed in Sir Stamos’ hasty retreat toward the King’s chamber as the hallway’s occupants dove to the side to allow them to pass. Sir Stamos turned the corner and arrived in front of the chamber. He took a moment to fix himself and knocked as the messenger fell in behind him.

After a brief moment Sir Stamos turned the doorknob and walked into the chamber. He quickly made his way towards the back of the enormous room and stopped about fifteen feet in front of the King and bowed. Moments later the messenger did the same.

King Frederick Heartfelt closed his conversation with his son, Prince Ty, and sat back in his chair. He absently rubbed his temple with his weathered hand and silently hoped this was good news. “What news do you bring, Edwin?”

Sir Stamos nodded and stood, looking the King in the eye. He nervously fingered the scroll hoping it was going to be good news. The King looked exceptionally tired and he wondered if the King had eaten in the last few days. His normally large frame had been shrinking since the day all this nonsense started almost two years ago.

Sir Stamos breathed in and approached the chair. “A messenger, sire. He arrived moments ago with this scroll. The scroll is from Redderin and Townesmen Schillings!” He handed it to the King and stepped back to wait

The King took a moment before opening the scroll and looked beyond Sir Stamos until his eyes fell upon the Redderin messenger. He was surprised at how young the man looked. His boots were caked in mud and his brow was covered in sweat. The messenger noticed the King’s stare and bowed his head in respect. The King nodded as the man bowed his head. The King’s attention went back to the scroll. He slowly broke the seal in an attempt to prolong the inevitable.

Sir Stamos forced himself to breathe as he watched the King’s eyes moving along each line. A breath escaped as the King finished reading. The lines on the King’s face softened as he sat back in his chair, while years of worry left his body. With only a brief pause, the King rose from his chair.

“Prince Ty, bring your sister to me.” The King couldn’t find any words to say more, so he walked to the window and paused.

Prince Ty nodded his head. He stood and made his way to the door. The Prince shrugged his shoulders at Sir Stamos, but didn’t question the order. He just disappeared out of the chamber.

As the door fell shut the King continued, “It’s over Edwin. It’s finally over.”

Sir Stamos thought he could see a tear escaping from the King’s eye, though the King was fixated on the horizon. Sir Stamos nodded to himself and felt the same relief washing over him.

The King abruptly turned and spoke. “Messenger.”

The Redderin messenger stood. “Yes, my lord.”

The King broke away from the window long enough to return to his chair. He seated himself and broke out a piece of parchment. The next few minutes he spent drafting a message. “Messenger, what is your name?”

“Michael, my lord.”

The King nodded. He rolled the parchment and started to work on the seal. “Thank you for bringing me these words.” The King blew on the seal and stood. “Here. Take these words back to Townesmen Schillings. It’s time to put this behind us. Edwin, prepare an escort for Michael. I intend for this message to make it all of the way this time.”

Sir Stamos nodded his understanding and took the messenger with him as they turned to leave the chamber. As they headed for the door, both men respectfully stepped to the side to allow Princess Elizabeth passage. She politely nodded at the men, but briskly continued into the chamber. Sir Stamos smiled to himself as he led the messenger through the chambers. Before they left heard the King’s orders-Messengers were to be sent to the front lines. The war was over. As Sir Stamos stepped into the courtyard he finally let himself feel the excitement. It looked like things were going to return to normal.

### **September 15th, 769, Castle Heartfelt with the Council**

“Sit down!” The King rose from his chair and pounded his fist on the table again. “Enough!” The King’s blood started to boil as the yelling continued growing despite his efforts. “Dammit, I said enough!” This last command was lost in the argument and nothing changed except the volume rose a few more levels.

Sir Stamos was the only member in the Council to notice the King’s apparent displeasure. Fearing the worst, he moved over to the King’s side and keeping his voice low, he whispered into the King’s ear, “Sire, please try and relax. You are still recovering from your illness, please.” Sir Stamos cringed from the look he received, but watched as the King nodded and fell into his chair placing his head into his hand.

The yelling continued and became even louder.

Prince Christopher, who up to this point had not contributed to the yelling, rose from his chair. The Prince was in his mid twenties and stood an imposing six feet. His eyes were a deep blue color and his position in life left him second in line to the throne. As he stood he took in the room.

At the head of the table he nodded briefly to his father who had a pale look on his face. He imagined this wasn’t helping his father’s recovery. He cringed as Sir Stamos poured his father some more of that awful concoction, but was relieved as he watched it take affect with the King visibly relaxing.

The Prince continued looking around the table. To his father’s immediate left, Confidence Massenberg from Fort North continued his attack across the table at Confidence Schillings from

Redderin. Confidence Massenberg had been one of the staunchest supporters of keeping Redderin a town instead of a full fledged Vassal of the Crown and had been a pain in the ass ever since Redderin was instated as a Vassal. The stocky Confidence once said he would rather rebel than share the Crown with a Redderin. Massenberg's voice rose another level as he renewed his attack on the Redderin Confidence.

The Prince shook his head as he noticed Confidence Pope of Bayside repeating Confidence Massenberg's every word. The Prince hoped that someday Confidence Pope would gain enough courage to stand on his own, but for now he continued his role as a sidekick. The geographical location of Bayside and Fort North had nurtured the relationship the two Confidences now shared. The role Confidence Pope assumed was, as his father once said, a lap dog to Massenberg's every whim. It seemed that, no matter how ridiculous Massenberg became, Pope would continue to back his ideas.

The Prince continued down the table and wasn't surprised to see some composure from Lady Loveland, the overseer of Markham. He had never known her to utter one word concerning the inclusion of Redderin into the Crown.

Years ago she had been handpicked by Confidence Thos Trynn and because of that the King trusted her implicitly. Lady Loveland functioned as the trade overseer, so she held no official power within the Council, but was responsible for all trade moving through Markham, whether north or south. In some respects, she was more important than the Confidences surrounding her. She caught the Prince's look and respectfully nodded. He returned the nod with a smile. She was a very beautiful woman in her late forties with the intelligence and experience to match. He watched as one of her advisors took her attention.

The Prince's gaze led him to Confidence Thos Trynn of Elizabeth Towne. He was shouting at both Confidences from the north and doing his best to force some common sense into the shouting match. His advisors were doing their best to interject and Trynn would occasionally nod his approval in their direction.

Confidence Trynn grew up with and was the same age as the King. They had spent most their young lives together and this intimacy had continued into adulthood. Years before the war, when King Frederick assumed the throne, his first order of business was to promote Thos to the Confidence of Elizabeth Towne. Thos Trynn had become the only Confidence not involved in the debacle that led to the War of Occupation. It was a distinction that Thos carried proudly.

The Prince noticed that a good number of the advisors to the Confidences stood idly by in disbelief at how the discussion had turned. Much to the Prince's displeasure, too many of the bolder ones contributed yells of support. The volume rose one more notch and then the unthinkable happened.

Confidence Massenberg lunged across the table at Confidence Schillings grabbing him by the folds of his robe. As the Confidences collided, parchments, mugs, bowls of fruit, and jugs full of water scattered and knocked across the table. A large jug of water splashed onto the table throwing the contents onto the King, who had risen in shock over the outburst.

As Sir Stamos did his best to offer some protection for the King, he called out to one of the aides. "Get help. Go!" Sir Stamos physically put himself in front of the King as the grappling increased.

Before Prince Christopher could react Royal Man Blackheart sprang from his corner and beelined for the two Confidences. Blackheart stood well over six feet tall and was an imposing figure on the battlefield, but the Confidences were too entwined to notice. Blackheart threw protocol out the window as he grabbed the back of Massenberg's robe and forcefully lifted him

from the scuffle. As he tried to put the Confidence on his feet, Massenberg wildly swung backwards with his elbows, knocking Blackheart in the jaw and then in the side of his head. Stunned, Blackheart dropped the Confidence back on top of Schillings, lost his balance and fell into Sir Stamos, whose body frame and age didn't support the mass of Blackheart. Both men tumbled, sandwiching the King into his chair.

The rest of the Council stared in awe as a trio of Guardsmen burst into the room. They then joined the rest of the room by staring at the sight in front of them.

The Prince paused momentarily, looking from his squashed father to the battle between the Confidences, to the gawking Guardsmen before he acted.

"Guardsmen, separate the Confidences, by my order!"

Without hesitation the Guardsmen took off into the fray.

Prince Christopher ran past the Confidences and grasped Blackheart in an effort to lift him off his father and Sir Stamos. The Prince grunted as he tried his best to lift the dazed bulk of Blackheart from the chair. He struggled for a few moments until Confidence Trynn grabbed a side of Blackheart and together they lifted him and placed him in an empty chair. The Prince held Blackheart in an upright position and tried to revive him.

With Blackheart off of him, Sir Stamos was able to move. He picked himself off the King and immediately inquired to the King's health. The King looked flustered and started to fall from his chair, but Sir Stamos righted him and grabbed for a pitcher of water that had survived the assault. As Stamos fumbled with the water, the King sat back placing his head against the back of the chair and closing his eyes. Stamos waited patiently as the King collected himself.

While Prince Christopher was rescuing his father, the Guardsmen had succeeded in breaking apart the Confidences and had dragged Massenberg to the other side of the room. Schillings, who was on the receiving end, was pulling himself together with the help of his aides.

Prince Christopher was relieved to have Blackheart conscious, and seeing his father's improved condition, he tried to regain some order.

"Please gentlemen, find your seats." He motioned for his Guardsmen to release Confidence Massenberg. He looked to the staff of aides surrounding the table. "Let's see if we can clean this mess up."

The aides moved from the outside of the table and started to put things back into place.

"Good..." Prince Christopher was cut off as Confidence Massenberg yelled at the top of his lungs.

"This is an outrage!" He headed back towards the table while glaring at the Redderin Confidence. "I will not be subjected to this table of lunacy." He turned to his aides. "Gather my things."

No one stirred.

"Now!"

The proclamation was made and the aides scurried around Confidence Massenberg gathering the loose parchments.

"This is not necessary..."

Without letting Prince Christopher finish, Confidence Massenberg started leaving the chamber. "Yes, this is! We are done!"

Struggling to hold onto the mess of parchments his entourage followed in his wake.

Confidence Pope looked sheepishly around the room until he caught a scowl from Massenberg which brought him into action. He nodded to his aides who started gathering his

things. Pope respectfully nodded his head in Prince Christopher's direction and followed in Massenbergs wake.

Before the northern Confidences departed, Massenbergs looked with pure hatred directly at Schillings and said, "This is not through. We will settle!" Massenbergs spun on his heels and disappeared out of the chambers followed by Pope and the rest of the aides.

Prince Christopher, boiling with rage, stalked after them only to be stopped by his fathers voice.

"Let them go, Christopher." The King rose from his chair and repeated himself. "Let them go."

The Prince turned around and bowed. "As you wish, sire."

The King wearily moved around the table. "This meeting is adjourned. Thank you all for coming." King Heartfelt walked through the door to his bedroom with Sir Stamos hurriedly following behind.

After the door shut, silence fell over the chamber.

Prince Christopher turned and kneeled down in front of Blackheart, who was still holding his head.

"How are you?"

Blackheart opened his eyes and frowned. "This wasn't how I envisioned this meeting."

The Prince smiled. "You or me both. Do you need the Healer?"

"No." Blackheart stood up with only a moment of dizziness. "I will be fine. How is the King?"

Prince Christopher shook his head. "This wasn't what he needed. I will speak with him later." He turned back to the table and addressed Schillings.

"I am sorry for what transpired, sir."

Schillings warmly smiled in his direction. "There is nothing you could have done to make this go any differently. I think we both know Massenbergs came to the table with this ending already written. If you will excuse me, I am retiring to my room. Please tell your father that I am sorry for today." The Confidence lowered his head and headed out of the chamber.

The Prince sat back down at the table and watched the rest of the occupants head for the door. He drummed his fingers on the table until Blackheart sat down next to him.

"Our next step?"

The Prince eyed Blackheart for a minute and then continued. "Bring me your plans for the recall. I don't see this situation resolving and I don't want to be caught without a plan."

"As you wish." Blackheart rose and disappeared from the room.

Prince Christopher put his elbows on the table and placed his head into his hands. He rubbed his temples for a moment and was surprised to hear a woman's voice.

"May I sit down, sire?"

The Prince looked up. "Of course, Lady Loveland." He stood up as she seated herself next to him.

"This has lasted longer than I anticipated and I need to return to Markham. Please tell your father I will return in a few weeks."

"I will my lady. I wish things could have gone differently. Do you wish any protection for Markham?"

"Not yet. I don't think Massenbergs has room for any more enemies. He has created enough today and can't afford to add me to the list. Besides, Markham will continue to trade, since the

merchants will go on despite our best efforts at improving their lot.” Lady Loveland rose. “Take care Prince Christopher. Until next time.”

“I will. Have a safe passage.” Prince Christopher put his head back into his hands and thought about the next day. He wasn’t sure tomorrow was going to be any different than today.

### **September 16th, 769, the next morning in the chamber**

“What do you mean they left?” Sir Stamos angrily slammed his fist into his other hand.

“As I said, they have left.” Prince Christopher was growing tired of this roadblock. “May I see my father now?”

“I just saw Massenbergs’s entourage this morning. Who is this information coming from?”

Prince Christopher rolled his eyes. “The Confidences left early in the morning with only a skeleton crew to make the first leg of the trip. As we speak, the rest of the entourages are making the final preparations to depart. The head of both parties gave this information to me. May I see my father now?”

Sir Stamos nodded. “Follow me.”

Both men left the chamber and entered the King’s bedroom. The shutters were closed and the King sat in his wide backed chair facing the door.

“Good morning, gentlemen.”

Both men knelt.

“They have left sire.” Prince Christopher kept his head down.

“I know. I watched them go.”

Sir Stamos and Prince Christopher exchanged glances with each other.

Lifting his head towards his father, Christopher addressed him. “Father, do you want us to stop them?”

The King stood and walked to his window. He pulled open the shutters and took in the fresh morning air. “No. Let them be. In due time we will readdress the issues before us, but for now let’s concentrate on the coming winter.”

Prince Christopher nodded. “I understand, sire.”

“We still have Elizabeth Towne and Redderin. Continue with the meetings.” Having said this, the King disappeared into his changing room.

Since they were dismissed, Sir Stamos and Prince Christopher quietly left the bedroom.

“I will inform the Confidences.” Prince Christopher walked out of the chamber wondering how long they would have to wait to readdress these issues with the north. He had a feeling the coming winter season wouldn’t be as relaxing as he imagined.

## **Chapter 2**

October 27th, 770; the Trader's Center in the Farmer's Region

The heavy sack tumbled from Talon’s shoulder and fell to the ground.

Merchant Salit reached down and picked up the sack. "Rest from your labors, Talon. You've been at this all morning."

Talon smiled in the merchant's direction. "I work all year for this. A few more sacks won't kill me." Talon brushed his hands off on his pants and ran his fingers through his dark blond hair. The sun was almost at its highest point as Talon was finishing for the day. He was happy that he was ahead of schedule, but picked up the pace, and with the merchant's help, he started moving more of the sacks. Sometime later, Talon unloaded the last of the sacks in his cart onto the merchant's sled and looked over to the merchant.

"Not too bad of a load, Talon." The merchant dug into his satchel and pulled out the payment. "Here you go."

"Thanks, Mr. Salit. See you next season." He tied the satchel onto his belt and headed for the trader's center with his cart in tow.

The Farmer's Region was in the last few weeks of the fall harvest and it seemed every farmer in the region had brought the last of his crop to sell. Talon tipped his head as he passed a few familiar faces selling to the merchants. He paused for a moment to get a better grip on the cart and wiped his brow.

Continuing on, Talon pulled his cart to the front of the center and walked inside. He browsed through the layout of tools spread throughout the entrance, but not finding anything, he continued to the kitchen area. He was looking over the afternoon's wares, when he overheard some gossiping farmers.

"He walked right out of the chamber cursing the Redderin Confidence right in front of the King."

Talon walked over to the counter while he listened to the conversation going on between the two farmers and the merchant.

"Where did you hear this? I know Massenbergh has a temper, but to swing at Schillings. Impossible." said the farmer closest to Talon. He wasn't familiar to him, but he was an older man with only half his teeth who looked like he had just stepped off the fields. He shook his head in disbelief at the merchant's comment.

"I just came from Hearttowne and I heard the same story, though I heard that Massenbergh attacked and injured Royal Man Blackheart." This farmer pointed his finger at the other farmer. "There is going to be another war; I can just feel it."

Talon tried his best to ignore the gossip, but found he was listening to hear more about Blackheart. They continued talking, but did nothing except speculate and then quickly abandoned the subject.

Talon picked out a Redderin apple and bought a mug of fresh milk. He took a chair a few down from the gossiping farmers and let himself relax for a few moments, since he still had a good ride ahead of him.

It wasn't long before he finished the apple. He quickly downed the milk and left the kitchen area. Before heading out of the center, he picked up another hand ax and a few rolls of twine. He paid for them at the counter and headed outside.

His horse was waiting for him along the side of the center tied to a hitch. Talon walked the cart over to his horse and got ready to go. He mounted the horse and started on the path that would bring him home. As he settled in he let himself wonder about how Blackheart was doing at the castle.

Those thoughts entertained him for the rest of his trip.

### **January 15th, 770, In the King's chamber**

"Bring in the messenger."

The door opened as Sir Stamos moved to greet the unexpected guest.

The messenger walked inside and stopped in front of Sir Stamos.

"I bring word from Confidence Massenbergh and Confidence Pope." He knelt to one knee and presented a scroll wrapped protectively in a large piece of leather.

Sir Stamos approached the man. He was dressed from head to toe in warm clothing with a lined-coat ending with a fur covering meant to shelter the head. Sir Stamos could only imagine how warm he was becoming inside the chambers with the fireplace blazing.



Before he could retrieve the scroll the far end door opened and King Heartfelt walked into the chamber.

Sir Stamos knelt. "Lord."

The King moved into the center of the chamber. "Who is our guest, Edwin?"

"A messenger from Confidence Massenber and Confidence Pope. He brings word."

The King shook his head and focused his attention on the man. "You must be frozen through, messenger." The King walked up to Sir Stamos and placed his hand first on Sir Stamos' shoulder and then on the messenger's, thereby releasing them to stand. "Warm yourself at the fireplace, son. It will take me a few moments to read this and then compose a response." The King took the leather wrapped scroll and walked over to his working table.

Sir Stamos escorted the messenger over to the fireplace and left the man to fuss over his coat.

Meanwhile, the King opened the leather wrapped scroll and began to read. After finishing, his hands dropped to his side. "Edwin, get my son."

Stamos scurried over to the King's side. "Prince Philip, sire?"

The King shook his head, "No. Bring me Christopher and then send for Royal Man Blackheart."

"Begging your pardon sire, but wouldn't the King-in-waiting be more appropriate?"

The King's temper flared. "Don't question my judgment, Edwin. This matter doesn't concern how many eggs the castle will need this week or how many asses we hold in the stables." The King rose slightly from his chair as his level of anger rose. "Get me Christopher."

"Yes, sire." Sir Stamos spun on his heels and disappeared out the chambers.

The King clasped his robes shut as he watched Sir Stamos leave. He thought he had already disciplined Edwin about questioning his judgment, but he just couldn't remember if he did. The King stared off into space as he tried to think back to specific incidents, but could only remember a vague feeling he had of doing it.

The King was brought back from his thoughts as his son burst into his chambers.

"Father, I apologize for taking so long to respond to your summons. What is wrong? Are you ill?" Prince Christopher hastily knelt in front of his father's chair

The King felt confused as he had thought Edwin had just left to get him only moments ago. The King replaced the puzzled look he had on his face as he remembered the scroll. "Thank you for coming, Christopher." The King nodded in his son's direction and placed a hand on his shoulder. His son, now released, started to rise. "This was brought to me moments ago." He handed his son the scroll. "News from our Vassals in the North."

Prince Christopher unrolled the scroll and started to read as his father leaned back into his chair rubbing his temples. In moments he had read the curt message.

"This is outrageous!" The Prince's face turned bright red as his temper boiled. "Who does he think he is to make demands of you, father?" The Prince turned at the sound of a cough near the fireplace. The Prince was surprised to find a man by the fireplace. "Is this the messenger my lord?"

The King nodded his head.

The Prince wasn't ready to reveal anything more than he already had to the messenger. "You will wait in the hallway until Sir Stamos returns. Have him show you to temporary quarters." The Prince's voiced the order and returned his attention to the King.

The messenger, feeling distinctly uncomfortable by the curt order, quickly gathered his loose garments and hastily disappeared out the door.

The Prince returned his attention to the King. "Who has been told?"

"You have been the first, my son. I have sent Edwin to find Blackheart."

"I understand. What are your thoughts, father?"

The King sat back in his chair and rubbed his temple. "I want a messenger sent to Markham, Elizabeth Towne, and Redderin, before the week is out, summoning them for an emergency session of the Council." The King paused for a moment, before continuing. "This messenger from the north will be sent back with a royal guard informing Massenberg and Pope of this session and telling them they will be present. What is the soonest we can expect the session?"

"The winter has been unusually rough and there doesn't seem to be any relief in sight. A storm is moving in from the north as we speak. I don't envision Massenberg being able to make the trip until the spring starts to break. I think the earliest we can expect to see him is the first spring month."

"I agree. The first spring month it is."

Both men turned their heads as Blackheart entered the chamber. He approached the men and knelt before the King.

"Thank you for coming, Royal Man Blackheart. Please rise."

"Your wish is my command, my lord." Blackheart stood and glanced at Prince Christopher.

"Christopher, please explain our dilemma."

Prince Christopher turned and addressed Blackheart. "Word from our friends in the north and I quote, 'The situation with Redderin has become unbearable and is forcing our hand. Speaking for Bayside, Confidence Pope, myself, and for Fort North, we will boycott any and all trading at Markham come this spring. Any goods transported north of Markham will be seized, until such time as Redderin is returned to a Towne and is stripped of its full Vassal status. Finally, Redderin must be subjected to reimbursing us for our war sufferings. I await resolution.' Signed by Massenberg and Pope."

"This is outright rebellion."

Prince Christopher thought he could feel the emotion coming from Blackheart's words. "I agree."

The King stopped both men from continuing. "Let's take one step at a time. First, what is the status of the army, Blackheart?"

"My lord, the army is in recall status with general strength members located in Hearttowne. We haven't actively recruited new members since the last meeting of the council, but we have fulfilled the ridiculous standards set at that same meeting. All royal detachments have been disbanded and have returned to Heartfelt. The Vassals have been without a royal contingent since the beginning of the winter."

Prince Christopher shook his head in utter frustration. "We both knew this effort to conserve funds wasn't worth the results, but it was a unanimous decision amongst all of the Confidences. Blackheart, we need to draft plans to change this."

Blackheart nodded. "I understand. I have been working on a plan that would leave a royal detachment in each Vassal without straining Prince Philip's coffers."

"Good. Christopher, have Edwin send for your sister, Anne. I am going to need those messengers within the hour. You will see to it that the royal guard will be prepared?"

Prince Christopher bowed. "Yes, my lord."

"Good. Leave me for now, but return with your sister and I will have our reply ready for Massenberg and his lap dog."

Both men bowed and left the King to his work. As the door shut, the King took out some parchment and flattened it out across the top of his worktable. By the time he had readied the ink, he found he couldn't remember why he was about to write a letter. The King placed his head in his hands and concentrated in hopes of his train of thought returning. Sometime later, he was so engrossed in his thoughts that he didn't hear his son enter the room.

"Father!"

The King was startled as he looked up and found Prince Philip standing before him. "Are you well, father?"

The King became furious at the interruption. "Yes, of course I am well. Why have you disturbed me?"

"I heard a messenger has arrived from the north. What words did he bring?"

"I have already spoken to your brother. Speak with him on this matter. Please leave me; I must attend to my response."

Prince Philip was outraged. He was the King-in-waiting and he deserved to be the first person to be consulted, not his brother. To add insult to the injury, he would now have to track down his younger brother and receive the information second hand.

The King returned to his message without waiting for an answer from Philip. He moved across the paper never remembering his lapse in memory only moments ago.

Prince Philip turned and stormed out of the chamber and went looking for the King's aide. Sir Stamos was supposed to be taking care of these matters and, at this rate, was likely to find himself out of a job once Philip became King. He already started visualizing his words. It was time to flex his King-in-waiting muscle.

As the King finished the message for Massenberg he was interrupted as Prince Christopher escorted Princess Anne into the chamber.

"Princess Anne, sire."

The King nodded. "The message is almost complete. We will need to have a similar one sent to each of the..." The King grasped his forehead and his face went flush with pain.

"Father!" Prince Christopher raced to his father's side in an attempt to help. He held onto the King's arm. "Father, what is it?"

The King struggled for a moment, "Get Edwin son, please!"

Prince Christopher looked to his sister, "Hurry Anne, find Sir Stamos!"

Princess Anne raced from the chamber.

The King, suddenly extremely weak, slouched in his chair. Prince Christopher held his father tight, refusing to let him fall to the ground. He spoke softly, "Edwin is coming father, just hold on!"

As he finished the sentence Sir Stamos burst into the room. "How long ago did this happen?"

"Only moments ago!"

"Bring him to his room. Hurry!"

Prince Christopher picked his father up like a small child and carried him into the bedroom. He gingerly placed his father on top of the bed and knelt at his side holding his hand.

Sir Stamos followed behind the Prince carrying his tools of the trade. "Have your sister retrieve the Healer." Sir Stamos nodded at the Prince. "Go on Christopher, I will remain at his side."

Prince Christopher nodded and stood. He briefly paused at his father's side before heading back into the chamber. "Anne. Please find the Healer."

As Princess Anne disappeared from the chamber, Prince Christopher sat at his father's desk. He read the message from the north and proceeded to finish his father's thoughts. Leaving the bottom blank for his father's signature, he started on the request from the rest of the Vassals.

By the next morning, the King, still recovering in his bed, had approved and signed each of the messages.

By that same afternoon, the respective messengers and royal guards embarked the castle in the middle of the winter's worst storm. If they were successful, all the Confidences would be present at the first month of spring.

Prince Christopher watched them leave from his room and wondered how many Confidences he would see this spring.

### **Chapter 3**

March 4th, 770; The Bastian Family Farm in the Farmer's Region

Talon crouched low and silently moved through the trees until he came to the edge of the woods. In the distance, he could hear yelling from the Guardsmen who were storming his father's farm. Through the haze, he could see the burning barn with smoke billowing out the windows. Behind the barn, the fields were ablaze and, at the field's edge behind the farmhouse, the woodpile was burning into the sky.

Talon spied three Guardsmen walk towards the woodpile. These were the only three he could see. He briefly wondered if the rest moved on, causing damage to someone else's property. Each of the Guardsmen grabbed a log and fashioned a torch. With fire in hand, they headed back towards the front of the house.

One of the Guardsmen broke from the group and launched his torch onto the top of the house, causing the other two to yell at him. The larger Guardsmen smacked him in the back of the head and pointed to the woodpile. The dejected Guardsmen turned and walked back to the woodpile, while the other two Guardsmen continued yelling at him as they went towards the front of the house.

Those two disappeared from Talon's sight, but he didn't give them a second thought because his attention went to the Guardsmen standing by the woodpile. He watched him take his time working on another torch and noticing how preoccupied he was, Talon decided to make him his first victim. Talon walked out of the woods and into the cover of the burning fields. He moved through the field unnoticed and, in moments, he was crouched right outside of the woodpile. The Guardsmen had his back to Talon and was mumbling to himself as he was finishing the torch.

Talon shifted his position to unsheathe his sword and as he pulled the sword from the sheath, he brushed into a burning plant, which broke off and fell onto his neck and down his shirt. The plant started to burn his neck and, as he moved, more pieces fell into his shirt and ran down his back. Talon swore under his breath and tried to shake it off before it burned him anymore. The movement caught the Guardsmen's attention.

"Hey! Stay where you are." The Guardsmen threw his torch to the ground and pulled out his sword. He started to walk around the woodpile in Talon's direction. "Stand up. Now!"

Talon, under his breath, cursed again. He balanced his sword behind his leg and stood up putting his hands out in front of him. He waited as some of the plant pieces continued to burn his back.

"Good. Now very slowly walk over to me." The Guardsmen stopped just outside of the field's reaches, motioning with his arm to have Talon move forward.

Talon took a few steps forward and felt the sword fall to the ground. “Dammit!” Talon muttered this a little louder than he wanted to.

“What did you say?” The Guardsmen stopped motioning with his hand and took a two handed grip on his sword.

Talon continued walking without answering the question.

The Guardsmen repeated himself. “What did you just say?”

Talon, knowing how hopeless things had become, started to laugh.

This infuriated the Guardsmen, who yelled his command this time. “Walk. Let’s go see some of my friends. I am sure they will want to talk with you.”

Talon continued laughing as he walked past the Guardsmen, until he felt the Guardsmen’s sword crack him behind the knees causing him to fall to the ground.

“Get up!”

Talon, still on his knees, was inches from the burning woodpile and felt his left side burning from the intense heat. He chose to ignore the Guardsmen.

“I said get up!”

Talon intentionally waited, testing the man. He was rewarded by a kick to his side. Talon let go of the breath he was holding and started to stand.

“Listen to me next time and this won’t happen.” The Guardsmen spit on the ground in front of Talon and continued. “None of this would have happened if you weren’t a Redderin sympathizer.”

Talon almost broke. He had spent the last two years of his life fighting side by side with the Heartfelt Guardsmen. Now, this man was accusing him of being a sympathizer. Talon quietly stood and resumed walking. The Guardsmen fell into place walking a few paces behind him.

“Your kind disgust me!”

Talon rolled his eyes. Obviously the Guardsmen wasn’t done talking and as they were walking along the side of the house he continued his tirade. In the middle of the tirade, Talon started to become irritated by the air. The smoke coming off the house was choking Talon, which made him cough to push the smell out of his head.

“What? Did you say something?” The Guardsmen poked Talon in the back with his sword.

Talon hadn’t said anything and didn’t bother to answer.

“You will get what’s coming to you as soon as we finish off the other sympathizers inside this house. Three Redderin lovers, Prince Philip will be very pleased.”

That was the last straw for Talon. He had watched them chase his only brother and their father into the farmhouse like they were animals and now this Guardsmen was predicting their death. Luckily, Talon’s father had been prepared. As soon as his father and brother were in the house Talon knew his father had barricaded the door. They were safe, for now.

As they neared the front of the house, Talon could still hear the Guardsmen trying to break through the front door. Talon wasn’t about to go without a fight, so he slowed by half a step and felt the sword point in his back. Feeling it was there, Talon spun around the sword. Surprised by the motion, the Guardsmen jabbed forward, but Talon was quicker than the blade as it missed the side of his chest. While the Guardsmen was off balance from his thrust, Talon knocked the man’s forearm, causing the sword to slam into the side of the house. Talon pushed the advantage by slamming his other elbow into the side of the Guardsmen face. Talon heard bones crack as he connected with the Guardsmen’s jaw. Not satisfied, Talon drove his knee into the man’s stomach. The Guardsmen started falling backwards, but Talon wasn’t done. He brought his other hand into play and slammed his fist into the man’s nose. The Guardsmen’s nose exploded

and Talon could feel the blood as it ran off his hand. The blow stunned the Guardsmen leaving him stumbling backwards until Talon grabbed him by his chest plate and pulled him close to his face.

“Just remember, you made me do this!”

The Guardsmen rebuttal was lost in his blood-filled mouth, but Talon wasn't in the mood to care anyway. He pivoted on his right leg and threw the Guardsmen into the side of the house. After the Guardsmen slammed face first into the wall he collapsed in an awkward position on the ground.

Some of his revenge satisfied, Talon walked over and retrieved the man's sword. Not losing his sense of humor, Talon shot the Guardsmen one last remark. “Don't imagine you're going to have much use for this.”

Remembering there were still more to deal with, Talon moved slowly down the side of the house. He could hear the other two Guardsmen still attempting to break into the house. Talon stopped at the corner of the house and hid himself. The smoke was still billowing off the house and it was finding its way into Talon's lungs. He stifled a cough and brushed away the tears in his eyes. As far as he could tell there were only the two Guardsmen at work. He listened intently to the activity in front of him.

Breathing heavily, one Guardsmen stopped and said, “Wonder what happened to Jeffrey?”

The other stopped to answer. “I don't know. Besides, you're the one that smacked him.”

“I know; don't remind me.”

Both men were silent for a moment.

“Okay, I'll go check on him.” The Guardsmen started walking towards the back.

Talon tensed knowing the man would walk right past him. He could hear the Guardsmen mumbling to himself as he approached. “Middle of a war and he is going to be sensitive. Should have left him behind...”

As the Guardsmen turned the corner he noticed Jeffery lying on his side next to the house. Without saying anything, the Guardsmen ran past Talon who stepped out from the smoke veil that hid him and struck the man right in the back of the head with his sword. Talon was glad he could barely see out of his teary eyes because he knew it was messy. Talon didn't waste any more time as he ran out in front of his father's house. The last Guardsmen had his back to Talon and didn't turn around at the sound of footsteps.

“Back already? Everything all better!” The Guardsmen sarcastically said without turning around.

Talon almost laughed at how stupid this Guardsmen was. He sprinted towards the man with a lowered shoulder and slammed into the man's back. The Guardsmen flew forward and landed face first onto the ground. Talon used his momentum and followed him to the ground. He slammed his body into the Guardsmen who hit the ground again knocking the Guardsmen's sword out of his hand. Talon cracked the man over the skull with the butt of his sword and felt the Guardsmen fall unconscious.

Talon sat up tasting victory, but it was short lived as he remembered his father and brother were still in the burning farmhouse. He ran up to the front door yelling their names. “Father! Barlow! Open the door; it's me, Talon!”

Talon repeated himself as he slammed his fists against the door. He continued to pound without hearing an answer. By this time, the flames had grown and were engulfing the wall and the door. Talon pushed as hard as he could and felt the door give in under his weight as he lost his balance and fell in with it. He landed on the ground surrounded by flames.

The entire house was engulfed in smoke. Talon crouched low and started moving through the flaming debris. He called out to his father, though for some reason he didn't expect an answer.

As he moved from the hallway into the living room, he heard a crash mixed with a muffled yell from somewhere in the house. Talon, forgetting the fire, stood up and ran headlong towards the back of the house. He turned the corner and was greeted by the sight of his brother and father fighting off a horde of Guardsmen pouring through a large hole in the kitchen wall. Talon crashed through the debris and realized he was too late. He watched his brother and father fall victim to multiple Guardsmen swords.

Talon screamed out, which did nothing for him, but draw him some unwanted attention. Talon stopped his forward momentum and readied himself to meet the Guardsmen. In that moment, he realized he had dropped his sword somewhere in the house during his mad rush towards the kitchen. A strange calmness came over his body as he waited for the attacking Guardsmen and the impending doom.

Talon said a brief prayer out loud. "Father, Barlow, I will see you both soon." Talon closed his eyes and waited. As soon as he felt a sword hitting his body he screamed out.

His own scream woke him up. Still living the dream, he reached around for something to use against his attackers. He jumped to his feet and started to move, but only succeeded in twisting his feet up in his blanket. The blanket twisted between his feet and tightened, causing him to lose his balance and fall from the bed. He fell backwards and landed on top of his night table instantly crushing it and sending the contents throughout the room. The crash knocked the wind out of him.

As Talon lay on the floor, he tried to regain his breath and he noticed he didn't smell any smoke or feel the burning sensation of the fire. He felt his body for sword wounds and finding none, he opened his eyes. The first thing Talon noticed was the sunlight coming from outside his window.

"It was only a dream." He said it to himself one more time trying to shake off its affects. He knew the loss of his father and brother encountered in his dream would linger for awhile.

After a moment he felt better and sat up. Seeing the sunlight, he briefly wondered how long he had overslept.

He threw the blanket onto the bed and glanced at the night table. It was spread throughout his room in various sized pieces. He picked up a few of the pieces, only to discover the table wasn't even close to fixable.

Talon laughed quietly to himself. He really thought he was done having those bad dreams. The last time they were reoccurring was during his first few months on the farm just after the war.

Talon walked over to his wash basin and splashed some water on his face. The water woke him up and he found himself thinking about the castle again.

The rumors had been spreading for months now. Just last week, he heard more rumors concerning the Northerns. On a certain level, he knew that exaggeration played a big part in the gossip around the Farmer's Region, but in every rumor there was a kernel of truth. The most recent story he had overheard was that the Northerns had appointed their own King, but this was from a trader at the center who had the tendency to take some liberties with his stories. Talon knew the only way to get an answer was to pay the castle a visit. He briefly entertained the idea, but knew he had far too much work to accomplish. Talon went to work without giving Heartfelt another thought.

## Chapter 4

March 21st, 770; In the Council room, Castle Heartfelt

The King stood up and looked around the table. His children occupied the first few seats and past them was the Confidences from Elizabeth Towne and Redderin. Beyond the two empty chairs sat the Markham overseer, Lady Loveland. Outside the table stood aides, some staff, and the representatives' entourages.

"Has there been any word?" The King looked at each member of the table.

Princess Anne stood. A few months ago, it fell to her shoulders to have royal messengers sent to Bayside and Fort North. Neither group had returned. Anne reported what she knew. "No word has been sent back from the north and we have not heard word from our messengers, sire. I don't feel there is a need to wait any longer." Princess Anne remained standing.

The King locked eyes with his daughter. Over the years she found more ways to impress him and it made him proud to be her father. Even with her young age, she returned his stare without falter. The King softened his eyes. "Thank you, my daughter."

Princess Anne nodded and returned to her seat.

The King moved away from the table and began a slow pace. "Prince Philip." Upon hearing his name the Prince rose. "Please recapture the events of the last few months concerning our friends in the north."

Prince Philip nodded and with a quick glare at Prince Christopher he began. He started all the way back with the departure of the Confidences during the last fall and went through the boycott messenger during the winter.

"Thank you." The King walked back in front of the table. "This leads me to bring the rest of you up to date on what my thoughts are concerning the north. This kingdom owes nothing to the Northerns, and I will be bold enough to proclaim they owe each and every one of us. The war we suffered was caused and manipulated by the Northerns and though it served their purposes, they put forth a meager monetary contribution and they then matched that with a meager amount of troops. Of course, neither of these made it on time. Their actions led to a few extra months of fighting. Those extra months affected each of us in this room.

The subject of the boycott concerns the fact that Redderin was instituted in the Kingdom as a full Vassal and James Schillings was granted a Confidence. I am going to say this once and only once. Redderin has been established into the hierarchy of this kingdom and is equal and entitled to the same rights and responsibilities as the other four Vassals. And I will add that this was not a matter to be voted on. I made the decision and the decision stands."

The rest of the council watched as the King returned to his seat.

"Since the Northerns have neglected their summons, is there any business we can conduct?"

Prince Christopher rose. "Of course, sire."

The room took a less serious tone as each representative took turns addressing the King. The session progressed through the routine and mundane issues that befell the Vassals. As the afternoon fell, the King called a recess.

"Let us stop here for the meal will be served shortly. We can pick up after lunch in the late afternoon. Thank you." The King got up from the table and adjourned into his bedroom.

The next few minutes the room became a flurry of activity as each Confidence and his entourage cleared out. Sir Stamos maneuvered his way through the crowds and stopped Prince Christopher.



“The King wants to see you. Now!” Without waiting for an answer the aide turned and disappeared into the King’s bedroom.

The perplexed look on the Prince’s face disappeared as he excused himself from the conversation he was having. He immediately went to his summons.

The Prince knocked on the bedroom door. Moments later Sir Stamos appeared at the door. “You’re expected.” He abruptly turned around and went back into the chambers.

Prince Christopher followed behind him becoming more and more tired of Sir Stamos’ attitude. Ever since the winter months had set in and his father had grown sicker the aide had become intolerable.

Since the King had taken ill, the majority of his summons had been taken care of while he was in bed. This time it was slightly different. The King was sitting next to his bed in his wide backed chair. The shutters were closed, which gave the room a gloom even though it was the middle of the afternoon.

Sir Stamos retreated into a corner of the room, leaving the Prince waiting patiently as his father finished his business with Philip, his older brother and the King-in-waiting. The brothers shared some of the same facial features, but Philip was slightly shorter and leaner than Christopher was.

The King looked up from his conversation and saw his second born waiting for him. He stopped the conversation in mid-sentence and addressed Christopher. “Please come forward, my son.”

Christopher approached his father and when he was two feet away he knelt down. “Good afternoon, father. How are you today?”

“No better than yesterday.” The King looked back to Philip. “Come see me later and we will finish this conversation.”

Prince Philip stood and turned to walk away.

“Philip.” Prince Christopher attempted to greet his older brother.

The Prince looked down as his younger brother with an angry scowl on his face. He was seething that his business was being put aside for his younger brother’s. “Christopher.” He forced the name out of his lips and continued out of the chambers without saying another word.

Prince Christopher ignored the scowl and waited to be addressed by the King.

“Thank you for coming so quickly.” The King adjusted himself in the chair. “Edwin, could you please open the shutters. I imagine I can take a little of the sun.”

“Sire, there is still a chill in the air. Are you sure this is wise?”

Christopher glared at Sir Stamos until he finally conceded.

“As you wish, sire.”

Christopher waited as the shutters were opened.

“You may leave us as soon as you are finished with the shutters, Edwin.”

Sir Stamos stiffened upon hearing those words. He latched the shutters open and abruptly turned around. His face was laced with anger, embarrassment, and infuriation. He swiftly removed himself from the bedroom, slamming the door as he left.

The King sat back putting his head against the back of the chair and closed his eyes for a moment. Without opening them, he spoke to his son. “Please sit, Christopher. There is much to discuss.”

Christopher moved himself into a chair facing his father.

“Has there been any word from the messengers?”

“No sire. I spoke with Lady Loveland and nothing was heard before her departure to come here. To be safe, I also asked Confidence Trynn and received the same answer.” The Prince folded his hands on his lap. “Maybe this harsh winter has hit them harder than we have felt.”

“No. We both know that is far from the truth.”

Prince Christopher nodded his head in understanding. “Yes, I know.”

“I can’t help thinking Confidence Massenberg’s has grown larger than the crown. Who knows, maybe he has already crowned himself King. I know Confidence Pope would run with him like a good lap dog is expected to.” The King paused only to let out a sigh. “Why am I destined to be remembered as the King of wars?” The King immediately put his hand out with his palm facing out. “Don’t answer that.” King Frederick absentmindedly smiled in his son’s direction. “I don’t envy your older brother at all. I wouldn’t want to be the King-in-waiting and having to assume the throne with a rebellion waiting to happen. By the way, I take it you two haven’t settled your differences?”

Christopher hesitated while he weighed his answer. “No.”

King Heartfelt nodded. “I understand. Is there nothing I can do?”

“No father. This is between me and my brother, though things have gotten better now that he is out of the military and into a job better suited to his skills.”

King Heartfelt nodded. “I understand.” He turned to a more constructive subject. “It’s time to start thinking about our future. At the meeting this afternoon, I want you to bring up the subject of the recall. I don’t want to be caught without a plan if, in fact, the Northerners have ideas for the future. Understood?”

“Yes, sire. What do you think of the proposal submitted by Blackheart?”

“I have looked over the plans Royal Man Blackheart has for the army and I want to have those plans in motion by the end of the week. Once the council resumes this afternoon, I want you and Blackheart to present this plan. I don’t foresee any problems with an approval, especially considering the circumstances.” The King opened his eyes and looked at Christopher. “You made a wise choice by picking him. He has proven his worth, though I never doubted it, I didn’t foresee how wise a choice it was.”

The Prince nodded and watched with concern as his father closed his eyes again. A few moments passed before the King opened his eyes and continued with his speech as if he had never paused.

“One more thing before you head to lunch. This boycott is not going to affect the trade with our other Vassals. As such, I want you to devise a small contingent of Guardsmen from Redderin and Heartfelt designed to protect Markham and Lady Loveland until the army plans you have presented me have been effected. I don’t care about the details; just get the group assembled quickly.”

“I anticipated your request and once the plans are presented to the council, I can finish the last piece of the unit.”

“I trust you my son. May your heart lead you well.” The King once again closed his eyes.

Prince Christopher waited for what seemed like an eternity until his father opened his eyes again. When he finally did, he slumped into his chair, startling the Prince.

“Father!” Prince Christopher jumped from his chair and grasped his father. “Father, are you okay?”

Within the Prince’s firm grip the King recovered.

“I am just tired Christopher. I am sure you have better things to do than entertain this old man. Before you go though, help me to the bed.”

The King leaned heavily on his son as they moved over to the bed. The Prince helped his father out of his robe and got him under the blankets. As the King fell onto the pillow, Christopher knelt beside him and waited a few moments. Before the Prince could leave, the King spoke.

“Have Philip seat the last of today’s meeting. Forgive the representatives for me and before you head off with your plans, have Edwin sent to me.”

“Your wish is my command, sire.” The Prince squeezed his father’s hand and started moving out of the bedroom.

“Thank you, my son!”

Christopher barely heard this whisper from his father as he closed the door to the chamber. He didn’t have to go far to find Sir Stamos. He found him seated at the council table pouting.

“Sir Stamos, my father needs your attention. He’s had another one of his spells.” The Prince started to inform him of the need to have Philip leading the afternoon’s session, but wasn’t able to because Sir Stamos dashed from the council room towards the bedroom. He stopped and paused at the door before going in.

“Send for the Healer, Christopher.” Without waiting for an answer, the aide disappeared through the door.

Prince Christopher was left to answer to the air. “As you command.” Without wasting any more time, he headed out of the council room and set about finding the Healer, his older brother and finally Blackheart. He was going to make sure Blackheart and he were prepared to lay out those army plans for the council and he only had a short while to discuss the options.

## Chapter 5

March 28th, 770; The Farmer’s Region

Craaack!

Talon swung again.

Craaack!

This time the log split in two. Talon threw the two pieces onto the growing pile. He wiped his brow and looked up at the sky. To no one particular he said, “I wish I would have started this earlier. Day’s almost half over.”

Craaack!

The next log split.

Thump thump thump.

Talon stopped swinging his ax. He could barely hear it, but it was getting closer.

Thump thump thump.

Talon tossed his ax on top of the woodpile. He wasn’t sure, but it sounded like horses, a lot of horses. Talon made his way to the front of his cabin where he found he could make out a group of riders coming through the dust cloud. Talon hadn’t seen this many riders since he had been at the Trader’s Center and it struck him as unusual. The Farmer’s Region was so far away from the Castle that Talon’s house was closer to Redderin. Seeing such a large group of riders was virtually unheard of.

While Talon was musing, the first of the horses came within eyesight. The first thing he noticed on the riders was the bright royal colors. Talon wasn’t sure what he had done to deserve a visit from the crown, but he imagined he would find out soon enough.

The unusually hot day left the sun beating down and caused Talon to wipe his brow again. The five riders he could see must have thought the same thing, since they were barely wearing

any armor. This left no doubt to the identity of the riders. Talon thought back to his years of service with the Royal Guard and was surprised he couldn't recognize any of the mounted riders.

As three more riders came into view, Talon stepped over to the side of the path and the entourage pulled to a stop followed by the next set of five. Two more riders than Talon first thought.

Talon instantly recognized Blackheart, but before he could wave, he was forced to bow in recognition of Prince Christopher. He went down to one knee and as he waited he stole a quick glance up at Blackheart. He seemed to look the same as when he had last laid eyes on him, though it felt like such a long time ago.

The Prince dismounted from Regal, his horse, and walked straight to Talon. "Stand tall before your Prince, Talon. How long have we known each other that we stand on such formalities?" Prince Christopher said while looking over the land around him. The Prince couldn't remember the last time he had been this far out of Heartfelt.

"I can only do my duty to honor my Prince, my lord."

"Posh...enough of this lord nonsense!" The Prince said with a broad wave of his hand.

"As you wish." Talon grinned. "My lord."

"You see Prince Christopher, how stubborn men never change!" Blackheart swung his leg over and dismounted, while looking around the old farm. Once before Blackheart had visited here, but long before the War of Occupation. He had spent time with Talon, his older brother, Barlow, and their father. The farm was full of activity back then. Now, it felt empty to Blackheart.

"You are quite right Blackheart, not even time has changed him." With a smile the Prince stared off into the distance.

"Nice to see you remembered me, Blackheart." Talon smiled to himself and realized how much he missed these two. He always hoped time would heal his wounds and he knew it was time to find out.

"Remember Youuu!" The Prince's attention was brought to Talon. "How will he ever forget one such as you. Can he ever forget the raid of the Redderin harvest or the charms of the Daughter of Massenbergr or maybe the missing rum, of which my father has not forgotten..." Prince Christopher was ready to continue for a long time, but Talon stopped him.

"Please my lord, you will tarnish my good name amongst new faces." Talon looked over at the other Guardsmen and would swear that a few had smiles on their faces.

"Your Prince cannot change the truth nor can he tarnish the Bastian name anymore than you have seen fit to." Blackheart said as he walked towards Prince Christopher. "If we weren't such good friends, and I use that term lightly, I would be embarrassed to be seen with the likes of you." Blackheart knew that far too much time had passed between them. He really missed Talon and was happy to see him. Blackheart knew the Prince was a little more reserved in his opinion, since he needed Talon and wasn't prepared to hear a no.

Talon, still on one knee, started to wonder what had brought out such guests and he got the feeling it wasn't for a social call. Talon left Heartfelt two years ago without looking back and had never set foot back there.

Talon spent those years recovering from the losses he suffered after the war. The whole time he spent recovering he would often think about these two friends of his from the castle. He could feel the unanswered questions that the both of them had.

The Prince placed his hand on Talon's right shoulder and released him to rise. As soon as Talon stood, Blackheart commanded the detachment to dismount.

“My lord, I don’t think you have ridden all this way to refresh my memory of our past deeds, nor to allow Blackheart the chance to change his mind about me. We have known each other for far too long to change those opinions.” Talon said as he placed his hand on Blackheart’s shoulder. He noticed how tired Blackheart looked and started to dread hearing what news had brought him out to the farm. Even with the heavy unanswered questions in the air, Talon couldn’t help just feeling happy to see Blackheart. The feeling was mutual and the men embraced.

“This much is true Talon, although I am glad to see you. May we come inside?” Prince Christopher said and he waited for the invitation.

“By all means. How long have ridden?” Talon stepped aside and gestured for both men to follow him.

“It took us two days, with some detours.” The Prince took a moment to look around the farm and could only imagine how long Talon spent keeping ahead. It looked like a tough load for one person.

“I understand. Your men can use the well around the side of the house and there is fresh feed by the stable entrance.” Talon pointed to the far side of the house. “Your mounts look exhausted.”

“This is because you choose to live on the outskirts of the castle’s reaches. Sometimes I think you looked for the farthest spot and then added twenty feet.” Blackheart smiled at Talon and then excused himself for a moment.

Talon watched as Blackheart addressed his men. He issued only one command. “Sentry positions.” Since this detachment was carrying a Prince, at least two men were required to stand guard, but Talon watched as four men assumed watch positions. The others saw to taking care of the horses. With the men in order, Blackheart followed Prince Christopher and Talon towards the house.

“Please come in, but Blackheart must wipe his feet.” Talon shot Blackheart a look.

The Prince grinned at the remark and said, “I cannot make any promises for Blackheart. He is as stubborn as you.” He stopped at the front door. “Shall we?” Christopher was comforted by the appearance of the farm. He had an idea of what Talon had gone through during the final stages of the War of Occupation and it looked like he had made it through those troubled times.

Talon opened the door and escorted them inside. “Can I interest your men in some food or some ale?” There was a large jug of ale in the corner of the kitchen and Talon offered it to Blackheart for his men. Blackheart disappeared out the front door with the jug in hand. Talon watched him go and noticed the Prince sitting across the room with his eyes closed and his head settled into his hands. He looked exhausted. Talon could hear Blackheart talking to the Guardsmen and it wasn’t long before he came back into the house.

“Let me see what else I can offer you, maybe something for you to drink Blackheart, to keep the conversation less one sided.” Talon said this as he opened the cupboard. He pulled down some loaves of bread, some cheese and three cups. Talon sat down with food and beverages and settled in, while Blackheart settled into a chair opposite of the Prince. The memories of the adventures he had with these men were threatening to overwhelm him. Only a few survived those days and that number seemed to be shrinking.

Talon’s attention went outside as he watched the Royal Guard as they filled up on water and supplies. They were passing around the ale Blackheart had taken out there. Eight seemed to be a lot of men for just an escort into Heartfelt territory. Talon could have sworn that, from his days

with the Guard, only four escorts were required inside Heartfelt lands. Talon wasn't sure he wanted to know what had brought about such changes in procedure.

The Prince rubbed his eyes and adjusted himself in his seat. "I see you still keep your common sense on the mantel, Talon." Prince Christopher settled deeper into his chair.

"Yes, my lord and I see my lack of using it might prompt me to sell it to Blackheart." Talon flashed a smile in Blackheart's direction and a snicker added to it from the Prince's direction.

"I see your fast wit and sharp tongue have blossomed in this hermit lifestyle. We passed your last neighbor almost half a day's ride away." Blackheart laughed as he continued. "The conversations you must have with your chickens or maybe with that donkey you call a horse, eh Talon!"

Talon's horse is small, but Talon never left Blackheart with the last word and today wasn't going to be any different.

"Are you still sore from the day she tossed you clear across the Royal Parade Ground in front of everyone, including, oh, what was her name, Rosalyn? Grudges are not one of your better traits, being a Royal Guardsmen and all." Talon smiled again at Blackheart and heard the Prince shift in his chair.

This topic caught the Prince's interest. "I don't believe I have heard this story, Blackheart!" Curiosity showed on his face as he grinned towards Blackheart.

"And never will you, nothing from me, bloody Prince or not. There won't be a word coming from this old man, even if I am a Royal Man." Blackheart crossed his arms and shut himself up. Many times Blackheart had wished Talon wasn't the one who witnessed that debacle, since he had been secretly giving him a hard time since it happened. The last thing Blackheart wanted was to have to endure both men giving him a hard time.

"It is no surprise you haven't heard of the tale of Blackheart's only love, well, that I know of anyway." Talon didn't want to change subjects, but this promotion was news to him. "What's this about a Royal Man? Blackheart, you were promoted to Royalty."

Prince Christopher turned to Blackheart, "I intend to get this story out of you, but for now I will spare you any further embarrassment." The Prince turned and concentrated on Talon. "Blackheart was promoted shortly after you left. As a matter of fact, he is currently Royal Man to the King and, as such, he is in charge of the military. But enough of that, you probably guessed that we didn't come out here to make a social call. What have you heard of news lately?"

"Royal Man, in charge of the military. I guess I have missed a fair share, but to answer your question, I hear passing gossip if I encounter a traveler at the trading center. Unfortunately, it is run by a mute and our conversations are rather, uh, one sided." Talon took a drink and continued. "I have overheard a few pieces of gossip though, and it all seems to be concerning the Northerns. A few months ago I even heard a story about Confidence Massenberg knocking Blackheart out. I thought these stories were just common gossip, but I assume by your visiting that I should have given them more credit."

"A mute trading post! You have definitely succeeded in become a hermit, as Blackheart so eloquently put it. Anyway, there is definitely truth to the gossip. We have been having problems with Confidence Massenberg and Confidence Pope for the past year."

Talon sat back in his chair as the Prince unfolded the events of the past year to him. Blackheart occasionally added some insights and explained how he was knocked unconscious. When they finished, Talon sat back even further, almost overwhelmed.

"I didn't realize how difficult things had become. Has nothing been heard from the Royal Messengers?"

“No and still nothing from the Northerns.”

“Has anything been done?”

“Surprisingly, the King didn’t realize how serious things had become until a few months ago, though I guess it didn’t matter considering how harsh the winter had been. We never even entertained the thought of visiting up north.” The Prince paused to drink his ale.

“Amazing. I really thought we wouldn’t see another war in Valerica for a long time after the last one.”

“So did I, but it seems Massenbergh has his own ideas about it. Blackheart and I have spent the last week with the Confidences from Redderin and Elizabeth Towne and the Townesmen from Hearttowne and Markham. As you can imagine, no one is interested in starting another war, but this boycott has to end before it really cripples the kingdom.”

Blackheart continued for the Prince. “Redderin can’t afford to lose the trade this spring, since it is still recovering from the war. Elizabeth Towne wasn’t able to trade because of the harsh winter, so it is waiting for the spring to reopen the Teal River. Like Prince Christopher said, we have to stop this boycott. Not to mention putting a stop to the other ambitions the Northerns may have.”

Talon nodded his understanding.

“If the Northerns go through with this boycott, Blackheart and I have been placed in charge of recalling the army to put an end to this nonsense. For the time being though, the King wants to have a small contingent in Markham, just in case there is more to this than we are seeing.”

“Why do you need a contingent in Markham? Isn’t the Royal detachment enough?”

“A year ago it would have been, but my brother convinced the council that the budget couldn’t handle the cost, so all of the detachments were disbanded. Each of the Vassals became responsible for themselves.”

“That is ridiculous!” Talon was shocked to hear about the poor decisions the castle had made. “I can’t believe that was passed.”

“Prince Christopher and I fought it, but the army and the detachments weren’t considered necessary, since there was peace again in Valerica. During this past week, we were able to present a new plan to the council and because of the situation with the Northerns it was met with a unanimous decision; well with the Confidences present anyway.” Blackheart refilled his mug and broke off a piece of bread as he continued. “Never-the-less, the contingent is forming and needs to leave as soon as possible. We have the full support of the crown to reopen those trade routes, even if we have to force it.”

The Prince picked up for Blackheart. “How I wish this will just turn out to be a misunderstanding and not a full blown war. I don’t feel King Frederick can withstand another war. He developed some kind of illness during the winter and it continues to grow worse. He is forgetting things and has lapses where he doesn’t know where he is. It scares me to think of losing him. Philip isn’t ready to be King, though in my opinion he will never be ready. It seems that we see eye to eye on fewer and fewer things these days, but I was born to be a King’s man and I will do my duty.

But enough of this chatter Talon, I need you. This contingent planned for Markham is missing a key role: its leader. I have come out here to ask you to fill that role. Will you accept?”

Talon was taken aback for a moment. “I am honored. I would have never guessed that this is how my day would begin. I…” Talon started to understand what the Prince was asking. Of course he felt honored to be asked to serve again, but was this what he really wanted. He grew silent as he collected his thoughts.

Prince Christopher momentarily interrupted his thoughts. "I know you have some demons to fight with, since you didn't leave us two years ago without a reason.

I realized the fact that we never heard from you again is enough of a warning for me, but I hope we can work through those reasons and in enough time for you to work with us. I need you to make the trip to Centerpoint. And quite frankly, I would be honored to be working with you again."

Talon drew in a big breath and tried to sort through his feelings. Barely able to concentrate, Talon focused outside the window and thought deep and hard about this decision. He was still fighting with his decision when Blackheart broke the silence.

"Speak Talon, what say you of this?"

"Hush Blackheart and let him collect his thoughts. He is not bound by duty like we are, but served with distinction until he was released from duty. He has the option to choose to be a King's man."

"You speak wisely, Prince Christopher, for my father is turning in his grave knowing I am considering rejoining the army. It almost killed him when Barlow went into the service and then I followed soon after him. My father never understood why we felt obligated to serve for the crown. He only served the land he owned.

I guess he chose his path as we all choose our own, though I do respect his choice. This cabin and lands are all I have left of my family. My father once said that the war only made heroes out of men who can no longer enjoy that status.

Anyway, I do have some ghosts, as you say, but I am ready to work them through. I cannot turn my back on my calling in life and I will not have my Prince ask me twice. I accept your offer, but I do have one condition!"

"Condition, eh?" The Prince sat back in his chair and awaited the inevitable.

"Blackheart will bathe."

Talon and Prince Christopher started laughing and reluctantly, Blackheart joined in. As the men laughed, Talon started to realize he had just accepted into a journey that he knew he would never forget.

Before finishing for the day, the Prince asked Blackheart if he could have a minute alone with Talon. Blackheart nodded his head and stepped outside to assemble the unit. Talon could hear him barking commands in the background.

"Talon, I wanted to ask of your father? If you would be able to tell me what became of him?"

"Of course. It took some time, but I have finally laid my father to rest." Talon sat back in his chair as he started the story.

"After we received word that the war was over, we were sent back to Heartfelt and I can't explain to you how happy I was to be going home. As soon as I arrived at the castle I searched for Barlow's company in hopes of both of us being able to return to the farm. I was only on the castle grounds for a few hours when I heard the news. It seemed that Barlow's company was still receiving resistance and the fighting was pushing itself into the Farmers Region. I was shocked. My moment of happiness was out the window.

Fearing the worst, I immediately headed for the farm and I made the trip in record time. I was surprised that I didn't encounter any Guardsmen as I made my way to the farm. I almost started to believe that the messenger was wrong, that the gossip was just gossip, because I just didn't see any evidence.



Of course, when I finally arrived at the farm I encountered a different story. The area was covered in a smoky haze and the smell of burning fields was overwhelming. I jumped from my horse and ran to the farmhouse. From the front of the farm it looked as if the house had survived the destruction. I tried to go through the front door, but it was barricaded shut, so I ran around the back and was greeted by acres of destruction. The stable was in pieces and carcasses of my father's horses were strewn all around me. The burning fields engulfed the horizon and the smoke blocked the sky.

After a long struggle with the back door, I eventually gained entry and my worst fears came true as I surveyed the inside of the house. There were scorch marks all over the house and broken wood and metal pieces everywhere. I searched room by room and when I walked into the kitchen the sight of my father, dead on the floor, greeted me. He had a dagger sticking out of his side and was lying in a pool of blood. After seeing that, I wondered if there was any way things could be any worse, until I saw who had killed him. Laying about ten feet away were the bodies of two Guardsmen. Two Heartfelt Guardsmen had killed my father.

I was devastated. I ran from the house to avoid the stench of death. I really don't remember much about those few days, but before I was done, I found the bodies of two more Heartfelt Guardsmen. I searched the entire grounds and I never saw any sign of Redderin Guardsmen, nor did I ever come across any more Guardsmen bodies."

Prince Christopher nodded his head. "I am beginning to understand your feelings toward the crown, especially Philip. It was his bad judgment that led to that night. Talon, I feel guilty about asking you to serve again. I don't know what more you have to lose to the crown. I..."

Talon interrupted him. "I do this because I have to, I need to serve. Feel nothing, my Prince, but feel proud that I am ready for this. Time will heal my wounds, but there is no reason for me to be wasting my time on this farm. You can count on me, but I do thank you for your concern."

Prince Christopher rose and walked over to Talon. "Then I will see you in Heartfelt in a few days. Until then Talon."

The duo walked outside and Prince Christopher mounted his steed. Now that the Prince was mounted, the detachment started its long trip down the path to the castle. Talon stood on the path and waited until he couldn't see them anymore before heading back into the cabin to put affairs in order before heading off to the castle.

He put away the cups from the visit and stared off at the horizon. He didn't know how long he had been doing it, but Talon stopped day dreaming and walked outside. He made his way to the back of the cabin and picked up his ax and swung. After a few swings he realized his heart wasn't into it. He knew in his heart that it was time to get ready. Duty was calling to him.

## **Chapter 6**

April 1st, 770; Hearttowne and the River Inn

Talon was a full day ahead of schedule as he trotted past the castle entrance and headed over the Teal River towards Hearttowne. He knew the other side of the bridge well, having spent so much time in Hearttowne back before the war. The bridge was the largest of its kind in the kingdom, the pride of King Heartfelt.

Talon was alone on the bridge this morning, but the river was full of traffic. Of course, only a small number of boats were heading north in bold defiance of the boycott.

The rest were loaded to the till and heading to Redderin. The war revitalization had created a booming industry for the merchants in both townes and even two years later the volume was

still being moved. Talon was happy to see things returning to a more normal state than the last time he had been around.

He wondered how far along the relations had grown between the castle and Redderin. He knew the increased trade between the townes must have lessened the differences and closed the gap that had existed since the early days. With Redderin a full Vassal now, Talon was glad to see that that part of Valerica's history was no longer a hot spot.

Talon trotted onto the Hearttowne side of the bridge and the path branched off in various directions, so he broke off of the main path that went into the center of the towne. He trotted along the waterfront and went past the handling docks for the Teal River. Watching the merchants load their boats, Talon spotted his destination ahead of him right in front of the Northern handling docks.

The River Inn was run by a friend of Talon's grandfather and was where Talon preferred to spend his time when he was in towne. The inn had a number of rooms, but was mostly known for its front restaurant and bar. The sign hanging from off the front porch was a carving of an owl that had been the proprietor's friend for years. That old owl died just before the start of the War of Occupation.

The River Inn's owner, Minty Stevens, was an old family friend who had grown up with Talon's grandfather. When both men became of age, Minty inherited the Inn, while Grandfather Bastian took the vow to become a Guardsmen. Rumor had it that Minty knew Grandfather Bastian well, although no matter how hard Talon tried, he could never get a story out of him.

Barlow once told Talon that when both their grandfather and Minty were younger they courted the same young woman from Redderin. It seems it was a fierce competition between the two and the lady wasn't ready to make a choice. Both men went back and forth in their efforts to court her, but Grandfather Bastian was called away to the Northern Border to aid with the defense of Valerica. Upon his return months later, he found her married to Minty. Grandfather didn't know how to handle it, so he stopped seeing them both. A few years later the lady passed away and for some unknown reason Grandfather Bastian didn't show up at the funeral.

Years later, the men would reunite for most of their adult life, until they would split apart for good. Barlow had told him that the details were even sketchier, but it seems Minty wanted grandfather to use his influence to make some changes with the relations between the Redderins. Grandfather tried his best, but wound up isolating himself from the inner circles of the crown. During a heated argument between the men, they just walked away from each other. It would be many years before they would see each other again and time didn't allow them the luxury of reconciliation, for Grandfather Bastian passed away shortly after the brief reunion. Minty never spoke of his grandfather with Talon, though he would often try and coax a story out of him.

As Talon grew closer he could see that the inn looked closed. It sat facing the Northern loading docks and most of those were bare. Talon knew it was early in the morning, but he thought it used to be open for breakfast. He brought his horse up to the front of the inn and dismounted.

Up close, the place looked no more open than from the path, but after taking care of his horse, he walked up to the door and found that it was open. He stepped inside and saw there was very little light leaking in from the closed shutters.

"Hello! Minty! Hey, Minty!" Talon waited for a response. "Is anybody home?"

Silence.

Talon headed towards the back of the bar where Minty used to live. As he headed that way, he noticed that the bar looked clean and there were mugs and large baskets across the counter

and behind the bar. Talon walked passed the bar and found the door he was looking for in the darkness. It was in the back of the dining area behind the main area of the bar, but this door was locked. Talon knocked and was rewarded with silence. His imagination kicked in and fearing the worst, he turned the knob and pushed hard on the door. Much to his surprise, the door fell inward with a loud crack.

Startling him, Talon cursed out loud and lost his balance, almost falling to the floor with the door as it tumbled to the ground. With the door now open, he looked down the hallway. His eyes adjusted to the darkness and found there was a door directly to his left and two doors at the end of the hallway. The door to his left had a sliver of light under it.

Talon made his way over the fallen door and stood next to the door on his left. He listened intently for any sound. At first, there didn't appear to be any sound, but Talon thought he could hear shallow breathing on the other side, almost as if someone was trying to disguise their presence. He wasn't sure what to do until he heard a shutter lock into place. He watched the bottom of the door as the line of light disappeared.

Talon knew the element of surprise was against him, since there was no way he wasn't heard yelling his way through the bar, unless the person on the other side of the door was deaf. Admittedly, breaking down the door hadn't helped either. Without many options left to him, and already one door in the hole, he pivoted on his left leg and kicked the door in with his full strength, while at the same time freeing his sword from his sheath. He prayed his attacker wasn't skilled in knife throwing or worse, carrying a crossbow.

He pushed aside those pleasant thoughts and was surprised as the door, barely half-open, struck something solid. Talon heard a dull thud followed by a metallic sound. With the door fully opened, he moved forward into the room and slowly made his way towards the center of the room. He wasn't quite past the door when a voice broke the silence.

“Stay right where you are and don't move either!”

Talon quickly adjusted to the light and glanced in the direction of the voice. As far as he could tell, he was alone with his guest.

Talon immediately recognized the voice and tried to answer, but he heard a footstep behind him. He started to turn around, but didn't make it around fast enough to miss the bottle being thrown at his face. Thanks to the Bastian family luck, he did turn around fast enough to catch a glimpse of the bottle as it smashed into his temple.

The force of the blow sent him reeling into the nearest wall, but he didn't quite make it that far before he tripped over a side table and fell to the floor headfirst. He heard a woman and the shuffling of a body, before he blacked out.

Talon came to sometime later with a splitting headache. He shifted his position on the floor and, almost immediately, he felt the metal point of a sword against his chin. He followed the length of the blade to his assailant, but the window was directly behind his attacker and the light blocked his view, though the silhouette was definitely one of a woman.

“Marilyn, let me get a look at him. And be careful with that godforsaken sword.”

“Uncle, are you hurt? Why are you limping?”

“Now don't concern yourself with me. Let's get to the business at hand.” He turned and moved in closer to Talon. “Who are you and what do you want, stranger?”

“Minty! Is that really you, Minty?” Talon didn't think he was talking that loud, but it was making his already pounding head ring. He strained to see if he could make out any features on the woman. “It's me, Talon. Michael Talon Bastian.”

“Michael Talon Bastian! Mich...well, what the hell are you doing breaking into my house? Wait a minute, how do I know it's you? I haven't seen you in a long time and I sometimes wondered if you were dead. Well, not you, but Michael Talon, well you know what I mean!” Minty stepped closer to get a better look.

“It hasn't been that long, besides what is time between old friends? To be honest, I'm not sure what I can do to convince you.” Talon said as he tried to adjust his position on the floor. Marilyn wasn't happy with that and pushed the sword deeper into his chin.

“Open the shutters, Marilyn.” Minty watched as Marilyn reluctantly moved over to the shutters with the sword still in hand and still pointing at Talon. Once she opened the shutters light poured in. “Let the stranger stand.”

It took Talon a little longer to stand up than he wanted to admit to.

“Good, now you stand into the light, Michael Talon.”

Talon thought he was in the light, but he moved into the supposedly lighter spot and waited for the verdict.

Minty squinted and looked him over at least three times before he spoke. “My eyes aren't half what they used to be, but I knew your grandfather and your father, Talon. Welcome back.” Minty walked over and embraced Talon. Time melted away between the two.

“Minty, you used to be open around the clock. What's going on? Is anything wrong?” Talon said as he rubbed his temple and felt the knot that was likely to grow bigger. He took a moment to look around and surmised his was in Minty's den.

“A long time you have been gone, too long. This damn boycott has been hurting my business, but let's sit down in the front room. Marilyn, see that it is presentable.” Minty pointed to the door and indicated that Talon follow him.

Talon took his first good look at Minty and surprised at how old he looked. His once black hair was almost replaced by gray hairs and his face was starting to show his age. As Minty started walking to the door, Talon noticed him leaning very hard on a walking stick.

After one more glance around the room, Talon followed Minty down the hallway. He glanced up at the staircase leading to the few upstairs rooms in the inn and was saddened to see they were boarded up. It might have been the poor lighting, but Talon wasn't sure the staircase even made it to the top. Those rooms brought back many memories, since Talon had spent many a night in those rooms, mostly working off a hangover before returning to the castle the next morning.

Talon was brought out of his reverie as he heard Minty grunt as he tried to maneuver around the door that was lying on the floor. Minty mumbled something, but Talon couldn't hear him. Minty was having trouble as Marilyn ran up to move the door, but wound up helping Minty finish walking over it.

“Never occurred to knock, Talon?” Minty said as he stepped over the last of the door.

“Spoils half the fun, don't you agree?” Talon hoped Minty saw the humor in it.

“Marilyn, I warn you, stay away from this one. Nothing but trouble.” Minty took him over to a table overlooking the road. “Sit down Talon. Something to drink maybe?” Minty maneuvered himself into a chair.

“Just some water, thank you.” Talon sat down across from Minty.

“Marilyn, could you get that water and then join us. So, what brings one of the last of the Bastian's back to Hearttowne?” Minty's voice was laced with deep concern.

“Some old friends came for a visit recently. They asked me for a favor.”

“You picked the wrong time to pay us a visit. Not even I thought north would pick up where Redderin left off. This boycott has my business in a slump, as you can tell. I am too old to be around for another war.” Minty sank deeper into his chair. “Wait a minute; I have saved something for you. Excuse me while I get it.”

Minty stood up and headed to the back of the inn. Moments after Minty had disappeared into the inn; Marilyn walked out of the kitchen and raised her eyebrows in alarm when she noticed Minty was gone.

Talon gave her the once over and noticed she was a very pretty girl, being at least a few years younger than Talon. She was slightly shorter than Talon with a beautiful set of brown eyes. Her hair fell past her shoulders and was a deep brown color.

Talon felt uncomfortable as she hesitated, placing the tray on the table. She was biting her lower lip and appeared to be genuinely nervous as she placed a mug in front of Talon. She glanced around the room and looked like she wanted to say something.

“Is anything wrong, Marilyn? That is your name right?” Talon said this with his best smile.

“Yes, my name is Marilyn. Um, where did my Uncle go?” Marilyn’s eyes searched the bar area.

“He’s your Uncle, uh, I mean I guess I heard you say that, but I just thought, uh, something else, I guess.” Talon stuttered out.

“Um, my Uncle. Where is he?” Marilyn said this with alarm creeping into her voice.

Talon felt the sting of her voice with that comment, but could hardly blame her. Less than five minutes ago, he was caught breaking into her home. Talon wished he could have given her a different first impression.

“Your Uncle said he had something for me and walked towards the back of the bar.” Talon stood up and offered her a chair.

“Oh.” Marilyn said without being convinced in the least.

“Uh, my name is Talon, Michael Talon Bastian, but most people call me Talon. Your Uncle and I go a long way back.” Talon motioned to the chair again and extended his hand to Marilyn. She reached out to Talon, but he could see he had not earned her trust and things weren’t helping that Minty hadn’t returned yet. Marilyn sat down across the table from Talon and was as far from him as possible. She poured Talon’s water and then began to pour a lumpy deep greenish brown liquid into one of the mugs. Talon winced as he watched chunks drop into the mug. He could only imagine what it was, but decided to ask anyway. “What, uh, is that exactly?”

“My Uncle is a very sick man. This is for his health, whether he likes it or not.” Marilyn finished pouring the concoction into the mug.

“And I will have you know I don’t like it at all and I bet you couldn’t find another man who does, Marilyn.” Minty was coming through the broken door as he said that. He was able to maneuver around the door this time. He came up to the table and laid a dagger down in front of Talon. The dagger was old and the sheath looked like it had seen better days.

Minty sat heavily into his chair. “Not as young as I used to be, Talon.” Having settled into his chair he continued, “This dagger belonged to your grandfather. Years ago, when he walked out of Heartfelt, he left this on the bar. I remember visiting him years later on the farm. He was so pissed about that dagger. I told him he could come and get it anytime. Laughed in my face he did. I thought I lost it years ago, but a couple of month’s back the old shed was destroyed. Tree branch crashed right through the roof. Worse lightning storm I’ve seen in awhile. Anyway, one

of the many artifacts I found was this dagger. Almost didn't recognize it, but once I took it out I knew it was your grandfather's."

"I barely knew my grandfather, Minty. He didn't live long after I was five or six years old." Talon said as he reached for the dagger.

"Your grandfather was quite the character. I miss him to this day. Never got the chance to really know your father, though there wasn't much chance, since I never saw your father leave that damn farm. I only met him on a few occasions in the Farmer's Region and I could tell he was too much like his old man to ever come to Heartfelt. I honestly don't know if he ever stepped foot into the castle or this town." Minty finished as he looked at his drink.

"My father did step foot into Heartfelt, though only once. Back when Barlow graduated from the Royal Guard and was given control of the Redderin Guard. My father made the trip, because I guess he thought the Redderin would finally receive a fair shake from the crown, but it wasn't long after that when he was transferred back to Heartfelt."

"Speaking of Barlow, he left something here for you. Let me get it." Minty got up once again and headed out, leaving Marilyn and Talon alone. The silence grew to uncomfortable levels as it dragged onward.

Marilyn finally broke the silence. "Would you care for something more to drink?"

"Yes, thank you." Talon tried his smile again.

"I knew your brother, Talon." Marilyn said matter-of-factly.

"You knew Barlow?" Talon couldn't keep the surprise out of his voice.

"I am originally from Redderin. My mother was a seamstress with the local guard and I sometimes would help out with the deliveries. The first time I met Barlow was a few months before the war during one of my deliveries. I made the deliveries for my mother with a small pull cart." Marilyn finished pouring his drink as she continued. "On my way to the grounds, I was stopped by four men with less than honorable intentions. I was only sixteen years old at the time and I was petrified. In the distance, I could see Vassal-grounds, but I was too afraid to run. Before I could react, one of them grabbed the cart from my hands, while another lifted me onto his shoulders. I really thought all was lost, but then this voice came out of nowhere, yet everywhere at the same time, and yelled for them to stop. This stranger told them to let me down and go about their business. I was scared, really scared, but I was just curious enough to want to see who this stranger was.

It was your brother. He was standing there in full Royal armor and he seemed at that moment to be larger than life. It might seem absurd, but the four men looked like children compared to your brother. Unfortunately, there was one in the group who wanted to prove something, so he pulled out a rusty knife and lunged at Barlow. At the same time the man who was carrying me threw me to the side of the road and took off after Barlow. I watched as your brother dodged the knife and then hit the man so I had I am sure he broke the man's wrist. The knifeman fell to the ground in pain as the other man met with a similar fate once your brother threw him. This seemed to quell any further action against Barlow, and me for that matter. Two of the men helped with the fallen one, while the fourth was already running down the road.

Your brother saved my life that day, and at the very least he saved my dignity. He escorted me the rest of the way and saw to it that I was taken back home with protection. Every time after that someone was sent to meet me if your brother wasn't able to make it. Don't think for a second that I didn't realize what that meant. Most people from Heartfelt wouldn't have given the time of day to someone from Redderin and especially someone who was from the Royal Guard.

Barlow was bigger than his job and I was very sorry to hear of his death. If you don't mind me asking, how did Barlow die?" Marilyn sat back as she poured herself a drink.

Talon told her the story of his brother's death. "I am glad I was able to talk to you. I have missed my brother these past few years. Once he left for the Royal Guard I would only get to see him on occasion and the last time we spoke face to face was at this very table with Minty serving us drinks."

He remembered that day like it was yesterday

"My Uncle told me many stories about the Bastian family and I believe them from meeting your brother all those years ago. What brings you to Heartfelt?" Marilyn said as she took a drink of the water.

"I was summoned by Prince Christopher. I am scheduled to see him today. That is my plan for the immediate future, but the rest is being decided for me." Talon said he took another drink of the water. It tasted good and was slightly sweetened with strawberries.

"That doesn't bother you, Talon?"

"I heard the gossip out in the Farmer's Region about the Northerns and I am too curious to let it go. Besides, what else is there to do? I can't spend the rest of my life on the farm." Talon said with more confidence than he felt.

"Ah, you are definitely a Bastian family member. Would you care for something else to drink?"

"No, I really don't have too much more time." Talon watched the road as a few people walked by the inn.

"I wonder what is taking Uncle so long. The backrooms are only so big. I hope he is all right." Marilyn looked beyond the door lying on the floor. Her Uncle's whereabouts were answered a few moments later.

With a crash and a curse, Minty appeared in the doorway. He was carrying a bundle of papers and a small case was in his right hand. Marilyn rose to help him out with his load. With Marilyn's help, he laid down the bundle of papers and the case in front of Talon. Marilyn took the opportunity to disappear into the kitchen as Minty sat down in front of his drink.

Talon wanted to give him a hard time about his drink, but his curiosity kept his words in check. Before Talon could ask about the papers, he watched Minty pour his drink through the floorboards. He left about a quarter of it in his cup and grabbed the other picture and filled the rest of his cup up with the scented water. With that being done, he winked at Talon and took a long drink. Talon did his best to not start laughing.

"Minty, uh, I suppose I could keep quiet about that for a small price. I especially think Marilyn will pay quite a bit for knowing what you just did!" Talon joked and could barely keep from laughing.

"Michael Talon Bastian!" Minty said with as much authority as he could muster. "What Marilyn doesn't know won't hurt her and the only price I will give you is a big fat lip. Although I have to admit it was much easier to do with you around. Normally, I have to do a lot more acting to keep Marilyn from finding out." Minty took a hefty drink of the now diluted concoction.

As if on cue, Marilyn walked in from the kitchen. She had overheard the last few words that Minty had just said. "What am I not suppose to find out about, Uncle?" Marilyn said with genuine concern.

Talon could hardly keep from bursting into a fit of laughter and he couldn't resist egging Minty on. "You know Minty, I am curious too, what do you not want her to find out about?"

“I might have some years on this body, but I will still take you over my knee and teach you some respect, Talon.” Minty had a cross look on his face and directed an even more sinister look at Talon. “Although seriously Marilyn, I was telling Talon that my leg has been hurting me a little more than usual.” With a quick wink at Talon, Minty steered the conversation in a different direction without Marilyn being any wiser. Minty stood up and shuffled over to Talon. “Those papers were left in your brother’s room during his last visit. I don’t know what they are about, but your brother was called away during the night and left in quite a hurry. The last thing he said to me was that he left some things in the room and he gave me that case as collateral. I wouldn’t accept it, but your brother was as stubborn as your grandfather was. When I cleared his room in the morning I found the case on the bed with a note telling me it was the collateral we discussed for my troubles. Your brother, stubborn to the end. I stored his things and forgot about them until a messenger appeared with the news of his death. I was sorry to hear it. How have you fared since?”

“It wasn’t what I expected and I went through some bad times. At the same time my father passed away on the farm.” Talon related the story to Minty.

“I’m sorry, especially that I’m only now finding out about it. I haven’t been able to make any trips to the Farmer’s Region since the war. My leg just won’t last through that long of a horse ride. I would have heard about it from the farmers, since everyone knew your father. He was one of the best farmers they had.” Minty sat back down. “Your grandfather made a good choice by settling over there.”

“I don’t think he knew how much my father had a green thumb until that first year on the farm. Did Barlow leave anything else?”

“No, just those papers and that case. I have been waiting awhile for you to come back. I wanted you to have those.” Minty watched Talon look over the items.

Talon glanced at the bundle of papers, but picked up the small box. He opened it and discovered he was looking at Barlow’s field pin. Talon had only seen this pin once before. He answered Minty’s unspoken question about what was in the box. “When Barlow was in the general army he had received this pin after a disastrous field exercise. The exercise involved the Redderin Guard and the Royal Guard. Barlow was in a company of sixty men and altogether there were about five hundred troops present. Of course this was back before the war. The basic idea of the exercise was to advance without being seen to achieve victory. There were two major units and through a series of mishaps Barlow was left to lead the last group of men to victory in spite of overwhelming odds. The remaining men that Barlow led to victory held a private ceremony and gave him that pin. He called it his field pin and held it in very high regards.”

Talon smiled at Minty and was glad to have possession of it.

“This show of gratitude to your brother doesn’t surprise me. He was a fine man and an even better soldier.”

Marilyn took the box and examined the pin more closely. “It is very beautiful, Talon.”

“I never thought I would see that pin again. It was something Barlow wouldn’t admit to, but I heard that story from a friend of his who was there. My brother never stopped amazing me.” Talon’s attention drifted to the bundle of papers.

“How long can you stay, Talon?”

Minty, I’m glad you brought that up. I am supposed to meet the Prince at mid day tomorrow, but I am early. I thought I would get a head start on whatever mission I have been chosen for. I think I should get going, but thank you for, well, for everything. I will try and get back before I am sent off on whatever mission Prince Christopher has for me.”



“Talon, it has made me happy to see you again and I will hold you to your word. Any chance you get, I expect to see you back here.”

Everyone rose with Minty’s comment and Talon placed the box inside the bundle of papers while heading for the exit. Once outside Talon placed the bundle into one of his carrying bags and addressed Marilyn. “It was a pleasure to meet you, Marilyn. Please take care of Minty for me!” They shook hands and Marilyn headed back into the inn.

“She is a fine niece to have. She is trying to get me to move to Redderin and everyday it seems like a better idea, but I just don’t know if I could ever give up Hearttowne.” Minty reflectively glanced at the surrounding area.

“I bid you farewell Minty and I will do my best to come back a little sooner than the last time.” With that Talon mounted his horse and headed onto the main path. He glanced back at the pack mule and rubbed his horse. “Almost there, girl. You probably need a rest after all this horsing around. Most riding we’ve done in a long time.” Talon quietly laughed at his joke as he wondered what awaited him at the castle.

## Chapter 7

April 1st, 770; Moments later, Castle Heartfelt

Talon was tired from the last few days of travel, but pushed on, retracing his footsteps along the waterfront until he was back on the bridge. On his way across, he stopped in the middle and looked around him. For a moment, everything in his life made sense as he smelled the beautiful spring air and took in the sunshine.

On both sides of the River he could see civilization and was momentarily mesmerized by the castle. It stood on the top of a gentle hill, yet that same gentle hill pushed it into the sky. Talon slowly broke from the spell and continued off the bridge and onto the path.

He turned onto the main path and headed towards the castle and within no time was approaching the castle. He stopped at the gate only to find that it wasn't manned. Unescorted, he proceeded into the castle. He walked past all of the buildings inside the castle and if he hadn't known better he would have thought the place had been abandoned. He passed the great hall and found that most of the castle occupants were outside the back gate, watching the Guardsmen exercise. Talon dismounted and walked through the back entrance. After seeing the hundreds of Guardsmen practicing across the field he threw out the abandoned castle theory. Talon moved off to the side and watched the Guardsmen spar for awhile.

Watching the Guardsmen was bringing back memories of his days on those fields, though his memories were cut short by the arrival of Prince Christopher. Talon caught him out of the corner of his eye as he was approaching from off the field. The Prince had some sweat coming off his forehead and his clothes were full of marks. Talon wasn't surprised to find the Prince sparring with the best of them.

When the Prince was within twenty feet Talon went down on one knee.

"My Prince."

"Rise Talon." He spoke as he touched Talon on his right shoulder. "You're early. Have you been to towne?"

"Yes, sire. I stopped in and spoke with Minty. He seems to be doing well. How are the exercises going?"

"Better than I expected. Getting the entire army back up to speed is taking less effort than Blackheart and I expected."

"Have there been any new developments since your return?"

"Two days ago we sent our first Royal Messenger to our brothers in the south. Very shortly, we will seek aid from a people who were defeated in a battle against us." Prince Christopher said as he started to pace. "The messenger should arrive within the week. Our hope is that these changes from the north have not affected the livelihood of the Southern Towne."

"The docks look busier than anytime I can remember, so I don't imagine the Redderin are suffering from this boycott."

"I thought as much, but I haven't been able to keep up with the developments in town, because Blackheart has kept me busy with the recall. Why don't we go find him and let him know you are here."

The Prince turned and Talon followed him back into the castle. As they walked, a Guardsman came within ten feet of the two.

"Good afternoon, Prince Christopher. Sir Stamos sent me to let you know the afternoon session will be starting and your presence is needed."

The Prince briefly conversed with him.

"Talon, please give your horse and mule to him. He will arrange to have it moved into the stables." Prince Christopher said as he nodded his head towards Talon.

"Yes sir. I will take those from you."

"Thank you. She shouldn't give you much trouble, but beware of that mule. Has a mind of its own sometimes." Talon passed the reins over to the young soldier.

"Yes sir. It shall be done." The soldier took control of Talon's horse and look to the Prince to be dismissed.

"Thank you, Steven. See you on the fields." Prince Christopher released him with those words.

"Yes, until tomorrow, my Prince." Steven took his new load and headed off to the stables.

"He will take good care of them, Talon. Come now, I'm already late for the afternoon meeting and I think Blackheart will be surprised to see you are early. Luckily, everything is already in place. Things can get rolling a day early." The Prince concluded and they continued on in silence.

As they walked, Talon noticed the condition the inside of the castle was in. It had definitely seen better days. The west wing was still in ruins and parts of the castle wall lay throughout the area. Talon remembered hearing the story of how the Queen had died behind that wall. He wondered what kept the King from repairing it. Castle Heartfelt has stood for at least a full century and the highest turrets were still reaching into the sky. As they continued on, Talon's curiosity got the better of him.

"Prince Christopher, what is holding up the repairs on the castle?"

The Prince nodded his understanding. "Once the war ended, we sent our tradesmen to Redderin to help with the repair on their end. They recently completed the major repairs, but the King sent them to Hearttowne to effect their repairs. As soon as they finish with the town they are scheduled to finish the major jobs within the castle. For now we are keeping ahead with a small crew. This skeleton crew, still attached to the castle, has done the best job they could, but until the main crew returns, the major repairs have to wait."

They continued to the Royal wing and walked past it to the servant's entrance. Prince Christopher was never one to stand on ceremony and for as long as Talon had known him he used the servant's entrance.

They stopped in the Prince's room and he hastily changed from his field clothes to something more suitable for the meeting. Without losing too much time, they hurried down the hall.

The day was still young as they continued past the other royal bedrooms and headed down to the conference chamber. Two guards stood adjacent to the door and snapped to attention as Sir Stamos walked out of the door. He had a look of surprise on his face as he noticed Talon walking with the Prince.

"There you are Prince Christopher. I was just coming to look for you. The Council awaits." He kept the door open and stepped back to allow them to enter the chamber. Sir Stamos proceeded to introduce Prince Christopher to the conference chamber.

Not so long ago, Talon was given an introduction, but since his departure two years ago, he understood the icy silence from Sir Stamos.

Sir Stamos closed the door behind them and disappeared to go about his business elsewhere in the castle. Talon, on the other hand, was faced with a world that he forgot had existed. Surrounding Talon were quite a few ghosts from the past. The table held Prince Philip, Prince Ty, Blackheart, three advisors unknown to Talon, along with Sir George, the king's brother and military advisor, and at the head of the table, King Frederick. Throughout the rest of room were people Talon didn't recognize.

The first to notice Talon's stupor was Blackheart. "Talon, will you address your King or does your mind match the look on your face?"

Before Talon could answer he realized what kind of look he had on his face and felt a little embarrassment, but he proceeded to kneel for his King.

"Rise, Talon." King Frederick motioned with his hand.

"My King, I have answered your son's call to service and contrary to Blackheart's opinion I am in full control of my faculties." Talon reported as he rose. "I am honored to be here, although I see Blackheart has neglected his end of the bargain, that bath."

With the ripples of laughter over, the meeting continued on as an unfamiliar face stood up to address Hearttowne concerns. Talon didn't know if he was the mayor or if he was an assistant as he spoke of the concerns of the town folk and voiced some concerns for the northern trade industry. Upon finishing his report he seated himself. The meeting continued in the same way, until the floor turned to Blackheart.

Blackheart began. "Your Majesty, I have assembled a group of Guardsmen who are to be sent to Centerpoint in anticipation of any attacks concerning the boycott. All the Guardsmen have come from within the Royal House and from Redderin, and once Markham is secured, I hope to have a supplemented unit dispatched to Elizabeth Towne to provide the same added protection until the army is back to full strength." At the mention of this twist, small murmurs were heard and Prince Philip rose to voice his opinion. Blackheart held out his hand telling the Prince to wait. Blackheart continued.

"I haven't asked him yet, but I would like Talon Bastian to head the second unit."

This proclamation was followed by a loud outburst on the council floor. Prince Philip was the first to his feet with utterances of how an outsider can lead such a mission for the Crown.

The arguments were growing until Prince Christopher rose and voiced the final opinion. "I will say this once and only once; the Bastian family has given the ultimate sacrifice for the crown and Talon has come very close on numerous occasions. He has given his family, his home, his honor, and his life in service to the King. I will not stand for his character being brought into question and pending the King's acceptance, he will be given command of the unit

destined for Markham with the full support of the crown and this council. And do I need to add...." During his speech he continued to raise his level of voice until he was almost shouting and stood taller and taller until Talon was sure the Prince was going to explode with fury.

Talon had only witnessed this side of his Prince on a few occasions. In his opinion, he thought that when Prince Christopher entered this zone, he deserved the King-in-waiting more than did his older brother. The room had grown silent since Prince Christopher started speaking.

Talon felt it was time to move on. "Your Majesty, I accept the role given." Talon felt the stares from the council on him, but he focused on the King.

"You have been given command and shall leave here carrying the full authority of the Crown. God Speed, young one." With that, the King rose and left the chamber.

Talon took a second to take in the room. He was not surprised by some of the looks he received. Strangely enough, he noticed he still had some allies left within the council. Obviously, Blackheart and Prince Christopher never wavered, but he noticed Princess Anne give a nod of approval to the Prince. Talon once had the Princess's undivided attention, but that was a long time ago and a story Blackheart could often be coerced into repeating. Aside from that foolishness, Talon received nods from the Hearttowne mayor and his assistant and gained an unlikely nod from Prince Ty. Talon had spent very little time with him and he almost never encountered him during the War of Occupation. Prince Christopher and Prince Ty always seemed to be at odds, so Talon took his nod in stride and took a step back behind Prince Christopher.

The Prince nodded to Talon and proceeded to take the floor. "Now that the formalities have passed, let us adjourn this meeting until one hour after departure time of the first team, agreed?" Nods came from the council, but Prince Philip had to voice his opinion and took the floor.

"Prince Christopher, when will that time be?" Prince Philip's voice was dripping with sarcasm.

"Exactly one hour after I know." And with that Prince Christopher nodded to Talon and Blackheart. "Talon, Blackheart, you are with me."

With those words the three men walked out the chamber. Aside from some mumbling, the council let them leave without further complications, though it didn't matter, because the council wasn't going to stop Prince Christopher. He was very determined and led Talon and Blackheart right past a bewildered Sir Stamos, who took the departure of the group as a signal that the meeting was over. They headed down the Royal Wing through the main doors and out into the courtyard until they were in Blackheart's room. To Talon's surprise there were two men already in the room.

Talon only recognized one of the men and before the door was shut, Trall had walked straight towards Talon. This was a man Talon could never forget. They embraced.

"Talon, never, never again did I expect to lay eyes upon you and especially not under these conditions! How are you? Well, let me look at you?" Trall said with unconfined excitement.

"Whoa, slow down Trall. It's good to see you again." Talon said as he embraced Trall one more time. He looked the man over and was surprised to see that they both had grown up since the war.

"I am beyond curious in wondering what has lead us together and in Blackheart's room." Trall said and gave Blackheart an expectant look.

Blackheart took the subtle hint and interceded, "I am glad we have decided to get down to business. Talon you know Trall, but allow me to introduce Bryant Theos."

Talon looked for some clue of his origins, but his dress told him nothing and his accent didn't give anything away.

Blackheart continued, "Bryant was the involved in the final six months of the War of Occupation for the Redderin side. He will be assuming command of the Redderin Guardsmen, but he will report to you."

Greetings were exchanged around the table along with handshakes. Pleasantries aside, the meeting continued.

"Right, let's get down to it, ladies. Talon has been placed in command of unit two and I am in charge of unit one. Both units will be leaving together and will stay together until we reach Centerpoint. At our arrival, unit two will disembark and head east to Elizabeth towne. We are hoping your unit will be able to deter any action taken against Elizabeth Towne. Trall is going to be part of your unit and you are welcome to place him in whatever capacity you need. If there are no objections to that, I will continue." Blackheart paused and look around at each member.

No one spoke up and Talon was more than satisfied to be working with Trall again.

"Good, our first goal is to head to Centerpoint as a team. When we arrive in Markham we will head out on our different agendas, but we will talk more about them later. So far, it is cut and dry. This afternoon, you will be able to meet with the members of your team, Redderin and Heartfelt. You have three members as of now, but I have chosen five more Guardsmen. Altogether you have four guardsmen and one Royal Man to supplement your ranks and to act as Guardsmen in charge of Elizabeth Towne. I hope you trust my choices, but you will have the final call. How are we doing so far?" Blackheart paused again and looked to Talon for a reply.

"I trust your judgment Blackheart, but I would like to have Stephen Loveland and William Nachtigall, if both are still within your ranks?" Talon looked at Blackheart and was impressed with how much control he had over himself. He was filling in as a Royal Man like he was born to do it.

"I anticipated those choices and, yes, both have been assigned to your team. The other Guardsmen are Caswel Holloway, Carole Reinard, and Kenneth Layton." Blackheart said and looked once again at Talon.

Talon's recognized the first name, but was surprised at the mention of a woman's. "A woman in the Royal Guard, Blackheart?" Talon gave Blackheart a smile that told of how proud he was of such a change to have been brought about.

"As you know, times have changed since you left and I will let Guardsmen Reinard speak on her behalf."

"Bryant, please fill in the Redderin names."

"Right. I have four Rangers; Yara Retore, Samatha La Sabre, Elizabeth Sanders, and Alexandra Mitchell."

"Thank you, Bryant. You will be able to meet all of them this afternoon or tomorrow."

Blackheart took the floor. "I realize that this is a small number of Guardsmen, but if at anytime we have an unanticipated complication you will be able to draw from my thirty men, but I hope both units arrive with full complements." Blackheart said.

"Is there any reason for only allowing a few members onto the team?" Talon asked hoping to get an insight into this trip.

"Talon, we are trying to keep this quiet. And, well, to be truthful, we can't afford to send anymore than that. The council will not authorize any more funds to be used until they have a clearer picture of what we are facing." Blackheart concluded.

"It looks like we are going to have to be miracle workers, within the war chest of course."

Blackheart nodded to the men and then looked to Prince Christopher.

"Very good Blackheart. Let's continue our discussions in my room. Talon you can get reacquainted with Trall and get to know Bryant. Good day gentlemen." The Prince helped Blackheart with his load and both men left the room.

"If it is all right, I would like to take care of some of my affairs before I am up to my heels in the saving of Valerica and all that." Bryant said with a smile.

"Understood, Bryant. We will see you this afternoon." Talon said as he looked to Trall to see if he had anything to add. "Sound good?"

"Yes, I will have my team there. Good day to you." Bryant left the room.

This left Trall and Talon alone in Blackheart's room. Both men knew they had a lot of catching up to do.

They spent a good portion of the afternoon doing just that, catching up.

Talon spent his time telling him about his brother, his father, Prince Philip, and what he had gone through during the last two years. "My father and brother had been killed and it all comes back to one person, Prince Philip. The irony in this whole thing, Trall, was that the Southern Towne had been retaken; Redderin was ours. There was no reason to go any further. Of course, I would find out later that Prince Philip was acting on his own and I still remember that day so clearly." Talon braced himself against the desk. "Trall, let's take a walk. This room is starting to feel smaller. I wanted to check on my horse and mule anyway."

He was glad to go out and get some fresh air as the afternoon breeze carried it. Talon's head cleared as they walked into the courtyard. From the courtyard, the stables were a short distance. As they approached, a stable boy appeared from the entrance.

"Good afternoon, sirs. Is there anything I can help you with?"

Talon didn't recognize the young boy. "Yes, I have come to check on my horse and a mule. A Guardsmen should have brought him along this morning." Talon described his animals to the boy.

"Of course, Guardsmen Teager dropped them off. This way."

Talon was shown to the stable where his horse was housed.

"Thanks for your help. By the way, what is your name?" Talon said as he rubbed down his horse.

"Yes, sir. My name is Peter, Peter Gredit. I fed your horse after Guardsmen Teager dropped her off, but I didn't take off her gear. I thought I would wait for your approval."

"Thank you, but don't worry about it. I will take care of the old girl, but I appreciate you making her feel at home." Talon said as he tried to see where they put his pain in the neck mule. "Did you have any trouble with the mule, Peter?"

"No, not at all, sir. We put her along the outer wall. Would you like to see her?" Peter started moving towards the rear of the stables.

"No, just wanted to make sure she didn't make a nuisance of herself. By the way, you can call me Talon. No need for the sir. Have you met Trall?" Talon looked over in Trall's direction.

"Of course, uh, Talon. Trall has been around for quite some time. Is there anything else I can do for you?" Peter asked.

"No, I will see to her from here." Talon made sure his horse was comfortable and then headed out of the stables after thanking Peter. "Okay, I have talked enough, Trall. What has happened to you these past few years?"

"I was as confused about things as you were after the war. Once I found out that you left the castle to head home, I really didn't know what to do. Prince Christopher released his garrison

from duty and I chose to take a break from the service. I had some words with Prince Christopher and he accepted my resignation, but I wished I had known what your intentions had been. I always fancied us doing something together, but you had already left for the farm.

With nothing else to do, I headed north to find my family. I spent a few months looking for them, but I didn't have much success, so I lost hope and headed back to Heartfelt.

It seems so long ago that I left Terri alone with the little ones to fight in the War of Occupation. You remember how upset she was when I left. I don't blame her, but do you realize I haven't seen her or the little ones in over four years. They probably don't think I am still alive.

When I returned to Heartfelt, I asked around about you, but I found out you hadn't been heard from in awhile. Prince Christopher and Blackheart filled me in concerning Barlow's fate. I was crushed and I wasn't ready to deal with any more sorrow. I didn't know what went through my mind, but I just couldn't bring myself to come and see you. I would occasionally talk to Minty and listen to the gossip, but no one ever mentioned your name."

"I didn't know what happened to you, Trall, but I knew I wasn't ready to come back yet either." Talon shook his head, but was glad to finally be reunited with Trall.

After nodding his understanding, Trall continued. "The Royal Guard never recovered the bodies from that last battle led by Prince Philip in the Farmer's Region. Once Prince Philip returned to the castle and King Heartfelt heard of what happened, he immediately demoted Philip to taxes and retributions.

Prince Christopher was given control of the Royal Guard and the crown's next move was appointing Blackheart to Royal Man and giving him direct control of the military. With Christopher's help, they have expanded the army to include special assignments. I have seen things turn around in a big way since those changes."

"I get the same feeling, just after one day with both of them." Blackheart had amazed Talon with how easily he handled being Royalty.

"I'm not sure how much you have settled concerning that final battle, but if things change with the north, Prince Christopher has already decided to mount an expedition into the Farmer's Region and put things back in place. I know it is a little late, but you know Prince Christopher, he wants to make it right, especially because you are directly involved. Keep in mind that none of this is official and I am telling you this as a friend, but whenever the Prince is happy with the plan, I am sure he will fill in the gaps and make things right with Barlow and your father's memory." Trall and Talon had stopped walking to overlook the training happening on the parade field.

They filled up the rest of the afternoon watching the Guardsmen and with their chatter. Before long they broke off from their conversation and headed back into the castle. After a brief walk they were in front of Blackheart's room, waiting to get a room assignment for Talon.

## **Chapter 8**

April 1st, 770; Talon's first day continues, Castle Heartfelt

"Talon, Trall." Blackheart moved back to let them inside his room as he noticed Talon's saddlebag. "I suppose I should show you to your room. Follow me." Blackheart walked the men one door down from Blackheart's room before he turned to Talon. "Trall's room is one more door down." He opened the door and led Talon inside.

"I will let you get settled in." Trall said as he headed out of Talon's room.

"This is your room for as long as you need it, Talon."

Talon took a moment and looked around the room. He noticed it was more than large enough for just one person and it even had a window facing the back of the castle grounds. "Not bad, Blackheart."

"It looks like tomorrow is the day to meet with your new unit?"

"That will suit me." Talon tossed his saddlebag onto the bed and walked over to open the shutters. "How much has the castle changed since I've been gone, Blackheart?"

Blackheart sighed as he thought about that question. He crossed his arms and answered with, "Sometimes, I don't even recognize this place. Listen, I wanted to tell you that I am glad to have you back. I haven't had the chance to talk to you about Barlow or your father, but I hope we can do that. I, well, dammit, you know that he should be the one in this job, not me. He should be here." Blackheart looked down before walking over to the window.

"I know Barlow is rolling in his grave, now that he has heard that compliment from you. Come on Blackheart, he knew the risks of being a Royal Guardsman. Although I don't imagine he ever planned on working for an incompetent fool like Prince Philip. I know he would have made it to Royal Man and maybe even more than that, but I am pleased to see they found the other right person to fill those shoes."

Blackheart nodded his understanding. "I know how you feel about Prince Philip, since I hold the same opinion. I don't understand it, but Philip still has the King's ear or I know he would have lost a lot more with that debacle at the end of the war. I have no idea what the Redderin did to him, but he has some kind of personal vendetta against them. He has been the biggest pain in the rump over taking care of the north. He still believes the Redderin are to blame for all of this. Do you know that he never allowed them to do a full inquiry into the remaining days of the war, but Prince Christopher intends to change that?" Blackheart decided to change to a more constructive subject. "Are you ready to head North?"

"Yes, I'm ready, but I do have to add that I hope there comes a time when we don't have to head anywhere anymore." Talon said this with a small smile aimed at Blackheart.

"Yes, I agree, but we both know that we would find somewhere to go anyway." After a quick look out the window Blackheart started for the door. "I must go, but let me know if you need anything."

Talon nodded to Blackheart as he left the room and then started to unpack his saddlebags. After dumping the contents onto his bed he unrolled his clothes and hung them to give them some air. He found places to stick the rest of his stuff and sat down on the edge of the bed.

The room was a little musty, so Talon walked over and stood at the window. He was looking out in the direction of the parade field and from this distance he thought he could see Prince Christopher standing in front of a small group of soldiers. As he watched, he noticed Blackheart heading out to the field.

Before long he was interrupted by a knock on the door.

"Come in."

Trall walked in looking like he was ready to head out. "I'm taking a trip into town. Is there anything you need, Talon?"

"No, nothing yet, but I was planning to head into town during the week."

"As you see fit. I will return shortly." Trall disappeared out the door and left Talon alone.

Talon's curiosity got the best of him and he sat down to see what his brother's papers were. Talon untied the bundle to read the first sheet. It was a listing of all the men who were in his unit for the duration of the war. Talon placed that one aside and wanted to make sure it made it to



Prince Christopher. The next sheet was a small note written to a field commander from Prince Philip. It was about the possibility of entering farm regions.

"The possibility exists as we push the Redderin farther west that we will eventually hit the Farmer's Region. The latest reports say nothing of that region's involvement with the Redderin, but I feel different. Some of those farms cross into Redderin territory and I know that makes them sympathizers. I authorize you to take any and all action necessary in the upcoming weeks to quell any further action by the Redderins and that includes silencing any Heartfelt citizen who stands in the way."

Signed by Prince Philip.

Talon put that into the same pile as the unit listings and stood up to clear his head. It wasn't as if he needed anymore proof that Prince Philip was responsible for his father's death, but now Barlow had handed him a signed confession.

Talon sat back down and continued reading. The next three had reports from the front, but it was nothing of interest to him. He put those into the pile holding the other documents.

The next document was a deed for land holdings deep in Redderin territory and it was signed by Barlow. Talon wasn't surprised, but wondered what his brother was thinking. The deed was for a lot of land, more land than his father held in the Farmer's Region. He didn't know where it was, for the names on the document were unknown to him. With this document, he started a new pile.

The next letter was a copy of the deed to his father's land and it included a document listing some new land. Their father always talked about picking up some new land, but Talon never thought he was serious. Apparently, Barlow did and he got his hand on some extra land. It made Talon sad to think that Barlow never got a chance to tell his father about it. He placed that in the second pile.

The next document was a Royal Guard policy listing how much money was owed to Barlow at the end of his time. It also listed the amount covered in case he didn't live past that time. It was quite a bit of money and Talon put that with the deeds. There was no way the Crown could afford to pay him for that, but maybe someday he would be able to collect.

The final documents were a stack of letters. After reading a few of them Talon, realized his brother had fallen in love with a Redderin woman. Unfortunately, none of the letters told of where she lived, but Talon was able to find out that her name was Christine. Talon told himself that when this was all over, he was going to find Christine and meet one of the last few people who had seen Barlow alive. Since the crown never told him about Barlow's death, he had a suspicion that Christine was still in the dark.

Having finished with the entire bundle, Talon lay down on the bed and started to drift into a deep sleep.

Knock, Knock.

Talon stirred, but thought that he imagined the knocking.

Knock, knock, knock.

Talon heard it that time, "Come in." Talon rose to his feet.

The door opened. "Yes sir, please excuse me, I am here to deliver a message." The messenger walked through the door.

"Go ahead, you have my attention." Talon sat up straighter on his bed. The boy looked young and Talon didn't recognize him, although he found he wasn't recognizing many people these days. The boy stepped a little closer inside and started with a question. "You are Michael Talon Bastian?" He looked closer hoping he had picked the right room.

"Yes, I am." Talon was curious. "Continue."

"I was sent by King Frederick to tell you this, 'the King requests an audience with you as soon as possible.'" The boy straightened up as he finished. "If you are available now, I can escort you to him."

Talon was curious enough to put his nap on hold. "I guess now is as good as later and well, for another thing, I don't think I want to be the one to keep the King waiting. Lead on boy." Talon said as he glanced at himself. He decided he was presentable enough and besides he really didn't have much else to choose from. "What's your name?"

"My name is David and I am a messenger here." David said this with a smile.

"Do you often work with the King, David?" Talon asked.

"I have been on Sir Stamos' good side for the past week and when that happens he tries to reward me. Unfortunately, it doesn't happen very often." David said with a sheepish smile.

Talon had seen firsthand Sir Stamos' temper. He knew how David felt. "Don't worry David, I am not usually on Sir Stamos' good side either, but I find that most people aren't." David laughed at that and gestured for Talon to follow him.

David led Talon out of the common wing, through the courtyard, up through the main entrance to the Royal Wing and onto the Kings floor. They walked right past the King's room and headed towards the library. The door was shut and two guards stood outside. Talon didn't recognize either of the young men, but they recognized David and waved him through. Talon guessed they knew the King was waiting for him. The door opened and David brought Talon inside.

The guards shut the door behind them and when Talon's eyes adjusted to the dimness of the room he saw the King in the far corner reading a very large book. The book was spread across a reading table in front of him and the King was so engrossed in the book that he didn't notice his visitors. David walked right up to the King and announced the visitor, Michael Talon Bastian.

The King looked up and motioned for Talon sit down in a chair that sat opposite of the King. Talon had only been in this room a few times and was surprised to see that the number of books was still growing. The shelves were full and books were stacked on the floor, on the tables, and next to all the chairs. It wouldn't take much longer before another room would be needed.

"Michael Talon Bastian, thank you for coming." The King looked up from his book and gave Talon the once over.

"It is my duty, sire." Talon stiffened at the formal mention of his name. Since he was just given his assignment he kept forgetting he was now in charge of a unit of men, the Kings men.

"Yes, well, I wanted to take this chance to talk with you. I understand your father passed away on the farm and, though I never knew him, I could tell he came from your grandfather: looks, attitude, and all. I am extremely uncomfortable with the circumstances under which he died. The effects of that war are still weighing down the kingdom. It seems you have given quite a sacrifice for the crown over the last few years. I was disheartened to see Barlow's name on the list of confirmed dead. I don't know the full circumstances surrounding his death, but I am sorry you have been forced to deal with both losses. In some ways, I feel like I have let your grandfather down, though since he wasn't about to visit me and tell me different, I won't have to incur his legendary wrath." The King nodded and paused for a moment. "Be very careful on this mission. You are the last Bastian and I don't wish to see such a name erased from the walls of Heartfelt. Now, I won't take up anymore of your time, so God speed to you, my son, and may the shadow of Heartfelt fall in your favor."

With that, the King retreated back to his book and left Talon to go about his business. Talon knew he had been dismissed and headed right out the door. He walked by the guards and was surprised to see David was still with the guards. Talon approached David. "Thanks for bringing me over here, David."

"Of course." He said. "I am just happy to see the King talking to somebody. He sees fit to spend most of his time in the library. The way his reading is going, someone is going to have to build another room just for his books. Can you find your way back?"

"Funny, I was thinking the same thing while I was in there. Yes, I will be fine; I've been here a few times. Thanks again. Bye." Talon retraced his steps back to his room and as he walked through the door he knew he desperately wanted to get that little nap in. He fell down onto the bed and closed his eyes.

Knock, knock knock knock.

Talon couldn't believe his luck. He wondered how long he had been asleep. If he went by his feelings, he would have guessed it wasn't that long. Talon briefly wondered if closing his eyes was causing the door to knock. He cursed out loud to himself as he opened the door and was surprised to find Trall standing there with his arms full of a very large wrapped bundle.

"Come in. Find something in town, Trall?" Talon's voice dripped with sarcasm.

"As if you can see. It sure is dark in here. Didn't the Prince's best man get a room with a little light?"

Talon took the hint and opened the window, while Trall walked into the room, managing to close the door with his foot. He laid the bundle down on the bed.

Talon's curiosity was at its peak as he addressed Trall. "Are you going to make me guess or are you going to tell me what's in your little bundle of joy?"

Trall didn't answer him as he started to unravel the tightly wrapped bundle of blankets, which took over a good portion of the bed. "I stopped over at the trade post and had a look in old Mick's backroom. He said he got these a few months back and had no idea what to do with them. I got them for a good price, although it was non-refundable, but no need to worry. You should be happy to know I used my best judgment, you know, as always." Trall continued to unravel the blankets.

"Trall, you're telling me this, why? To make me feel better? Well, I used to trust your judgment, but it has been a long time. Besides, do you realize the King has not forgotten the wine incident! Prince Christopher gives me a hard time about it every chance he gets and that was a fine example of the Trall judgment." Talon raised an eyebrow and knew he would get a quick response.

Trall didn't let him down. "Now, do we really need to bring up the past? Let's move forward. Besides, I just know you are going to like these!" Trall gave him his best innocent face and hoped for the best. "Besides Mick threw in the blankets for free.

"Well then, enough talk. Let's see what I am supposed to like that we have already paid for." Talon held his breath as Trall finished unwrapping.

Out of the bundle came four suits of what looked like Outerlands chain mail. They looked older, but seemed to be in good condition. The suits were like ones he remembered seeing before the War of Occupation.

"What do you think?" Trall asked expectantly.

"Are they really from the Outerlands?" Talon asked in awe.

"The best Mick could tell was that they might be from there, but they could also have been built in Fort North. I would say we are probably right on with the first theory." Trall moved the first one off the pile.

"If he is right, we are looking at some very good suits of chain mail. The stuff they were making before the war was incredible. I've always wonder about its quality." Talon reached down and picked up the top suit. "All of the straps appeared to be in the right place and they looked sturdy enough to use. Amazing. How many do you have? I see four, right?" Talon said as he continued to inspect the chain mail.

"Yea, four. Mick didn't seem to think he was ever going to be getting more of these, but I thought every edge we had would help. They say this stuff will put up with a lot of abuse." Trall was playing around with the straps on the second suit.

Talon had already thrown one of the chain mail suits over his head and was attempting to fasten all the straps. The chain mail extended a few inches below the belt line, but didn't restrict movement.

Trall adjusted the side straps and noticed for the first time how dirty the chain mail was. "I think you just ruined you shirt. These things are pretty dirty, though it doesn't look like there is too much rust. How does it feel?"

"Aside from being dirty, it's a pretty good fit. It doesn't weigh as much as I thought, but it feels strong. Let's try to see how much of a range of motions I have." Talon stretched this way and that and found he could move freely.

While Talon was pushing the limits of his suit Trall was throwing one on. In no time, both men faced each other with armor and sword. There wasn't much room for swordplay, but that didn't stop them. They sparred back and forth for a few minutes; blocking swings and sometimes letting the chain mail take the brunt of the blows. The suits were really holding up to the abuse. Since they really needed to get the suits clean, they swung a few more times.

Before they could finish, the door flew open and in stepped Blackheart and two Guardsmen with swords drawn. Once in the room, Blackheart realized there was no danger and started to get mad. He also looked a little out of place. The Guardsmen behind him were dressed in the proper uniform, while Blackheart was in a pair of bottoms with nothing on top. He didn't have his belt and his sheath was in his right hand with the sword in his left.

Startled by their sudden appearance, Talon and Trall turned to face the attackers and had to keep from laughing upon seeing Blackheart at the door. Talon was biting very hard on his bottom lip, but it wasn't working.

Blackheart noticed and growled at them. "What the hell is going on in here, Talon? Trall?"

"Uh," This was all Talon could say before Blackheart jumped in.

"Guardsmen, you're dismissed. Talon, I heard the swordplay from my room and feared the worst. What the hell are you two doing fighting in your room?" Blackheart's voice continued to rise in volume.

"Um." This time Trall tried to answer and he was also cut off.

"Am I going to get an answer out of you two or am I going to have to beat it out of you, one at a time." Blackheart's voice had risen to a level just below a yell.

Talon tried again once again to get through to Blackheart, "Black...." But Blackheart continued on.

"I can't believe you two." Blackheart was mumbling now and was walking towards Talon. He put his sword into the sheath, as he continued to grumble. "What stories those guards will have after witnessing this display! Wait a minute." Blackheart ran his finger across his new

discovery. "These are some fine examples of chain mail." For the first time Blackheart noticed the two wearing the chain mail suits. "This looks like some good mail."

Trall pounced on the opportunity. "These might even be from as far as the Fort North or maybe the Outerlands and are supposed to be some of the best kind out there. They seemed to have passed our test that you so rudely interrupted." Trall winced as he watched Blackheart give him a look, so he quickly changed the subject. "Talon, what do you think?" Trall sent a wink to Talon's way.

Talon quietly thought it over. "I think I would really like to get some more suits. Blackheart, any idea where we can get some more?" Talon winked back at Trall and was glad that Blackheart's temper was subsiding.

"I'm not sure, Talon. You and the members of your unit are welcome to the armor choices we have, but you are going to have to choose from mostly plate armor. Personally, I wish I knew where some of this type could be found. Very lightweight, I assume." Blackheart said as he looked over the two remaining on the bed.

"Yea. I think it weighs less than fourteen stone and it is very flexible." Trall was beaming. He was pretty happy with himself since he was the one to find these. "They are also durable, Talon here pounded on me with his sword, but nothing made it through."

Blackheart took one last look at the armor and said, "Well, since I see you two are in no real danger, I will return to my room. See you later." Blackheart turned and left with sword in hand.

As soon as the door closed, both men started laughing. "Never thought I would see a sight like that, Talon." Trall had to sit down he was laughing so hard.

"I think we really embarrassed Blackheart in front of those guards. I guess it's a good thing he will be leaving his men for awhile." Talon said in between laughing.

"Who is taking over his job; during our little trip I mean?" Trall said as he started to regain some of his composure.

"From my understanding, Prince Christopher is going to fill in on the field for Blackheart. I don't think this will take us longer than two months. A trip to Markham will take around a week and about a week to return. We are going to have to add a few days for our trip into Elizabeth Towne. Then we have to leave at least two weeks for any complications and, if I didn't know better, I would think Blackheart is planning on more than that. I really think he is worried about this." Talon said as he wiped a tear away from his eye.

"Can I get that chain mail back from you? I think if I paid Peter, you know, the stable boy, some good money, he would be more than happy to restore them to good condition before we have to leave"

"Yes, hopefully it won't take too long because I would like to get some practice in with them on."

"I will take care of it. Until the morning then."

"Very well." Talon shut the door and grabbed a different shirt to throw on. Before he could get comfortable there was another knock. Talon headed there for what felt like the millionth time and wondered about the wisdom of leaving the farm. He followed the path that he had cut to the door and pulled it open. Blackheart stood there without the sword, the guards and with all of his clothes on.

"Talon, sorry to intrude, but would you care to join me for dinner in the hall?"

Talon felt his stomach grumble at the mention of dinner, "I would enjoy that, Blackheart."

"Well, if you are ready we can head right down. Dinner should be on the table by now."

Talon took a quick look around the room and decided it was probably a good idea to just eat dinner. "Fine, let's go."

Talon and Blackheart headed out of the common wing and walked out of the inner courtyard. The castle was well lit despite the dark falling over the sky. As they walked along the wall of the common wing Talon could make out the supports on the west wing. He couldn't tell if the gate was closed, but it was a good assumption at this later hour. The barracks looked relatively quiet and that probably meant the hall would be full of Guardsmen. It was starting to cool off as the sun fell farther from the sky.

While they walked something struck Talon as odd. "Blackheart, why do you still live over in the common wing? You being a Royal Man and all?"

Blackheart chuckled, "Well, the answer is pretty simple. With the exception of guestrooms, they don't have any rooms open in the Royal Wing. As a matter of fact, it seems that Princess Anne and Princess Elizabeth are sharing a room."

"That's easy enough."

They finished walking past the common wing and they could now see the front entrance to the hall. From the volume coming from the building Talon guessed that most of the Guardsmen were having dinner there. Talon caught a whiff of the food and smiled. It smelled great.

"Chef still cooking?"

Blackheart nodded. "Of course. We pay him whatever he wants, just to keep him here."

Talon smiled at the comment and remembered the meals he had when he was a Guardsmen. Chef was the best cook he had ever met.

During the meal Talon and Blackheart sat with some of the Heartfelt members of the units and traded stories. It wasn't long before both men were done and standing in Talon's room.

"Tomorrow, I thought I would introduce you to your unit. Why don't we meet on the parade ground tomorrow morning, so we can get the introductions out of the way? It's time you start sparring with the troops anyway. You still as good as the war days?" Blackheart said with a smile.

"I am not going to make any promises, but I do need to brush up on my close quarter combat." said Talon.

Blackheart smiled and added, "Well, we have some of the best out there."

Knock, Knock, Knock knock.

Both men turned their heads at the knocking on the door. Before Talon could even move to the door, Trall opened it himself and walked in, this time without any sort of bundles. "Evening Gents!" Trall said.

"Trall, evening. How goes the battle?" Talon asked.

"Talon, Blackheart." Before Trall could continue there was another knock on the door.

Knock, Knock.

This knock turned all three heads. Trall opened the door to be greeted by the smiling face of Prince Christopher. Talon and Blackheart fell to one knee and Trall stepped back from the door and invited the Prince in. Prince Christopher moved inside and placed his hand on Blackheart's shoulder.

"Rise men. Trall, it's good to see you again, although I am beginning to think they will let anyone in on this little adventure."

"Well, since I decided I won't let Talon have all of the fun, you are stuck with me, too. How is life as a Heartfelt? Philip still a fool?" Trall said

"Trall, show some respect for the Prince!" Blackheart said with outrage and a slight growl in his voice.

"Now Blackheart," The Prince said hoping to calm down Blackheart, although it made him happy to know Blackheart was just doing his job. "We both know Trall is incapable of such a feat, especially when he is right." The Prince added dryly as he opened a scroll and gave it to Blackheart. The Prince addressed Blackheart. "I only made one change to your list. I want to keep David Red back here. I have given you Richard Lee instead."

Blackheart looked over the list and then handed it over to Talon.

Talon glanced at the list and though he recognized some of the names, he didn't recognize enough of them. Talon handed the list to Trall.

"Blackheart, these are some of your better stock within the ranks." With a raised eyebrow Trall added. "I noticed you have also chosen some of the more unorthodox ones. Interesting mix. What are the civilian functions?"

"I have broken up the thirty members into six groups. There will be a specialty assigned to each team and the civilians are supplementing the food and support unit. I have a Royal Guardsmen for each group, but I will maintain as their overall leader. Some of the unorthodox members are the best qualified for the job. Besides, most of them preferred Talon's team and are looking forward to being independent of the rest of the Guardsmen."

"Excellent, Blackheart. I am starting to feel more and more comfortable as we move together again." The Prince moved to the half open window. "I am hoping we can turn things around for the Kingdom. Especially before my father gives up his crown to Philip."

"I hate to be the one to run, but I have to do some leg work before the night is over." Trall said as he headed for the door. "Talon, the chain mail is being worked on as we speak."

"Tomorrow we are going to meet the new unit. I will see you on the parade field in the morning." Talon said as he followed Trall to the door.

"Very well, good evening everyone." With that Trall left the room and the three men for the night.

"Seeing you and him together again brings me back to the time before the war." said Prince Christopher. "Times were so much more innocent then. Blackheart, if I remember right, you were even having a little fun."

"Prince Christopher, I also remember him being a little more fun back then, although Trall was a terror." Talon added. "I am surprised the King never kicked us out onto the streets."

"Sometimes, I'm amazed myself. I think my father is grateful for the times I spent with you. It kept my head on straight." The Prince followed with an observation. "I often wonder how different Philip might have been if he would have spent less time acting proper and spending more time with us."

"I don't think Prince Philip would have spent any more time with us than he already did." With a little anger in his voice, Blackheart continued. "I get the impression that he doesn't like us very much and I can't speak for Talon, but I feel the same way about him."

"Prince Christopher, I am not going to voice my opinion about him, but I do have some papers for you to look at." Talon made his way to the desk in the corner of the room. "These papers were given to me by Minty Stevens. Barlow had these in a bundle that he left at the inn. I am sorry to have to bring this subject up."

The mood in the room immediately changed. Talon walked over to the piles on his desk and retrieved the bundle, handing them Prince Christopher. Talon stepped back and watched the Prince review them.

Within a quick glance the Prince knew where this was going. "Talon, I was hoping to avoid this conversation or at least put it off until later. I know how poorly my brother performed during his tenure as leader for the military. We both knew how incapable he was in that position, but I really thought it would turn out positively. He had some of the best Royal Men in the service. Every day, I find out how close he came to prolonging the war and I find his personal vendetta against the Redderin disheartening. I want to speak to you further when we get the opportunity. Can I have these papers?"

"Of course. I will reserve my opinion for our meeting." Talon added with a sense of relief that this conversation was over.

"If you will excuse me, I will leave you to your weighty matters. I will see you in the morning, Talon. Prince Christopher, until we meet again." Blackheart added with a slight yawn. Having said that Blackheart disappeared out the door.

Prince Christopher and Talon looked at each other and both didn't seem to want to tackle the topic on the table. Trying to steer the conversation Prince Christopher added, "How is Minty doing?"

"He is getting old, too old. His niece is staying with him at the inn. I wish you could have seen what his niece is making him drink. Some kind of concoction that I would have to be duped into drinking." Talon winced at the thought of it.

"I haven't been to Minty's since you were last in the castle. To be truthful Talon, I haven't stepped foot into Hearttowne since last autumn. I really wish some things would return to the way they were before the war." The Prince looked out the window like things might change just because he said so.

"Why don't we visit Minty, sire?" Talon asked realizing he was only half-joking.

"Now." The Prince looked at him like he was crazy.

"Sure, back in the day, we would just be starting."

The Prince looked back out the window for what seemed like an eternity. When he looked back at Talon he had a big smile on his face. "I think you are right. Get Blackheart and I will meet you back here in a few minutes."

The Prince took off with papers in hand and Talon was happy to have avoided the Philip subject for the evening. He was elated that they would be visiting Minty. He headed for the room next door and knocked. Blackheart answered the door and invited Talon in.

"The Prince and I are headed to Minty's. I was ordered to get you for the evening. Besides, I would like to spend some time with you. What do you think?" Talon asked in hopes of trapping him into going.

Blackheart rolled his eyes, having heard this tone of voice from Talon before. "I will tell you what I think. You two are crazy. Prince or not, he is as loony as you." Blackheart rolled his eyes for a moment and then answered. "I can't believe I am saying this; it is so incredible to me, but I guess I can't turn down an invitation from you or a direct order from the Prince. Besides, the last time I went to Minty's was a few months after we returned from the war. I guess it's time to see what we are doing all this for. How much time do I have?" Blackheart said with a smile on his face.

"Excellent! I was a little worried there; wasn't too sure you were going to come along. Prince Christopher said he would be back in a few minutes."

"I am going to throw on a heavier shirt, so how about I come get you when the Prince arrives." Talon said and he was already heading out the door without waiting for an answer.

Blackheart called after Talon. "Understood. I will be ready."



Talon headed back to his room. He decided to chance it and went to Trall's room. His knock wasn't answered, so he assumed Trall had already left on his errands. Talon went back to his room and got ready to head out to Minty's for old time's sake.

## Chapter 9

April 1st, 770; A Royal trip to Minty's

It didn't take long before the trio was out the door and heading for the stables. Since it was getting late in the evening, it came as a surprise to the stable boy, Peter, to see the Prince leading the group. Peter assembled the horses and, in moments, the party was ready, with four Guardsmen providing protection for the Prince.

"Peter." The Prince brought his horse over.

Peter wasn't used to being addressed by the Prince, but he stammered out an answer, "Yes, my lord."

"Leave word with the stable master, make up your horse and join us this night. We shall wait the few minutes it takes for you to get ready." The Prince said this with a smile and it seemed to relax the young boy.

Peter wasn't sure what to do. He turned and was about to run off when he remembered his manners, "Uh, yes, my lord, thank you." With that, Peter ran off into the stables. Moments later he returned, ready to go. "I am ready sire. Is there anything you shall need?"

"Nothing at all Peter. Well, nothing but yourself and some good spirits. Lets ride on men. Talon, I believe you know the way."

Talon kicked his horse into the head of the line and when he was within shouting distance from the gate he yelled to the guard. "Open the doors for your Prince."

The guards at this late hour were not impressed by Talon's exclamation until they caught a glimpse of Blackheart and Prince Christopher a few trots behind Talon. Since there were only two guards at this late evening hour, one ran to open the gate, while the other stood in a position of honor. With a rough salute the group trotted out of the gate onto the main path and followed it over the bridge into Hearttowne.

Before long, the traveling party arrived at Minty's. Everyone lashed the horses to the hitching rail. The group headed inside, leaving two Guardsmen at the entrance. Before they could get comfortable, the backroom door opened and Marilyn came out. She was surprised to see so many people.

"Talon, welcome back. Uncle will be so pleased to see you again and so soon...Please sit, everyone, anywhere you want!" Marilyn walked with them to a table.

"Thank you Marilyn. Allow me to introduce Prince Christopher Heartfelt." With this introduction Talon managed to surprise her even more. "Prince Christopher, this is Marilyn Stevens."

Marilyn blushed and gently bowed in respect. "Welcome to our inn Prince Heartfelt. I am sorry I didn't recognize you, but I am from Redderin and I have never met the royalty of Heartfelt."

"Pay it no mind, Marilyn; I am pleased to meet you. May I ask your last name again, my lady?" The Prince took her hand and planted a kiss upon it.

"Yes, sire. Stevens, Marilyn Katherine Stevens. I am Minty's niece. He is the owner of this inn."

"Yes, I know your Uncle very well. Let me ask you a question, did your mother run a tailor shop in Redderin Proper?"

"Yes, sire. She passed away recently. I'm not a seamstress like my mother, so I sold the shop and answered a letter from my Uncle."

"I am truly sorry to hear of her death. I spent a short amount of time in Redderin before the war and had some work down in her shop. You were a little younger back then. How long has it been since she died?"

"It has been over a year now. She died in her sleep."

"If there is anything I, or the crown, can do, please don't hesitate to ask."

Marilyn blushed, but bowed, "Thank you Prince Christopher. I appreciate the concern."

"Have you met everyone?"

"No, well, I did meet Talon this morning and I know Wayne Lord."

"Let me introduce you to Richard Blackheart, Paul Unique, you know Wayne Lord, this is Peter Gredit and Jackie Kirby."

With introductions out of the way, they took seats at a middle table, while Marilyn took their orders.

"I wonder where Minty is hiding?" The Prince commented.

"Yea, I was looking forward to seeing him again." Talon said as he looked around the inn.

"This part of Hearttowne is really taking the loss of trade hard. My mother lives not too far from here and she is constantly worried about the area." Wayne Lord commented after taking a good look around.

Before anymore small talk could happen Minty walked through the door.

"Prince Christopher, Blackheart, Talon, I can't believe it. I haven't seen you two in a long time. Talon had you beat, but he got here this morning. I can only imagine the excuses you two have. Royalty or not, I haven't seen the likes of you two in months, maybe years. Peter, how are you doing?" Minty said as he took in all of the guests.

"Fine, Minty. Stablemaster John will probably come see you this weekend." Peter said as Talon poured him some ale.

"Good. He has become quite the regular; I am guessing that castle life has become a little dull these days. Wayne, how is your mother doing?"

"You know how things are Minty, she really misses my father. Hell, I miss him. How are you doing?" Wayne Lord took a sip of the ale Talon had poured.

"I would be doing a lot better if I had more nights like tonight. I have a feeling Talon had something to do with this little gathering." Minty gave Talon a quick wink.

"Now wait a minute. My only part was to mention this to Prince Christopher and here we are. Although no one really thought Blackheart was going to leave the castle, much less that room of his." Talon said as he saluted Blackheart with a cup of ale.

"You make me out to be some kind of lump on a log, besides I will admit that this has been a long time coming, but what is time between friends. Minty, it's good to lay eyes on you again. I see you broke down and got some help." Blackheart looked past Minty towards the kitchen.

"Ah, Marilyn. My brother, her father, died before the war in a hunting accident and left her with her mother. When her mother passed on, she really didn't have any need to stay in Redderin. She didn't want to come up here, but I needed her help. Being that I am her last living relative I figured she wouldn't turn me down. I have to endure her health drinks, but for the most part it has been a needed breath of fresh air. She is something else." Minty stopped as he heard the kitchen door open.

Marilyn came walking into the room with some more pitchers of ale and some baked bread that was lightly seasoned. After she situated everyone, she asked Guardsmen Kirby a question.

"Excuse me, Guardsmen Kirby, I didn't know they allowed women to serve in combat roles for Heartfelt."

"Call me Jackie, please. I was among the first of the women to be initiated. It happened towards the end of the war. Prince Christopher assures me it was for equality, and I am inclined to believe him, but I think that it had a little more to do with the shortage of males as soon as the war finished. Have you ever thought about becoming a Guardsmen?" Jackie asked.

Marilyn blushed at the idea and noticed that everyone at the table was watching her. "It has always been an option for women in Redderin, but I don't think I have ever considered such a choice. To be honest, I have no idea what I am going to do. I never picked up any trades from my mom and I wasn't with my father long enough to learn his trade. I don't even know if I would be cut out to be a Guardsmen." Marilyn finished hoping that the attention would be off of her.

Jackie thought about this and answered, "My husband felt the same way and was shocked to find out that I was going to become a Guardsmen. He never got over it and left me to head north where they hold more traditional views. Your heart will lead you Marilyn, but at least you know this can be a choice." Jackie said.

"Marilyn, Jackie is right. I have always felt that we have treated women unfairly. I will agree that the council was concerned with the man shortage, but the change came about and that is all that matters. Minty, were you ever a Guardsmen?" Prince Christopher asked.

"When I was young, I wrestled with that decision, but fate intervened. My father passed on and he left me some money and this inn. I decided to stick with the inn. I haven't regretted it since. I was never much of a fighter, although I will say Marilyn is quite the swordsman. Ask Talon." Minty laughed and winked at Talon. Everyone at the table looked over at Talon.

"Is that right, Talon? How would you know of such a skill?" Blackheart asked with pure enjoyment showing on his face.

"Of all the people to have to hear this story, I was hoping it wouldn't be you Blackheart." Talon caught himself blushing from the embarrassment.

The Prince followed right behind Blackheart and proceeded to continue the harassment.

"Now, I am also interested, Talon. Are you a little out of practice after farming for so long?" The Prince was watching Blackheart who could barely keep from laughing out loud.

Talon knew he was stuck. Neither man would let him go until they were told the story. "My lord, I was taken by surprise. I would like to think that the farm life did nothing to my sword fighting skills, but I believe it was more of bottle throwing skill than of the sword. I was knocked on the head by a bottle and I would say it is a good bet that it was from Marilyn's hand." Talon looked around the table and wasn't surprised to see that he had a captive audience.

"Don't forget to mention your ill fated fall." Marilyn added with a giggle.

Talon looked over at Marilyn. She was trying her best to not start laughing. He knew when he was beaten. "Thank you for reminding me, Marilyn. After I lost my balance from the knock on my head, I stumbled at a good speed towards the wall and before I hit it, I fell over a small table and knocked myself unconscious." Talon said this as fast as he could hoping that everyone would miss it. He had no such luck, since everyone at the table was laughing. Blackheart was laughing the loudest and was more than happy to provide a comment.

"Talon, I have always been amazed that you made it through the war much less through today. Marilyn, I have to congratulate you on taking down the legendary Talon Bastian. Many men have tried and very few have succeeded. I am glad to see that you are on our side." Blackheart said in between laughing.

"I will have you know that my head still hurts from that blow. The sword comes into play when I awoke to find it poking me in my chin." Talon rubbed the very same spot on his chin. Maybe it was his imagination, but he thought he could still feel it.

The Prince commented. "I think I am missing something, but why would Marilyn attack someone as innocent as you, Talon." The Prince winked at Blackheart, which caused him to break out into a fit of laughter.

"I think Marilyn would like to field that one." Talon dryly added.

Marilyn said in a matter of fact tone of voice, "Talon broke into the inn."

The laughter rose in volume and Talon followed up right behind that comment, "Well, broke in is a little harsh. When no one answered I became a little concerned and entered without invitation."

"Now that Talon is one way of putting it. I for one am just glad it happened. A bottle to the head. I can't think of many things that would make me laugh as hard, although the time Blackheart and Talon borrowed that rum from King Frederick's party comes to mind." Prince Christopher said as he patted Talon on the back.

"Why did you have to bring that one up, Prince Christopher? I once thought Blackheart and I would live that one down, though I see the way it is to be." Talon looked over at Blackheart who knew better than to try and stop the Prince from telling this story.

Blackheart tried anyway, "Sire, I don't think the Guardsmen need to hear such a story about me and my past indiscretions. I would like to think I am no longer being held responsible for something that was clearly Talon's fault." Blackheart said in an effort to throw off Prince Christopher. "Not to mention, you are forgetting someone even more responsible than Talon, Trall Fagan."

"I almost did forget he was involved, but even back then you were a Royal Guardsmen and therefore anytime your subordinates stepped out of line, you were responsible. Although I will admit that it was comical, I don't think my father holds the same opinion." Prince Christopher poured himself some more ale.

"Are you going to tell me the story Talon or am I going to have to use my imagination to figure out what you did back then?" Marilyn pulled up a chair and sat down next to Talon.

Talon threw his hands up into the air. "I give up. I owe you one, sire. Back in the day, way back in the day, Blackheart and I were a little less respectable." This brought laughter from Prince Christopher and Blackheart. Talon continued. "Maybe, that is stretching the truth, but we were both young, still in our late teens. Anyway, King Frederick threw a lavish party for the people of Hearttowne. It seemed like the whole kingdom turned out for this particular get together. This was quite a few years before the War of Occupation. Blackheart and I were filling in as guards for the lower lever. It just so happens that was also where they kept the spirits. We were relieved early from our shift and Blackheart convinced me to take a case of rum for ourselves..."

Before Talon could finish the sentence, Blackheart jumped in, "Whhhaaaatt? Now you are stretching the truth. This whole ordeal was your plan. You were the mastermind, I was just the pawn." Blackheart was trying his best to not be drawn into this anymore than he already was.

"For the sake of the story and your reputation, I will compromise and blame it on Trall. To begin with, and this is one fact even Blackheart will not be able to refute, Blackheart slipped into winery, while I was distracting the guards. At the same time, Trall was securing a stable for us to enjoy the rewards. Now, in the back of the winery there was some very expensive Redderin Rum. It had been aged for the minimum ten years and was going to be used during the final toast at the feast. Well, in the darkness, Blackheart thought he grabbed a case of ale, but he

didn't realize what he grabbed. So, not knowing what he had, Blackheart left for the stables and, after distracting the guards a little more I followed after him. I met up with him in the stables and I wish I could have painted a picture of that look on his face. Trall had already broken into the case and discovered Blackheart's mistake. Of course, here is where it gets good." At this point everyone was laughing along, except for Blackheart; who was bright red with embarrassment. "Blackheart then told me that on his way to the stables Prince Christopher had seen him with the case in his hand. At the time, I tried my best to keep from laughing, because I could tell Blackheart would have ripped my head from my neck. He was scared to death. About ten minutes later we could hear Prince Christopher yelling at the top of his lungs and I bet you can guess whose name he was yelling. Sire, maybe you would like to continue from here?" Talon smiled at Blackheart and looked over at Prince Christopher.

"I think I can provide everyone with a little bit more information. While the borrowers had their stash in the stable, the King was getting ready for the final toast. I headed into the hallway to ensure the wine was ready, when I spotted Blackheart. I really thought he was on his way to the main hall to deliver the rum, so I turned and headed back thinking that all was taken care of. Moments later, Chef came running up to me screaming that someone stole the Redderin Rum. It didn't take me very long to put two and two together. Back then I knew where these three would hide and I dashed to the stables. I caught a glimpse of a head in the stables and I yelled to it, but it disappeared, followed by the patter of running feet. I took off in a mad dash for the stable and when I turned the corner I found an open box of Redderin Rum and nobody there to claim it. Chef came in behind me and was shocked to see the Rum sitting there in the middle of a stall. Luckily for those three, the Chef was only a few moments late or things would have been a lot hairier. Talon, Trall, and Blackheart avoided me for a few days and later on we laughed about it, but that night I was in my father's chamber trying to explain to him why the rum was late. I never mentioned any names, but my father knew somehow, isn't that right Blackheart?" The Prince looked over at Blackheart.

"Yes, sire." Blackheart said with a slight frown on his face.

"How do you know that Blackheart?" Talon asked.

"Years later, during the ceremony where I became a Royal Man, the King whispered in my ear and I quote 'I have chosen Redderin Rum for this occasion, care to guess why?' He then winked at me and continued on with the celebration. I have never been so embarrassed in my relatively short life." He thought back to that day and laughed at the memory.

"I noticed my father stop the ceremony to talk to Blackheart and I thought that was rather odd. Later on that night, I talked to my father about the interruption. I had tears in my eyes that night from laughing so hard. I can imagine how uncomfortable the comment had made Blackheart and how he must have wanted to see Talon or Trall again, who my father still thinks were innocent of the whole affair." The Prince looked in Blackheart's direction and waited for the outburst. He didn't have to wait long.

"Whhhaattt?" Screamed Blackheart. "The King doesn't know of their involvement?"

Now that Blackheart was beyond embarrassed, everyone laughed at his shock. Blackheart knew he was buried in this whole affair and he tried to save face, "It never fails, Talon, whenever we are both involved I am always the bad guy. Years and years of me being the bad guy." Blackheart finished the sentence with a hearty laugh and another drink of his ale.

During the story, Minty had brought out two bowls of northern tree sacks and with the ale setting in, the men were having trouble with the coordination necessary to open them. The northern tree sacks were medium sized hard-shelled nuts. The nut inside had an excellent taste

and, as a bonus, it countered the effects of the ale. The trick was to crack them right along its seam with even steady pressure. Unfortunately, everyone at the table was feeling the ale and was having great difficulty in succeeding at this art.

Marilyn disappeared into the kitchen for a moment and then came back into the room carrying two more pitchers and some fried salted potato sticks. She placed these down and reoccupied her seat next to Talon.

Prince Christopher and Blackheart were engaged in a conversation with Minty, so Marilyn turned to Talon. "Are you going to be around Heartfelt for awhile or are you heading back to the farm?"

"It looks like I will be in Heartfelt for awhile. Actually, I was planning on meeting someone here tomorrow night for dinner." Talon said.

With a frown Marilyn added, "Oh, I understand."

Talon continued without noticing the change in her attitude. "I don't think I will be going back to the farm for awhile. Do know Trall Fagan?"

"No, I really haven't been around here that long. Why?" Marilyn said as she refilled her glass.

"He is the one I am supposed to meet here tomorrow." Talon said as he finally cracked open his tree sack.

With a sudden grin Marilyn followed with a question. "Are you going to be busy after the meeting with Trall?"

"No. I, uh," Talon suddenly found himself very nervous and very hot. "Do you have something in mind, I guess, maybe we could get together?" Talon noticed how close she was to him and he could feel the sweat running down his back.

"I would like that very much, well, I mean if you are available." Marilyn relaxed a little and took a drink.

"I am. Have you been to the Castle?" Talon asked.

"No, I haven't really spent that much time out of Hearttowne."

"Let's do both then. I would like to show you the castle and, if you wouldn't mind, how about showing me how the town has changed in the last few years."

"That sounds like a great idea. I will try and get the night off from Uncle tomorrow. I would love to get a tour of the castle."

"It's done then." Talon paused and realized what a full day tomorrow was becoming.

In a break from his conversation, Minty looked over and noticed Talon and Marilyn engrossed in a conversation. He brought them back into the conversation with a quick question and a funny grin. "What are you two conspiring to do, hmmm?"

Marilyn blushed as she watched everyone's heads turn towards her and Talon. Her voice was almost a whisper, "Uncle, would it be all right if I took off tomorrow night?"

A slight smile was growing on Minty's face, but he didn't want to embarrass her anymore than she appeared to be, so he agreed. "Of course, I can take care of things..." After seeing the look of relief on her face he decided to embarrass her anyway. "Wait a minute, what for?"

Once Minty agreed, Marilyn had relaxed and was ready for another topic of conversation. Now she knew that wasn't going to come very easy. Blushing again, she said to Minty, "Talon is going to show me around the castle."

"He is, I mean, uh," If truth was to be known Minty was happy to see his niece going out and doing something, but he wasn't going to let that stand in the way of giving Talon a hard time.

Blackheart jumped in, "Are you going to let this scoundrel take your only niece out without an escort?"

Now Talon and Marilyn were as red as was possible.

A few years back when Marilyn first decided to accept Minty's offer, Minty always wondered if he could ever fill in as a parent for her. Since then, Minty had assumed the full responsibility of being Marilyn's only living relative. Minty chose to remain quiet and it was having the desired effect. Minty's quiet was making Talon squirm in his seat. He looked around the table and had to bite his tongue to keep from laughing. He noticed both the Prince and Blackheart's enjoyment watching Talon's suffering.

Minty finally broke his silence. "I, uh, um, I guess it would be al...." Minty mumbled the rest of the sentence.

The Prince jumped in, holding back his laughter, and said to Minty, "What was that Minty? Was that a yes?" The Prince let his laughter out, which was immediately followed by Blackheart's. This last outburst turned Talon an even brighter shade of red. Marilyn had a smile on her face, but was still embarrassed by the whole ordeal.

Minty rubbed his temples in hopes of keeping from laughing and tried to say it again. "Dammit. Yes, it was a yes! Oh, how your mother must be turning in her grave to hear that you will be spending a day with a Hearter and a Bastian, no less." Minty sat heavily into his chair and grabbed for the nearest pitcher of ale. He hoped Marilyn was distracted enough to let him have a glass.

Minty wasn't that lucky.

"What do you think you are doing? You know you aren't supposed to be drinking. Put it down right now." Marilyn immediately grabbed the pitcher from Minty.

Minty looked up and caught Talon's eye. Talon winked at him and Minty knew he was caught. If Talon spilled the beans about him draining his health drink this morning, then Minty knew he would never hear the end of it. Minty decided to take the spotlight off of him. "I give up, Talon, but I warn you. She better come back to me in one piece and standing up!"

With that final comment the Prince and Blackheart lost all composure and burst into another fit of laughter. Neither regained their composure for a long, few moments. By that time, Talon had joined in the laughter and Marilyn looked relieved that the whole subject was starting to pass. The rest of the evening continued with the Prince and Blackheart giving Talon looks and trying to further embarrass him.

Since it was already late, the trio decided it was time to assemble the Guardsmen and head back to the Castle. Minty escorted the trio to the front entrance and kept himself noticeably in between Talon and Marilyn. The Guardsmen had heard the evening winding down and had already gotten the horses ready.

Minty left the men on the road with good evenings and headed back inside. Marilyn lingered for a second and said good-bye to everyone and then stopped to say she would see Talon tomorrow. When she did that, Talon could hear the comments between the Prince and Blackheart. Talon said his "good night" to Marilyn and apologized for his friends. With that done, everyone mounted up.

"So, do you need a chaperone for tomorrow, because I can order Blackheart to come along! You would accept, is that not right, Blackheart?" The Prince's comment was followed by a wink.

Blackheart started laughing again and said, "Of course, I couldn't turn down a direct order from my Prince." This was followed by even more laughter from both men.

Talon finally broke his silence on the subject. "The last time I looked, the both of you have been without the company of a woman since, well, since I have known you. You two could learn something from me." Talon sat back on the saddle and realized how funny this must be for them. "I can't believe you both, but I guess if it were one of you, I would be doing the same thing, if not worse." This time Talon joined in the laughter.

They continued with the laughter as they trotted on towards the castle. The four guardsmen had turned to flank positions and assumed their professional roles. The ride to the castle was short and the trio managed to stay on their horses despite the lightheaded feeling they had. The group approached the gate and once again surprised the guard on duty. Obviously the man he relieved never informed him that the Prince would be returning during the early hours of the morning.

The guard snapped to only because Peter had rode ahead to inform the guard that the Prince was approaching. After his brief discussion, Peter continued onto the stables and Talon assumed he was making it ready for the Prince.

The four guards split into two groups and headed to help open the door to accommodate the large group. Talon could only imagine how fast the news of their late evening would travel around the castle by the morning. Talon glanced over at Prince Christopher and by the look on his face Talon didn't think he was very concerned. After passing through the gate, the guards spoke briefly to Blackheart and then were dismissed. All four headed back to the gate to help secure it for the evening. The trio led their horses directly to the stables and were met by Peter and the stable master, John Livings.

"Welcome back, Prince Christopher, Gentlemen. I trust Peter wasn't a problem this evening." John said. He grabbed the reins on the Princes horse. "Steady, girl."

"Not at all, John." said Prince Christopher. "As a matter of fact, he was a perfect guest."

"Well, I am pleased to hear that and I thank you for bringing him along. I have not seen such excitement in his eyes for a very long time." John started to rub down the horse's mane.

Meekly Peter added, "Master John, please, you are embarrassing me."

"I am happy you came along with us. Very soon I may need your services again. I will speak with John in the morning." Prince Christopher winked at Master John.

Prince Christopher dismounted and Peter grabbed the reins from Master John. Peter gave the Prince a curious look, but Peter knew he wasn't going to get any information tonight and gave his last greeting for the night. "Thank you sire, have a good night everyone." He led the Prince's horse away.

"I will venture that Peter and John will have some news for you in the morning, good night." Turning to address John, Prince Christopher spoke, "We will discuss the boys' future in the morning. What time are you available?"

"My sire, your time is my time, but I would like to see you first thing, otherwise I will be forced to listen to Peter all day, if you know what I mean."

With a good-hearted laugh from the trio, the Prince continued, "Yes, I can tell his excitement is great. First thing in the morning it shall be. Have a good night, John."

John turned and headed back into the stables.

Two of the guards arrived and dismounted next to the Prince, who turned and said his good-byes. The Prince started for the castle as the Guardsmen fell into place at his side, until the Prince turned back to Talon and Blackheart suddenly.

"Oh, Talon, before I forget. Good luck tomorrow on your adventure with Marilyn!" With a quick wink in Blackheart's direction the Prince continued on towards the castle.



Talon looked over at Blackheart and could see that Blackheart was trying hard to keep from laughing out loud.

Talon dismounted and told Blackheart, "Get it over with. You are going to hurt yourself if you don't let it out. Let it be known, if he wasn't the Prince and if you weren't such a good friend I would take both of you to the battle field."

A hearty laugh followed that comment as Blackheart dismounted.

Peter reappeared and took both of the men's reins. "Excuse me, Talon, but do you have any idea what the Prince would need me for, maybe, even a hint?"

"No, You were there all evening and his declaration about it was as new to me as it was to you. It looks like you are going to have a long night of waiting." Talon offered a smile.

"Aye, not even that ale is going to help to knock me out. Well, have a good night, Talon and same to you, Sir Blackheart." Peter led both horses into the stables.

Both men said their goodnights in unison and went back to their rooms for a night's rest.

## Chapter 10

April 2nd, 770; The Common Wing, Castle Heartfelt

Knock knock knock.

Talon sat up in his bed and found the sun beating on his pounding head. Upon his return from Minty's, he had left the shutters open and, as he looked out the window, he noticed the sun was a little higher in the sky than Talon had planned on.

Knock, knock.

Talon threw the blanket off and hurried to the door.

"Coming." Talon opened the door and found William Nachtigall standing there. The smell of the morning meal was strong as William walked into the room.

"Morning, William." Talon invited William into his room as he threw out the breakfast idea, figuring he was late for the meeting this morning.

William stood slightly taller than Talon and his broad shoulders spoke volumes about his skill with the broadsword. Talon addressed William. "I am glad to see you again. Am I late? Anything new happening?"

"No, there is still time. I was hoping you would have breakfast with me and Stephen." William sat on the corner of the bed. "Before I forget, Caswel Holloway, Royal Man in charge of us four Guardsmen, will not be able to make it today. Prince Christopher is arranging a meeting for you during the next day or so. Have you been given any information on this man?"

Talon thought for a moment and then answered, "No, I haven't heard his full story. Should I know him?"

"Not necessarily. Why don't we head for the Great Hall and I will tell you along the way?"

"Breakfast sounds good to me. Maybe it will help with this damn hangover." Both men walked out of the room and headed into the courtyard.

William continued. "About Caswel, he is from Elizabeth Towne and spent most of his time there before and during the war. He was field promoted to Royalty a few months after the war and I am not up on all the details, but a militant group who was not happy with the outcome of the war tried to seize power in Elizabeth Towne. Confidence Trynn was to be overthrown by these rebels and it seems Caswel saved the Confidence's life, or so the story goes. As I said, I am not up on the details, but never-the-less, Caswel received the rank of Royal Man. Of course, when the council recalled all Guardsmen teams back to Heartfelt last year, Caswel was moved

into a recall status in Hearttowne and has been trying to get back to Elizabeth Towne ever since. You can see why he is a good choice for us."

"That makes sense." Talon opened the door as they arrived at the Great Hall. He was greeted with a hall full of Guardsmen and a serving line filled with food.

"Talon, Good morning."

Talon smiled at Chef and, as he shook his hand, Stephen Loveland walked over. The whole breakfast was spent reliving old times with these men. Before long the men finished the breakfast and William went back with Talon to his room.

"How much time do I have?" Talon said as he walked into his room.

"Not too much. If we don't hurry, we are going to be late for maneuvers and you know how much Blackheart hates tardiness. Are you ready now?"

Talon looked around for his sword and a heavier shirt. "I think so, what's on the agenda for today? Do I need anything special?" Talon found his sword under the bed and decided not to guess on how it ended up there.

"You have sturdy clothes on and you should only need your sword. You can bring your javelin, but we aren't spending much time on alternate weapons today. Well, shall we?"

Talon double-checked to see if he was forgetting anything and walked with William to the door. "The last time I spent this much time on maneuvers was before the war. Of course, Blackheart wasn't in charge then." Talon walked outside the room with William and closed the door. "Times have changed."

"Well, Blackheart never changes. He really took control of the Guardsmen. When Philip was finally removed from head of the Guardsmen, things really gained momentum as Prince Christopher took his place. His first goal was to appoint Blackheart as the Royal Man in charge. Everyone looked forward to that. During Philip's reign, we had a civilian in charge of the Guardsmen. Do you remember Mike Lucas?"

"Yes. I met him when the war started."

"He drove most of us crazy, especially Blackheart." William turned the corner followed by Talon. William continued, "Maybe it wasn't the fact that he was a civilian, but was probably due to the fact that he was an ass dedicated to making Philip happy."

William and Talon picked up the pace as they came to the parade field, which was covered with Guardsmen. "Are we late, William?"

"I imagine we are a little behind schedule."

They were within hearing distance and Blackheart was telling the Guardsmen to break into groups of two. As they broke off into groups Blackheart caught sight of Talon and William approaching.

"Nice of you two join us today, Guardsmen Nachtigall and civilian Bastian!" Blackheart followed that with a quick wink. "Still recovering from last night?"

Talon smiled. "Of course. Haven't had that much to drink in a long time. What about you?"

"I was, but I spent a few extra hours this morning sweating it out. Now it's your turn."

"Great. What is on the agenda for maneuvers? Where do you want me and my sword today?"

Blackheart made a gesture to a Guardsmen standing close by. "Carole Reinard, come over here, please."

A Guardsmen, who was clearly a woman, came over. She was in half armor that only covered her chest but left the rest her body exposed. She was slightly shorter than Talon, but

seemed to be in control of herself. She stopped in front of Blackheart and said, "What can I do for you, Blackheart?" She placed her sword in her sheath and waited patiently.

Blackheart looked over at Talon and then back at Carole. "This, Carole," Blackheart pointed to Talon, "is Michael Talon Bastian, better known as Talon. Talon, this is Carole Reinard. She has been assigned to your team and was one of the first female Guardsmen to join when the policy changed."

Talon shook Carole's hand and looked back at Blackheart, who continued, "Carole, Talon was shocked, well maybe I should say surprised to hear that women were now part of the Guardsmen. You will be sparring with him this morning and I don't expect you to hold back"

Talon jumped in hoping to save himself. "I, for one, hope you do hold back, since I haven't done this in awhile. Besides, I wasn't surprised that women were in the ranks, I was more surprised that the council allowed them into the ranks. Still, I am glad you are part of my team."

"Thank you, Talon. Blackheart has spoken of you before. I hope you will find me to be as adequate as the others and hopefully even more so. I see you have your sword and are not wearing armor. I will do the same. And if you are ready we can begin sparring?"

"Blackheart, am I ready to begin?" Talon said with a smile.

Blackheart looked at Talon and a big laugh rumbled out of him. He said, "You will never be ready enough for Carole, and I will ask her again and this time I hope she will hold back for your sake. Have fun Talon. William, I get you today."

Blackheart and William walked a little farther over, but they were still within sight of Talon and Carole. Talon moved over and got into position. Carole said, "You might want to stretch. That will give me a little time to remove my body armor."

Talon saw the wisdom in her advice and proceeded to stretch. While he was stretching he looked up and noticed Carole removing her chest armor. Once it was removed it left no question that she was a woman. Talon was still getting used to the idea of women Guardsmen. She finished getting her armor off and started to do some of her own stretching.

When both of them were done they placed heavy leather sheaths over their swords. This prevented serious injury, but still managed to cause some black and blue marks and occasionally a few deep bruises. With quiet determination, they circled each other on the field. Talon sized up her movements and was impressed with her control. She made the first move with a jab to his open side. Talon easily blocked the jab with his sword. She followed it up with a full swing towards his head. Talon ducked and shuffled to the left. He followed with a blow towards her side. She cracked her wrist to deflect the blow and missed. Talon struck her hard against her lower chest cage. Carole seemed shocked to have been hit and followed with a full swing at Talon's head. Talon ducked and swung again into her other side. Talon scored another hit and Carole jumped back, defensively putting some distance between her and Talon.

Talon smiled to himself. He had been fighting for a few years before she was old enough to carry a sword. Patience was giving Talon the edge. Talon risked a short swing and was rewarded with a swift chop to his sword. That reaction told him he had her attention. She had underestimated him, but Talon knew he wasn't going to get such easy shots in for much longer. Carole swung directly at him and he met her blow with the same swing. They collided and she gave in and pushed the advantage. She followed through and scored a blow to the same spot on his lower rib cage. Talon felt the blow. He countered and swung to her open side. She deflected and swung again at him. Talon's sword caught hers and he inverted his wrist with a good tug and pulled her sword right out of her hands. Her momentum carried her forward and Talon tripped her back foot causing her to tumble next to her sword. Talon turned and swung to pin her to the

ground, but was stopped by her. She had already retrieved her sword during the fall and easily threw off his attempt for a pin. This surprised Talon and he was thrown off balance.

Carole noticed his stumbling and scored a clean kick to his knee, which caused him to end up on the ground next to her. Now, the race was on to see who would stand up first. Carole had the extra momentum and was on her feet waiting as Talon regained his stance. Both fighters stared each other down.

Neither of them was paying attention to the other fighters around them and almost all of them had stopped fighting to watch the match between Talon and Carole. Once both fighters were ready to go at each other again, the circle of fighters around them broke into applause. Talon broke his concentration long enough to find out they were cheering them on.

Carole faced the crowd for a moment and then made the first move. She aggressively came at Talon with a straight swing trying to score a hit on his upper chest. Talon waited for the right moment then took a step backwards and let her swing go right by him. As she was following through with the swing, Talon spun on his right heel and swung parallel to the ground and caught her in the small of her back as she went by. Talon heard a grunt from her as his sword connected. He had surprised her. She turned and recovered from being hit.

Talon spun again to face her. She had already turned and was preparing another assault. She was obviously ticked off. Some of the closer fighters were laughing to themselves and unfortunately it was loud enough for her to have heard it. She came forward with a more controlled swing. Talon felt how much power she had as he blocked each hit. She pushed him back at least twenty paces by the time Talon was able to take back control. He pushed her back five paces when she let Talon swing past her. This left his right side open and he knew it. The blow came fast and it came hard. He gasped and recovered to fend off her next swing. Talon started to realize how good she was, very powerful for her size, but her temper needed some work. He smiled to himself, happy to have her on the team. They kept swinging at each other for the next few minutes. Neither one scoring a hit.

Talon decided to try his sword trick one more time. He swung and caught her sword in his. With a flip of the wrist he tried to send her sword sailing. This time she was ready and she flipped her own wrist. With both of them doing this, their swords went flying into the gathered crowd. They looked at each other with surprise. After realizing what happened, Talon looked to see what happened to his sword. He saw Blackheart had caught his sword and another Guardsmen was holding onto Carole's.

Blackheart laughed and flung Talon's sword back to him. "You don't seem to have lost your touch. Maybe I should try farm living." Blackheart laughed as he walked between the two. "Carole is one of the best I have. What do you think, Talon?"

"I have never met a woman who could yield a sword with such force." Talon nodded at Blackheart and turned to Carole. "Once you learn to control your temper, you will far surpass any swordsmen I have ever met." Talon took in a deep breath and walked over to shake her hand. "How long have you been doing this?"

"Thank you, both of you." Carole said as she shook Talon's hand. "I haven't been doing this very long. I am glad to hear that I am improving."

"Improving, you are a natural." Talon looked over at Blackheart.

"Everyone, continue with training. Stephen Loveland, William Nachtigall, Kenneth Layton front and center." Blackheart yelled those names and looked around to make sure he was heard. They all came within a few moments. "Talon let me introduce you to the Heartfelt part of the team. You know Stephen and William. This is Kenneth Layton; he is your Master Archer.

Along with Stephen this makes two archery experts for your team, though Stephen is new to the program, so for now he is going to remain a swordsmen." Blackheart continued as Talon shook Stephen's hand. "You've met Carole; she is your master swordsman. Gentlemen and lady, Talon is your man now. He has been appointed leader of your group. I am going to retrieve the Redderin side of your team, so take some time to get to know each other." With that Blackheart disappeared from the group.

"Why don't we take a few steps back to get out the way?" Talon said as the group moved out of the circle of fighters. "I am glad to have you all on my team. I choose some of you because of past experiences and Blackheart and Prince Christopher picked the rest of you. Is everyone ready to go?"

A unison of yes' was heard.

"Excellent. As soon as the Redderin Guardsmen arrive, we will spend the rest of the time training as a team, but for now let's continue with the maneuvers. The Guardsmen nodded and headed back onto the field.

Talon watched them go and then looked around. Seeing that no one was paying attention to him he risked touching the recent tender spot given to him by Carole.

"She got you pretty good, Talon." Blackheart said as he walked towards Talon. "It seems to me that you are letting a lot of women get the best of you."

"I laugh at your words, Blackheart. Marilyn got lucky with her blow and Carole just has a little more practice than this old dog." Talon said as he was taking off the practice sheath. "I was going easy on Carole. Next time she won't be so lucky. I am just glad she is on our side."

Blackheart rolled his eyes, but didn't punish his friend's ego anymore. "She will aid you during the trip. She hasn't been at this as long as we have, but it is coming to her naturally. I am surprised you didn't bring along the javelin." Blackheart said and ended it with a chuckle.

"As much as you hate that weapon, I think you should try it. I would destroy you with it at a long distance. It's not that bad at close quarters either."

"If I wanted to take care of you at a distance, I would have my archer fire a arrow through you. Speaking of which, are you going to need to be outfitted with one?" Blackheart asked.

"Yes, I wouldn't mind having one as an option."

"Consider it done. Bryant has the Redderin training on the other side of the castle. I have sent a messenger, so why don't we continue to spar until they arrive?"

Talon bowed and escorted Blackheart onto the field.

Both men went back to the fighter's area. Talon took advantage of the time he was given and sparred with as many different opponents as he could. Each time he faced someone new he was able to remember more and more of his abilities. The sword felt better and better in his hands. After getting some more bruises, he remembered he was waiting for the Redderin Guardsmen.

Talon looked at the back castle wall and saw Bryant Theos standing next to Blackheart. To Bryant's side, were the four Redderin Guardsmen that were to join unit two.

"Talon, bring the Heartfelt Guardsmen over."

Talon waved his understanding to Blackheart and assembled the rest of the group in front of the Redderins.

Now that they were together, Blackheart called out each of the Guardsmen by name. Talon kept his eyes on each person as he mentally sized them up.

"...Guardsmen Elizabeth Sanders. And that Talon is the members of your team, with the exception of Royal Man Holloway. Prince Christopher is arranging a meeting as soon as

possible." Blackheart stepped out of the group and stood next to Talon. "Ladies and gentlemen, this is Talon Bastian and he is going to be in charge of this happy bunch until the Northerns return Valerica to normal. I will leave you to conduct your business. Good luck."

Talon nodded to Blackheart and faced the group. "Good afternoon. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Michael Talon Bastian, but call me Talon. Let's get some introductions. Why don't we start with Trall?"

Talon listened as each person introduced themselves, but paid particular attention to the Redderin Guardsmen, who he was seeing for the first time.

A tall woman with startling black hair greeted the group, "My name is Elizabeth Sanders. Thank you for this opportunity. I look forward to great and bad things for the North." She stepped back and allowed the next in line to move forward.

"My name is Samantha Le Sabre." Samantha was a little shorter than Talon, but carried herself in a way that spoke of confidence. "It feels good to be on the Heartfelt side for once."

"Hello, my name is Yara Teroe." Yara was a full figured attractive brunette, who seemed better suited to Royalty than a Ranger. "I hope I can benefit the team."

The last of the group spoke up. "My name is Alexandra Mitchell." Alexandra, the shortest of the four women, had short brown hair and a slight sparkle to her eyes. She stepped back and didn't add anything more than her name.

Talon found it odd that she didn't elaborate, but given the circumstances, he could understand being preoccupied.

"It is a pleasure meeting all of you and I am not sure how much time we will have before we are shipped out to Elizabeth Towne, but I hope to get more than acquainted with each of you. Guardsmen William Nachtigall," Talon paused and pointed in William's direction. "is in charge of handling any and all supplies you will need."

For the next half an hour the unit talked back and forth. Many of them had spent time together before. Unfortunately, a couple times, people remembered back when the two people were at war. Talon was hoping there wouldn't be any problems with old prejudices, but the war was still fresh in a lot of minds, including his.

Talon wondered why Royal Man Caswel Holloway hadn't shown up and though it bothered him, he wasn't ready to make any waves, yet.

The meeting winded down.

"For those of you who need equipment go with William as soon as we finish." Talon looked over at Trall. "Anything to add?"

"We have procured a section of the barracks for our guest from Redderin."

"Do we have room assignments?" Talon said.

"Yes, although they aren't really assignments. The area we are allowed to use has plenty of rooms. You can take whatever room you want."

"Why don't we head over there now." Talon looked around and nobody seemed to object. "Before we go are there any questions?"

The Guardsmen turned and started to talk to each other. Finally, William Nachtigall spoke up. "Do you have enough room for four Guardsmen?"

"Yes. I think we have over twenty rooms." Trall said. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, we would like to move into those. We really belong with the unit and besides those rooms are a whole lot nicer." William tried his best smile.

Trall looked over at Talon, but Talon did nothing but shrug his shoulders. Trall answered for him. "I see no problem with it, but make sure you inform Caswel about what you are doing."

Talon nodded at Trall and continued. "Since that's settled, let's head over to the barracks. I want to have everyone in their rooms, by this afternoon." Talon turned and led them back inside castle grounds.

The group continued through the castle grounds, until they came to the last set of rooms in the barracks. As the unit looked around inside, Talon noticed there was more than enough room for each member.

The members of the unit disappeared until they had occupied a room and, even with the Heartfelt Guardsmen, they didn't fill up the area they had been given.

The Heartfelt Guardsmen had taken a group of rooms together, while the rest of the unit had picked rooms with less planning. It wasn't long until everyone was back outside.

"Let's stop for some food and then meet at the armory first thing. Thank you. Everyone is dismissed." Talon took a step back and motioned to Trall. The rest of the unit disappeared in what Talon thought was record time.

Talon and Trall followed in the wake of the rest of the unit as they headed over to the Great Hall.

### **Moments later; The Library Bedroom, Castle Heartfelt**

Prince Christopher stepped inside the library bedroom and was surprised to see his brother there once again. Christopher stood against the wall and waited to be acknowledged.

King Heartfelt was deep in discussion with his first born, when he noticed Christopher walk into the library. The King waved his hand to cut off Philip and addressed Christopher.

"Christopher, how are you, my son?"

Prince Christopher nodded. "Excellent as always. I am sorry to intrude; this can wait for another time."

"Nonsense. Philip, please wait in the chambers for a few moments."

Prince Christopher cringed; knowing his brother wasn't very happy about being ignored for his little brother's concerns. Christopher stepped aside to allow Philip to pass. Christopher took the silence from his brother as an indication of how angry he was with the situation, but put his brother out of his mind and addressed the King.

"Thank you for the audience, father. I have come to report that both units are now complete and within a short amount of time will be ready to be shipped out to Markham and Elizabeth Towne."

King Heartfelt sat back in his chair. "Good. Continue with the preparations and keep me informed as to the status of both units and the status of the army. We are going to resolve this before the summer yields to the fall. Pass onto Blackheart my happiness with the way this is progressing and tell your brother that I will see him before dinner this evening."

Prince Christopher nodded. "I will."

The Prince turned and couldn't wait to pass this to his brother. Christopher wasn't sure how much longer Philip was going to keep his temper in check.

As he walked out of the bedroom, he found Philip gone. In his place was Sir Stamos. Christopher rolled his eyes as the advisor walked over. The Prince silently wondered how long this lecture was going to last.

### **Later that afternoon; The Armory, Castle Heartfelt**

Unit stood in front of the armory. The entire group waited as William opened the doors.

"Okay, who's first?"

Talon pointed to the women from Redderin and they headed up to the front of the line. As the women walked inside, Talon noticed the unity within the Guardsmen and he quietly hoped to himself that the teamwork wasn't going to change once Caswel became involved.

"I think this will be a great team." Trall seemed to be genuinely pleased.

Talon looked around at each member and was feeling the same thing. "Yes, I am inclined to agree with that." Talon noticed a figure walking towards them from the front of the hall. Talon looked over at Trall. "Do you think that is Caswel?"

Trall followed Talon's eyes and said, "I really can't tell, but I'm a little disappointed that he didn't show up."

"I am really starting to wonder about him. So far, he is the only wild card." Talon looked back over at the figure and let his thoughts wander. The armory line was moving at fast pace and Talon said as much to Trall. "It won't be much longer before we are done here. I guess we will have to set up another meeting just for Caswel." The figure was close enough for Talon to recognize him. It wasn't Caswel, but Prince Christopher. "I guess the man in charge decided to stop by for a visit." Within a few moments the Prince was walking towards Talon. He kneeled down onto one knee and awaited the Prince.

"Greetings Talon, please rise." The Prince gestured with his right hand and Talon rose. Prince Christopher noticed the commotion he was causing with the Guardsmen. "Continue on with what you are doing. Don't mind me; I just wanted to see how things are going."

Upon hearing this, the Guardsmen went about passing out more supplies. Talon looked back at the Prince. "Things are really moving along."

"Good, I am glad to hear it. I am trying to arrange a meeting with Royal Holloway, but he hasn't been very cooperative."

"Well, we are jumping right into maneuvers tomorrow morning, so he can arrive whenever he's ready."

"Good, since things are going so well, I guess I will leave you to your unit. Nice to see you, Trall."

"Same here Prince Christopher. Send a greeting to Blackheart for me." Trall smiled at Talon.

Prince Christopher chuckled and waved as he headed back towards the castle.

Talon stepped in line behind Peter, who had been told by the Prince that he was now part of this team. Talon could still feel the excitement on him. Talon waited as William finished handing gear out to the Redderin Guardsmen and then to Peter.

Talon's attention was brought back to the armory as Peter came out with his hands full. "Get comfortable with that sword, Peter, you are going to be using it a lot."

"Aye, Talon. Listen, does everyone have a horse?" Peter shifted the weight and it looked like he was going to drop his equipment.

"I guess we will have to ask. I will have a list for you, but I think we shouldn't have to worry." Talon looked around to find Trall. He was talking to Samantha so Talon stepped into the armory. "How is it going, William?"

"Just fine, Talon. What are you going to need?"

"I think the only thing I will need is archery supplies." Talon watched as William assembled his request.

The Royal Guard used a medium range bow, since they learned early on that a long-range bow only worked if you were trained to be a marksman. Talon inquired about getting a long-range bow. William nodded his head and pulled out some supplies from a different pile.



"Had a few requests for these from the Redderin Rangers!"

"Good. Anything else you can spare for me?"

"You bet." William threw a couple of heavy shirts onto the pile. Next he tossed a few sturdy pairs of pants. Talon was glad to have those, since he hadn't packed many things. "Do you have any daggers in the inventory?"

"Yes." William disappeared into the back and reappeared with a longer dagger than Talon expected.

"Thanks. I think this should be all I need." Talon took his load and headed back to the group and as soon as he left the armory, Trall passed him and got in line.

Talon addressed the group. "I think we have done enough today, so let's reassemble on the parade field tomorrow morning and jump right into maneuvers." Talon watched as Trall and the rest of the Guardsmen walked out of the armory. He waited as William finished locking the door and then repeated his order to them. "For your information, I have been given a room in the common room, and it's one room down from Blackheart's and Trall's room. I am available anytime of the day or night." Talon looked over at Trall. "Let's call it a day."

The unit took their new load of gear and headed back to their respective rooms. Talon and Trall helped each other as they headed back to their common rooms.

Talon tossed his load onto the bed and followed behind Trall to his room. "Why don't we go to Minty's after you get settled?"

Trall nodded his head as he tossed some equipment onto his bed. "Fine. I have to run an errand, so why don't we just meet there?"

Talon nodded. "I will see you there."

Talon returned to his room and started to put his new gear away.

Knock, knock, knock.

He smiled to himself as he walked to the door. It felt like his room was pretty popular. He opened the door and found Prince Christopher standing there.

"Sire."

"Mind if I come in, Talon?"

Talon stepped back and allowed the Prince into his room.

"What do I owe the honor, my lord?"

"I finally got a hold of Caswel and met with the same amount of resistance from him. He isn't extremely happy with being assigned to your unit. I don't think I have ever met someone with a bigger ego than that man. We discussed his problems and rest assured I will have him at the maneuvers by the end of the week. Is that acceptable?"

Talon nodded his head. "Of course it is, sire, but I haven't even met him and I already have a negative first impression. Hopefully, things will change, when we talk face to face."

Prince Christopher walked to the window and gazed across the fields. In a moment he started to speak. "I was thinking about..."

Knock, knock.

Talon turned and wondered who else was going to stop by. He opened the door and was shocked to see King Frederick standing at the door. Talon fell to his knee. "Sire."

Upon hearing Talon, Prince Christopher turned and also dropped to one knee. "Sire."

The King blessed Talon's shoulder and walked into the room. He was wearing a thick robe and had a large journal tucked under his arm. "Rise, Talon. Rise, my son."

Both men stood and exchanged quick looks at each other. The King occupied the spot the Prince had had at the window. Moments passed without anyone saying anything. Prince Christopher's curiosity led him to ask why his father was walking around the common wing.

"Is anything wrong, sire?"

The King smiled in his son's direction. "Can't an old man wander around his own castle, just because he is bored?"

Prince Christopher wasn't sure how to answer.

"Don't answer that, my son." The King turned and walked over to Talon. "I found this journal after I spoke with you yesterday. I felt you would like to have it." The King handed Talon the large book.

Talon took the book and inspected the cover. It read, "The Journal of Cavanaugh Bastian."

Talon looked into the King's eyes with a face full of excitement.

"Your grandfather wrote this during the first war I seated as the King. I hope you are able to draw strength from the power of your grandfather. Return it to me when you can."

"Thank you, sire. My father wouldn't tell us stories about our grandfather, so I really never knew him. I don't know how to thank you."

"No need to thank me. I..." The King stopped as he brought his hand up to his forehead. He started to lose his balance as a look of pain crossed his face.

Prince Christopher grabbed his father and held him steady. In a few moments, the pain subsided.

"Father, let me take you back to your chambers." The Prince's voice was barely a whisper. "I will be your strength."

The King nodded his understanding and with Christopher's help they started moving from his room.

Talon was confused and didn't know what to do, but the Prince met his eyes and nodded to him that it was all right. Talon let the Prince walk his father back to the chambers without question.

## **Chapter 11**

April 2nd, 770; Talon and Marilyn

As Talon turned onto the path heading towards the Inn, he heard a horse approaching from behind him. He turned and was surprised to see Trall galloping to catch up to him.

"I guess we are both running behind." Trall said with a smile and continued, "Anything new?" Trall slowed to Talon's pace.

"I had the strangest thing happen to me back at the castle. As a matter of fact, that is why I am late." Talon shook his head as he turned his horse towards the Inn.

"What happened?"

"Let me tell you once we get settled.

"Okay. Trall looked confused, but dismounted and walked with Talon to the posts and lashed the horses off. Trall lead the way into Minty's.

"Both entered the inn and were greeted by Minty at the bar.

"How are you doing, Minty?"

"Just fine. Things are starting to feel like the old days. It used to be everyday you two would find your way in here. Sit, anywhere you want." Minty said as he came out from around the bar.

"Thanks, Minty. Seems more crowded than last night." Talon said as he scanned the crowd of about ten.

"Of course it is. Most people aren't out until the wee hours of the morning."

"You were here last night, Talon?" Trall said as he sat down at the table.

"Yeah, the Prince, Blackheart and I headed out last night for old time's sake. We knocked on your door but you weren't around. Spent most of the night here." Talon took a seat opposite Trall.

"What can I get you, boys?"

"How about some ale with an order of fried potatoes?"

"Sounds good, that should do us, Minty." Trall said as Minty disappeared behind the bar. Trall gazed over at the bar and saw a younger attractive women come from behind it. "Look at her, Talon! Wow! I should've been coming in here more often."

Talon laughed, but kept his mouth shut. His eyes met with Marilyn's and she headed over their way.

"Talon, look she's coming over. Listen, not to be rude and all, but you have been on the farm too long. Let me do all the talking." Trall said as he fixed himself up and tried to push some of his hair down.

Talon held his breath and tried to keep from laughing. "Okay, I probably am a little rusty. She is all yours." Talon shifted in his chair and almost broke out into a fit of laughter. Meanwhile, Marilyn had made her way over to their table.

Trall jumped at the opportunity as soon as she was in striking distance. "Hi! You must be new here. My name is Trall Fagan and this is Talon Bastian."

Marilyn looked over at Talon, who smiled and gave her a quick wink. Marilyn played right along. "Nice to meet you, Trall." Marilyn used a whispery voice.

Trall sensing the kill sat back in his chair and winked at Talon. "I take it you are not from around here."

"No, I just moved here from Redderin. What about you soldier, where are you from?" Marilyn sat down on the table right in front of Trall. She crossed her legs and threw her hair back.

Trall was a little surprised, but took it in stride. "I have been around Heartfelt for awhile. What do you say I show you around the castle? Maybe tonight." Trall looked over at Talon. Talon was beet red and Trall made it worse by winking at him.

Marilyn looked over at Talon and then back at Trall, "Under ordinary circumstances I would love to, but someone else is already taking me." Marilyn looked at Talon and winked.

Trall wasn't sure what to do. He looked over the table and Talon just shrugged his shoulders. "Oh! Who in Valerica is this person that would be a better host then me?" Trall knew he was grasping at straws, but he wanted to save face in front of Talon.

"Oh, I am not sure I can mention that." Marilyn tossed her hair over her shoulder and looked at Talon. He winked at her and mouthed that it was okay to tell Trall. "Well, I guess I can tell you since he is sitting across from you."

Trall looked horrified and Talon couldn't hold his laughter anymore. Marilyn jumped off the table and sat down next to Talon. "Are we still on for this afternoon?" Marilyn finished as she threw her arm around the back of Talon's chair.

"You bet, Marilyn. Where do you want to go first, the castle or the towne? I thought we would have dinner at the castle. Sound good?"

Trall finally regain his composure with a look of total defeat on his shoulders. "You know each other? I mean, well, I, you set me up, Talon."

"Now, I did no such thing. You wouldn't let me get a word in edgewise, but I do wish you could have seen your own face. Trall Fagan, I would like you to meet Marilyn Stevens. Marilyn, this a very good friend of mine, Trall."

Marilyn and Trall shook hands while Talon watched with a smile on his face.

Marilyn was the first to speak, "I am sorry about that Trall. When I looked over at Talon during your introduction, I couldn't pass up what his face was saying. It's nice to meet you." Marilyn smiled and looked at Talon, "How about I show you the town first, then we can finish up at the castle?"

"Okay, I like the sound of that, although I reserve the right to take you back here after dinner." Talon said with a laugh.

"Okay, let me get you guys your order. Nice to have met you, Trall." Marilyn walked back to the kitchen with a wave to Talon.

Talon was surprised to see such a change in her attitude. He hoped she had forgotten about her first impression of him. "She is from Redderin and she knew Barlow."

Trall laughed and added, "Boy, did I look like an ass to her."

Now it was Talon's turn to laugh. "You are right about that. You definitely looked like an ass, though I don't think she will hold it against you."

Minty appeared with their dishes and a pitcher of ale. Marilyn followed behind him with some cups and silverware. "Enjoy, I will be back to refill this." Minty took off to the next table, which was filled by some new outsiders.

"Excuse me, here are you cups. Talon, I am ready whenever you want to head out. Uncle said he can handle things for the rest of the day." Marilyn explained.

"Okay. Great! I was hoping to get an early start. I have to meet Peter, you remember Peter, from last night? I have to meet him tonight, after I bring you home."

"Talon, you know that's not necessary." Marilyn quipped.

"Obviously, you don't know your own Uncle. Minty would hang me out to dry if I let you come back on your own. No more arguments. I will be ready in a little while, okay?" Talon said with a smile.

"Okay." Marilyn said as she headed to the next table.

"I see you two have hit it off rather nicely, eh." Cracked Trall.

"You have no idea." Talon related their first meeting to Trall.

With a laugh Trall added, "You can't catch a break. You know, I have the feeling your brother didn't meet women by using your tactics."

Talon laughed as he finished chewing and said, "I never saw my brother in action, but he must have been something else. He seems to have won over the Redderins. I never thought how much that war against them must have hurt him. To answer your question, yes, she has warmed over to me. I should have left that farm a long time ago." Talon joked.

Both men dug into their meals.

"What happened to you at the castle?"

Talon recounted the King's visit to his room and the attack the King suffered.

"What do you think? Have you heard anything about the King having an illness?"

"No." Trall stopped and thought for a minute. "Well, during the winter he fell ill, but I assumed it went away as the spring fell. He was in that much pain?"

"Prince Christopher had to hold him up. It's scary, but I think I wasn't told for a reason. Anyway, I just thought you might find that interesting."

"I do, but I better get going and get ready for maneuvers tomorrow morning. I will see you then." Trall stood up and waved to Minty. Trall looked back at Talon; "Good luck tonight. Stay out of trouble, too."

Talon laughed at that. "Take off with you." Talon finished his drink and searched the bar for Marilyn. He wasn't looking very long when Marilyn sat down next to him. She was smiling and looked ready to go, but both of them just sat there together and watched the people come and go.

"I am ready to go, but I don't mind just doing this for awhile."

"I know what you mean. I haven't had very many moments like this since I left the farm. What about you? Haven't things slowed down since you got here?"

"Yeah, but it's different. It's a sad change. Nobody likes what's happening. I can see it in everyone's eyes, even yours. I can tell bad times have affected a majority of your life. Not that I've been much luckier." Marilyn said.

"Yeah." Talon whispered.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Look what I have done. We are both depressed, but that's what we get for slowing down. Come on, let me show you the town and then you can show me the castle." Marilyn jumped to her feet and threw her apron over the counter. She ran over and said a few words to Minty. She wasn't there long before she came back over to Talon. She picked him up by the arm and dragged him towards the door. "Bye, Uncle. I will see you tonight."

Talon looked back and waved to Minty, "I will bring her back in one piece, Minty."

"You better hope so, Talon. I will be waiting." Minty said with a scowl and a forced wink.

The face almost made Talon laugh, but he knew better. They turned onto the path and off they went. They walked in silence for a little bit.

The afternoon was almost over and the sun wasn't very high in the sky. It was starting to cool off and Talon glanced at Marilyn and saw that she seemed warm enough. Marilyn caught his glance and Talon tried to look away without getting caught.

"Don't worry about me." Marilyn had caught the look. "I will be plenty warm. What do you want to see? Is there anything you remember from before and want to see?" Marilyn said with a smile.

Talon looked around, "I have to be honest with you, Marilyn, I have spent many years in Heartfelt, but I have never been anywhere in the town. Well, except for your Uncle's place."

"I guess that the castle is worth seeing then." Marilyn smiled at the thought. "If you never came into town, why would you stop by my Uncle's place?" Marilyn asked while side stepping a small puddle.

"Well, my Grandfather died when I was pretty young. He spent almost all of his life at the castle. When I was old enough, I made my first trip to the castle. I was lucky enough to meet the Prince. It was a very young Prince Christopher and he asked me if I was the same Bastian as Cavanaugh, my Grandfather. After talking for awhile, he mentioned your Uncle's place as one of the old hangouts that all the soldiers went to. I was pretty curious, so I visited your Uncle. He acknowledged that he knew my grandfather and my father, but he didn't provide many details. I was to find out later that somewhere down the road your Uncle and my Grandfather had a falling out.

Minty wouldn't give me any details, but I stuck around that day and started going there on a regular basis. He always treated me like a grandson. I think he has been trying to make up for

losing my Grandfather as a friend. I guess, though I have never asked him about it, that sometimes he gives me that look, you know, like he is looking back in time. My father used to tell me how much I looked like my Grandfather. Barlow took after my Father, but I took after my grandfather." Talon said.

"No one looked like your mother?" Marilyn said.

"Well, we both inherited her gray eyes and, as my father use to say, her laugh. I really didn't know her. She died when I was very young. What about you, who do you take after?" Talon said as they turned onto the main road. As far as Talon knew this led straight to the ocean docks.

"Well, I really don't remember my father, but people always told me that I looked a lot like my mother. Oh, have you ever been here?" Marilyn said as she pointed with a sweeping motion towards a side road.

"Well, I thought this road leads to the docks?" Talon asked. "Where does that road go?"

Marilyn laughed. "If we stayed on this road, we would eventually stop at the docks, but the Town Square is on the right side of the fork we are coming to."

They walked down the road for a few more minutes. Pretty soon, Talon was able to make out the Towne Square. A couple more minutes later and he could see around the Towne Square. Buildings of every kind surrounded a large field which contained a monument that stood taller than most of the buildings. The monument was right in the center of a field and people having picnics surrounded it. A few couples were finishing their picnics and joining the crowds of people milling around the square. The outer square was full of shops and places to eat. Marilyn and Talon were walking through the only outlet. The square was actually more of an oval with only one way in and out and that was only by foot. Talon noticed horses were not allowed passed the entrance and there was a long guarded hitching post that sat at the entrance.

Marilyn grabbed Talon's hand and dragged him along to the front of the stores. "What do you think, Talon?"

"I can't believe I have never been here. I always thought how dreary the town felt. One would be inclined to believe that if they never left the street Minty's was on. I wonder if the Prince has ever been here or even Blackheart. This is great." Talon said as he took in the different shops and smelled all the different foods. They walked arm in arm deeper into the square. Talon started to smell the ocean as they got deeper and deeper into the square. "We are close to the ocean, aren't we?"

"Yes, the main street runs parallel to the square and it continues onto the docks at the ocean. One of the reasons they closed off the square to the main street was to keep the traffic to a minimum. The ocean docks should be picking up again now that the winter has passed." Marilyn said as she looked inside a candle store.

"You might find this hard to believe, but I have never been to the ocean on this side of Heartfelt territories." Talon said as he sniffed the salty air again.

"Have you ever seen the ocean?" Marilyn asked.

"Sure, the farm is practically on the ocean, but that is the Heartfelt side and it is actually a bay because of the Trio Islands. The closest I have ever come to the Hearttowne side was back during the war. I can remember smelling it, but it was dark and we never made to the water. Have you ever been to the bay?" Talon said as they continued to the next shop.

"I, well, no, I guess I have never been over there. To be truthful, I have only crossed the bridge into Heartfelt once before. It was late at night and I really don't remember much. Someday, I hope to make it over past the castle. Maybe when things return to normal you can

show me your farm. I bet it is the same as the land I have seen in Redderin." Marilyn said as she walked further into the square.

"It probably is. The farm is pretty far away from the castle. My father always joked about us being more Redderin than Heartfelt. I guess I was never cut out for farm life or I wouldn't take every opportunity to get away from there." Talon said as he looked inside some of the restaurants.

"Who is watching the farm?" Marilyn asked.

"Oh, my father made friends with a farmer down the road. I sold him the livestock and gave him the land to farm this fall. He has a big farm and I am sure he would love to own the farm my father bought. Maybe someday I will have to sell it to him. I already know farming isn't going to be my way of life." Talon said as they walked up to a bakery. Inside was every kind of sweet Talon could imagine and even some he couldn't. Talon led Marilyn into the bakery and looked around. There were plenty of things Talon wanted to have, but he picked a small cinnamon bun. He saw Marilyn looking over the cakes and walked over to help her pick one out. Instead of a cake, she chose an oatmeal cookie. Talon paid for both and they headed back onto the walk. "How is your cookie?"

"It's still warm. I will make you a deal, a bite of this cookie for a bite of your bun!" Marilyn joked with a big smile and puppy eyes.

"I guess I can be persuaded." Talon said as he thought to himself about how much he hated oatmeal cookies. A few moments after that thought Talon found a piece of her cookie in his mouth and him giving her some of his bun. It wasn't as bad as Talon thought it was going to be, but he quickly took another bite of his bun. "How was my bun?"

"I have had better." Marilyn said and started to giggle uncontrollably. Talon didn't know what else to do, but her giggle was contagious. Talon started to laugh with her. Marilyn put her arm around his waist and pulled him close. Talon was surprised, but placed his arm around her shoulders. They continued to walk this way sharing each other's food.

The sun was starting to dip in the sky as they walked until they reached the far end of the square. Finishing with one end, they headed down the other side of the square and window-shopped the entire time. Before they realized it, they were back at the entrance and they drifted apart.

"Do you want to head to Heartfelt? There aren't very many other things to see here?"

"Well, I thought we would have dinner at the castle and maybe a quick tour. By the time, we get there it will be almost dark. Shall we go to dinner?" Talon asked.

"Okay." Marilyn said as she kicked a stone down the path.

"Great, then it's a date." Talon quipped. This time Talon kicked the stone before Marilyn could. This led Marilyn to speed up and kick it before Talon could. They did this the entire way back to Minty's. Before they knew it, they were back in front of Minty's.

"Let me stop in and check on my Uncle. Do we need one or two horses?" Marilyn asked with a coy smile.

"I think we can take mine." With that both of them went inside Minty's. The dinner crowd was starting to show up. A few tables were full, but nothing that Minty couldn't handle.

"What are you kids doing back here so early?" Minty gave them both a curious look and a raised an eyebrow at Talon. "The night just started, did you see the castle already?"

"No, not yet Uncle, we are on our way there now. I just wanted to make sure you were getting along without me." Marilyn half joked as she gave Minty a kiss on the cheek.

"Well, I will have you know that I ran this establishment for years before you came along." Minty said with a smile. "Now why don't you take Talon and get along to the castle. If I remember right, Chef doesn't like to serve cold food." Minty gave both of them a glance before he headed to the closest table.

"I guess we should go, kind sir." Marilyn said as she extended her arm to Talon. "Shall we?"

Talon locked arms with her and headed out of Minty's. Talon unhooked his horse from the hitch and mounted. He grasped Marilyn and firmly put her behind him. With them both settled, they trotted off until they were crossing the bridge into Heartfelt.

Talon couldn't remember the last time he had such a good time. Marilyn felt warm on his back as she was holding him tight, leaving him with a comfortable feeling. Even with the wind, he could still smell her hair. At that moment, he decided he could get very use to this.

The sun was setting as they crossed the bridge. They stopped for a moment and it was a breathtaking sight to see the sun set over the river.

As they came down off the bridge, Marilyn looked around her. Even at this distance, Marilyn could see two turrets on what seemed to be the front of the castle. As they trotted closer Marilyn was able to make out the front of the castle and the front gate. Right next to it and built into the wall was a large building. "Talon, what is that building used for?" Marilyn asked Talon.

"That is the front gate guard house." Talon said as he picked up the pace and quickly led them to the gates of the castle. For once, Talon recognized the guard, Andrew Riker.

"Greetings this fine evening, Talon." Andrew was already opening the gate to admit Talon.

"Thank you, Andrew. Have you eaten already?" Talon asked as he slowed down to let the gate be lifted.

"Yes, another fine meal by Chef, although I would stay away from the dessert. Enough to fill you up just by looking at it. Have a good evening, Talon, Miss." Andrew waved them on.

Talon moved the horse towards the stables. Before he could even get within shouting range, Peter came running out to greet him. "Talon, you are early, although I am ready anyway. You should see the chainmail, and..." Peter trailed off as he realized Marilyn was with Talon.

Talon spoke before Peter could finish. "Actually, I am not early. I am on my way to dinner with Marilyn." Talon winked at Peter who blushed. "Marilyn, do you remember Peter?"

"Of course. How are you, Peter? What do you boys have planned this evening?" Marilyn commented.

With a blushing face, but a big smile, Peter answered, "I am fine tonight, thank you."

"How about I come and see you in a few hours?" Talon said. He turned to Peter. "Peter here is an expert with chain mail. He is going to be fitting me in a suit tonight." Talon said as he maneuvered his horse in front of the stables. "Peter, give Marilyn a hand off the horse."

Peter reached over and helped Marilyn. With Marilyn off the horse Talon moved into the stables. Marilyn looked at Peter and said, "How did you ever become an expert in chain mail, Peter."

With another blush, Peter shuffled his feet and answered her, "I think Talon is exaggerating. My job is mostly leather working. The chain mail was in very good condition. I did some cleaning, but the person who wore it was a little smaller than Talon." Peter finished while still being embarrassed.

Talon reappeared from the stables and walked over to Marilyn and Peter. "I put her up for the night, Peter. Have you had dinner?"



"No, I haven't Talon. I was working on Trall's suit. He stopped by a little while ago and I was able to make a few more adjustments. I guess I sort of forgot about the time." Peter said.

"Well, why don't you come with us Peter?" Marilyn asked.

"I, uh, I couldn't." Peter stammered.

"Nonsense. Whenever you are ready we can head over to the hall." Talon added with a nod to hopefully reassure Peter.

"Okay, I would appreciate that. I'm ready."

"Okay. Great. Marilyn, Peter, let's get something to eat." Talon said. He then turned to Marilyn, "After dinner we can take that tour I promised you." Peter led them to the hall.

Marilyn couldn't help but look all around her. She tried to guess what she thought each building was for. The wall surrounding the castle seemed to go on forever. It was tall-Marilyn guessed it was probably close to fifteen feet tall and was about four feet across. The top of the wall had a walkway built on top that ran the entire length of wall that was in Marilyn's view. Marilyn guessed that at one time it was probably used for defense, but now it just had flags of all sorts hanging from it. Marilyn recognized a few of the flags that were from Redderin, but she wasn't sure about some of the other ones. The stables were situated right inside the gate. From the stables, they walked along a path that was leading them to the back of the castle. To her left was one of the largest buildings Marilyn had ever seen. She guessed it was probably where the Royals lived. With a closer look Marilyn noticed a building running all the way down the wall on her right side. It literally started back at the stables and Marilyn swore she couldn't see its end. "Talon, this is wonderful." Marilyn was excited.

Talon looked at her and realized her level of excitement. He saw the expression on Marilyn's face. The last time Talon had seen that look was when he had first visited the castle. This was right after he become old enough to ride a horse. During that trip into town, Barlow had taken him with. Their father forbid them to go to the castle, but Barlow had made some friends who lived inside the walls.

Marilyn was able to remind him of what he was taking for granted. "I am glad you like it, Marilyn. I was hoping you could see more of it during the daytime, but it still has its charm in the evening." Talon held Marilyn's hand and they walked up to the entrance of the hall.

"Here we are, Marilyn." Peter said as he opened the door for them.

"Thank you, Peter." Marilyn said as she walked inside. She could smell the food from back at the gates and now she knew why. The serving line was enormous. There was more food than she thought existed. The place was crowded. She saw uniformed soldiers, royalty and all kinds of people. She didn't realize she had frozen in place until Talon tugged a little on her hand.

"Let's get something to eat." Talon led her to the serving line. Both of them started down the line.

"Talon, good evening. I don't believe I have had the pleasure." Chef said while serving Talon.

"Chef, this is Marilyn Stevens. She is Minty's niece." Talon said.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Chef. I have heard some great things about this place." Marilyn said.

"The pleasure is all mine. You have paid me a great compliment; I've had your Uncle's cooking. Enjoy your dinner, Marilyn. If you will excuse me." The Chef disappeared into the kitchen.

Talon and Marilyn finished with the serving line and headed into the general seating. It was going to be hard to find a seat, but Talon saw Blackheart waving him over. Talon and Marilyn headed off to that table.

"Take my seat, Talon. I have to be running anyway. How are you enjoying the castle, Marilyn?" Blackheart picked up his plate and moved out of Talon's way.

"I am impressed Blackheart. I understand why Heartfelt's have such pride." There was an empty seat next to Talon and Marilyn sat down.

"Yes, I would have to agree. If you need anything, please don't hesitate to ask. Enjoy your meal. Good evening to you both." Blackheart disappeared into the crowd.

Talon looked around the table and recognized a few faces. Talon introduced Marilyn around as they both dug into their meals.

"Talon, doesn't the Chef have a name?" Marilyn asked.

Talon laughed, "Sure, I have only heard it once, back when I asked the same question. His name is Nicholas Bridges. I don't think I have ever heard someone call him that. His food is too good for him to be called anything but Chef." Talon smiled at her.

Marilyn was surprised the answer was so easy. Both finished their meals and prepared to leave. Marilyn said good bye to Peter who was sitting at another table. They walked outside to a cool night breeze.

"Are you ready for that tour?" Talon asked.

Marilyn was ready to see more of the castle. "Lead on Talon and thank you for dinner."

"My pleasure. Right this way, mademoiselle." Talon led her towards the back gate of the castle. From here, Talon pointed out the weakened portion of the wall. It was directly after the barracks building ended.

Talon related the story to Marilyn. One of the raids that occurred in the final stages of the War of Occupation was almost successful in breaking into Heartfelt. If it weren't for the Queen, the castle would have been overrun. With most of the units gone, the Queen led a small group of Guardsmen and a lot of civilians to reinforce the wall before it fell. Just as they got the wall secured an arrow made it over the wall. It was a random shot, but it struck down her majesty. She died later that week from an infection. It effected the King in a big way.

Finished with the story, Talon and Marilyn walked towards the south wall. In the corner was the armory. It was built into the wall and also served as an entrance to the southwest turret. They continued, turned and headed back towards the front gate. This time they walked along the southern wall. They held hands and walked in silence for awhile. Talon pointed out the Royal wing and they headed back towards the stables. Before they got there Talon showed her the courtyard. From where they were standing, she could see the King's entrance. In the middle of the courtyard was a monument. Talon explained that it was of the first king to sit on the throne of Heartfelt. After Marilyn took it all in, they continued to walk to the stables.

"I am sorry the tour was so short. I really have to see to this chain mail with Peter tonight." Talon explained.

"Don't worry about it, tonight was perfect. Maybe when things slow down you can show me around the inside of the wings." Marilyn added.

"Okay. Let me get the horse." Talon disappeared into the stables. He returned shortly after with the horse. "Ready?" Talon mounted the horse and lifted Marilyn on with him. Talon gave the horse a nudge and they took off to Minty's. The ride seemed quicker than usual. Talon was sorry that the night had to end. In record time, Talon pulled up in front of Minty's. "Here we

are, my lady." Talon helped her down. "Apologize to Minty for me. Tell him I will see him later."

"I will Talon and thank you for a wonderful day and night." Marilyn smiled to him. "Now get going, you are probably late enough as it is."

"You are right. I better get going, but, um, would you like to have breakfast in the castle sometime?" Talon's stomach was in his throat.

"Of course. Just let me know when. Good night." Marilyn squeezed his hand and headed into the inn.

Talon watched her until she disappeared inside. Once she was inside he took off in a mad charge for the castle. It was getting late and he had another full day tomorrow. Hopefully, things with Peter wouldn't take too long. Before he knew it, he was dismounting and heading into the stables. Peter met him at the stall.

"Are you ready for me, Peter?" Talon asked as he finished with his horse.

"You got it." Peter led Talon into the back room. He brought out the suit and had Talon put it on. It didn't take long before Peter had his measurements.

Talon took some time to look over the suit. It was now highly polished and once it was sized it would offer him a high level of protection. "Good job, Peter. I am glad the Prince chose you for my unit. Well, I will see you at maneuvers. Have a good night." Talon left the stables and headed to his room. He fell into his bed without even taking off his clothes.

## Chapter 12

April 16<sup>th</sup>; Two weeks later in Castle Heartfelt

"Please sit down, Talon." Prince Christopher nodded to the chair opposite of his desk.

"Is Trall needed for this meeting?" Talon sat in the chair.

"No. You can repeat this information to him and the rest of the unit at your leisure. I have discussed this with Blackheart and we feel this will be the best course of action. The general army is taking longer than we anticipated returning to full strength since we have been unable to recruit enough bodies. The bodies we do have are taking longer to train than we thought. Since those developments appear to be with us for awhile, I have decided that Blackheart will not be leading unit one to Markham."

"Who will be, sire?"

"That was a hard one to call. We are in short supply of men who can fill such a role, but we have decided to do some creative improvisations. So, this is how the units will look." Prince Christopher handed a scroll to Talon. He continued as Talon started to read. "Your unit is now destined for Markham. You are one person short of your original total, but with Peter Gredit you still number twelve.

Unit one will now be destined for Elizabeth Towne with Royal Man Caswel Holloway in charge." Prince Christopher paused.

"Caswel will be in charge of unit one! I won't lie to when I tell you that I am extremely happy about losing him from my team, but to have him in charge of the other team. I do feel sorry for those Guardsmen. Is twelve all we are going to have for the Markham detail?"

"Yes, but unit one is going to stay with you until you are established and comfortable within Markham. I will personally explain this to Caswel and make sure he understands his new mission."

"Good. I haven't been able to explain things to him since I met him."

"I hate springing this on you, but Confidence Trynn sent a messenger during the beginning of the week requesting these arrangements. At the next council meeting I intend to bring up the lack of support that Markham is being left. Maybe I will be able to have a number of Guardsmen sent over to your team, since you are the front line."

"Thank you, my lord. I imagine my Guardsmen are going to be relieved now that they don't have to put up with Caswel."

"I've noticed how popular he is amongst the Guardsmen. I'm doing everything I can to figure out a different way of running unit one. Don't consider these plans as finite, except for Caswel being kept off of your team." The Prince stood up. "That is all I needed from you. Can I walk you to the parade field?"

"Of course. Are you going to do a little sparring this morning?"

"I'm sure I can be persuaded."

Talon smiled as he walked with the Prince to the morning maneuvers.

### **April 16<sup>th</sup>; Later that afternoon at Minty's**

Talon decided to have lunch at Minty's. Even though he knew the only reason he wanted to eat there was because it gave him an excuse to see Marilyn. Before long, Talon walked in the front door of the Inn and sat down at a table close to the window.

Marilyn appeared from the kitchen and sat down next to him. Neither one said anything to each other. It was early in the afternoon and both were already dragging their feet.

Talon noticed that the Inn was relatively quiet with only a few patrons seated at other tables. Talon looked over at Marilyn as she was looking out the window. "Hi! Business looks a little slow."

"Hi. Same old lunch crowd. I wasn't expecting to see you until dinner. I hope everything is all right at the castle?" Marilyn looked at Talon with a concerned look.

"It is much better than expected." Talon smiled at her and continued. "If it wasn't, I probably wouldn't have been able to slip away."

Marilyn smiled and reached over the table and held his hand. "I am glad you did." They looked into each other's eyes for a moment and Marilyn said, "Do you want something to eat?"

"Yes. I was hoping you would ask. Can you join me?"

"I should be able to. This is probably the most we will get this afternoon. Let me go find out." Marilyn started to rise.

"Please tell Minty that I invited at least ten people here tonight. They should be around after the dinner hour is over."

"Okay, I am sure he won't mind the business. I'll be right back."

Talon watched her walk away. He was starting to really like the simple things in life. Marilyn returned a few moments later.

"What are you hungry for?" Marilyn sat down next to him. Talon threw an arm around her and she nestled in.

"How about some beef stew? Maybe a little bread." Talon squeezed her shoulder.

"Okay, I'll throw some vegetables on the side." Marilyn slipped out from Talon and started to head to the kitchen.

Talon smiled as she left and said, "Thanks Mom!"

Marilyn shot him a smile as she headed inside the kitchen.

Minty came out a few moments later and headed over to Talon's table. "How are things at the castle?"

"Same old. Did Marilyn tell you about tonight?" Talon asked.

"Yeah. Not a problem." Minty heavily sat down.

Marilyn walked out of the kitchen over to the table with a pitcher and two glasses. She sat down across from Talon. "What are you two talking about?"

Minty winked at Talon and looked at Marilyn. "You, of course."

Marilyn smiled at this and started to pour Talon's drink, "Isn't it time for your drink, Uncle?"

Minty grimaced as Talon laughed. "I will make it, Marilyn. Relax and I will bring you two your lunch." Minty got up and walked back to the kitchen.

Marilyn finished pouring the drinks and sat back. "How much longer do you think you have here?"

Talon wasn't sure of the answer, but he knew it wasn't long. "I really don't know, but my gut is telling me it won't be much longer before I have to leave. What are you going to do?"

"I have been thinking about that. I talked to Uncle and he wants me to stay here with him." Marilyn paused and seemed to think about that. "I think that's what I'll do."

Talon was happy to hear that she wasn't heading back to Redderin anytime soon.

"Who is coming tonight?" Marilyn asked.

"The members of my unit." Talon replied.

"Anyone I know?"

"Yeah, a few people. Peter will be here. Of course Trall will be coming and I think the Prince and Blackheart might be here. A couple of the unit members are from Redderin. Maybe you will know some of them. There will also be some Guardsmen you have already met." Talon took a drink.

They talked for a little while longer, until Minty appeared with their food. On Talon's plate were the vegetables that Marilyn promised. He laughed and together they shared some of their food. The conversation continued just like it had since their first date. Time slipped away until Talon realized he needed to get back to the castle.

"I will see you tonight."

"Okay." Marilyn gave him a kiss on the lips and disappeared into the kitchen.

Talon momentarily watched her go and then left the Inn. He headed back to Heartfelt and was back in his room before he knew it.

Knock. Knock.

Talon moved over to the door. Before he got to it, Trall walked in.

"How are things?"

Talon smiled at Trall. "Come in. Couldn't be better. I am glad you stopped by. I wasn't able to tell you about the new changes at maneuvers this morning." Talon crossed the room and sat on the corner of his bed.

"Really. Who's making changes?" Trall sat at Talon's desk.

"Prince Christopher. I spoke with him this morning."

"Funny he didn't mention it to me when I saw him. Before I forget, he is coming tonight and is going to bring Blackheart along."

"Good. I wondered if you had asked them. Anyway, here is what has changed." Talon spent the next few minutes explaining the developments and the changes.

"Looks like we're are ending up with the better end of the deal. Caswel has been nothing, but a big pain the neck. I do feel sorry for the first unit's Guardsmen."

Talon laughed. "I told the Prince the same thing."

"Well, I have to run some errands, but I will see you tonight at Minty's."

"Okay." Talon closed the door behind Trall as he disappeared down the hall. Trall had left him with a new sense of confidence and he realized how everything had fallen into place for his unit. With the exception of Caswel, the rest of the unit had bonded instantly. Now that the Caswel problem was eliminated, the near future looked bright. Every day the maneuvers improved, until Talon wasn't sure how much farther up the team could go. Peter had even become a terror with his sword.

Feeling a little tired, Talon got up and went over to lie on his bed. It wasn't long before he had fallen asleep. Sometime later, Talon was awoken by a knock on the door.

"Talon! Talon, are you home?"

Talon brushed the sleepiness out of his eyes and sat up. "Yes. Come in." Talon wondered if he said that loud enough.

"Talon." A few more bangs on the door. "Talon."

Obviously Talon didn't speak loud enough. "Coming." Talon walked over to the door. He opened it and was surprised to see Peter standing there. "Hi."

"Sorry to wake you Talon, but I was about to head into town and I noticed your horse was still in the stalls. Is anything wrong? Are we still on for tonight?" Peter's excitement showed through.

"Yes, of course. I guess I owe you a thanks since I would have slept right through till the morning. How late is it?" Talon looked outside the window to get a bearing.

"It is a little past the dinner hour. Are you ready to go?" Peter was brimming with excitement.

"Yeah, let's go."

Peter and Talon dashed to the stables. Before long, they were standing in front of the Inn. They pushed their horses through the crowd of horses on the hitching post and headed inside.

There was a high level of noise coming from inside and Talon guessed they weren't early. Peter opened the door and found what looked like the entire unit. Here and there, Talon saw people he didn't even recognize. As he continued to scan the bar, he found Marilyn behind the bar with Minty. They were too busy to have noticed anyone else coming in.

Trall appeared out of the crowd. "Almost didn't think you were going to make it." Trall smiled at Peter.

"If it wasn't for Peter, I would still be in my bed counting donkeys. How are things going?" Talon looked around and everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves.

"Things are going great. I don't think Minty's had this much business in a really long time. I was starting to think he wouldn't remember what it was like." Trall led Talon and Peter around.

Talon mingled with everyone and it looked like there wasn't anyone missing. Talon took one more look and realized there was one person missing, Royal Man Caswel Holloway. Talon wasn't sure what to think. On one hand, he didn't show up to the morning maneuvers, so he couldn't have known about this, but Talon found it hard to believe that someone didn't pass the word to him. Talon decided not to worry about it.

Talon sat down at a far table with Trall and Peter as William Nachtigall walked to the center of the room. He got everyone's attention and called for Kenneth Layton to join him. Talon was curious about what he had planned, but he didn't have to wait long. Both men started to sing. William led and Kenneth added the background. Stephen wasn't about to let them have all the fun so he jumped up and added some of his own background. Just when Talon thought it couldn't get any bigger, Samantha La Sabre joined in. It wasn't the greatest of songs, but everyone started to clap along.

With his attention on the show, Talon didn't notice Marilyn sneak over to his table. She sat down right next to him with a drink. Talon was surprised to see her. She didn't let him say anything, but kissed him full on the lips and then started to watch the show. Talon took a drink and sat back with her. It lasted for a longer time than Talon thought possible. Once they finished the song William walked over and grabbed three cups. He started to juggle them and with the help of Stephen he went from three to seven. It was amusing and it made Talon happy that everyone was having such a great time.

In the middle of William's juggling act, the Prince and Blackheart walked in. The commotion caused everyone to look back, including William. William heard the Prince being announced and lost his concentration. He had four cups in the air and he was able to catch two of them, but one went crashing to the floor, while the other cup headed for Stephen's head. Stephen was looking at the Prince when the cup struck him in the side of his head. Talon had a feeling this wasn't part of the show, but he started laughing. Everyone else joined in. The Prince and Blackheart walked over to Talon's table. Talon looked behind them and saw the Royal detachment fanned out in front of the inn.

"Good evening, Talon!" Talon started to motion to kneel, but the Prince stopped him. "Relax, Talon. Stay seated. Nice to see you again, Marilyn." The Prince took a seat opposite of Talon. Blackheart followed right behind him.

"Good to see you both made it! You just missed William and the gang singing." Talon laughed at the thought.

"Actually, Blackheart and I have seen it many times over, although the juggling is new." The Prince turned around and looked in William's direction.

William had picked up where he left off. With the exception of the broken cup, he now had six in the air. Stephen would occasionally toss in a plate. He continued for a good deal of time, before making preparations to finish. He started calling out names. Then after he called the name, he would fire a cup in their direction. It took the first two by surprise before the rest realized what was going on. By then there were two more cups and a few more bruises added to the casualty list. William caught the last one in his hand and bowed. The room broke into applause.

"Thank you, everyone. Please show your generosity by paying for the cups I broke." William bowed again and money came flying at him. Once the clapping died down, William picked up the money and handed it over to Minty. Everyone returned to their conversations.

"That was quite a show. How you keep such talented people in the Royal Guard is beyond me, Blackheart." Talon laughed and waited for Blackheart's legendary temper.

"Don't start with me or I might have William incorporate you into the show." Blackheart smiled at the thought and then got serious for a moment. "I see Caswel didn't make it to tonight's festivities. I had William find him and let him know about it. Prince Christopher told me of his no shows at maneuvers." Blackheart looked around again.

"Well, since you boys are talking business, I will find out if anyone needs anything." Marilyn stood up and started into the crowd.

Minty showed up a few moments later. He greeted everyone and put a pitcher with some mugs on the table. Minty spoke briefly with everyone before heading back to the bar.

"How are things going with the unit?" Prince Christopher looked at both Talon and Trall. Talon answered and proceeded to give him the rundown. Trall added in some insights and combined they brought the Prince up to speed. "Good. I want to meet with you and Trall during

the week. This will be to get the ball rolling." The Prince looked over at Blackheart. "I want you and one or two of your Royal Guardsmen. Whoever you have placed in key positions."

Blackheart nodded his agreement. The Prince looked to both Talon and Trall for the same. Talon briefly looked at Trall and then nodded his agreement.

"There is going to be another meeting of the Council during the next week, so we are going to iron out all of the details for the Confidences. Be prepared."

The council meeting was set for sometime during the week and now that the men had covered the basics, the conversation shifted from business to pleasure. The old soldiers talked until the late evening. It was running late for the Prince and Blackheart, so they left for the evening. This freed up Talon and Trall. Both men went to spend time with their new unit. The party was threatening to last all night, but Minty started closing up shop.

Talon reminded everybody to meet on the parade field in the morning. With a room full of groans everyone started to pile out of the Inn. Talon waited behind and talked to Marilyn for a few minutes. After a kiss from her and a good bye from Minty, Talon and Trall mounted up and headed back to the castle.

"Quite the evening, Talon."

"I was happy to see that everyone had a good time."

Talon and Trall went through the front gate of the castle. After returning their horses to the stalls both men went to bed.

## Chapter 13

April 23rd, 770; One week later in Castle Heartfelt

Knock knock knock.

Talon awoke to a pounding on his door.

Knock knock knock.

Talon jumped out of bed and answered the door. "Yes."

"Good morning, sir."

Talon was surprised to see David at the door. "Is anything wrong, David?" Talon was a little concerned by being visited. He looked around to get a sense of what time it was.

"Nothing is wrong, sir; just a woman, by the name of Miss Marilyn Stevens, is being escorted to the hall. She said she was to meet you for breakfast." David said this with a smile on his face.

Talon ran to the window and realized he had overslept. With a few muttered curse words Talon ran back to David. "Thank you. How long ago was this?"

"I left as a Guardsmen was escorting her to the hall. You might be able to beat them there if you hurry. Have a good morning, sir." David closed the door and disappeared down the wing.

Talon looked around his room and realized he didn't need much time to get ready for breakfast. Mostly because he didn't have to change, since he had slept in his clothes. With a quick run through his hair, he dashed off to the hall and stepped inside, finding Chef already serving his date. Talon slowed down and tried to act like he wasn't late.

Chef was the first to notice he had come in. "Good morning, Talon."

"Good morning to you, Chef. I see you have already served my guest." Talon used his best smile on Marilyn, "Good morning, Marilyn."

Marilyn smiled at him and said the same.

Talon grabbed some food and followed her to a table. As he sat down across from her he noticed the place was practically empty



"I'm really sorry I am late. I kind of overslept this morning. I hope you didn't have any problems getting inside the castle?"

"Not at all. Haven't I seen that shirt before? At dinner last night, right?" Marilyn giggled.

Talon laughed in spite of himself. "I have never been much of a morning person." Talon ran his fingers through his hair again and wondered how bad it looked. "I wanted to get here so badly that I just threw the first thing I grabbed on." Talon wasn't about to admit that he slept in the shirt.

Marilyn smiled. "Don't worry about it. I am glad you invited me to breakfast. Uncle says hi." Marilyn looked around the hall. "Not much of a crowd this morning!"

"I've noticed that too. I guess not too many people are big on mornings." Talon picked at his muffin and wished he had ordered some eggs.

"No matter how many times I come here in the morning, I can't get over this castle at night. There is a certain magic to the night time."

Talon and Marilyn continued talking through the breakfast. He had been seeing her for the past few weeks and the relationship was blossoming.

Finishing with breakfast, Talon walked back to the gate and Peter met them there with her horse.

"I will be at the inn if you can break away after your training. Maybe we can still head down to the beach. Have a great day. Bye Peter." Marilyn trotted off towards Hearttowne.

"You've been seeing her a lot lately, huh?" Peter asked as he walked with Talon.

"You could say that. I don't think I've had dinner at the castle in at least a week. We really seemed to hit it off." Talon turned from the stables and headed back to his room. "See you this afternoon at maneuvers, Peter."

"Okay, Talon." Peter turned and heading inside the stables.

### **April 23rd, 770; Later that morning in the chambers**

The Council members stood as King Heartfelt walked into the chambers.

"Thank you for coming today." King Heartfelt rounded the table and stood for a moment at the head of the table before continuing. "Let's get down to business."

The King seated himself first, and then the rest of the members followed.

Confidence Trynn stood. "I feel we have only one matter to discuss at this meeting and we all know what that is-the Northerns!" Heads nodded down the table as Trynn continued. "I elect we cut to the heart of the matter, so we can return to our townes. I no longer feel safe being so far away from home."

King Heartfelt looked into Tyrnn's eyes and nodded his head. "I agree, Thos." The King looked over to Prince Christopher. "Bring in Blackheart and the unit commanders."

"As you wish, sire." Prince Christopher slightly bowed and then disappeared out of the chambers.

The chambers remained quiet for the few minutes it took for the Prince's return.

Sir Stamos stood at the door and proceeded to introduce the members following the Prince. "Royal Man in charge of the Military, Richard Blackheart." Blackheart walked into the room and took his place next to the Prince.

"Unit One Commander, Royal Man Caswel Holloway."

Caswel strutted into the room and met eyes with Confidence Trynn. Both men nodded respectfully.

"Unit Two Commander, Talon Bastian."

Talon walked into room and stood next to Caswel and waited to be addressed by the King.

"Thank you for coming, gentlemen." King Heartfelt stood up as he addressed the group. "You may continue, my son."

Prince Christopher nodded. "Thank you, my lord. We have deviated from the course we set almost a year ago. The training of the general army is taking more time than we anticipated." The Prince paused for a moment. "Here is the new course. Unit one and two have been ungraded in status and have become invaluable. After receiving word from Confidence Trynn, we made the necessary adjustments to the units and I will let Blackheart explain things further." Prince Christopher took a step back and motioned for Blackheart to continue.

Blackheart nodded respectfully and took the floor. "The two units are excelling beyond the original limits and will be more than ready to meet the challenge that could be facing us. As it stands now..." Blackheart continued to explain the changes in commanders and the changes in the destinations of the two units. "Prince Christopher and myself have fulfilled the Council's desires within the established budgetary constraints and will have the general army back to full strength at the start of the summer." Blackheart nodded and took a step back.

"Thank you, Blackheart. Are there any questions?" King Heartfelt sat back down as he waited for the inevitable.

Lady Loveland stood. "Yes, I have one, sire. I fail to see how only twelve Redderin and Heartfelt Guardsmen will have any effect on what could be an army attacking from the North. I don't wish to belittle the unit nor to underestimate their talents, but I do have some concerns with the current plan. I would feel safer..."

Confidence Trynn stood and stepped into the conversation. "Lady Loveland, I believe I can end the concerns you have for the unit's strengths. Since the King has granted my request of a larger group of Heartfelt Guardsmen and Caswel as commander of unit one, I intend to repay the favor. I intend to send two men for every one man I receive from Heartfelt. As it stands I am receiving thirty men from the crown. Isn't this correct, Blackheart?"

Blackheart nodded. "That is correct Confidence Trynn."

"Thank you. So, I have accordingly planned for that number and intend to send you sixty Elizabeth Towne Guardsmen in addition to the Heartfelt and Redderin Guardsmen you will already have. I request to have a messenger sent when the units are ready to depart. My intention is to have my unit arrive to relieve unit one from their duties at Markham. Unit one can then make good pace to arrive in Elizabeth Towne. Is this acceptable to the crown?"

King Heartfelt nodded his head. "Christopher, I want you to handle the arrangements with your sister, Anne. This is more than acceptable Thos and I appreciate your efforts to help correct this situation. Does this meet with your approval Lady Loveland?"

Lady Loveland curtsied. "This plan goes a long way towards easing my concerns. Having this many members within the town limits will ease the merchants union. I also see the major benefit of having a representative from each of the townes of Valerica. Thank you, Confidence Trynn and thank you, King Heartfelt."

Both Confidences reseated themselves.

"Prince Christopher continued. "We haven't decided on a departure date for the units, but as soon as they have completed their specialized training they will be sent to the front line. Has there been any indicated threat to Markham that would warrant us to speed up the training program and have the units there in a quicker time, Lady Loveland?"

"None so far, but the merchants union hasn't waited for a threat. They recently hired on a small contingent of mercenary's to protect their warehousing interests. So far this has been acceptable, but I would prefer to have the crown represented by Guardsmen, as well as having

the strength of each of the townes. For now, I believe I can wait for the unit's arrival, but haste may become more urgent as the spring goes on. I will defer to your judgment and that of your commanders, as I have done in the past. Thank you for keeping Markham's safety a part of your plate." Lady Loveland bowed deeply and reseated herself.

"Markham will always be a part of the kingdom and will always be included in our plate." Prince Christopher nodded to Lady Loveland and then turned his attention to the King. "Sire, do these plans laid before meet with your approval?"

King Heartfelt sat back in his chair and pondered for a brief moment. "I am slightly concerned with the schedule of the general army. When you mentioned the training is taking longer than anticipated, could you elaborate as to the nature of the problems and the solutions?"

Prince Christopher nodded. "Blackheart is better suited to answer your question. Blackheart?"

Blackheart nodded and stepped forward. "Upon the end of the War of Occupation and after the general army was released, we kept a limited number of Guardsmen in a recall status. Much of the recall force was young men, who didn't participate in the war and never received formal training. We are finding out the level of readiness is less than we assumed it to be." Blackheart paused as the King nodded his understanding. "Of course, this is easily corrected and has only had a minor affect on the training. We found that after we allowed women into the Guardsmen rank, that the recall army was almost fifty percent female. With the prosperity of Hearttowne, almost fifty percent of them have been or are pregnant. This left us scrambling to fill the ranks. Once again, with the booming economy, we have had a difficult time recruiting, but the boycott is already correcting that trend.

Finally, we have determined that by the rate we have been proceeding, we should have a general readiness of eighty percent at the beginning of the next month and a full hundred percent by the end of that month. Of course, we expected to already be at full strength." Blackheart stepped back from the table.

"We didn't anticipate the pregnancy problem two years ago. I am pleased to hear that the setbacks have been properly corrected. We might just be one step ahead of the Northerns. I am pleased Christopher." The King stood. "Is there anything further concerning the Northerns?"

The council fell silent.

"Excellent. I call for a recess and we can return and finish up any business you may have. We will move quickly in order to return each of you to your homes. Thank you."

The King moved from the table and walked into his chambers. Sir Stamos followed behind him.

Talon stood back against the wall and watched the flurry of activity around him. He quickly noticed Caswel embracing Confidence Trynn and carrying on with his entourage. It surprised Talon that someone actually enjoyed the man's company. His thoughts were interrupted as Blackheart walked over to him.

"I am scheduled to discuss the arrangements of the Elizabeth Towne Guardsmen with Confidence Trynn. He only mentioned me, but do you wish to be present at this meeting?"

"I would, but I am expected at maneuvers today. Please keep me informed of his intentions. Sixty men would add a little bit of security to the towne. I couldn't think of a better addition to the team. Thanks for the offer, but I will get with you later."

Talon disappeared out of the chambers and ran to his room. He was already late for maneuvers and it didn't sit well with him. If he was going to lead the team, he had decided early on to act like he was a part of the team.

Talon quickly threw on a heavier shirt and headed for the door.  
Knock, knock.

Talon was surprised at the interruption, but opened the door.

"Good morning, Talon." It was Royal Man Holloway.

"Good morning. How can I help you?" Talon said.

"May I come in?" Caswel asked.

"Of course." Talon brought Caswel to his makeshift desk. "I have a list here of my full unit. I haven't brought this up before, but do you have any objections to working with the Redderin Guardsmen?" Talon asked politely.

Caswel looked over the list before answering. "No, there is no problem on my end. As a matter of fact, they might come in handy, given their intense dislike for the northern townes. I would like to talk to you about a few things." Caswel seated himself. "First, I would like to inquire about Trall Fagan."

"He is second in charge of the unit. Why, do you know him?"

"No, only by reputation." Caswel turned away from the papers. He looked directly at Talon. "May I speak frankly?"

This surprised Talon, but he knew he wanted to hear this.

"Of course."

"I personally don't understand why you have been chosen as the man in charge of that unit. Although I understand you have quite a reputation from your war days, I would be happier if a man sworn to the crown was commanding. I want you to know that I have nothing but Elizabeth townes' interests at heart. I have made it my personal mission to maintain her dignity before the crown. As for Trall Fagan, I resent him being put second in charge of your unit. I would think it would be to the crown's advantage to have someone else in that position. Someone who didn't shift loyalties." Caswel finished his speech and hoped he wasn't in for a private meeting with Blackheart.

Talon looked out the window and found it odd that he was echoing the some of the same questions that were running through his head. Talon wasn't about to let him know that. "To answer your first observation, you are in unit one for Elizabeth townes' interests. I am on this team for the crown's interest. You will be in charge as soon as we secure Markham." Talon looked deep into Caswel's eyes. "I will remind you of this once and only once. I have been placed in charge of unit two by King Frederick. I trust you understand rank by appointment. You will also note that you will not find someone with stronger loyalties to Heartfelt than Trall Fagan. I will let you decide if Trall is worth your respect." Talon finished the last sentence feeling drained. This wasn't how he wanted this meeting to go. "I am glad we have had this discussion. Feel free to bring up anymore questions at anytime. We are assembling the entire team this afternoon, of which I am already late. I hope you will be there."

"Not today. I must attend to business with Confidence Trynn, but I am sure my Guardsmen are behaving."

Talon picked up on the reference to the Guardsmen, but he decided to let it ride.

"I understand. If there is nothing else then, I must be going. I am already late." Talon extended his hand. "Our difficulties aside, I feel it is going to be a pleasure to serve with you."

"Yes. I look forward to victory. For Heartfelt." Caswel shook his hand.

"Dismissed."

Caswel walked out of the room.

Talon's meeting with Caswel had put him in a bad mood. Even though he was late, he decided to ask Blackheart some questions. Talon left his room and headed next door. Blackheart answered his knock.

"Good afternoon!"

"Good afternoon, Talon. What can I do for you?"

"Do you have a few moments to answer some questions?" Talon said.

"Okay, come in. I have to see Confidence Trynn in a few moments, but I can field a few." Blackheart led him into his room. Both men sat down at the same round table from just a few days ago. "What can I help you with?"

"Blackheart, I am going to be blunt. Why was I picked to lead this mission?"

Blackheart sat back in his chair and folded his arms. "Talon, I am not one to understand the motives of the crown, but I can tell you this. Prince Christopher doesn't trust anyone else. He needed someone who hasn't been tainted by Philip. It seems that the King agrees with Christopher. I find it disheartening that Prince Christopher can only trust two people with these responsibilities-you and me. Have you talked with Caswel Holloway yet?" Blackheart asked.

"Yes. We just had a meeting."

"Good. I wonder sometimes about his loyalties. Be very careful around him."

Talon found it spooky that Blackheart was echoing his thoughts. "I understand. Will I be told anything else before we are sent to the front line?" Talon asked.

"Of course. The Prince is going to call us together for a final meeting. All of the objectives will be laid out. Can you be patient until then?" Blackheart asked.

"Yes, although I've been away from this for too long." Talon breathed deeply.

"Of course, but you have done well." Blackheart rose from his chair. "I really must go. Sir Stamos will only wait so long."

"I understand." Talon stood up headed out to maneuvers.

### **Later that afternoon**

Talon looked out the window for what seemed like the hundredth time. It was still early, so Talon headed out to the stables. He retrieved his horse and headed towards town. It wasn't long before Talon was in front of the Inn. Talon dismounted and headed inside. The place wasn't very crowded. There were only one or two people beside him. Talon seated himself at the front counter and it wasn't long before Marilyn appeared from the backroom.

"Talon. Hi!" Marilyn dropped off a plate of food before heading over. "I am surprised to see you here!" Marilyn sat down next to him.

Talon laughed and said, "I kind of surprised myself, too. I had some time to kill and I thought we could go to the beach again. There isn't much sunlight left, but I think we can spend a little time together." Talon smiled at her. His spirits were already improving.

"Well, let me go tell, Uncle." Marilyn headed back to the kitchen. It wasn't long before she came out of the kitchen. She tossed her apron onto the back table. "Ready to go?" Marilyn walked behind Talon and gave him a quick shoulder massage.

"If I would have known about this then, we could have skipped the beach." Talon smiled as he felt the tensions leave his shoulders.

"I guess you must be pretty important to have so much stress in your shoulders." Marilyn gave him a little more before she reached down and grabbed his hand. "Let's head to the beach."

Talon could barely move as they headed outside. There was no sense in bringing two horses so Marilyn jumped onto the back of Talon's. "Lead the way, Marilyn."

Marilyn wrapped her arms around his chest and moved herself closer to him as she whispered directions into his ear.

Talon steered the horse onto the road and followed until he could feel the ocean's salty breeze. Moments later, the docks became visible. There wasn't much traffic in the harbor.

Marilyn pointed to a long beach just south of the docks. Talon carefully steered the horse into the sand. They trotted along the waterfront and, as the docks became smaller, Marilyn signaled him to stop.

"This is a good spot. There are better ones further down, but we will have to wait to go to those when we have more time." Marilyn jumped down off the horse.

Talon dismounted and looked around for a place to tie off his horse. After finding a suitable spot, Talon returned to Marilyn who was walking along the waterfront. "This is beautiful." Talon reached over and held her hand. She took his hand and put it around her shoulders. She hooked her hand around his back. They pulled closer together and walked like this down the beach.

If he had a choice, Talon would have preferred to walk like this forever. He knew how unlikely that was and stopped her. "I will be leaving soon."

They disengaged from each other. Marilyn walked closer to the ocean. She stared off into the distance. "I had an idea that you wouldn't be here long. I mean, the way things are going in the North. Are you coming back?" Marilyn asked.

Talon looked at her. She was beautiful. He couldn't lie to her. "I don't know. I don't even know what I am getting into." Talon looked at his feet. He was so nervous that he started to dig a small hole in the sand with his foot.

Marilyn knew in her heart that was the best answer he could give her, but it still didn't seem like it was enough. She walked over to Talon who was looking down at the sand. She placed her hand underneath his chin and lifted his head until their eyes met. She stared him in the eyes and, on an impulse, kissed him full on the lips. It was a long kiss. When they parted she held onto both of his hands.

"I don't want to talk about this again. I want us to spend whatever time we have together without worrying about tomorrow. Besides, now you have an incentive to come back home." Marilyn smiled and gave him another kiss on the lips.

Talon put his arm around her shoulders. She put hers around his waist. Once again they pulled each other close and walked back to where the horse was tied up. They walked without saying anything. Talon squeezed her shoulder and gave her a quick kiss on her forehead. He looked over at her and found her looking at him with a beautiful smile. The walk ended a lot sooner than Talon would have liked.

"I guess we should be heading back." Talon gave her hand a squeeze and headed over to the horse. "The sun sure sets fast."

"Make me a promise!" Marilyn had turned and was staring off into the horizon.

"A promise?" Talon untied his horse and started walking it towards Marilyn.

"Yes, promise me you will show me the bayside of the ocean someday." Marilyn turned and looked right at him.

Talon was suddenly very uncomfortable. "I can't...I just can't promise that." Talon didn't want to promise something he couldn't provide. With that question, their mood turned depressive. Talon tried to cheer her up, "Anyway, if I did promise you that and I wasn't able to do it then my ghost would haunt you forever and ever." By this time Talon had walked up behind her. He wrapped his arm around her.

Marilyn breathed a long sigh and said very quietly, "I would take your ghost right now if I could."

They stood there holding each other for a few moments. Talon was the first to speak. "We really should be going." Talon stepped back and mounted his horse. Marilyn lingered for a little while but turned and Talon helped her onto the horse. She wrapped her arms around his chest and pulled herself closer to him. Talon felt her against his back and wished things would be different.

He guided his horse off the beach and headed onto the road. Before Talon could fall anymore for Marilyn they arrived in front of the Inn. Talon helped her down and followed her to the front door. "I will come see you as soon as I can." Talon held onto her hands.

"Okay." Marilyn stood up on her toes and gave Talon a kiss on the lips. They finished and she headed inside.

Talon mounted his horse and headed back to the castle.

## Chapter 14

May 2nd, 770; The last day in Castle Heartfelt

"Excuse me, sir." The Northern messenger followed in the aide's step. "I must see the King!"

Sir Stamos led the messenger into Prince Philip's room without knocking. As Stamos entered the room, he found the Prince admiring himself in the mirror. "Forgive the intrusion, my lord, but we have word from the Northerns. Enter messenger and bring forth the scroll."

The messenger walked into the room and stopped without acknowledging the Prince. "I insist you take me to the King immediately. I have no intention of revealing this scroll to anyone, but King Frederick Heartfelt." The messenger folded his arms and stood his ground.

Sir Stamos looked to Philip for guidance. "Your wish, sire?"

Philip tightened the fastenings on his shirt and walked towards the messenger. "Follow me. Sir Stamos, let's bring him to my father."

"But sir, we..."

Prince Philip turned his eyes onto the aide and flashed him a look.

Sir Stamos didn't continue, but followed behind the messenger as the party headed towards the King's chambers.

The Prince knocked once and then stormed into the chambers.

"Father, I bring a messenger from the North." Philip turned the corner and found no one in the room. Unfazed, Philip headed into the King's bedroom. "Father, I bring a messenger from the North."

The group came to halt as they found King Heartfelt seated in his chair with his forehead in his hands. "Why have you interrupted me, Philip?"

"Did you not hear, father. I bring a messenger from the North." Philip didn't notice the look his father gave him as he pushed the messenger forward.

The Northern messenger showed his respect and knelt on one knee in front of the King, while he waited to be addressed.

King Heartfelt sighed as he wondered how a Northern messenger understood protocol better than his own son did. "Rise, messenger. Present your message."

"Thank you, my lord. I bring word from Massenberga and Pope of the Northern Valerica Townes. Please accept this scroll on their behalf." The messenger walked forward and handed the scroll to the King.

"Thank you." The King broke the seal and proceeded to read. After only a few moments, the King sat heavily into his seat for a moment. With a burst of energy he yelled to Stamos. "Get me Christopher and Blackheart. Now!"

Sir Stamos was shocked by the emotional outburst and hesitated while exchanging looks with Prince Philip.

"I said now!" The King rose from his chair as he bellowed out Christopher and Blackheart's name. "Both of them, now!"

Sir Stamos moved out of the chambers with a lightning pace.

"Take this messenger and hold him until I am ready to respond. Do this now, my son." The King sat back down hoping to avoid a conflict with his son.

"As you wish, sire." Philip grabbed the messenger by the arm and dragged him into the chambers. Inwardly, Philip found himself boiling at being left out of the King's request. He was the King-in-waiting, not Christopher. Philip felt the vengeance building within his system. He wasn't sure how much longer he would take second seat to his younger brother.

### **May 2nd, 770; Later that day in Minty's**

Minty sat down across from Talon as he put down a plate and a pitcher of ale. "Things slowing down at the castle? I think I have seen you in here every day of the past week."

"Nothing left for us to do at the castle, but wait for the recall date. It feels close, though I couldn't explain where that hunch is coming from." Talon dug into the plate as Minty relaxed in the chair.

"I wish you weren't going. I can tell it will crush Marilyn. I don't think I have ever seen her this happy." Minty tipped back his mug of ale.

"Speaking of Marilyn, when did she decide to let you have ale?" Talon threw him a lopsided smile.

Minty held his mug up in the air. "Ale. I'll be damned. This is a mug of ale. No use stopping now." Minty chuckled to himself as he finished the mug off.

"You're hopeless, Minty." Talon continued eating as Marilyn walked out of the kitchen. Seeing Talon at the table she immediately waved to him.

"I will be over in a little bit." Marilyn smiled and blew Talon a kiss.

Talon caught the kiss in his hand and put it on his cheek. "Take your time. I'm not in any kind of rush."

Minty turned and watched as Marilyn moved over to another group of tables and when she was out of hearing range he turned back to Talon. "Do you know anything about a messenger from the North? He supposedly arrived this morning."

Talon dropped his fork. "Messenger? From the North? This is news to me. What do you know?"

Minty leaned in closer to Talon. "Two sailors stopped in here this morning for breakfast. Thankfully, Marilyn was out picking up supplies, so she doesn't know of the visit. Anyway, these two sailors were boasting of the importance of the guest they escorted from the north. They wouldn't provide any details, except to say that the messenger brings an answer to the current situation."

"An answer? Did they say anything else?" Talon had suddenly lost his appetite.

"No. Like I said, they wouldn't provide any details. I was hoping you could fill me in, but I see this is the first you have heard of this."

Talon shook his head and watched as Marilyn disappeared into the kitchen. Once the kitchen door closed, he stood up. "Please tell Marilyn I am sorry that I couldn't stay long enough



to see her, but I will visit tonight." Talon turned to head out the door as he called to Minty. "Thanks for the information. I will tell you what I can." Talon pushed himself through the door and, after mounting his horse, headed back to Heartfelt.

Minty cleared away Talon's meal and headed into the kitchen. Before he made it to the door, Marilyn walked out.

"Where is Talon?"

Minty put down the dishes and gently patted her arm. "He was called away to the castle, but said he would return to see you tonight."

By her Uncle's actions, she was getting the feeling that something was up. She allowed him to keep his secret. "Oh. I guess I can wait until tonight." Marilyn brought some food over to a customer.

She felt the curiosity burning inside of her, but held it in check. It wasn't a surprise that Talon was called back to the castle, but she just wished he wasn't involved in this whole mess. She vowed to stop worrying about it as she served the rest of the Inn's customers.

### **May 2nd, 770; Later that day in the Courtyard, Castle Heartfelt**

Blackheart was walking across the courtyard when he spotted Talon leaving the stables. He called to him.

"Talon! Talon!"

Blackheart made his way over to the stables and was greeted by Talon.

"Talon. I am glad I found you. We are having a meeting with the Prince." Blackheart turned and started for the royal wing. "We had a visit from the North this morning."

Talon, who was following in Blackheart's hasty steps, picked up the pace to match his stride. "I know. Minty told me of their arrival."

Blackheart chuckled. "Is there an end to the things he knows? Still, the Prince was given the information almost as soon as it was delivered. I arrived afterwards and now it's time to bring the people it affects up to speed."

Talon nodded. He realized the seriousness of the situation as they entered the Prince's room. Sitting in front of Prince Christopher was Trall Fagan, Royal Man Caswel Holloway, Royal Guardsmen Richard Lee, and Royal Guardsmen Ron Champagne.

Talon and Blackheart approached the Prince's desk.

"Now that we have Talon, we can start this meeting." The Prince stood and addressed Talon and Blackheart. "Please take a seat, gentlemen." Christopher waited as they seated themselves. "Good, now I can begin. We had a messenger this morning arrive from the North. He brought word from Bayside and Fort North. Let me begin with Confidence Massenberg.

'Written on this day for all of Valerica. Fort North shall, from this day forth, be known as Kingdom North and will no longer be under the control, whether directly or indirectly, of the Castle of Heartfelt. This is our declaration of independence. Any entity who does not comply with the above shall be met with force until compliance is understood.'

Signed, King Donald Massenberg."

Before anyone could answer, Christopher held up his right hand, cutting off everyone. He put down the Massenberg scroll and picked another scroll. "Here are the words of wisdom from Confidence Pope. 'Written on this day for all of Valerica. Bayside shall, from this day forth, be known as Kingdom Bayrica and will no longer be under the control, whether directly or indirectly, of the Castle of Heartfelt. This is our declaration of independence. Any entity who does not comply with the above shall be met with force until compliance is understood.' Signed by King Richard Pope."

This time Prince Christopher opened the floor to discussion. He instantly realized his mistake as everyone started talking.

"Enough. Please, we all know this is ridiculous, but the North has made their decision." Prince Christopher walked around his desk and sat down. "Talon, I can see you have a comment. What would you like to share?"

Talon smiled. "I see Confidence Pope, excuse me, King Pope has finally succeeded in becoming a lap dog. He could have at least come up with his own declaration of independence."

"We have noticed the same thing. My assumption is that we are dealing with just one entity, Confidence Massenberg. Well, we have spent the first part of this year in preparation." Prince Christopher sat back in his chair and took a deep breath. "Okay. Here is how things are falling into place. Unit one and unit two are departing castle grounds before sunrise tomorrow. I need you both to keep this under wraps, so pass this information to your teams only. Please try and make sure they don't pass it along to loved ones until it is absolutely necessary. I realize that is a tall order considering that this is their last night in the castle, but please be discreet. I don't know if we have a leak within the castle, but I don't want to jeopardize your trip to Markham. Blackheart will fill you in on any more details." The Prince stood and started for the door. "I must go to a meeting, but good luck and lead with your heart, gentlemen. Blackheart." Christopher closed the door without waiting for any questions.

"I think the Prince summed up the whole affair." Blackheart sat on the edge of the Prince's desk. "It looks like we are going to speed up the training for the general army and have them out to Markham before the end of the month. This doesn't give your group much time to prepare, Talon."

Talon nodded. "I wasn't expecting that much time anyway."

"Good. Are there any more questions?"

Blackheart scanned the row of men in front of him and waited. "Okay. Dismissed!"

Caswel jumped out of his chair and took off out of the room. Talon watched as Blackheart shook his head at Caswel's departure. From Blackheart's reaction and the others in the room, Talon could see how embarrassed the Royal Guardsmen were with Caswel's behavior.

Talon spoke to both of them. "I am in the room next to Blackheart in the common wing. If you need anything don't hesitate to ask. If we are going to weather this storm, we are going to have to stay on the same side."

Blackheart followed his comment after Talon. "Anytime, anything. My door will be open until all of you gentlemen depart tomorrow." Blackheart paused for a moment and rubbed his temple. He looked over at the Royal Guardsmen. "I am going to be blunt with you. I didn't approve of Caswel heading your unit. Unfortunately, he is the only Royal Man around and he has Confidence Trynn's ear. I even offered one of you as an option for heading the group. Unfortunately, Prince Philip decided we couldn't afford another Royal Man, so I was forced to keep Caswel in charge.

You both are going to have make judgment calls in the field. Keep in mind that I will back each of you one hundred percent. I am placing my trust in your hands. Make sure you pass this to the other Royal Guardsmen. I feel they need to hear this." Blackheart stood up and walked around the desk. "Better yet, if they aren't preoccupied, have them come and see me. I think they deserve to hear this for themselves. If you don't have any more questions, I will see you before you leave."

Both Royal Guardsmen walked over and shook Blackheart's hand. The same respect was given to Talon and Trall. Having been dismissed, the Royal Guardsmen left the room.

"Well, Talon, it looks like we have another War of Occupation." Blackheart sat down and let out a long sigh.

"One difference, though. We are heading north for this one." Trall smiled and tried to brighten the depressive mood that was threatening the room. "Don't tell me you two are worried about this? You guys are professional soldiers. Blackheart, you are the man in charge. Talon, you have control of your unit's destiny. This time you can make sure this doesn't happen again. Don't lose focus. Remember, we are the good guys." Trall leaned back in his chair and patted Talon on the back.

"Leave it to Trall to ruin a perfectly good depression. What do you say, Blackheart? It's almost lunchtime. Let's get something to eat."

Blackheart nodded and the group headed to the Great Hall.

Talon and Trall left the Great Hall after finishing their lunch and headed towards the barracks. Both men had mixed emotions about filling in the team.

As they approached the unit's wing, William Nachtigall came shooting out of the barracks with a boot following behind him. He ducked letting the boot fly over his head.

Talon and Trall stopped in their tracks as they listened to a woman shouting from inside the barracks.

"You get the hell out of here, William Nachtigall. I don't care if you are the last Guardsmen in all of Valerica."

William hadn't noticed Talon and Trall standing there as he picked up the boot. Barefoot, William started to walk back into the barracks. He put on his best voice and said, "Come on baby, I might never return. You may never see me again. War is hell!" William kept walking towards the barracks.

When Talon and Trall heard his last comment they almost burst into a fit of laughter. But before they had the opportunity, another boot came flying out of the barracks. William wasn't as quick this time. The boot caught him square on the forehead. William staggered for a moment and then dropped to the ground. Talon and Trall ran over to see if he was all right.

"William! William!" Talon picked up his head, while Trall checked his breathing. "Are you okay? Come on William, speak to us!" He didn't answer, so Talon started to worry.

As they cared for William, another boot came flying out of the barracks. It was clearly a warning shot as it sailed over their heads.

"Don't even think about coming in here again, you, you, ahhhh, you beast!"

Talon heard the door slam. "William!" Talon kept checking on William and was concerned because he wasn't answering. Talon feared the worst as he looked over at Trall. Some motion caught his eye and he noticed William moving.

William's eyes shot open. "Talon, Trall, I love you guys!"

Trall started laughing, but Talon wasn't going to give William the pleasure. "What the hell is going on, William?" Talon bit down harder on his cheek as he tried to contain his laughter.

"Well, I kind of thought that was obvious. Of course, now that I didn't win her over, she made sure everyone on this wing heard her. I won't get many second chances around here. What brings you two around?" William took the help offered and stood up. He brushed off his clothes and started to put on his boots. "I thought we had the day off?"

"You did, but we had a little visit from the north this morning. Thought we would pass the word to the unit. Is everybody around?"

William scratched his chin. "Not sure, but you've got me curious to find out what the word is. Let's go find out."

"Are you done here, William?" Trall smiled at his own comment.

"Yeah. Maybe it was fate that she threw me out. I wouldn't want to be late for this surprise meeting."

"From what I hear, you could have stayed there and still been on time."

Talon started laughing upon hearing Trall's comment. "Let's go, you two. The sooner the unit knows the better."

William put his other boot on and took the third boot to the woman's front door. After dropping it in front of the door, he hastened to catch up to the other two.

The three men headed into the barracks and started knocking on doors. After a few moments, most of the unit was assembled.

The group gathered around Talon. "Trall and I had a meeting with Prince Christopher and Blackheart. Royal Man Holloway and his Royal Guardsmen were also there. Anyway, if you haven't heard already, a messenger arrived from the north this morning. This messenger hand carried declarations of independence for Fort North and Bayside. They have renamed their townes to Kingdom North and Kingdom Bayrica. Any questions so far?" Talon looked around. "Okay. Here's is the burning question. What does this do to our timetable? Well, we are to be off castle grounds before breakfast is served!" Talon almost felt the exhale of breath. "Bryant will see to it that the rest of the Redderins are informed of this change. William, will you do the same for the Hearters?" Both men nodded their understanding to Talon. "Okay. Since time has become increasing valuable, I am dismissing everyone until the early morning hours! Dismissed." Talon stepped back as the barracks cleared out. His mind drifted to Marilyn and he knew he needed to spend one last night with her and he took off out the door with the rest of the unit.

Awhile later, Talon walked into the inn and before he could close the door, he had Marilyn in his arms. She had run over and jumped into his arms. He tried to say hi, but Marilyn kissing him on the lips stifled it.

After they stopped kissing, Marilyn was the first to talk. "What are you doing here? I thought for sure that I wasn't going to see you for a few days. What happened with the messenger? Is anything wrong?"

Talon chuckled as he led her over to the bar. "Which question do you want me to answer?"

Marilyn laughed. "Do you want dinner?" She locked arms with him and sat down at the bar.

"What can I get for you, Talon?" Minty walked over with a mug full of ale and placed it in front of Talon.

"Yes, just bring me whatever you would recommend. I take it you have heard the news?"

Talon took a drink of the ale and found it had never tasted better.

Minty continued cleaning some mugs out and gave him a look. "Nobody has really told me anything. I was kind of waiting to hear the news from you!"

Marilyn didn't let Talon answer. "Is it true? Is there really going to be a war?"

"It looks that way." Talon wasn't sure how much he could really tell them, but he needed to trust someone and they were the closest thing he had to family. Before he could continue, Minty spoke to Marilyn.

"Do you want anything, Marilyn?"

Marilyn nodded her head. "Sure, but I can get it, Uncle."

"Relax, Marilyn. I can handle the crowd tonight. Entertain our guest while I fix you both something up." Minty disappeared into the kitchen leaving Talon and Marilyn alone at the bar.

"I don't know if you can tell me, but does this change when you are leaving?"

Talon nodded his head. "Why don't we eat dinner and then let's head to the beach and talk! Okay?"

Marilyn nodded her agreement and changed the subject. They continued to talk, until Minty returned from the kitchen with their meal. They ate as they talked with Minty.

Talon tossed his napkin onto his plate. "Dinner was excellent, Minty. Do you mind if I steal Marilyn for the rest of the evening?"

Minty smiled. "Of course. Bring her back in one piece, huh."

Talon laughed. "Of course. Are you ready to go?"

Marilyn turned on the stool and spun Talon around. "Just waiting for you." She winked at Minty and then led Talon out of the inn. "See you tonight, Uncle."

They mounted Talon's horse and took off for their favorite spot on the beach. It was later in the evening, then Talon thought and he was surprised to see that the sun had already disappeared from the sky. It wasn't long before the couple was walking down the beach.

"Something is wrong, Talon. I can see it in your eyes." Marilyn stopped walking and looked him in the eyes.

"I guess you can read me like a book. Do you want the bad news or the bad news?"

Marilyn played in the sand with her foot before answering. "That bad, huh!"

"Well, I am leaving the castle before first light." Talon reached over and held her hands.

"First light, when?"

"Tomorrow. This is my last night in Heartfelt." Talon felt her hands go slack."

"Tomorrow... I guess I expected this, but that doesn't seem to be helping." Marilyn gripped Talon's hands tighter. "I am going to miss you."

Talon didn't answer, but embraced her. They spent the rest of the time walking arm in arm without saying another word.

When they came within sight of the docks, where Talon had left the horse, he mounted up and pulled Marilyn with him. Faster than Talon wanted, he was riding up to the front of the inn.

Talon helped Marilyn down and then dismounted. It was late in the evening as Talon walked Marilyn to the porch. "Will you say good-bye to Minty for me?"

"Can't you come inside? I am sure Minty is still awake." Marilyn was hoping he would stay a little longer.

"I really can't. I still have to meet with Blackheart." Talon wasn't sure how to say good-bye. "I don't want to say good-bye, but..."

Marilyn put a finger on his lips before he could finish. "Don't say it. Just give me a kiss and then go. I will see you again, Michael Talon Bastian!"

Talon forcefully kissed her and it lasted for quite awhile. When it finally ended, he did what he was supposed to do and mounted his horse. Wordlessly, he kicked his horse and headed off down the path.

He didn't get very far when he stole a glance at her. She was standing on the porch watching him go with tears in her eyes. The ride back to the castle felt like it would never end.

Talon dropped off his horse and ran into the common wing. He hoped Blackheart was still awake. As he headed towards Blackheart's room, he met up with Trall.

"Ready to go Talon? How did Marilyn take it?" Trall crossed the hall and followed Talon as he headed down the hall.

"Of course. Better than I expected, but I'm not sure I am taking it very well. How are you doing? Ready to go?"

"Yes. I spoke with William and Bryant and the team is ready to go. As soon as morning hits, we are outta here."

"Great. Have you spoken with Blackheart?"

"Yes. I talked to him earlier. He said he was going to wait up for you."

Talon stopped in front of Blackheart's door. "Thanks, Trall. I guess I will see you in the morning."

"Okay. Try and get some sleep!"

Talon laughed quietly to himself and knocked on the door.

"Talon, I was wondering if I was going to see you tonight? How is Marilyn?"

Talon followed Blackheart into the room. "Better than I expected, but I wish I could have met her a long time ago. How are things?"

"Okay with me, but what about you?"

"I'm ready. The unit's ready. Everything is set." Talon sat down on the corner of Blackheart's bed.

"Good. Trall told me the same. I haven't gotten a report from Caswel, though I didn't expect one." Blackheart sat down at his desk. "I wonder about his loyalties, but now is not the time. I wish I were going with you, Talon. Please be careful." Blackheart grew serious for a moment. "I fully expect to see you back here once this nonsense is over. Besides, I don't want to have to inform Marilyn of your whereabouts."

Talon and Blackheart talked for a few moments, until Talon remembered he still had some packing to do.

"Thanks for coming back to get me! When we finish this I want to spend some real time together."

Both men embraced. "Do you need any help packing?"

Talon followed Blackheart to the door. "No. It shouldn't take very long, but thank you."

"Okay. Good luck and may your heart go with you." Blackheart watched him walk back to his room and hoped this wasn't the last time he would see him.

Talon, who was used to this lifestyle, packed in a short amount of time.

He lay down on the bed and fell into a deep sleep.

### **May 3rd, 770; The next morning at the Castle gate**

Talon stood in front of his entire unit and suddenly realized he was missing someone.

"Anybody know where William is?"

Trall moved his horse forward. He had a grin across his face.

"He's getting another bandage put on his head. Seems he had another run in last night in another part of the barracks."

"I hope nothing serious."

"No, although this time the victim threw the first thing she saw. In this case, it was a pretty hefty rock. Knocked him right on the side of the head. He was out colder than the boot to the forehead. He's fine, but he got a little cut on the side of his head." Trall pointed to the side of his head.

Before they could finish, William trotted over to the team. "Sorry, I'm late."

Talon laughed. "Don't worry about it. Trall filled me in on the details. I hope it didn't cause any permanent damage to your head?"

Before William could say anything, Carole answered. "Don't worry; you wouldn't be able to tell anyway."

The whole unit started laughing. Talon moved himself to the front of the group as William filled into his spot.

"Fame, fortune and plenty of good fighting await. This is this unit's destiny. Lead with your heart." Talon turned and started off through the gate, with the rest of the unit following him.

### **Three hours later, in the King's room.**

Sir Stamos announced the arrival of Prince Christopher and Royal Man Blackheart.

"Good morning." The Prince bowed to the King. "Father."

The King nodded his head. He was facing his open window from his routine spot. "What news have you, my son?"

"Unit one and two are en route to Markham. I request permission to inform the council of their departure." The Prince looked to Blackheart, but continued. "We have also come to request the full support of the crown once both units arrive in Markham."

The King looked in his son's direction. "Don't concern yourself with your older brother's prattle. You have my full support. The council is only an extension of my authority. Think nothing more of it." The King grew silent for a moment. "I imagine you and Blackheart have more important things to do than waste your time with the upcoming council meeting. I will inform them of the developments. Get my army back to full strength, son. Lead with your heart, gentlemen. Dismissed."

Christopher bowed respectfully and then led Blackheart out of the room. "Things are going our way, but I can only hope the units will meet with the same success. No sense in worrying about it. Let's see to our army."

Prince Christopher and Blackheart walked out into the courtyard and headed to the parade field. The first unit of the new army was forming on the field, awaiting their first inspection.

The race to take back Valerica was on.

## **Chapter 15**

May 3rd, 770; William and the Tower

"Where the hell is he?" Trall's pace brought him right in front of Talon's horse.

Talon dismounted and stood next to William's horse. "Who wants to bet on what time he is finally going to show up?" Talon looked around him for takers.

"I'm in." William dismounted and clapped Talon on the back.

Talon knew he would be in. "Okay." Talon shook his hand and turned to Trall. "Tell the rest of the unit to dismount. We will take an extended break until Caswel decides to show up."

Trall threw his arms in the air as he walked away.

Within a few moments after Trall's order, the members of unit two gathered in a circle next to the riverbank.

"All we can do is wait for unit one." Talon heard a few grumbles and could do nothing but agree with them. "We don't want to waste time, so he has until the sun falls before we move further up river."

Talon dismissed the group and watched as they trickled down to the waterfront. "So far so good, huh?"

Trall smiled. "You could say that. Although we both knew he was going to be trouble I never imagined the trouble would start this early."

Both men relaxed on the riverbank and did the only thing they could: wait.

The sun had just reached past its highest point in the sky as unit one came into view.

“Hey, Talon I called it. What do I win?” William laughed as he pointed to the lead scout of unit one.

“You get to out of washing dishes for a week.”

“Sounds good to me.” William turned and headed off down the river. “Hey Stephen, you’re washing my dishes for me.”

Talon turned to Trall and laughed. “I never thought I would ever get the chance to work with that man again. Some things never change!”

“William is one of those who won’t change.” Trall looked down river at unit one. “What are you going to do about, Mr. Holloway?”

Talon sighed as he watched the unit break rank to allow Caswel into lead. “This is going to be one long week!” Talon shrugged his shoulders at Trall. “Reassembled the team, we are going to move within the hour.

### **One week later; the Outskirts of Markham**

Both unit leaders stood at the edge of the forest path. This was the last path they would need to take before entering the town limits of Markham. It was early in the morning and the sun was just starting to peek over the horizon.

"Caswel, are you ready to head into town? My unit will go first."

"Okay."

Talon was a little alarmed by the short answer, but he was ready with or without his support.

From this elevation, they could just make out the docks of Markham.

"William, Stephen, you've got lead. Scout ahead. We will follow at the appropriate distance." Talon looked over at Trall who nodded his approval.

Talon moved his horse out of the way and waited as the scouts entered the path going towards Markham. Talon waited until the scouts had disappeared before issuing the order. "Everyone ready to move?" Talon heard some mutterings and started to head out after the scouts. "Let's move."

"Wait."

Talon turned and wasn't surprised to find who the source of the complaint was. "Yes, Caswel?"

"My unit is not ready to move forward."

Talon wasn't surprised to hear groans from Caswel's Guardsmen. This wasn't the first time everyone else had to endure Caswel's inability to stick with a decision. Talon risked a glance at Trall and saw he looked like he was going to explode. Talon was hoping to avoid another conflict. "Fine, Caswel. Unit two is moving without you, but as a personal favor to me, would you please join us as soon as you are ready!"

"Right." Caswel returned to his Royal Guardsmen.

Talon shook his head and started after his scouts.

### **Moments later; The scouts progress**

Halfway through the forest path, the scouts came across a fork in the road. Luckily, they were prepared.

"Right one?" Stephen looked again at the reproduction of the path.

"No. Don't worry, I've been here before. The left will take you into the first set of homes. The right side is just one more route to another residential part of the town. We need to head through the middle." William glanced behind him one last time. "I guess it's going to be awhile until they decide to follow us."



Stephen looked down the forest path and wondered the same thing. "I can probably guess what they are doing right now."

William grinned and sat back on his horse. "Really. Don't keep me in suspense."

"Right now, Trall is about to explode at Caswel because he is complaining about something, anything. Caswel's Guardsmen are groaning from listening to Caswel and Talon's is doing his best to mediate the whole dispute." Stephen started heading down the path. "I really hope someone figures what to do with him. I, for one, am really tired of listening to Caswel. I really feel sorry for the Guardsmen who are heading with him to Elizabeth town. At least we can ditch him once we finish here."

"To me, Caswel is the least of my worries. I'm more worried about us getting through this. The north had to make a move." William followed behind Stephen. "This place is giving me the creeps. Have you noticed we haven't met one person yet?"

"Yes. I just didn't want to say anything. I was kind of hoping that if I didn't mention that fact that it might not matter."

William laughed. "Too late now. Let's move further down the path. Maybe, we will find out we are being paranoid."

The scouts trotted ahead in silence. They slowed down as they came to edge of the forest path. They could see houses through the thin forest on each side of the path. Nothing seemed out of place except for the silence.

"What do you think we should do?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, should we report the silence to Talon?"

William laughed. "You do realize how stupid that sounds?" William continued riding. "I think we should push a little further before heading back."

"Okay. Lead on then!"

The scouts trotted on until they came to another fork in the path.

"Which way now, smart guy?" Stephen hoped William wasn't about to have one of his legendary lapses of forgetfulness.

"Uh, I don't remember this fork in the road." William looked over at Stephen who looked like he was going to dismount and pound William's skull in. William whispered sheepishly, "Just kidding."

Stephen couldn't help but laugh. "One of these days."

William chuckled, "The docks are on the right and there are houses to the left. Straight ahead will take us behind the warehouses. I guess we wait for guidance from the big man." William started to move off the path. "Might as well stay hidden, you know, just in case."

Stephen saw the logic in hiding and followed William into the shadows. An eternity passed as they waited for something to happen. Stephen rolled his neck in an effort to remove the growing kinks when he noticed some movement coming down the path. "William, did you see that? William!"

William had been facing the wrong direction. "See what? Where?"

"I swear on the crown that I just saw someone coming down the path." Stephen hesitated, hoping to see some more movement. "Dammit. This is the first exciting thing to happen all day. Let's go check it out."

They carefully headed off down the path. They hadn't moved very far when a figure walked out from the trees and onto the path.

The figure was holding his hand up with the palm out. "Halt! Popeton no longer accepts visitors from the south. You will leave this town. Before you go I am going to confiscate your horses. I do this under the authority of King Richard and the Northern Dynasty."

William stopped in front of the man and using a hand signal he told Stephen to do the same. He noticed the figure was only carrying a short sword. William looked around to see if he had any buddies that were making him so bold. Once he realized the figure was alone he laid into him. "Listen Jack, why don't you go back to the Northern Dynasty and tell your supreme overlord that this is still a Heartfelt territory and he and you better get the hell out." William winked at Stephen who could do nothing but roll his eyes.

It took the figure a few seconds to realize what William just said. "Jack. My name is not Jack and you are not welcome in Popeton. I will ask you only once to leave here on your own feet or I cannot be responsible for what happens to you." The figure took a threatening step towards the two.

Stephen started to say something, but it was too late, William was too annoyed. "Popeton! Northern Dynasty! Who the hell is coming up with these names? Don't answer that, Jack. Look, I have had enough of your self-important babbling. Now, why don't you lay down your sword on the ground like a nice gentlemen and then please, keep in mind I did say please, step away from it."

Stephen knew trouble was about to start. Jack didn't look like he was amused. Stephen circled behind William to provide some sort of protection. In the distance, he could see unit two heading this way. "Jack, are you alone in, uh, Popeton?"

"How dare you! I will not answer your questions. Both of you, get off those horses and lay down your weapons. I am charging you with disregarding laws set forth by King Richard and I am taking you for prisoners in the name of the Northern Dynasty!" He took another step towards the two.

William almost fell off his horse. "Are you serious? Who exactly do you think you are? Stephen, do you believe this joker?" William kept his eye on Jack, but wondered why Stephen didn't say anything. "Stephen, are you all right?"

"Yeah, sorry. I just noticed the full team isn't coming. Looks like we lost Caswel. Never mind, what are we going to do with Jack?"

William glanced back and noticed the same thing. "I guess we can get an early start on this war. Sorry, Jack."

Jack's eyes grew big, but before he could recover enough to mount a defense, he watched William draw his dagger faster than anyone he had ever seen. Moments later, the handle struck him in the head. Jack fell to the ground, unconscious.

The move startled Stephen. "Did you kill him?" Stephen moved over to his body.

"Naw, I just put him out of our hair for awhile, though he is going to wake up with a splitting headache." William moved his horse over to Jack. He dismounted, retrieved his dagger, and with a leather strap, he bound Jack's hands behind his back.

"What do we do with him?"

"Throw him onto the back of my horse. Let's go meet with Talon."

William tossed Jack onto the back of Stephen's horse and both men headed down the path.

### **Later that afternoon; The scouts trouble**

After a little confusion, unit two had followed right down the middle path and put on a little extra speed. Not even that helped since they still hadn't caught up to the scouts.

Talon was in such a bad mood that he didn't even notice the trouble ahead. Luckily he heard Trall calling him.

"Talon. Talon, look ahead."

Talon looked up ahead and saw his scouts talking to a man. Just as the man took a step forward, Talon watched as William knocked the man on the head. The figure collapsed in a heap. Talon didn't need to be told something was wrong. "Oh boy, let's move it people." Talon kicked his horse and got moving at a fast trot. Talon was relieved as he watched the scouts start heading his way. Their visitor was on the back of Stephen's horse. "Looks like they took care of our new friend. Any sign of Caswel?"

"Not yet, but did you expect anything different."

Talon looked around at his group. "Let's meet up with the scouts and figure out some kind of plan."

It wasn't long before the scouts were next to the unit. They took a moment to formulate a plan.

"What do we have here, William. Found a new friend." Talon dismounted and walked over to him.

"You don't know the half of it. Meet the representative from the Supreme overlord of the Northern Dynasty, otherwise known as Jack."

Stephen rolled his eyes and laughed.

Talon wasn't sure what to make of it. "The what from where?"

"Of course, you realize we are trespassing in Popeton. I would suggest we leave this area immediately."

Talon looked over at Stephen, who could barely keep from laughing. "I see you have taken care of the dignitary."

William dismounted and threw Jack onto his shoulders. He walked a few yards off of the path and tied him to a tree. William gave Jack's bindings a tug. He left him alone now that he was secure. "We didn't head into town yet. We stopped at the second fork." William walked over to horse. "What's the plan?"

"It looks like the north has already sent personnel here. Obviously, this guy isn't alone." Talon looked to Trall. "Is there anything else ahead? Any ideas?"

"No. That fact alone bothered William and me. We didn't see one person the entire time. The houses off the path don't show any signs of life. I would love to know what's going on."

"I would too, but I would really like to know where Caswel is." Trall shook his head and continued. "According to the layout of the town, the second fork can lead you to one of three choices: the docks, the warehouses, or more residential areas. Why don't you scout ahead and follow the right path. You should be able to see the entire waterfront, the warehouses, and across the river."

"What's so important about the other side of the river?"

"According to the map, that is where the main building is. Also, the northern vassals staged support forces from that side during the War of Occupation. Back then, Markham was still a neutral place and in order for the war not to interfere with trade, the housing was built on the other side of the river. After the war ended, no one from Heartfelt really paid attention to what happened to those buildings, so we will probably find that they will be our biggest problem."

"Okay. William, you and Stephen continue onto the waterfront and report back to this spot. If you encounter any difficulties, well, major difficulties, then head right in this direction. I think

we should assume the worst, gentlemen. The north might have already attacked here. Let's do some scouting around while you two head towards the waterfront. Sound good?"

"You betcha. Ready Stephen?"

"I'll follow you."

The scout team turned and headed down the same path they had just come from.

"That takes care of the first stage. I want three people to take the left path and three more to take the right. Make sure you return to this spot. Have anybody in mind, Trall?"

"Yes. I'll take care of it." Trall disappeared into the crowd. Moments later the six members headed off down the two paths.

The only thing left for the unit to do was wait and prepare.

### **Later that day; The scouts continue**

William took lead. As they came upon the fork he moved closer to the trees. Stephen followed in behind him.

"So far so good!"

"Can you see anything?" Stephen was trying to look around William without drawing attention to himself.

"The path is clear. I can make out the end of a dock. There is a warehouse off on the left of the path, but I can't see any further. What do you think? Should we go for it?"

"Can we make it to the warehouse? That should provide us with some cover until we head onto the waterfront."

"No sense in wondering. Come on."

William took off across the path followed by Stephen. Neither man noticed the newly built guard tower by the waterfront until it was too late.

"Oh, boy! Do you see that?"

William tilted his head. "Oh boy is right. Look! Someone is coming down the ladder. He's mine." William jumped into motion hoping to stop the man. As he left, he called to Stephen, "Do you have your bow handy?"

Stephen started up behind him, "Yes."

"Well, the man up top is yours." William kicked his horse again and took off in a blind dash.

Stephen slowed to take out his bow. He reached behind him to grab an arrow when one stuck into his saddlebag. "Whew. That was close." Stephen loaded his arrow, aimed and fired. "Dammit." The shot went right over the guard's shoulder. Stephen reloaded. He looked, aimed, and was surprised to see another man show up at the rail. "Double trouble." Both men angled towards William. Stephen cringed as they fired. Both shots completely missed. Stephen released. His arrow found its mark.

The closest guard was hit in the shoulder. The guard staggered, then dropped his bow over the side and, in an effort to save it, went with it. This guard crashed to the ground. Stephen reloaded hoping to push the advantage. He was so intent on hitting the second guard that he missed the look William gave him as he dodged the falling body.

Stephen was ready to fire when the guard disappeared behind the rail. "Dammit." Stephen kept his attention on the tower. Eventually that guard was going to have to raise his head again.

William pounded past the fallen guard and was happy to see Stephen was finally contributing. He looked behind him, but saw Stephen taking aim. William only remembered seeing one man on the tower, but he hadn't waited around to test that. William focused on his target. The man jumped down from the ladder and was heading for a horse that was tied off to

one of the tower supports. William drew his sword and headed in for the kill. The man lunged for his horse. William came along side of him and blocked him from getting to the horse. William noticed the man wasn't armed and this didn't seem fair to William. He turned his horse around to make another run and was surprised to see the man running away from the tower forgetting about his horse. William put his sword away and reached for his dagger. William kicked his horse and took off after him. He pulled alongside the man and quickly ended the encounter.

Whaaackkk.

William jumped right off the horse and quickly tied the man's hands to his feet. William was about to relax, until he noticed Stephen making a mad dash to the tower.

"Hey, what's wrong?"

Stephen didn't miss a beat, but yelled, "Look up!" He continued under the tower and jumped onto the ladder. He was halfway up the tower by the time William realized what was going on.

"Oh, boy." William watched as smoke escaped from the tower. "Somebody is definitely going to see that!" William jumped back on his horse and took off to try and help Stephen.

### **About the same time; The Northern Guardsmen**

Across the river Northern Guardsmen Frank Candia was on watch in the second newly built tower. He was drifting in and out of sleep when he noticed the other tower.

"Hey Patrick, we aren't testing the fire signals today, are we?"

Patrick sat up in his chair. "Not that I know of, why?"

Frank pointed over to the other tower.

Patrick followed his arm. "Oh. What do you want to do, send a horse?"

"You wanna go?"

"Sure." Patrick started the climb down the ladder. "You want me to tell the watch leader?"

Frank thought about it. "Nah, give it some time. Scott is on watch over there and I have a feeling he is just goofing off."

"Okay, Frank. You're the boss." Patrick dropped down from the ladder. He mounted his horse and took off to the other tower.

Frank leaned back in his chair and fell asleep again.

### **The scouts again!**

Stephen had climbed to the top of the ladder and was doing his best to break through the floor. After repeated blows he was forced to assume the guard must have placed everything he could on top of the trapdoor. Stephen continued to pound on the door with the butt of his sword. He was making so much noise that he didn't hear William underneath him. He finally looked down when William grabbed his foot. William was making gestures with his hands. Stephen had no idea what he was trying to tell him. Before he could speak, William put his finger on his lips and made a signal Stephen could understand. He wanted Stephen to keep trying to break through the floor. Stephen continued despite his confusion, which turned into surprise as he watched William crawl off the ladder. William grabbed support beam after support beam until he was hanging onto the edge of the tower. He started to pull himself up the wall until all Stephen saw was his feet. William was going to need something to divert the guard's attention, so Stephen started to haul off on the trapdoor. It was starting to give, but it was going to take a lot longer than he wanted. The longer that fire burned the more noticeable it was going to become.

William smiled to himself as his fingers grabbed the edge of the tower. He could hear Stephen smashing with greater intensity into the door. He hoped it was enough to distract the guard. William balanced his weight on one hand and positioned his dagger better. As he put his other hand onto the lip he glanced down and, since he still was a kid at heart, he spit. He laughed to himself as he watched it hit the water. Now, he was ready to go. Using his arms, he started to sway back and forth until he had some decent momentum. On the upside of his swing, he pulled up on his arms and threw one leg over the side and found himself sitting on the lip with one leg in. William counted his blessings when he noticed the man was on the other side of the tower and moving a chair to place on top of the trapdoor. William would have paid good money to have the look on the man's face painted for him as it went from surprise to anger. The Guardsmen threw the chair he was moving at William. The move startled William, but he leaned back to avoid being hit. Unfortunately he didn't lean back far enough because one of the chair legs jabbed him in the stomach. As soon as that happened his mood changed, he was ticked now.

The guard followed right behind the chair running blindly at William, but instead of making it to William, he fell over the vat containing his signal fire. The vat spilled throwing fire all around the wooden tower. If it weren't for the fact William was about to be attacked, he would have found the whole thing funny. Flames, on the other hand, surrounded the guard, and to save himself, he dove at William. Luckily, William absorbed the blow and didn't lose his balance. William now had the advantage, but his luck ran out as the wall he was sitting on, obviously not ready to hold both men, cracked and then ripped from the side causing him and the guard to fall with the piece of wall. William turned his body and threw the man to his outside. He dove for the edge and was lucky enough to grab a hold. The guard, however, wasn't done yet. He turned his body and grabbed onto William's waist. Both men now hung from the side of the tower.

Stephen heard movement and hoped luck was favoring William. He continued hacking away at the hatch until he watched a large piece of the wall come falling down from the side of the tower. Moments later, Stephen saw two sets of feet dangling. Before he could say anything, he watched as the guard came sliding down Williams legs until he was hanging on from his ankles.

"Uh, Stephen, a little help here!"

Stephen was dumfounded by the request and broke into a fit of laughter.

William, still hanging onto the ledge, thought he could hear laughter. He yelled this time. "Stephen, would you get this joker off me!"

Stephen realized how serious things were and stopped laughing. He took out his dagger. The guard, who hadn't paid attention to Stephen, now noticed him and his dagger. The guard's eyes grew large and he tried to sway as Stephen threw the dagger. It wasn't enough and the dagger struck him in the stomach. Unbelievably, Stephen watched the guard hold on. He knew he had to get that man off William's legs and soon. Stephen racked his brain trying to think of something else to throw at the guard when the guard lost his hold on William's legs and fell to the ground.

Stephen called to William, "Are you okay?"

William grunted a few times and reappeared on the support beams of the tower. "We better get off of here. The floor of the tower is covered in fire!"

It took Stephen a moment to realize what he just said. "What? Oh, boy." He threw his sword into its sheath and scaled down the ladder. He only stopped once to make sure William

was following. Stephen dropped to the ground and ran from underneath the tower. William came out moments later.

Stephen turned and looked up at the tower. It was covered in flames. "What did you do with the first guard?"

"He's tied up by my horse. Why?"

"Let's grab our horses and hide him. Maybe, when someone comes they will think it was an accident."

William laughed. "It's worth a try."

Both men gathered up their horses. Stephen pulled his arrow out of the one guard while William ran over to the other guard.

As William reached down to pick up the unconscious guard he heard the pounding of an approaching horse. William looked up and wasn't that surprised to see another guard. He had been wondering when someone was going to notice the blaze. He shot a look back towards Stephen who was so busy retrieving his horse that he hadn't noticed the horsemen. William was on his own. He decided he would try his hand at acting. William dryly commented to himself, "I hope this works." He jumped up and started running towards the horsemen. "Help, please! help!" William ran towards the horsemen and quickly palmed his dagger. "Have you sounded an alarm? The others are hurt."

The horsemen pulled up next to William. "The others are hurt." The horsemen started to turn, actually believing William, but he didn't make all the way around. "Wait a minute, who are you?" The horsemen reached for his sword.

William wondered if it was his acting or his incredibly bad luck that this horsemen didn't believe him. "The name's Jack. I am the supreme overlord of united kingdom's of Valerica. You are?"

"What?" The horsemen wasn't amused and his actions said as much. He started to draw his sword and said, "Stay right where you are!"

William wasn't about to do that. In one fluid motion, he jumped at the horsemen putting his foot on top of the horsemen's foot in the stirrup for balance and then cracked the horsemen over the head with his dagger. William jumped back down not realizing he had surprised the horse. He had to back down as the horse took off in a blind run. The unconscious rider fell from the saddle catching his foot in the stirrup. The horse dragged the man down the path right past Stephen and continued up the path. William shook his head and almost started laughing. "These Northerns don't have much of a sense of humor." William put his dagger back into his belt. "Oh, well."

William went back to his work. He threw the unconscious guard onto his shoulder and then headed over to Stephen.

"Did I just see what I think I saw?"

William grinned, "What?"

"What? What happened? Who was that?"

"I didn't get a chance to ask him. Why?"

Stephen wasn't sure if he wanted to continue the conversation. "Forget about it."

William jogged over to the row of houses. He threw the guard down next to a tree and tied the unconscious man to a small tree. Tugging on the constraints, he was satisfied the guard was secure, so he headed back to Stephen.

"Ready?"

"Sure." Stephen led the way from the tower. "You do realize Talon is probably going to kill us."

William looked back as the tower spit more smoke. He was sure Talon was going to kill them.

### **What's a Northern Guardsmen to do!**

Northern Guardsmen Frank Candia woke up with a kink in his neck. He rubbed the spot and walked to stretch his muscles. He did a quick lap around the tower and ended up facing the Teal River.

"Oh, my!"

He was shocked to notice that tower one was engulfed in flames. Frank ran to the bell and sounded the alarm. "Today is not turning out to be my day. I wonder if Patrick ever made it over there." He shrugged to himself, "Oh, well." Frank continued ringing the alarm.

## **Chapter 16**

May 3rd, 770; Markham

Talon and the rest of the unit continued waiting for the scouts. It was longer than Talon wanted as both scouting teams returned to the main unit. Trall gathered with each of the teams and had a brief discussion. He broke off from the group and headed over to Talon.

"This placed cleared out in a hurry. They reported nothing but abandoned homes."

"I guess we aren't one step ahead of the north. Well, let's go see what William and Stephen found." Talon gathered everyone up. Once he had everyone's attention, he issued the command. "Let's move." The procession headed down the path with Talon in the lead.

Trall edged his way to the front. "Notice who we are still missing?"

"Yes. I can only imagine what his excuse is going to be this time."

"I don't think I want to hear it. Do you think they found anything in Markham?"

"Who? William and Stephen. Not really sure, but William could find trouble in a church."

Trall laughed. "Reminds me of you, back in the day."

"I know. I'd thought about the same thing."

Both men continued to laugh as they headed closer and closer to Markham.

### **Caswel's Risk**

Caswel paced back and forth in front of the path. There was no way he was risking his unit and his life on this town, but he was running out of ideas to keep stalling his men. He went back to pacing and hoping an idea would come to him.

Royal Guardsmen Ron Champagne was tired of sitting around. He went over to Royal Guardsmen Richard Lee. "I think it's time to push Caswel. You with me?" Ron had the feeling Richard was one of the only Royal Guardsmen who would stand up to Caswel.

"Yes. You want the honors?"

"Sure. You get next one?"

Richard chuckled. "Okay, fair deal." Richard patted him on the back, "Let's go stick a dagger in Caswel's mood."

Ron hoped having the united front would put enough pressure on Caswel, but he wasn't going to hold his breath. "Excuse us, Royal Man Holloway. May we have a word with you?"

Caswel looked down at the two from his horse. He knew this was trouble. "Yes. By all means."



Ron looked over at Richard, but stepped forward. He straightened his back and started, "Umph. We have a job to do. This unit is under direct orders to provide protection to unit two. We need to move."

Caswel looked past both of his Guardsmen. "We are not ready to move."

Richard continued before Ron could. "With all due respect, sire, each Royal Guardsmen and his Guardsmen are ready to go with the sole exception of you." Richard stood up a little taller after realizing what he said was borderline disrespectful.

Caswel dismounted and walked over to Richard. "With all due respect, I am in charge and I will tell you when you are ready. Understood."

Richard nodded his head.

"What? I didn't hear you!" Caswel walked a few steps closer until he was almost standing on top of him.

Richard looked directly at him. "Yes, sire!"

Caswel stared at him for a few seconds and said. "Mount up. We move." Caswel turned around and mounted his horse. Without looking back he started onto the forest path.

Ron looked over at Richard. "That went well, don't you think?"

"We're moving, aren't we?"

Ron grinned at that comment. "You still want the next encounter?"

"A deal's a deal."

They had won the battle, but the war wasn't over yet.

Ron mounted his horse. "You heard him, men. Move!"

Unit one headed in the same direction that unit two had gone down almost a full hour ago. The civilians accompanying them moved in behind the group. It wasn't long before they came to the first fork in the road. Caswel halted everyone. "Royal Guardsmen Champagne."

Ron glanced at Richard, but headed up to speak with Caswel. "Yes, sire."

"Send some scouts in both directions of this fork. The rest of us will wait here. Have the scouts report back here when they are done."

"Yes, sire." Ron headed back and picked two units. They immediately disappeared down the two paths.

"Good. Now we wait."

"Yes, sire." Ron turned around and wasn't surprised to hear groans from some of the more eager and honorable Guardsmen.

### **Talon and Trall's Discovery!**

Talon was getting closer to the second fork in the road when he smelled the air. "Trall, do you smell that?"

Trall took a moment to inhale deeply. "Yeah. Smells like something's burning, like wood."

"Any ideas?"

"Not really. I suppose we better find William and Stephen fast."

Talon agreed and broke into a fast trot. The smell grew stronger as they grew closer to the second fork in the path. "The docks are on the left. Correct, Trall?"

"Yes. That is where the scouts are supposed to be."

The unit made it to the fork and barreled down the right hand path. Talon wasn't halfway down the path when he was forced to avoid an oncoming horse. Talon swerved and was surprised to see a rider being dragged behind the horse. When Talon swerved he cut in front of Trall, who had to swerve to avoid smashing into Talon. Before anyone could react to the horse, all eyes fell forward. No one could say anything. William and Stephen were coming down the

path towards the unit, but everyone's attention was drawn to the tower behind them. The entire top was engulfed in flames. Some of the support beams were starting to catch on fire. Moments later the entire top of the structure fell to the earth leaving the support beams with nothing to hold but flames.

William was the first to say something. "Hi Talon, Trall. What's new and exciting?"

Talon almost burst into laughter and tried to say something, but Trall was one step ahead of him. "What the hell happened?"

William opened his mouth to speak, but Talon stopped him by raising his hand. "Not you! Stephen, what happened?"

Stephen looked from William to Talon, but resigned to telling the story. Stephen made sure he included every detail including William's climb, his grapple, and his almost fall.

"I am going to assume by the fact there are guards and guard towers that the town is not abandoned. I am also going to assume that these same people have seen or smelled that towering inferno. Correct me if I am wrong, but that would also explain the horse and dragging rider."

"Okay, okay. I admit we have caused a little problem here, but Stephen came up with a good plan. We removed as many traces as we could. We tried to make it look like we had never been there. Maybe whoever investigates will think it was an accident."

Talon looked at William then at Stephen. "Well, besides for the tower, is there anything else I need to know?"

"There was one other guard still alive. He is tied up in the woods and out of sight."

"Okay. What's the next plan?" Talon looked around. "Anybody?"

"We can't stay on the waterfront, so why don't we head back to the fork in the path. If we head through the middle, divide the unit, we can cover the warehouses, the docks, and the bridge. If Stephen's plan worked, we can even buy ourselves some time to size up their forces. Sound good?"

"Okay. From this point on, it's safe to assume that Markham encountered hostilities recently. Our first concern is to secure the area and then we find out what happen to Lady Loveland and the town's occupants. Let's move to the fork. We can follow the middle path and break into teams by the warehouses if I am reading the map right?"

"That's what I'm seeing. Let's go."

The unit turned around and headed to the fork. No one looked back to see a few of the support beams come crashing down on top of the smoldering blaze.

The unit paused briefly at the fork. Talon wasn't surprised to see Caswel hadn't made it yet. With the burning tower in mind, Talon set down the path. According to the map there were three warehouses facing the waterfront. The unit started passing the first warehouse.

"Trall, why don't we stage the first team. We'll make them swordsmen, between the second and third warehouses. The other team, the rangers, will be on the other side of the third warehouse. Has anyone seen any sign that the Northerns are using this side of the Teal River?"

No one provided a yes. "Okay. I think it is safe to assume they are holed up on the other side of the bridge. Do you think we have enough to lock them out of here?"

"Maybe, but it wouldn't be a question if we had unit one with us."

"I know Trall, but I have to believe some of those Royal Guardsmen will knock some sense into Caswel. The question remains, before we go any further, do we split into two teams?"

"Doesn't sound like we have much of a choice. Even though it doesn't make sense, I think we are spreading ourselves too thin, but if the archer squad could hold off reinforcements then maybe, just maybe, we can gain some ground."

"Right. So let's stick with the two-team plan. Which one do you want, archers or swords?" Talon asked Trall.

"Decisions, decisions. I think it's pretty obvious which team I belong on. You've seen me fire a bow. I think I will take the sword team between the warehouses."

"Okay. I do remember seeing you shoot, so I think this will be the best arrangement. As soon as you are ready, give me a heads up. We will be at the second warehouse momentarily."

"Right." Trall broke off and gathered together the small group. Moments later the entire group stopped short of the opening between the warehouses. "We're ready to go, Talon." When Talon didn't answer Trall became concerned. "Anything wrong?"

"I hear voices, people running. I think they have finally noticed the burning tower."

Trall dismounted and looked around the corner of the warehouse. Men were running towards the tower. None of them were armed and Trall assumed they were there to fight the fire.

"You are right. We better get to work. Swordsmen, remove your quivers and pass them to the rangers." Trall complied with his own order.

"Why don't we ditch the horses into this warehouse?" Talon pointed out a smaller warehouse on the left side of the path.

"Okay. Everyone who isn't taking a horse head over there."

Talon maneuvered over to Peter. "Do you think they will be all right?"

"Sure. Let me go ahead and I will make sure they are taken care of." Peter felt disappointed that he was not going to be involved in the fighting, but he knew what his job was.

Talon saw the look in his face. "As soon as you finish with the horses and you are comfortable that they can be left alone, rejoin Trall and his group of swordsmen. If I remember right, you are better with a sword than a bow."

Peter's excitement level shot up. "Yes. And thank you." Peter trotted off to the warehouse. The door had already been broken down. Peter was let inside to start making preparations to receive the horses.

Talon told his rangers to leave the horses with the swordsmen. Loaded down with the extra quivers, the rangers started to head off to the bridge. Talon stopped for a moment and even though he was already carrying a large load he grabbed his javelin.

"I was wondering when you were going to break that out."

"Trall, you know I can't forget about my old friend, the javelin. Good luck out there."

"Thanks, but we won't need it if you can keep those rangers in line. Once we stop the flow of Northerns, we take some control, well, on this side of the Teal anyway."

Talon shook hands with Trall and then turned and headed off to catch up with the rangers.

Trall stood in line with the rest of his swordsmen waiting to secure the horses. The warehouse was bigger inside than it looked. There were stalls in the corner that fit two horses without any trouble. In more time than Trall wanted to lose, the swordsmen were on their way to the alley between the two warehouses.

"William. Stephen. You have lead. Go as far as you are comfortable, but please remember we don't want to be seen."

"No problem, Trall. Don't forget we are professionals." With a wink William disappeared around the side of the warehouse with Stephen right behind him.

Trall rolled his eyes. "That's what I was afraid of." He ran to the side of the warehouse and peered around the corner. He noticed the alley was littered with junk: old crates, piles of clothes and garbage. He smiled to himself knowing there were plenty of places to hide. William and Stephen had made it to the half waypoint and they flipped Trall a signal.

"Good." Trall stepped back. He looked back at the last three of his swordsmen: Carole Reinard, Kenneth Layton and Peter Gredit. "We have plenty of cover. Let's go." They dropped low and turned the corner. Hiding from junk pile to junk pile, they moved quicker than Trall expected and were making up for the time lost putting the horses away. William and Stephen were almost to the end of the path when they dove for cover. Trall took the hint and halted everybody. Moments later, Trall was given the signal to continue. William and Stephen didn't move from their spot. Obviously, they had found a spot where they couldn't move any further without being seen. Trall brought his group a little farther forward and then took up positions. All they could do now was wait.

After a long wait, Talon quietly led his team past the second warehouse and stopped at the edge of the third. Directly across the path lay their objective. The woods would provide them with cover and an ability to get very close to the bridge unseen. Talon hoped both proved true. Taking lead, he peered around the corner of the warehouse. He could make out the bridge and, unfortunately, it wasn't empty. A squad of Northern footmen was in the middle and crossing. The footmen weren't the biggest problem. Just beyond the bridge lay another newly built guard tower. From this distance, Talon couldn't see inside.

"There are footmen crossing the bridge now. As soon as they are gone, I want all of us to make a run for the woods. Everyone ready?"

Talon looked again and watched as the footmen disappeared down the waterfront. No one else was coming. "Let's go."

All six archers made the dash into the woods. Once inside, Talon looked around to verify they had made it without any trouble. The other rangers were already making their way towards the forest reaches. It looked like they passed the first test. Talon watched as Yara Retore and Bryant Theos moved up to the point. They assumed the closest point to the bottom of the bridge. Bryant Theos took Alexandra Mitchell to the northeast area. Their position allowed them a clear shot of the middle of the bridge. Talon maneuvered over to Elizabeth Sanders.

"I guess it's just you and me."

Elizabeth smiled. "Yes. Why don't we fill in the middle?"

"Okay. After you, my lady." Talon waited while she positioned herself and then filled in next to her. Both quivers lay at his feet with the extra bow. Talon laid his javelin down against the tree. He looked around and started the next part of the plan: the wait.

### **Caswel's Folly!**

Caswel was happy with the way the operation was proceeding. So far, they had seen nothing to indicate the Northerns claims to Centerpoint and he still had a full unit. He was a little worried by the lack of people one would expect in a busy town, but he wasn't going to worry about it. He smiled to himself, as he felt even closer to his personal objective: Elizabeth town. His reverie was cut short.

"Sire, forgive me for the intrusion, but both scouting teams have returned."

Caswel looked down from his horse and saw it was Richard Lee. He was starting to get the feeling this man was going to be trouble. "What have they to report?"

"Nothing. Both paths contain abandoned homes. May we continue to the second fork?"

Caswel didn't see any reason not to. He was starting to get the feeling that Centerpoint was really deserted. "Let's move." Caswel turned and headed down the path.

Richard turned and repeated the order. "Move." He headed back to his horse. Ron was holding his reins.

"Did I hear you correctly?"

Richard grabbed his reins and mounted his horse. "Yes. No questions asked."

"Really. What did you do, bribe him?"

Richard laughed. "I wish. That would at least explain his behavior. He must have some angle, but I'll be damned if I know what it is."

Ron turned and looked back at the Guardsmen. No one was moving. Ron didn't blame them; he had to ask twice himself. "You heard the man! Let's move."

The thirty members of unit one finally headed down the path to the second fork. The procession continued onward. As they grew closer to the fork, everyone noticed the smell.

"Do you smell that Ron?" Richard continued to smell the air.

"Yes. Wood, well burning wood. What do you think it means?"

"I don't know, but we are going to find out sooner rather than later."

Caswel smelled the wood long before his Guardsmen. A growing sense of danger was threatening to ruin the rest of his trip. He knew it meant trouble and it was getting closer. The smell was increasing as he led the unit closer to the fork. He could hear some of the Guardsmen talking and could tell they were ready. Caswel, on the other hand, was having a really hard time. All he wanted was to reclaim Elizabeth town and resume his lifestyle the way it was before the Northerns flexed their muscle. Caswel drew in a long breath and tried to calm his fears. Sure he was given a field promotion after the Elizabeth town debacle, but no one really knew the full story. No one lived who was there with him at the climatic ending, but Caswel did and walked away a hero because of it. This was a position he intended to keep and since he won it by deceit, he didn't see why it couldn't be kept by deceit.

Pausing at the end of the path, Caswel was startled to finally see the source of the smell. He saw what was left of a building engulfed in flames. There was a line of men that ran from the river to a spot right next to the blaze passing buckets along. The blaze was out of control and they weren't making much headway. Caswel was so intent on the blaze that he failed to notice a line of Northern footmen coming towards the blaze.

Royal Guardsmen Ron Champagne noticed. He didn't waste any time issuing orders. "Civilians to the rear. Archers follow behind. Swordsmen are with me. For Heartfelt." Ron started to move forward amidst the flurry of activity he started. He paused for a brief moment by Caswel. "Sire, I would recommend falling in behind the archers."

"I will remind..."

Ron broke into a trot and left Caswel and his opinions behind without a second thought. "Richard, take your swordsmen wide. Let's try and outflank them."

"Okay. See you in the middle." Richard threw him a salute as he directed his men to a different course than Ron's men.

Both teams flew into the battle. With the majority of the crowd busy with the fire, their approach wasn't noticed until they came around the warehouse. Ron was in the lead and was surprised to see how many Northerns there were. None were on horseback and, with a quick glance, he didn't see any archers. Ron raised his sword and jumped right into the surprised footmen.

It didn't take long for the fireman to notice the incoming attack and it took even less time for them to react. A group of them headed for the first dock and jumped into the river in an effort to make it to the other side. A small number headed up the path towards the bridge, yelling that they were going to get help. The rest ran straight into the fight, ignoring that they didn't have any weapons or armor. These Northerns dove at the attackers, trying their best to wrestle them from their horses.

The archers took up arms as soon as they crossed in front of the warehouse. They sent volley after volley of arrows into the back ranks of the Northern footmen. For now, they had clear shots, but as more and more Guardsmen entered the fight, they would have to start being more selective. A small section broke off and targeted the running firemen. These volleys scored fewer hits, but kept them from coming back to haunt the Guardsmen later.

Before Ron knew it, fighting surrounded him. He slashed left and right and continually moved his horse in an effort to trample the lesser footmen. He said a silent prayer that the Northerns hadn't thought ahead and brought along archers. Sitting higher than the battle has its advantages, but it also makes one an easy target. Ron pushed those thoughts to the back of his head and concentrated on the growing battle around him. He noticed the archers' volleys were taking their toll on the Northerns, but the Northerns were now starting to crowd around the Guardsmen. The tactic was working as less and less shots were fired for the chance of hitting a Guardsman was greatly increased.

Ron kept slashing further and further into the crowd, until he felt a stabbing pain in his leg behind his shin. He looked down to find a footman slicing into him with a dagger. Ron swung his sword into the footman's wrist, knocking the dagger out of his hand and cutting the footman deeply. Another footman filled in behind the fallen man. Ron was prepared for this footman as he started to jab with his dagger. Ron slashed at him but wound up causing the footman to stick his dagger into the rear of his horse. Ron braced as the horse reared up on its hind legs. He squeezed harder with his legs and was almost thrown backwards as the horse continued to buck. Fortunately, the footmen around him were just as concerned for they were giving him a wide berth. Even as Ron fought for control of his horse, he was disheartened to see a group of footmen attacking the archer squads. He knew they had followed too close to the swordsmen, but it was a little late to correct that oversight. Ron pulled tighter on the reins and hoped some luck would fall from the sky or he had the feeling this was going to be one of the shortest wars in the history of the Heartfelt's Valerica.

## **Chapter 17**

May 2nd, 770; The Waterfront Battle

William shifted his position in an attempt to get a better view. Moments earlier, the focus of the Northerns had been the fire, but now he watched as chaos reigned. The firemen were running in every direction possible. The group of footmen, who were conversing before, ran off with swords drawn.

"What's going on?"

William looked back at Stephen. "I don't know. I can't see that far." William focused his attention on the firemen. A large group was running down the docks. William could only imagine what was making them do that. When the group made it halfway down the pier, a number of arrows cut them down. "Somebody's attacking them."

Stephen nodded and headed back to relay the message to Trall. "Someone's attacking the Northerns."

"Who? Is it Caswel and the unit?" Trall motioned for the other swordsmen to start moving forward.

"We don't know for sure. William hasn't been able to see them. Personally, I think it's a safe bet."

"Okay. Let's do our duty and join the battle."

The whole group stood up and drew swords. They walked over to William who was still crouched behind some junk.

"Ready to earn your pay, William?"

William jumped at hearing his name said so loud. "Are you crazy, Stephen. They are going to hear you?" William looked behind to see the other swordsmen standing up. "Whoops. I assume we are going in?"

"Good assumption. Ready?"

William stood up. "After you, old man."

Trall smiled. "Let's go." Trall led them out onto the waterfront. "For Heartfelt."

The rest of the swordsmen echoed behind him. The entire group came out from the protection of the warehouse and into complete chaos. There were people everywhere. The sun was dipping in the sky and it was starting to get dark out. In the distance, the tower was still burning and leaving a fog of smoke throughout the waterfront battlefield. Northern footmen surrounded guardsmen on horseback by at least three for every Heartfelt horse. In the distance, the archer's arrows had been silenced as they were being harassed by a group of footmen and firemen. The odds were clearly with the North.

William called out. "Looks like we showed up in the nick of time." He let out a battle cry and ran headlong into the closest group of footmen. The rest of team followed. The battle was on.

### **Talon's Turn**

Talon was starting to get bored. No one had come across the bridge since the first group of footmen Talon had seen. He could feel the anticipation the rest of the rangers were feeling. Suddenly, a group of men came running towards the bridge. They were dirty and looked to be in a major hurry. Talon assumed something must have changed on the front lines. The group started up the bridge and was met halfway by four horsemen. The group huddled together. A frantic conversation followed.

Talon raised his hand and whispered a command to Elizabeth. "Take aim." He watched her pass the same to Anthony. Talon turned and passed the same to Alexandra. Comfortable that everyone was ready; Talon let his arrow fly. Moments later, five arrows flew behind his. Talon swelled with pride as he saw why the men and women with him earned the title ranger. Each of the arrows found its mark. Three of the firemen fell to the ground. Two of the horsemen were struck and fell off their horses. The horses, without riders, bolted and ran down the bridge killing one of the firemen in the process. Talon's arrow struck the middle horsemen in the shoulder, but he was able to hold on. Moments later, he lost control of the horse. His horse bucked him off and sent him flying into the bridges railing. The railing didn't support his weight and he fell with debris into the Teal River. The rangers didn't give the remaining survivors any time to react. Another volley of arrows struck them down. One lucky firemen didn't receive a killing blow. He jumped up and bolted across the bridge. So much for surprising them. Talon made his bow ready. The battle was on.

### **Trall's Turn**

Trall picked a footmen who was intent on slicing into Ron Champagne. Trall, having a sense of honor, wasn't about to kill the man by stabbing him in the back. Instead he cracked him over the skull with the butt of his sword. The footmen fell to the ground. Trall's actions earned him the undivided attention of numerous footmen. Trall stepped back to give himself some working room. Two of the footmen made threatening steps towards him. Trall balanced his sword between his two hands waiting to see who would make the first move. The footmen on

his left charged ahead with the sword in his outstretched hand. Trall timed himself and stepped back as soon as the point of the sword was threatening to pierce his chest. The footmen's momentum carried him right passed Trall. He welcomed the break, since the second footmen followed right behind him, except he swung right at him. Trall blocked the blow with his sword. He could see the other footmen recovering and he needed some distance. Trall unloaded with a flurry of blows on the footmen in front of him. The footmen, who was less skilled than Trall, started to walk backwards, until he was starting to stumble from the pressure. Trall wasn't ready to give up the attack, but the footmen, who was walking backwards, fell over a body lying on the ground.

"Trall, behind you."

Trall heard the yell and turned to face the incoming footmen while instinctively throwing his sword up. The footmen slashed at him, but his sword deflected the blow. Trall backed off to find himself in the same situation he was in before, both footmen standing in front of him. Trall breathed deeply and stepped closer to the attackers. As he took another step towards them, he was surprised as William, coming from the side, punched the left footmen in the side of the head. The footmen fell to the ground unconscious.

"You owe me, Trall."

Trall was about to answer when the other footmen charged towards him. He readied himself as the footmen swung straight on. He deflected the sword off to his right side and in one motion brought his knee up into the footmen's stomach. The footmen folded over and dropped to one knee. Trall closed his hands together and hammered the footmen's back. The footmen dropped to both knees. Trall finished the footmen's fall by cracking him over the skull with the butt of his sword.

"Having troubles?"

Trall looked up to see William engaged in a sword fight very close to his left. "They don't make footmen like they used to. I do owe you one, don't I?"

"Don't worry, I'll collect."

Trall left William to his sword fight and headed over to another horsemen who was surrounded by footmen. As he drew closer, he recognized Ron Champagne.

Trall yelled to him, "These guys really seem to like the ones on horseback."

Ron was sweating profusely, but remained civil. "Not a fact I am really enjoying." Ron went back to slashing at the footmen.

Trall stood on the outside of the circle of footmen. They started to close in on Ron. Trall decided he wasn't happy with being ignored. He put his beliefs in honor aside for a second and went up to the closet footmen and kicked him behind the knee. The footmen tumbled forward and much to Trall's horror he was crushed under Ron's horse. Trall wasn't given much time to reflect. Another footmen ran directly at him with a sword in his outstretched hand. Trall wondered if that was the only move that they were taught. He let the man get as close to his chest with the point of the sword as was possible and then quickly stepped back. Once again, the footmen went right by him. Trall kicked the man in the shin and, as the man keeled over, he kned him hard in his stomach. The footmen fell to the ground in pain. Trall, having a strange feeling of déjà vu, cracked him over the skull with the butt of his sword. The man lay unconscious at his feet.

Trall heard a muttered thanks as he took a moment to take in the battle. Trall's victories felt shallow as he looked up to the overwhelming odds they were facing. The archer squad was still fighting a large group of footmen. Their arrows still silenced. Each of the horsemen was



surrounded by at least two footmen and, in some cases, even more. Trall was horrified as he watched a footmen pull Jackie Kirby from her horse. Trall took off in a mad dash to reach her side.

There were three footmen, one of which had already started to mount Jackie's horse. The other two were dragging Jackie away. To her credit, Jackie was putting up a valiant fight. Trall ran straight for her and as he passed the footmen mounting her horse, he slashed the man across the back of his thighs. He felt his sword cut deep gashes into the man, who immediately fell to the ground in pain. Trall hardly noticed for his attention was on Jackie. The closest footmen met with a blow from Trall's sword. He aimed for the footmen's exposed forearm and was rewarded as he sliced deep. The footmen immediately released Jackie's leg and dropped his sword to grab the new wound. Moments later, the man reached down to grab his sword from the ground and Trall kicked him in the face. Without missing a beat, he continued onto the last one holding Jackie. This one wasn't armed, so the firemen threw Jackie into Trall's arms and took off after the horse.

"Are you okay?"

Without waiting for an answer, Trall dove at the firemen. Both men fell to the ground. Trall palmed his dagger and rolled until he was on top. He quickly stabbed the man in his side. Before getting up, he backhanded the firemen, knocking him out. Trall stood up and retrieved his sword. He quickly wiped the dagger and set it back into his belt.

Trall turned around to rejoin the battle as he watched as a footmen unleashed a flurry of blows on Jackie. He watched as she was pushed further and further back. Trall ran forward to stop the assault. He knew he was going to be too late and was horrified to watch her fall backwards over a dead footmen. She fell to the ground with such a terrible force that her sword was thrown free from her hands. As she lay there with the wind knocked out of her, the footmen took full advantage of her condition. He saw an opening in her armor and swung his sword. The sword found its mark; it cut through the leather between the armor plates and it slashed a deep cut in her side. Jackie screamed out. She buckled over into a fetal position and grabbed her side.

Trall was there a moment too late, but that didn't stop him from exacting revenge. He attacked the footmen before he could continue attacking Jackie. His sword struck the footmen's and sent his arms into the air. Trall swung again and again with more and more intensity and kept pushing the footmen further and further backwards. He pushed the footmen to the riverbanks and swung with all his frustrations and anger channeling into his sword. His sword connected with the footmen's and caused the footmen's sword to crack off from the handle. The footmen, now weaponless, stood tall. Trall faked a swing and then followed through with an unusual move. He head butted the footmen. He didn't give the man a moment to recover; instead he stabbed the man through the side of his chest. The blade went deep inside the footmen's chest cavity. Trall lowered the dead man to the ground and attempted to retrieve his sword. It was stuck. Trall didn't have the patience for this. He brutally put his foot on the man's side and yanked hard on his sword. Trall's sword came out of the man with a sickening sound. Trall wasn't overly concerned and gave the man a little push that sent him rolling into the river. He turned and went back to check on Jackie.

Jackie was still curled in a fetal position next to the dead footmen she fell over. Trall dropped to her side and was relieved to see she was still breathing. He ripped the sleeve of his shirt until he had a large piece. He inspected the wound and pushed the piece of his shirt onto the wound to stop the flow of blood. When he put pressure on the wound Jackie stirred.

"Trall." Jackie painfully rolled to her side. "Trall, is that you?"

"Yes. It's me Jackie." Trall started to rip a long piece off his other sleeve. "You're going to be okay. Just hang in there." He wiped her forehead and brushed her hair out of her eyes.

Jackie started to respond, but fell unconscious. Trall took the long strip he had and tied her plate armor to the top of the wound. He hoped that would keep the loss of blood to a minimum until this was over. Trall worked on positioning her body, when a voice interrupted him.

"Trall! Trall!"

Trall turned and looked in the direction of the voice. It was Ron Champagne. Trall stood up. Ron was busy fighting with two footmen.

"Trall, get your swordsmen over to the archers. Free the damn archers!"

Trall yelled back his reply, but Ron was engaged at the moment. Trall knelt down and kissed Jackie on the forehead. "I will be back for you. Please hang in there." Trall stood back up and looked for the rest of the swordsmen. William and Stephen were closest to him.

"William, Stephen." He waited, and even though they didn't respond, he knew he had their attention. "We need to free up the archers. Head to the back line."

Satisfied, Trall took off towards the back. On his way, he found Kenneth, Carole, and Peter fighting side by side against a shrinking number of footmen.

"Kenneth!" He barely looked his way. "We need to free up the archers. Head to the back line!" Trall kept running. "Make sure you bring Carole and Peter."

Trall dodged between footmen and watched two more Guardsmen fall from their horses. Trall couldn't bear to hear the footmen celebrate. He pushed himself further along and saw a group of unarmed men fighting with the archers. There were three groups of archers, which totaled fifteen men on horseback. The group was surrounded by what Trall estimated to be thirty men. Trall arrived just in time to watch a group pull a Guardsman off his horse. The Guardsman disappeared into the fog of men. Trall picked the first group of men and headed for them. He knew old tricks die hard, so he knelt the first footmen from behind. The footmen buckled over and crashed into the other footmen. Trall didn't give them a chance to breathe. He swung at the next closest one and caused a deep gash across the man's chest. Trall didn't realize these men weren't wearing any protective armor, until he had swung. Trall held back on the force of his swings, but still plowed through the firemen. A number of firemen started to notice Trall. More and more of them started to run away. Trall was so engrossed, he didn't notice the other swordsmen moving in around him. Slowly, one archer at a time was released from defensive positions and started to fire again into the battlefield. Trall was pleased to watch the first arrow fly over his head. The archers were the only hope they had in surviving this conflict. The swordsmen continued to push the firemen away and were relieved to find less of them were hanging around.

"Trall. Look out!"

Trall heard the pounding of hoofs. Before he could react, William shoved him to the side. A fireman, who had won a horse, came barreling by. Since he was weaponless, he used the horse as his battling ram. After missing his first run, the horsemen returned for another run. So far, everyone evaded his second pass, but the horsemen didn't turn around this time, rather, he headed right into the main battle. Trall seized the opportunity.

"Archers." Trall saw two acknowledge him. "Take aim. Bring down the man on the horse."

The same two archers nodded their replies and then took aim. Trall looked back and watched the first arrow penetrate the man's back and then the second found his shoulder. The

firemen tumbled from the horse. The horse continued on through the melee, trampling two footmen on the way.

Trall was amazed to find the battle moving north. Trall ordered the archers to keep a safe distance from the main battle, but to still take as many safe shots as possible. Trall kept his swordsmen in front of the archers and followed the progression of the battle. The horsemen finally had the upper hand and they had formed a circle. All of them were keeping the footmen on the outside of the circle. This tactic was working as the archers continued to pick off the footmen on the outside of the circle without the danger of hitting a horsemen. The group of footmen, knowing their time was limited, started to bring the fight further north. Trall could make out the bridge in the distance as they continued moving. Trall allowed himself to relax a little, knowing they were gaining some ground. Since the battle was changing hands, Trall released William and Stephen from their guard duties with the archers and sent them into melee. Both men took off into the thick of things. The fighting continued to move at a fast pace. They were even closer to the bridge now. Trall started to wonder about reinforcements and hoped Talon had been successful.

The walking battle continued, until Trall watched as the unarmed firemen started to run up the bridge. The footmen provided cover by increasing the attack. Trall released Carol, Kenneth, and Peter to the battle and followed them shortly after ordering the archers to focus all arrows on the bridge.

Trall picked up the pace and went in swinging.

## **Onto Talon**

Talon kept a watchful eye on the bridge. It had been quiet since the firemen got up and ran across the bridge. He had the feeling that it was only a matter of time before the reinforcements came running across the bridge.

"Talon, do you see that?" Elizabeth moved closer to Talon.

"Huh, where?" Talon looked all around.

"No. On the bridge. Is that a person or am I imagining things." Elizabeth pointed towards the center.

Talon followed her arm. He looked intently at the bridge. He followed along the bridge, taking note to stop at each figure laid across the center. The sun had almost set and it was playing havoc on his eyes. Talon shook his head to clear the sunspots and resumed looking.

Elizabeth moved closer to the embankment and assumed a stance. She brought her bow out and loaded. Talon wasn't sure what she was seeing, but he waited. Elizabeth pulled her arm back and aimed. Talon continued to look at the bridge, but had yet to see any movement. Elizabeth fired.

Talon watched the arrow for a brief moment, until he lost it in the sky. Moments later it struck through the arm of a Northern who was crawling across the bridge. The arrow went through his arm and embedded itself in the bridge. The Northern cried out and struggled to remove his arm from the arrow.

Talon was having a hard time understanding why the Northern footmen was attempting to cross the bridge in that manner. It didn't make any sense, until a volley of arrows flooded the trees. One landed directly in front of Talon. Elizabeth came crashing back to her old position.

"Guess we know what that guy was doing."

Talon looked over at the bridge and was surprised to see the man still struggling with the arrow. "Alexandra, can you hit him?"

Without an answer Alexandra aimed, fired, and struck the Northern in the chest. He fell to the bridge dead.

Talon smiled to himself. "Thanks." He knew she was the quiet type, but he was glad actions spoke louder than words.

"Talon. We should really move."

"I think you're right, Elizabeth." Talon started to pick up his things, when another volley of arrows flooded the spot Elizabeth first fired from. "Guess they know we're here?"

Elizabeth smiled, "Good guess." She turned and moved closer to Yara and Bryant.

Talon moved in the opposite direction and filled in between Alexandra and Kenneth. After settling into that spot, another volley of arrows penetrated the woods.

"They are getting closer with the shots." Talon scanned the waterfront. "Does anybody see them?"

Alexandra leaned over and said. "Follow the river's line until it meets the bridge. There."

Talon followed the river's line until he started to make out shapes looming against the side of the bridge. "Think we can reach all of them?"

"On this side, sure, but I thought I saw some arrows come from the other side."

"How many are on this side? I can make out six."

"I see seven."

"Yes. Seven."

Talon reached into his quiver and loaded. "Everybody ready?"

"Yes."

"On your mark."

Talon aimed and fired. Two more arrows flew behind his. They couldn't have timed it any better. The group was in the process of standing up and sending another volley into the woods. As the group started to aim, three arrows slammed into them. Two of the Northern archers fell into the water. The other arrow struck a Northern in the arm. The remaining archers took off to the other side of the bridge.

"Keep me covered." Talon got up and walked through the forest until he was behind the other archers. "We just sent some archers your way."

"We see them, but we can't see enough of them to do anything about it, besides that's not our biggest problem. Look." Elizabeth pointed down the waterfront.

Talon looked in that direction and was surprised to see the battle moving towards the bridge.

"Oh, boy."

The slow moving battle changed. A large group of firemen broke off and started on a dead run for the bridge. The horsemen, still fighting some of the footmen, were powerless to act. Arrows were haphazardly picking off the outer rim of footmen, but as the firemen ran the arrows followed in their trail. Talon knew that the closer the fighting came to the bridge the easier a target the horsemen were going to make.

"We need to do something about those archers!" Talon racked his brain trying to figure out a way to occupy those archers or Talon knew the horsemen were going to be the next set of casualties.

The battle raged until it reached the bridge. The footmen intensified their strike, clashing against the horsemen, causing the battle to reach a crescendo. The unarmed firemen, under the cover of the footmen, were running blindly towards the bridge in hopes of stepping foot on the other side. The other side being the only part of Markham that was safe.

The entire group of Northern archers sent a volley into the battle. Talon knew he was out of time as he watched an arrow strike one of the closest horsemen. The horsemen fell to the ground and sent his helmet tumbling into the river. A nearby footmen hopped onto the unoccupied horse and galloped towards the nearest Guardsmen.

"Dammit." Talon stood up and almost started pacing. He snapped off a command. "Fire at that group of archers on the other side of the bridge." Talon heeded his own advice and fired in the area he thought they were hiding at. Talon paused, waiting to see if any damage was done.

The silence that followed from the area gave Talon some relief, until another volley of arrows flew into the battle. Talon, still partially hidden in the forest, could only see a few horsemen, but he watched too many fall from their horses. One arrow missed its mark and a footmen dropped to the ground.

"Dammit." Talon needed action. "Keep firing." Talon ran into the battle. He threw his bow to the other rangers and in the same motion drew his sword. He hoped he wasn't going to need his sword since he was more interested in warning the horsemen than he was in sword fighting with some footmen. He recognized Ron Champagne as he approached the battle.

"Ron!" Ron didn't look in his direction. Talon kept running closer. "Ron!" Talon needed to get closer, but he had to make some room first. Talon came up behind a footmen and kicked him in the back of his knees. The footmen fell onto his knees and before he could move, Talon boxed him in the ears. The footmen fell face first to the ground.

"Ron!" This time he noticed.

"Talon."

Talon didn't let him finish. "You need to get the horsemen away from the bridge. Get away from the waterfront. Send everybody to the warehouses." Ron looked perplexed, but Talon continued. "There is a group of archers at the water's edge on the other side of the Teal." Talon pointed in that direction and to emphasize his point another volley of arrows rained down. "You have to get everyone clear of them."

Ron nodded his head and started hacking his way across the fighting. Talon wasn't done yet. He spotted the Heartfelt archers in the distance. He started for them, but didn't get far. Two footmen took an interest in him.

"Gentlemen." Talon had been waiting for this all day. "I, aw, forget it." Talon charged at them. He swung at the first one and their swords connected. Talon stepped back and swung again. Talon watched as the second footmen started to move around. It wasn't long before Talon couldn't see him. Talon didn't like the feeling of the other footmen behind him, so he sidestepped and swung to keep the footmen in front of him busy. Talon could just barely make out the other footmen, when Ron came behind him and knocked the footmen on the skull. The footmen fell to the ground. Talon swung again at his footmen and, having his concentration back, they locked swords together. Talon tried one of his favorite tricks. He twisted his wrists and yanked. The footmen's sword went flying. Before Talon could react the footmen pulled a dagger and charged at him. Talon swung and hit the arm holding the dagger and then stabbed the footmen in the chest. The footmen fell to the ground dead.

"Nice, Talon."

"Thanks, Ron. Did you pass the word?"

"Yes. I am going to make sure the rest of the horsemen are moving closer to the warehouses. Not much longer before the footmen are going to cross the bridge. What do we do then?"

Talon hadn't thought that far ahead, but he looked around and more of the footmen were crossing the bridge. "Break the men off, when and if that happens. We need to regroup. Let's meet further up the trail by the last warehouse."

"Okay. I will bring the horsemen. I suppose we should consult his majesty, Royal Man Holloway."

Talon cringed at the thought, but knew it would be proper. "I will leave the decision up to you. Where is he anyway?"

"I asked him nicely to remain with the civilians. He is probably cowering in fear behind the cook." Ron smiled in spite of his company.

Talon chuckled. "Just don't lose the cook. I consider him far more valuable than Caswel, but you didn't hear that from me."

"Yes, sir. I will see you shortly." Ron took off through the melee.

Talon jogged towards the back ranks. More and more of the footmen were running from the battle. The archers had come from behind their hiding places and were providing cover for the footmen. The waterfront was clearing out. Talon reached the Heartfelt archers and was surprised to see Trall leading them.

"Thought you wanted to be a swordsmen?"

Trall looked up, happy to hear a familiar voice. "I thought the same thing, but I guess that's how the guard tower tumbles."

Talon chuckled. "Gather everyone up that you see. Let's meet between the last warehouse and the forest. I think we are going to have to change plans now that the river is going to separate us."

Trall threw him a mock salute. "I'll be there and I might even bring a few friends."

Talon nodded his head and took off towards the forest. He passed the word as he went. The fighting had all but finished. The remaining footmen were heading over the bridge. Talon jogged around the corner of the warehouse and started to stake out a claim for the meeting.

## **Chapter 18**

May 3rd, 770; The Next Attack

Caswel stood at the southern corner of Markham surveying the remains of the guard tower. He could see the civilians huddled behind the first warehouse and briefly entertained the thought of joining them.

Caswel started to pace back and forth, ignoring the fallen bodies of some of his own horsemen and archers. Mentally, he blocked out the deaths his team had suffered. Try as he might, he could still see each attack that led to the death of one his Guardsmen. He inwardly cursed at the lack of foresight shown by Blackheart. No one wanted this town; the real goal lay at Elizabeth town. This battle was a waste and each death put him one step further from taking back Elizabeth town. Ultimately, he wanted to restore the town to the crown, but lately he was wondering about switching to the currently winning side. He didn't think he really had enough courage to do something like that, but it made him feel better just having those thoughts. In the end, it left him with options. Options, he thought to himself, are what he needed for now.

Caswel turned and started pacing in longer strides. In the distance and through the gloom, Caswel watched a horseman gallop his way. Fear stuck him until he realized the rider was from Heartfelt.

"Sire."

Caswel waited until the man was closer before dignifying him with a response.

"Sire, I have a message for you."

Caswel paused in his pacing and was surprised he didn't recognize the man. "I am listening."

"The units are assembling outside the third warehouse. Sir Talon Bastian and Royal Guardsmen Ron Champagne request your presence for the meeting."

Caswel was impressed by the Guardsmen's protocol and was surprised to see the man lower his head in respect. Caswel held his answer, allowing his authority to seem more daunting. Another of Caswel's tricks at being authoritative was to keep his answers short. "I understand."

The messenger looked up expectantly and realizing that the simple message was also a dismissal, he turned and headed back to the third warehouse. As he galloped away, he muttered to himself. "What a pompous, egotistical, no load carrying, donkey's ass."

Caswel smiled to himself as he watched the messenger leaving. He felt he had impressed the young soldier and was happy with the feeling of respect that was left to him.

Without wasting anytime, he immediately headed back up the path towards the fork. There was no way he was following the Guardsmen through the battle scene, instead he choose to take the long, but safe route. As he trotted up the path, one of the civilians spoke up.

"Sire. Has there been word?"

Caswel looked down on the man with contempt and scorn. Once again, Caswel exercised his authority by pausing before his answer. "I have no information for you." Caswel dismissed the man with a look and headed back down the path.

The civilian, normally a genial soul, cursed out loud, "Conceited, swell headed, pretentious, donkey's ass!"

Caswel, feeling superior once again, thought he heard the civilian call him a donkey's ass. Caswel immediately dismissed the idea, knowing the lower class respected him and his position. Caswel continued his march in ignorance.

### **Trall's Command**

Trall watched Talon head back into the battle. He turned and spoke to Guardsmen Paul Unique. "It looks you are in charge of the archers?"

"Yes, though I could have waited for the opportunity."

Trall frowned at the comment. He was surprised to see the footmen pull down Royal Guardsmen Di Bona. Trall barely knew him, but he knew he must have been excited to assume that role at such a young age. Trall assumed Paul overheard his conversation with Talon, but double-checked. "Did you hear, Talon?"

"Yes, sir. I will bring my rangers."

Trall nodded his head. "Okay. I will see you at the meeting." Instead of heading to the warehouse, Trall jogged back to where the battle began. He had something to take care of before he attended to the meeting. Trall picked up the pace hoping he wasn't too late. As he came up to the spot where the battle started, he searched the ground looking for her body. He could barely see, being this close to the tower. Even the moon wasn't able to penetrate the gloom coming off the smoldering guard tower.

Trall started to panic, knowing she needed help. He frantically searched the ground in front of him. He walked over the dead bodies of the footmen and paused over the Guardsmen, making sure they were beyond help. As he moved closer to the river, he could hear a faint moaning. Trall ran towards the sound. Next to the body of a footmen lay the body of Jackie Kirby. She was curled up in a fetal position and Trall silently prayed it was her moaning, not the footmen.

Trall fell to his knees and quickly felt her forehead. Her forehead was burning and his hand came away full of sweat.

"Jackie." Trall tried again, this time in a whisper, fearing the worst. "Jackie." Trall bent his head down and choked back tears.

Jackie slowly opened her eyes and was happy to see Trall kneeling by her side. She reached up and touched the side of his face with the back of her hand. Trall reached up and held her hand to the side of his face.

Trall smiled deeply into her face. "I, uh, thought you didn't make it!"

Jackie smiled back and weakly replied. "I didn't know you cared, kind sir."

Trall let out the breath he had been holding since he saw her. "I, I'm sorry I had to leave you."

Jackie brought his hand to her lips and gently kissed it. "I understand."

Trall was relieved. "Can you move?"

"I don't think so."

"Can you handle me carrying you?"

"I...I just don't know. I'm worried about reopening the wound."

Trall nodded. He hadn't thought ahead. There wasn't anyone close and he just couldn't bring himself to leave her again. Almost defeated, he watched a woman come out of the gloom.

"Sir, I..oh, is that you Trall?"

Trall was surprised to see Kathy Wolf walking over to him. "Kathy! What are you doing here?"

"I have been waiting with the rest of the civilians behind a warehouse. The group of us thought the rest of you had forgotten about us."

Trall squeezed Jackie's hand and then stood up. Kathy was a civilian from unit one. She was a cook's assistant and Trall now had the help he needed. "Listen, who else is with you?"

"Well, the rest of the civilians. Why?"

Trall smiled at his luck. "Bring everybody here. We have to move Jackie. The units are meeting at the end of the docks. Okay?"

Kathy looked down at the ground and for the first time noticed Jackie's body. "Um, yes. I will be right back." Kathy took off into the gloom. Trall let go of his second breath since he found Jackie. "You're going to be fine Jackie, just fine."

Jackie didn't answer; she just closed her eyes.

Trall wasn't waiting long when he heard the group of civilians calling his name.

"Over here." As soon as Trall said that, he realized how useless the comment was. Trall could barely see in front of him. Moments later Kathy came out of the fog with two others.

Trall briefly filled in the details of how the battle went and then asked for assistance carrying Jackie. After Trall and two of the civilians carefully lifted Jackie, Kathy led the men through the battlefield. They walked as close to the warehouses as was possible and found the air clearing the further they were away from the tower. Trall decided it was too risky to head in front of the last warehouse, so they went down the side of it. Trall was thankful this alleyway wasn't as littered as the one where he and the swordsmen had hidden in earlier in the evening. The group walked onto the middle path and started to turn towards the forest when Trall heard one of the civilians muttering, "Pig headed, [mumbled], donkey's ass."

"Excuse me, what did you say?" Trall looked over at the civilian and saw Royal Man Caswel Holloway trotting in the distance behind him. His blood immediately started to boil. Jackie must have noticed because she grabbed his forearm and squeezed gently.



"Trall!" She didn't say another word, though the look she gave Trall added dimensions to his name. Trall held his composure and kept the group moving. He silently hoped Caswel didn't say anything. Even with the quick glance he took, he could tell Caswel had sat the battle out. His blood continued to boil.

"Trall." Caswel headed over in the group's direction. "Trall."

If he hadn't felt Jackie's touch on his arm, he would have exploded at Caswel. Instead, in a monotone voice and without making eye contact he said, "You are wanted at the meeting. We will see you there."

Caswel slowed down to a trot and briefly considered flattening Trall's disrespectful tone, but something in Trall's manner told him otherwise. Caswel nodded his head and trotted off to the meeting without another word.

Trall was more than happy to watch him go. He returned his concentration to someone who needed it, Jackie. The group continued walking to the meeting sight.

### **Talon's Opportunity**

Talon knelt down by the side of the warehouse. He had already gathered and spoke with the majority of both units and the Royal Guardsmen. He sent a small mixture of archers, rangers, and swordsmen to stand watch over the bridge. Peter reminded him of what they left behind at the other warehouse, so he sent a couple of footmen with Peter Gredit to retrieve the horses.

"Peter, make sure you grab the donkey. He's carrying our food. I can imagine you are as hungry as I am."

"You got it, Talon." Peter ran off to join the Guardsmen.

Talon turned to the remaining Guardsmen.

"I need some volunteers." A number of volunteers stepped forward. "Thank you." Talon gave them their assignment. "I need about four of you to start patrolling the waterfront." Talon gave them an overview of what he wanted to accomplish on this patrol. Royal Guardsmen Bolton Legates decided to lead them. Talon gave them one last order: be creative.

Talon watched as the Guardsmen headed off to the waterfront. Another group of Guardsmen were setting up a makeshift camp just inside the forest. Talon was glad they realized the harsh reality. They weren't going anywhere for awhile.

"Talon."

Talon raised his head upon hearing his voice being called.

"Talon."

Talon looked up and was surprised to see Caswel trotting his way. "Nice to see you, Caswel." Talon tried his best to keep the sarcasm out of his voice. It didn't work.

"Yes. Has the meeting started?"

Talon rolled his eyes and wondered how Caswel carried that much arrogance with him. "Yes. And as a matter of fact it is almost over. Why?"

"Why?" Caswel's voice raised a level. Don't you think I have some say in what is happening with my unit? I will have you know I was given control by the King himself and furthermore..."

Talon cut him off. "Enough. I will address your concerns in a moment." Talon stood up and turned towards the last group of men with him. "I need some more volunteers." Knowing they would all step forward, he raised his hand to stop them. "Hold it. Let me finish. You are going to want to hear me out first." Talon took a breath and then continued, "I hate to ask this, but it needs to be done. I need a number of you, say three or four, to search for survivors, well, Heartfelt survivors along the waterfront."

Guardsmen Lennon spoke. "What about the dead?"

"Leave them." Talon paused. "For now, anyway."

The Guardsmen nodded and led his group off to the waterfront. Talon breathed deeply, he wasn't looking forward to dealing with Caswel.

"Now, Caswel. Where were we?"

"I do not like to be interrupted. Now that I have your attention..."

Talon let his eyes wander as Caswel started his tirade. Caswel had barely finished his second sentence when Talon saw Trall and the group of civilians walking towards them.

"Trall!" Talon took off towards Trall, not even noticing the look on Caswel's face. "Trall." As he got closer he saw them carrying a body. "Oh, boy." He ran even harder. "What happened? Who is it? Oh, Jackie. Is she okay?"

Trall smiled. "Whoa. Slow down, Talon. Could you give us a hand?"

"What, sure." Talon fell in place behind Trall. He looked down and was relieved to see Jackie staring at him. "How are you?"

Jackie grinned. "Feels like my first date with Trall."

Talon burst into a fit of laughter. "I didn't know you two were an item. Your first date was that bad, Trall?" Talon couldn't see Trall's face, but he knew he was bright red.

"We need to get her to a healer. She is obviously losing her mind." Trall shot a glance back at the two of them and gave Jackie a quick wink. "Seriously though, she was stabbed in her side. I don't think it was too deep, but it was enough."

Talon mulled that over. "Okay. Some of the Guardsmen have been making a camp inside the forest. Let's bring her in there, and then I can fill you in on what's been going on."

"Okay. I see you have already spoken to Caswel"

Talon laughed. "Not really. And I don't intend on saying much more to him. He has proven his worth on this trip."

They set off into the woods to find a spot to set Jackie in. The Guardsmen had worked fast, creating a large flat area that provided plenty of coverage and it couldn't be seen from the path. Upon seeing Jackie, the Guardsmen ran over to offer assistance. It wasn't long before Jackie was comfortably lying in a secluded corner. Talon troubled the nearest Guardsmen to find Healer Rivers. Talon hadn't seen the man in quite awhile and for the first time he wondered if the Healer made it through the melee.

Talon gave Trall a recap of all that had gone on while Trall attended to Jackie. Trall filled Talon in on what he saw at the battlefield. Talon knew they would have to take care of the dead bodies soon, very soon. Trall agreed, but knew they just couldn't spare anyone else. While they were talking, Healer Rivers came into the forest camp.

"Nick, it's good to see you are still among the living."

"Thanks, Talon. What's the problem?"

"I think Trall can answer you better."

Healer Rivers nodded and headed over to Trall.

Talon left the men to take care of Jackie. He walked back out of the forest and found Caswel waiting for him. Seeing him standing there with that smug look on his face brought out the anger in him. In that instant, Talon thought back to everything he had to put up since first hearing Caswel's name. He stepped onto the path and watched Caswel start to open his mouth.

"Stop. Don't say another thing, Caswel. I am going to say this to you one time. Your unit has been assigned to me. You stood there next to me, you listened to the same order from Prince Christopher, the same order came from Royal Man Blackheart, and last time I checked, they both

outrank you. Now, I don't want to hear another thing from you until I give the order to release unit one from its duties to Markham. Until then, keep your goddamn mouth shut unless you plan on becoming part of the unit. Dismissed."

For a moment, Talon thought Caswel was going to say something. Talon stood his ground until Caswel quietly turned and walked away. Talon wasn't happy about what happened, but he was hoping his point came across loud and clear. Thankfully, only a few of the Guardsmen witnessed the spectacle and they politely acted like it never happened. Talon turned and headed back into the woods. He moved over to where Trall was watching over Jackie.

"A little trouble with the fearless Royal Man?"

"Was I that loud?"

"Loud enough. Do you think it did the trick?"

"I don't think it mattered, except I don't expect him bothering me anymore."

"Good. At least something good will come out of it." Trall patted the ground next to him.

Talon took the offer and sat down next to Trall. Trall hadn't moved from his spot since Healer Rivers had begun his work on Jackie. From what Talon gathered from the bits of conversation he overheard, she was going to be on better ground in a few days and, if nothing else happened to aggravate it, she would make a full recovery.

Sitting quietly allowed Talon the time to think, but he was a little curious about Jackie's comment.

"Trall, mind if I ask you a personal question?"

Trall looked over with a quizzical stare. "Sure."

"How long have you been seeing Jackie?"

It took a moment, but Trall answered him. "A few months. I'm sorry we didn't say anything. At first, we just kept it quiet. I mean I wasn't sure how people would take it, me being a former Guardsmen and all. Then we didn't want our relationship to influence my job with you or her being assigned to Unit one. Sorry."

Talon surprised Trall by laughing. "I've been wondering what you always did around the castle. It seemed like every time I stopped by your room you were gone." Talon chuckled to himself. "Well, that clears up one mystery."

"You know, we almost got caught that night you went into town with the Prince and Blackheart. I was in her room when she was recalled. When the Guardsmen came to get her to be part of the escort, I hid under the bed. Of course, at the time, I didn't know what was going on, so after she left I went to find you, but you were already heading into town with the Prince. Jackie filled in the details later."

Talon laughed. "And all this time I thought you were working!" Talon turned serious for a moment. "She is going to have to stay with us you know?"

"Yeah, I know. There is no way she can travel."

"It doesn't look like we are going anywhere for awhile anyway. I think our next step is to block that bridge."

Trall nodded his head in agreement. "Don't suppose we have time to eat first."

Talon laughed. "I don't see why not. Let me go and see if Peter's back with the supplies. I will make sure unit one's civilians are starting dinner for their unit." Talon stood up. "I will bring you both back something."

Trall nodded and then went back to his vigil.

Talon made his way back to the path and discovered Peter and the Guardsmen moving down the path. Talon called together some other Guardsmen and made a hole in the warehouse side.

After Peter looked it over, they started to move the horses in. It was still early in the night, but Talon didn't see an end to the activities for quite awhile. After talking to the civilians he got the meal going. In the meantime, he grabbed a number of Guardsmen and started working on his plans for the bridge. He set up a larger group of archers to keep a watch and then started to dig. Two others jumped in place with him, while the others ran to gather items to block the bridge.

Having accomplished a majority of the chores and, even stopping for something to eat, Talon found a quiet spot and settled in against a tree. It was getting very late in the evening and no one had time to get some sleep. Talon wasn't sure how much longer they could keep up the same pace. Everyone had been going since early this morning. Talon leaned his head against the tree and looked up into the sky. The sky was clear and full of stars. Talon wasn't able to enjoy it very long because he drifted off.

"They're attacking. Everybody up." Guardsmen Unique ran into the forest compound screaming of the attack.

Talon jumped up and smacked his head on a low hanging branch.

"Dammit."

Talon didn't waste any more time as he grabbed his sword and headed towards the forest. He cursed himself for falling asleep and wondered how long he had been under. He looked around and found there was no way to tell. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Trall hastily give Jackie a kiss on her forehead and then head off in the same direction.

"Ready for some excitement, Talon?"

"Not this kind, no. How's she doing?"

Trall briefly looked back. "I think she's going to make it. Nick is keeping a close eye on her."

"Well, why don't we head out there and dish out some pay backs?"

"Sounds like a plan! After you." Trall stepped back and bowed slightly.

Talon bowed his head and ran out onto the path. Guardsmen were running towards the bridge to stop the rush of Northerners.

"Archers, Rangers to the trees!" Talon broke into a sprint with Trall right behind him. Talon heard more Guardsmen break out of the woods and briefly looked for his unit. He knew the rangers were already en route to the trees next to the bridge. Talon and his five rangers had single handedly stopped the flow by staking out that position and he hoped they could repeat their actions. Talon watched as Elizabeth Sanders disappeared into the forest.

Talon surveyed the situation. The bridge was full of Northern footmen and Northern horsemen and he could just make out the slower Northern archers forming up on the other side of the bridge. Talon drew his sword and ran up to a position behind the Guardsmen making a wall. Trall followed behind him with sword in hand. The Guardsmen waited for what seemed like an eternity, but the Northerners just stood on the bridge. Talon leaped over to Guardsmen Taylor.

"How long have they been up there?"

"It started with just one Northern standing right in the center. We sounded the alarm as soon as we saw the rest appearing from across the river. Strange."

"Very strange, indeed." Talon paused and looked behind him. Most of the Guardsmen were assembled with the exception of the patrol and the men selected to find the survivors. Talon wasn't happy with the amount of men and women he had left. He watched Guardsmen Paul Unique bring his archers into the trees. Talon was glad to have them back there. He knew the archers and rangers were going to make or break this battle. With his five rangers and Unique's eight archers they had a good chance of walking away unscathed. Talon watched the bridge for a

sign of movement. Neither side made any motions. Talon wondered how long the standoff would last.

A yell cut through the silence.

"Over there, by the docks. It's the Northerns."

Talon looked in the docks' direction. Coming across the river were two rafts full of Northerns. Talon wasn't given much time to ponder the move, because moments later the Northerns yelled a battle cry from the bridge and raced towards the Guardsmen.

Talon yelled to Unique. "Give me five of your archers. Stop those rafts."

Without reply Unique sent five men to the docks. Talon sent four Guardsmen in the same direction.

"Rangers, archers. Fire at will."

A volley of archers was the reply. The arrows rained down onto the approaching Northerns. Talon cringed as he watched footmen tumbled to the ground, only to be trampled by the oncoming horsemen. As the first set of footmen came down off the bridge, they tried to jump the ditch built hours before. Right outside the ditch lay heaps of junk they had dragged from between the warehouses.

Two of the footmen made the jump, only to smash into the junk. They lost their footing and tumbled backwards falling into the ditch. The Northern horsemen, watching the problems the footmen were having, slowed down their descent. Talon smiled as he watched the entire forward momentum of the bridge assault come to a halt. The rangers/archers unit rained volley after volley into the group.

Talon risked a look at the docks and saw the first raft making its way to the pier with less numbers than it started with. Unfortunately, the second raft was right behind it and it was still full. Talon wondered how long their advantage would hold. In answer to his thought, the last row of the bridge assault turned out to be archers. They stood in the middle of the bridge and sent a volley of arrows into the line of Guardsmen.

Talon yelled before the majority of the arrows rained down. "Heads up, everyone." Talon dove forward and heard the sound of the rest of the Guardsmen doing the same.

Their luck ran out at the volley from the bridge. The second raft landed, spilling more footmen onto the pier than the Guardsmen could handle. The group retreated under the cover of the five archers. Talon watched as they fell into place with the other Guardsmen. Talon yelled to the archers as soon as they were clear.

"The bridge. Fire at those archers on the bridge." For emphasis Talon pointed to the center of the bridge.

The archers took cover beside the warehouse and fired a volley. Talon looked forward and saw another volley coming out of the trees. The Northerns were taking heavy losses, but it wasn't over yet. The first group of footmen came running from the pier. Talon jumped to his feet and ran with a group of Guardsmen to stop their assault. A few of the footmen fell to the ground with arrows sticking out of their chests. Talon and his group met the rest of the footmen head on. Swords clashed and two more footmen fell to the ground. Talon watched a Guardsmen get shot in the throat and fall violently to the ground.

In the same instant, Talon felt a prick in his thigh. He swung and pushed the footmen he was fighting to the water's edge. He took a moment while the footmen was off balance and peeked at his leg. An arrow was sticking into his chain mail. He didn't feel any pain and wondered if it hadn't penetrated his mail. He looked up and watched the footmen lose his balance and tumble into the river. Talon turned and was met by another footmen. He blocked

the footmen's attack and swung to the footmen's side. The footmen blocked and went to swing again. He missed Talon and slid on the wet grass next to the Teal. The footmen's leg flew into the air and his body followed behind him. Talon started to circle around the man to get a clear shot, when an arrow struck the man in the throat. Talon turned to see the Northern archers across the riverbank firing into the battle. From their vantage point, they were able to fire unmolested.

Talon issued a quick order. "Move back. All Guardsmen move back."

Talon, being free of any charges, took off towards the bridge. He knew the rest of the footmen would follow. Talon could see Trall direct the swordsmen to the few footmen who were making it over the barrier. Talon yelled to the archers in position by the warehouse.

"Get those footmen by the docks."

Talon watched them take aim and fire into the oncoming footmen, who were trying to match the Guardsmen retreat. More of the footmen fell to the archers, but a number broke through the remaining Guardsmen. Two more of the Heartfelt soldiers fell to the ground with arrows sticking out of their armor. Talon started moving everyone back. The Northern archers were rapidly taking down more and more Guardsmen. Talon hoped to put some distance between them.

The strategic retreat was gaining them some ground. As Talon approached the warehouse, he directed the archers to return to the forest. At this distance, they were removed from the flight of the Northern's arrows. The Guardsmen took a moment to form a solid defensive position. The remaining footmen from the raft were the first to attack, followed with a few of the successful footmen from the bridge. Talon watched as the Northern horsemen turned and trotted off the bridge. Apparently they had become tired of being target practice for the rangers. The bridge was clearing and he hesitated, wondering if the Northern archers would dare take positions on the bridge.

"To Heartfelt!" Talon screamed as loud as he could and started the forward attack. He quickly counted around thirty footmen. He was amazed to see they now had almost equal odds. He wanted to remember that for later. He was hoping to ask Trall if they had ever had even odds.

Talon pushed away the thoughts and concentrated on the job at hand. He attacked the first footmen with an overhand blow. The footmen countered and Talon found he was fighting a seasoned fighter. It was almost a welcome relief considering how inexperienced the rest of the footmen appeared to be. Talon wasn't sure how long they had been fighting, but his arms were sore and he was having a hard time keeping his eyes open. Just when he thought his body was going to drop from sheer exhaustion, Talon found himself running after the Northerns. The remaining footmen were retreating back to the bridge. They were encountering extreme difficulty maneuvering around the junk while constantly looking overhead to avoid the arrows. Talon collapsed to one knee as he watched the Northern backsides running across the bridge.

"Caught yourself a winner?"

Talon grinned at Trall, "First time I have been in a fair fight since this day started."

Trall put his hand out and helped Talon to his feet. "What do you say we try and grab some sleep?"

"Sleep! Who needs sleep?" Talon cringed as he stood back on two feet. "Thanks, Trall." Talon wasn't sure he would have stood up again without Trall's help.

"Don't mention it. Let's hurry though, I want to see Jackie before it gets any later!"

Talon chuckled. "Okay. Let's call it a night."

The group of Guardsmen headed back to the forest compound leaving a new set of bodies for the bridge watch. Very few Guardsmen bodies were left behind, but Talon added them to his list of things to do in the morning. He wondered how many more bodies were going to wind up on the waterfront.

The majority of the Guardsmen disappeared into the forest compound. Talon left Trall to have some time with Jackie and found the same tree as before. He started to close his eyes, but stopped, hearing footsteps.

"Excuse me, sir."

Talon adjusted his eyes to the darker light and recognized Royal Guardsmen Bolton Legates. Talon started to rise, but Legates motioned him back down. "No need to get up. The first patrol is back. Nothing to report."

"You missed all the excitement."

"So I've heard. The next team is already forming up. They know where to go. If there is nothing else, I will retire."

"No, let's hope there's nothing else. Have good night Bolton."

Bolton nodded and disappeared into the forest. Talon put his head against the tree and tried to sleep. He inwardly cursed and stood up. Of course, now he couldn't sleep. Talon made sure he had his sword and headed out to find the patrol getting ready to go. He knew he would be tired by the time he returned from a patrol. He grabbed a quick peek at Trall and then disappeared out of the forest.

## Chapter 19

May 3rd, 770; Talon's Last Dance

Talon, almost forgetting his javelin, headed back inside the forest compound. He grabbed his javelin and double-timed it to catch up with the first patrol. It was late, well after midnight, and after the last attack, Talon wanted to make sure there weren't going to be any more surprises.

"Talon." Trall yelled after him. When he realized Talon didn't hear him, he jogged after him. "Talon."

Talon turned and waited for Trall to catch up.

"They can do it on their own, you know."

Talon grinned even though he was enormously tired and yet he couldn't fall asleep. "I know. I'm wide awake and I guess I am still worked up from that last attack." Talon could tell Trall wasn't happy with that answer. "Okay. Let's make a deal. You get some sleep and when I come back we can switch."

Trall looked at him and knew he wasn't going to listen to reason, but he had a compromise. "Okay, okay. I know when I can't win, but as soon as you get back, wake me."

"Sure. Sleep tight." Talon ran off to catch up to the patrol, leaving Trall to head back to their makeshift camp.

Talon caught up with the four Guardsmen as they started to walk down the waterfront, keeping closer to the warehouses than to the docks.

Guardsmen Ronald Miller turned as he heard approaching footsteps. He was surprised to see Talon following them. "Anything wrong, sir?"

Talon immediately had second thoughts about his choice to accompany them. Seeing the look on Ronald's face, he felt like he was intruding. "No. Just hoping you wouldn't mind me tagging along."

Guardsmen Miller paused and, against his better judgment, he respectfully accepted. "As you wish, sir."

Talon felt the tension. "No need for the sir. Talon will do fine. Don't even mind me, although I was hoping to go a little farther than the last patrol."

"How far do you want to go, sir, er, I mean Talon?"

Talon thought about it. "I really want to follow the waterline until we get to the houses. I don't imagine anyone is going to be coming in from the south, but I would like to take a look in the general vicinity. I suppose we should follow the warehouse line until we get back to camp."

"Yes, Talon."

The Guardsmen turned and headed as close to the docks as they felt comfortable. Talon watched as Guardsmen Laura Good fell behind and assumed the watcher role. Her only job was to make sure there weren't any Northern archers readying a volley to go across the river. Talon left her to her work and followed the patrol as they continued by the docks.

The team paused at the last dock when they heard a noise towards the end of the dock. Talon crouched low and fell in behind the rest. Guardsmen Preston Spell took lead and ran down the pier with his sword drawn. Moments later he returned with a smile on his face.

"False alarm. One of the rafts from earlier is lodged under the pier. That's our mysterious noise."

"Understood."

That was all Guardsmen Miller said as he continued moving forward. The team arrived at the guard tower or what was left of it. Guardsmen Miller turned and addressed Talon.

"You wanted us to continue on through the houses?"

"Yes. I just, well, I don't know, call it a hunch."

Guardsmen Miller didn't respond. He motioned with his hand and the rest of the Guardsmen started towards the first house.

Talon walked around the burned remains of the tower. He started to sift through the outer edges, but he didn't get far before he was interrupted.

"Talon, sir. Did you just see that?"

Talon finished sifting through the debris from the tower. "No. I wasn't paying attention." Talon started walking closer to the Guardsmen, when suddenly the group crouched down. Talon didn't need to ask questions. He followed their lead.

The Guardsmen started moving closer to the house by the waterfront. Talon followed along trying to close the distance he was from the other four. Two of the Guardsmen broke off and planted themselves against the house. The other two started to head for the waterfront. Talon, who was closer to the first two Guardsmen, chose to continue going towards the house.

Something didn't feel right. Talon stopped in his tracks. The other Guardsmen halted. Talon quietly drew his javelin from his back. The quiet grew until it was almost unbearable, then a figure burst out of the forest and ran down the waterfront. Talon was almost so surprised that he didn't react, but he fell in behind the rest of the Guardsmen, who were chasing down the lone figure.

Keeping as silent as possible, they followed quickly in the path being left by the figure. They kept up a decent pace and could hear the figure as he was making no efforts to mask the noises he was making. Talon grew uneasy.

As the chase continued, the figure turned off of the waterfront and headed into the underbrush. No one was happy with that change. Guardsmen Miller spoke up.

"Wait."



The Guardsmen stopped.

"Let's keep our distance. I fear he is leading us into an ambush." Talon looked around at the Guardsmen.

"As you wish, sir."

Talon nodded and they continued moving forward at a much slower, but more aware pace. The sounds of the figure grew quiet, until no one could hear him. The only sound left was the water lapping against the shoreline.

The lead Guardsmen, Ronald Miller, fell back to a position beside Talon. "I would like to send two Guardsmen about ten yards out and have them circle in from the waterfront. They can make better time and I think we can surround the figure."

Talon looked at the Guardsmen and could tell he was beyond irritated having to ask for permission. Had Talon let this man do his job, he would have already issued that command. Talon berated himself for a moment, thinking back to the days when he used to grow tired of asking permission to wipe his nose. "Guardsmen Ronald Miller, I am giving you permission this one time, but from this moment on, you remember you are in charge here, I answer to you."

The Guardsmen nodded respectfully. "I understand sir, uh Talon. I want you to fall in behind me and Guardsmen Preston Spell. We move."

Talon was surprised at how quickly the Guardsmen responded to his command, but nonetheless he followed it to the letter and fell in behind the two Guardsmen. They moved forward through the underbrush and Talon watched as the other Guardsmen disappeared in a different direction.

Talon grew uncomfortably hot as they traveled deeper into the underbrush. Standing by the waterfront moments ago with the cool breeze coming off the river masked the heat of the night. Talon wiped the sweat off his forehead and continued to unsnag his javelin sling from the underbrush as they moved further into the forest. The moon had provided enough light during the beginning of the hunt, back at the waterfront, but it was all but blocked out now. Talon could barely make out Guardsmen Miller, who was only a foot or so in front of him.

There wasn't any sound coming from the figure they began chasing and there was a good chance they walked right by him once they entered the brush. Talon wiped his brow again and with it he hoped to wipe away the negative thoughts. He knew it was the lack of sleep that was causing his pessimism. He took a moment to berate himself again for not listening to Trall's advice. By all rights, he should be laying next to that tree waiting for the next attack from the Northerns. Talon continued his train of thought, until he was so absorbed in his thoughts that he almost collided with Guardsmen Miller. Talon stopped and, for a moment, was relieved he didn't walk into the man. Embarrassed already with his conduct, he knew that not paying attention wasn't going to help his growing negative disposition or Guardsmen Miller's opinion of him.

Quelling an urge to ask what was going on, Talon waited. In the gloom, Talon almost missed the hand signal from Guardsmen Miller. They moved forward and Talon was relieved as they broke through the brush.

Crouched low, they emerged into a long field of tall grass. Talon could see from the riverbank to the path they had come in on a few days ago. The grass provided limited coverage and the bright moon threatened to give away their position with every step. Following behind the Guardsmen, they moved closer to the waterfront. The group stopped once again. This time Talon could see why. Further up the riverbank and under the cover of the forest was a small raft full of Northerns. Talon watched as they beached themselves and was disheartened to see two

more rafts off to the side. Those were empty and Talon strained his eyes to see if he could make out where the occupants were. He didn't have any luck and assumed that they had already started to head towards the docks. The group of Northerns in Talon's eyesight started to form up on the riverbank. One was left behind on the raft and he headed back across the river.

Talon, moving with deathly silence, stopped once he was next to Guardsmen Miller. Before Guardsmen Miller could say anything, Talon spoke in a forced whisper.

"I want Guardsmen Spell to go back to the camp. He needs to beat the Northerns. That leaves me and you until the other two Guardsmen appear from the path they followed, though I fear they have already met with some Northerns." Without offering a response, Guardsmen Miller, motioned to Guardsmen Spell, who quietly started back through the underbrush.

Talon focused his attention on the group at the water's edge. By Talon's quick count, he figured there must have been close to fifteen men. Talon, hoping to hear what they were saying started moving closer. Guardsmen Miller followed in his path. When they were within a few yards, Talon halted. The conversations stopped and a large number broke off and headed down the waterfront. Four Northerns were left by the landing. Talon assumed they were handlers for the next raft. Talon could still hear the pounding of the other Northerns who were heading to the docks of Markham. Talon silently prayed that their messenger would arrive in time. Talon wasn't sure how long they had been sending men over, but he had to assume they already had to have close to thirty men heading for the docks.

Talon moved backwards until he was next to Guardsmen Miller. Knowing how close he was to the Northerns, he lowered his voice to below a whisper. "I want to get closer. Try to follow behind me." Talon watched as Miller acknowledged what he said with a nod. Talon, satisfied with the current plan, moved forward through the tall grass. Each step Talon took seemed as loud as thunder. Talon was getting close enough to hear some of the conversation. The men were laughing and not paying any attention to the field. Even Talon, if he were in their place, would have found it a ridiculous notion that there would be someone hiding in the grass.

The hiding place ended abruptly. Talon tried to move just a little bit closer, but stepped on the sling from his javelin. He tried to step backwards, but only succeeded in stepping on his own foot. Talon balanced on one foot for what seemed like an eternity, until he lost the little bit of balance he had left and crashed to the ground.

All four heads turned at the noise. Two of them started to move forward, slashing at the grass with their swords. Talon looked back at Miller, who was shaking his head. Talon decided to buy Miller some time. He motioned to Miller to stay down and then he stood up. By the looks he received he knew he had surprised the Northerns.

Talon brought up his javelin, knowing he was in deep trouble. The first footmen ran at him and swung his sword with an overhand blow. Talon caught it in the middle of his javelin and extended his left arm. The move sent the left side of the javelin into the footmen's cranium. The footmen stumbled backwards; fell over an unseen log, which caused him to send his sword tumbling out of his hand to disappear in the thick grass. Talon followed him only to be flanked by the second footmen. This footmen sent his sword to Talon's side. Talon cut downward with his javelin knocking the footmen's sword to the side. Talon watched as the third and fourth footmen raced off down the river's edge, no doubt to recruit some help.

Guardsmen Miller, watching the whole scene, jumped up and took off after the other two footmen.

The move surprised Talon, but Talon focused on the footmen in front of him and kicked towards the man's shin. The footmen, anticipating the move, side stepped and Talon missed. He

was carried forward by his momentum and slipped on the wet grass. Catching himself, he remained vertical, though only on one knee. The footmen, seeing his opportunity, advanced with his sword with a two handed grip extended over his head. Talon placed his hands in the javelin's grips and awaited the blow. The footmen followed through and connected with the javelin. Talon felt the blow in his elbows and was shocked as the javelin split down the middle. Talon cursed to himself remembering he never fixed the javelin. The Northern pushed the advantage and left Talon blocking the next blow. Talon finished what the Northern started and split the javelin into two pieces. He now had one piece in each hand. Talon, still sliding on the grass, swung both pieces at the footmen. The footmen blocked one of the pieces and Talon sent the other into the man's side. The footmen cringed as the javelin penetrated his leather armor. Talon cracked the footmen on his arm, sending his sword into the grass and then stuck the other piece through the man's thigh. The footmen fell to one knee, Talon's level, and Talon, taking the piece out of the footmen's side, sent a blow to the man's head. The footmen fell to the ground unconscious. Talon recovered from his fall and took a moment to recover from the battle. Trying to stand up, he braced himself with a piece of the javelin. Talon laughed to himself, as he thought of what Trall would say now that his javelin was reduced to a walking stick and a small one at that.

Talon's breather quickly ended as the other footmen tackled him. Talon's leg seared with pain as he fell onto one of the pieces of his javelin. As Talon rolled with the man, he manipulated his good leg into the man's stomach. Once he rolled onto his back Talon pushed with that leg and flung the man off him. Talon took the moment he bought himself to pull the piece of javelin out of his leg. He forced the piece out of his leg and stifled a scream. As he tossed the blooded piece to the side, he was tackled again by the footmen. Talon felt his breath leave his body as he was slammed forward. The footmen didn't realize how much momentum he had until he flipped himself over Talon. Talon fell backwards and tried to regain his breath. He reached up and felt the blood running from his upper lip. He pushed on his teeth with his tongue, but his lip was the only casualty from slamming his face into his own knee. Talon got himself to one knee, before he felt the pain from his thigh. He braced himself as he stood up. Balancing on one leg, he drew his sword and waited for the footmen. Upon seeing that Talon was armed, the footmen took off in a blind run. Talon hopped along with no chance of catching up.

The footmen headed towards the waterfront and stopped at the water's edge. Talon continued in his pursuit, albeit slower. The footmen hesitated at the water's edge and then turned north, heading towards the Markham docks. Talon turned himself and headed on an angle to intercept the footmen. The footmen jumped up the ridge and was almost behind the cover of the forest when Talon fell over the inert body of the unconscious footmen, who earlier, had broken his javelin. Talon, already ungraceful, tried stand up and put his body's weight on the injured thigh. With accompanied pain, he toppled to the ground. While he was laying face down he could hear, though far away, "He's over here. [Mumble] one of them [mumble.] Come on."

Talon tried again to stand. This time he was successful. He could hear the pounding of footsteps and he took the option of surveying his surroundings. He couldn't run back towards Markham, without running into the wrong people, so he turned and started across the grass field. His thigh made him give up on the idea of running, so he hobbled for the cover the dense forest was promising him. Talon disappeared into the forest and was somewhat relieved it had less growth than the one they started in, but that also meant he needed to get in further to mask his presence. As if he needed a reminder, an arrow struck the tree next to him.

"Oh, boy." Talon pushed himself further into the woods. The ground quickly started to elevate, making his travel even more difficult. Without the moon to guide him Talon immediately lost his way. Shortly after losing his bearings, he could hear the sounds of multiple people crashing through the underbrush. Talon bit down the pain and moved a little quicker.

The sounds were growing closer as Talon broke through the underbrush and fell head first down the side of a small cliff. He rolled down, smashing to a stop with his side against a small tree, bruising a few ribs. Then the tree, cracking under his weight, sent him bouncing further down the drop off. Talon felt a large rock smash his back and then he bounced further down the cliff. Just as Talon wondered if the cliff ended, he crashed to the ground with a jolt that almost knocked him unconscious. Talon, without any breath, rolled himself as close to the side as he could. He silently prayed no one would notice him. He lay there, hoping he couldn't be seen. A few feet away, the Teal River rushed by.

Talon listened and still heard the sounds of men crashing through the underbrush. When Talon was sure they sounded like they were moving away, he sat up. That small physical action sent pain throughout his body. The jolt threatened to knock him out. Braving the pain, Talon tore some of his shirt and crudely fixed up the hole in his leg. His lip had stopped bleeding, but a quick check with his hand revealed a large knot on his forehead. A little more thorough check revealed two more on the back of his head. Touching them sent his body screaming for relief. As far as he could tell none of the knots were bleeding and he assumed that was a good sign, although he really didn't know if that was true.

Forgetting about his bruised ribs for a moment, Talon tried to pull himself up and almost screamed out in pain. Suppressing the pain, Talon stood up. He looked up and was surprised to see he fell a good twenty feet. Giving up on the idea that he could climb right back up the cliff, he started to walk north along the cliff face. He could barely hear the footmen as he walked further along the water bank. The cliff slowly shrank until he was back at the grassy field. Talon hid in the forest as he watched another raft trying to be pulled ashore. Moments later, a small canoe pulled up onto the river bank. Two men jumped out leaving the canoe by itself. The two men were thrown some rope from the small crew on the raft. Talon realized the current was slowly picking up and the crudely made rafts weren't able to fight the current. The two men tied the rope off to the closest trees and then helped the men ashore. There was a rushed feeling to their movements and, as soon as they touched the riverbank, they ran off towards Markham. Talon knew that meant the next attack had begun. Moments later, the riverbank was empty save the rafts and canoe. Talon started across the field. In his plan, born of desperation, he decided to cut the rafts loose and slow down anymore plans of crossing the river. Talon went from the speeded pace of his earlier hobble to a slower paced limp. There were four rafts on the riverbank. Most were tied to one tree. Talon stepped up to them and reached for his sword, only to find it gone.

"Dammit!" Talon started to untie the first rafts knots. Once untied, he threw the rope back onto the raft and gave it a little push to help it down the river. Talon repeated the same action for the next two. Moving to the next tree, he started to untie the fourth and last raft. The knot he encountered wasn't about to give. Perturb, he spoke out loud, "Can anything go right today?" Since no one answered him, he continued to work on the knot. Finally working it through, he threw the ropes onto the raft and gave it a little kick. He smiled to himself as he watched the four rafts slowly drifting down the river. Talon limped over to the canoe. As he was about to push it into the river an arrow struck him in his shin. The pain in his only good leg left and caused him to fall face first into the canoe. The force of his fall sent the canoe adrift.

Talon, on the verge of blacking out, felt the movement of the river and realized he was floating in the canoe. Talon reached up and tried to right himself in the canoe. His hand slipped and fell outside the canoe. Moments later, and before Talon could bring his arm back into the canoe, an arrow slammed through his arm fastening it against the canoe. This time Talon didn't suppress anything. Talon cried out in pain. He briefly wondered if Trall had heard that. Fearing another shot in the arm Talon jerked his arm back into the canoe and felt the arrow break in his arm. Ignoring the pain Talon pushed himself as close to the side of the canoe as possible. Fighting blackness, he watched arrows fly over the canoe. Wishing himself lucky, Talon felt the canoe get caught in the current. Thinking he was free Talon relaxed. After visibly relaxing, one more arrow came to haunt him. It slammed right next to his head, just to the side of his ear. Talon's ear was so close and the impact was so loud that he wasn't sure he could hear anything. Talon tried to shift his position, but he banged the arrow in his shin against the side of the canoe. The pain sent his body into another convulsion. As he was trembling, he bent his leg and reached for the arrow. He pulled and strained until the arrow tore out of his muscle. The pain was so intense Talon's head fell back and bounced against the canoe. His head bounced against the arrow, and before his head even finished landing back on the canoe, he was out of it.

### **A Day Later; Halfway to Heartfelt**

Talon felt the sun beating on him as he came around. He felt throbbing all over his body and knew better than to move. Talon opened his eyes and then shut them, blocking the bright sun. He briefly wondered how long he had been out cold. Having nothing else to do, his mind wandered to Markham. Fearing the worst, he started to imagine the ambush worked. The Northerns had stormed the camp.

Deep in thought, he was brought back to reality from a muscle cramp in his leg. Talon, fearing more pain, tried to avoid extending his leg. Moments later the cramp got the best of him and he was forced to extend his leg. Pain seared through his body. He felt himself blacking out and he wasn't sure if he minded. Before he gave in, a melodious whistle broke the concentration he had on his pain. Talon opened his eyes and found a small bird resting on the edge of the canoe. The sun was still beating down, so he was forced to squint. He smiled to himself as he recognized the bird. It was a rare sight this far north. It was a Redderin red bird. Its patch of red on each wing shone bright in the sun.

"You look a lot happier than I feel little friend."

Biting down the pain Talon raised his hand in an effort to block the sun, but halfway there the bird perched on his hand. Talon paused, watching, mesmerized by the small bird.

"You have brightened the day, my little friend." Talon held his arm for few more seconds, but his bruised ribs caused his arm to falter. The bird, feeling the drop, took flight.

Talon watched the bird until it disappeared from his sight. Once the bird disappeared his distraction also went away and the pain returned. Talon, who could no longer hold his arm up, dropped it to his side causing more trembling throughout his body. He didn't fight the blackness this time. He readily gave up; silently praying he would wake up again.

### **Two Days Later; Just Outside of Heartfelt**

For the two days the canoe and its occupant drifted further and further down the Teal River. Following the current, it would arrive in the vicinity of the Hearttowne docks in another day or so. Things didn't allow that to happen. Sometime after midday the wind shifted. The canoe followed the wind and landed on the west bank of the Teal. It became lodged in a fallen tree hanging over the river. The canoe and its occupant's trip ended.

Talon woke from a dream about water. Opening his eyes, he tried to ask for water. Nothing left his lips. Talon's thirst almost made him laugh as he realized no one was going to answer his request. The throbbing had all but disappeared and now he felt numbness. He had enough strength of mind to wonder if that was necessarily an improvement. Talon, thirst controlling his mind, realized he wasn't moving. He looked around and saw the canoe was lodged under a fallen tree.

"Dammit. Just my luck. Wonder how far I got before we got stuck. I don't imagine anyone is around."

Talon lifted his head to see if he could figure out where he had landed. Try as he might, he couldn't see above the lip of the canoe unless he sat up. Talon didn't even entertain that thought.

As if someone was listening to what he just said, he could hear footsteps. Someone was walking in his direction and it was growing closer. Talon strained his ears, but found it wasn't necessary as the person came crashing through the underbrush. Talon not just heard, but felt the feminine scream and sympathized with the women as he heard her sliding down the cliff. Moments later the women splashed into the water. She sent a wave of water over the canoe.

Talon felt the water as it splashed off his face and arms. He didn't know something so simple could feel so good. Talon chuckled to himself as the water ran from his forehead. He did get what he asked for.

Talon could hear frantic movement in the water next to the canoe and felt the women's urgency. Forgetting his own predicament Talon rose to the occasion. He moved every part of his body in an effort to sit up only to be rewarded with the feeling of all those injuries reopening. Talon fell back against the canoe and felt the blackness coming back. Silently, he told himself, this was getting old. He lay back down, trying to regain his composure. He could hear the women crawling along the log. He waited patiently for her to arrive, but he fell into unconsciousness about the same time she screamed.

## Chapter 20

Epilogue; May 5th, 770; David and Amy

"Marilyn!" Minty waited for a response and wasn't surprised when he didn't get one. "Marilyn!" He raised his voice and still didn't get a reply. Minty left the kitchen and headed into the dining room. He spotted Marilyn in the same spot he had been finding her these last few weeks. Minty walked over and sat down at her table. "Marilyn."

Marilyn was brought back to reality. "Yes Uncle." Marilyn wondered how long he had been calling her.

"Still thinking about him?"

The first week Talon left, Marilyn didn't miss a step, but as soon as the gossip reported that Talon's unit had arrived in Markham she had changed tunes. Minty couldn't count how many times a day he would find her sitting at the same table they used to sit at watching the front porch in hopes she would be the first to glimpse his return.

In a voice Minty could barely hear, she replied, "Yes. I just hope he is all right."

Minty touched her arm and gave it a small squeeze.

Marilyn looked up at Minty. "Do you think he is okay, I mean really okay?"

Minty couldn't stand looking at her saddened face. The answer he had wasn't one she would like. "I wish I could tell you that. I wish I knew. I can't help but remember he is the last Bastian." Minty realized this was the wrong thing to say almost immediately. Marilyn's face grew even sadder. "Seeing your face makes me wish I could take that comment back."

Marilyn smiled warmly in his direction and then let her gaze find the front porch again. She was surprised to see a small bird perched on the windowsill. Marilyn smiled at the sight.

Minty, surprised to see her smiling, looked out the window. "What a rare sight."

Marilyn looked back at Minty. "They say the Redderin Red bird brings good luck and happiness."

Minty smiled at her and hoped it was true.

Marilyn watched the bird for awhile and was even given a little song before the bird took flight. She watched it until it disappeared from sight, but then slipped back into her earlier mood.

Seeing that look, Minty knew there wasn't anything more he could do. He handled the customers for the rest of the morning.

### **Amy and David**

"Hey David. David!" Amy looked around for her boyfriend. "Come on David. I didn't come out here to play hide and seek." Amy couldn't see him through the thick overgrowth, but she could see a break in the thick growth a few yards in front of her. She headed for it. "David!" Amy knew he was out there and she didn't find it the least bit funny. Why did he have to chase after the poor animal? Amy kept moving forward when she heard a faint voice calling her name. "David. Where are you?"

No answer was forthcoming. Amy had had enough and stomped off towards the opening. Her arms were full of scratches and she was tired of removing her dress from the branches. She could almost feel the sunlight on her as she neared closer and closer to the opening. She felt a wave of relief as she walked out of the growth and then a wave of fear as her second step caused her to slip and fall. She felt reassured by the comfort of hitting solid ground until she realized she was falling and falling quickly. She screamed out loud only to have her mouth fill with water as she crashed into the Teal River. Her arms reached for anything to grab onto and she succeeded as her arms caught onto a fallen tree. With another breath of relief she started to pull herself up the branch.

Amy felt humiliated and even more tired, but she hung onto the thought of what she was going to do to David whenever, and if ever, he decided to show up. She kept crawling along the log until she noticed what looked like a canoe lodged under the log closer to the shoreline. After untangling her dress from some branches, she continued up the log. After what seemed like an eternity, she had crawled far enough to see what was in the canoe. With a quick glance, she realized what was inside and she screamed once again, but louder this time, much louder. Before she could finish the scream, she passed out.

David had given up on his chase and started back to find where he had left Amy. He knew she wasn't going to be very happy with him. He felt bad about taking off like that and, to make matters worse, he had promised this would be a special day for just the both of them. He picked up the pace in the unlikely chance that she wouldn't be as mad if he showed up any earlier rather than later. He wasn't really quite sure where he had started the chase, but he had a feeling she would be waiting for him by the Teal.

He broke through the growth in the spot he thought she was at and saw a patch of her torn dress on a branch and knew he was in real trouble. He started heading towards the waterfront, but froze as he heard a scream. He knew it was Amy. David broke into a run, a run that brought him right into a low hanging branch. He tumbled to the ground. After he shook off the effects of the fall, he got up and started running again. This time a little more carefully. He could see an opening in the distance. As he moved towards it, he was startled to hear another scream. This

one was louder. David ran even faster until he broke through the growth and fell down the small drop-off that Amy had just fallen down. On his way down to the water, he caught a glimpse of Amy lying across a fallen tree.

During mid fall he called to her. "Amy. Amy." David splashed into the water and immediately started to swim towards her. He lowered her into the river and cradled her head. She awoke when her body touched the water. "Amy! Are you...Amy?" David brushed hair off her forehead and carefully swam her closer to the riverbank. As he brought her up on the riverbank, he had to lean closer to her what she was saying. "What, Amy? You look like you've seen a ghost."

Between shivering lips and near shock she whispered, "David, the canoe. The canoe."

"What? What canoe?" David took his eyes off of her for a second and looked around. His eyes found it. There was a canoe a couple feet away from him lodged in the fallen tree. "That canoe. What's wrong?"

Amy was almost too tired to say anything, but she managed one last word. "Body." Amy slipped into unconsciousness.

"Body. What does that mean?" It did grab his curiosity, so David made sure she was firmly on the bank before he swam over to take a look.

David got a firm grip on the fallen tree and lifted himself up. He shuffled over to the canoe and looked inside. "Holy..." David wondered if the body was alive. "Sir. Sir." David reached in and checked to see if the body was warm. "Sir." The man was still warm. He needed to get help, not just for Amy, but for this poor soul. David took another look and was surprised the man was still alive. He was covered in dried blood and his arm had an arrow broken off through his forearm. From this position, David couldn't tell if he had any other more serious injuries, but he had a feeling that dried blood had to come from someplace other than his arm.

David shuffled back down the log and walked along the riverbank. "Amy." He bent down and tried unsuccessfully to revive her. "Damn." David gave her a kiss on the forehead and started heading up the incline. He had a good idea of where he was and took off in a blind run for the horses. He could make it to the front guard at the castle faster than he could find help in Hearttowne. It wasn't long before David had retrieved his horse and he was heading towards Heartfelt.

### **Later that afternoon, Minty's**

"Marilyn." Minty wondered why he even bothered to call her anymore. He walked out of the kitchen and found her in the same spot as before. It was getting closer to the lunch hour and he was hoping to pick up some supplies in town, but he could see he couldn't leave Marilyn by herself. He sat down next to her. "Marilyn."

Marilyn blinked twice, but didn't say anything.

"Marilyn, I really need a few things from in town. I don't suppose you could run for them." Minty was starting to think that a little fresh air would be a good thing for the child.

Marilyn thought she heard him ask her something, though she didn't start paying attention until it was too late. "I...I'm sorry, Uncle. What did you say?"

Minty smiled and repeated his request.

"Okay. What do you need?"

Minty breathed a sigh of relief and told her what he needed. He hoped the walk would take her mind off things. "Let me get you the money." Minty disappeared off into the backroom for a few moments and came back with a small bag. "Here is some money. And take your time, okay?"



Marilyn smiled at Minty and gave him a kiss on his cheek. Without another word, she walked out of the inn. Minty watched her go and was surprised to see her head off in the opposite direction. "Oh, well." Minty went back to feeding his customers.

Marilyn wasn't quite sure why she was walking towards the castle when her errands lay on the other side of Hearttowne, but she started to forget about her troubles as she headed for the bridge. She didn't know why Talon had affected her in such a way. One day he stepped into her life and, after she fell for him, he left her alone. They had spent such a short amount of time together and though she knew it was ridiculous, she fell in love anyway.

She stopped in front of the bridge and picked up some stones, placing them in her hand. She remembered when she was just a young girl in Redderin. She would spend all day throwing rocks into the water from the center of the Redderin Bridge. Today, she felt like just throwing rocks in the water. She stopped in the middle and stood up on the railing. One-by-one, she threw the rocks into the Teal.

Marilyn was so intent on watching the ripples that her rocks made that she almost didn't notice a horse and his rider racing towards the castle. Marilyn stopped for a moment and watched the rider disappear in a hurry. She wondered why he was in such a hurry and the only answer she could think of involved the war with the north. With the distractions the rocks were providing, she had started to forget about it, but now her depressive thoughts returned. Marilyn tried to shake off the feelings and returned to her rock throwing.

The last rock left Marilyn's fingers and splashed into the Teal. She decided it was time to run those errands. As she took a last glance of the river, she was surprised to see the rider from moments ago being followed by six Guardsmen. Marilyn watched them disappear into the woods at a speed she wouldn't use. She shrugged her shoulders and headed towards the ocean docks before Minty started to worry about her.

### **David's Delivery**

David crashed through the brush with the Guardsmen following close behind. He pushed his horse through the brush and followed the riverbank until they came across the fallen tree, the canoe, and his girl. David pulled his horse to a stop and dismounted. The rest of the Guardsmen, who had to ride in a single file, halted and dismounted. David hurdled the tree and pointed to the canoe. Seeing the Guardsmen take over the canoe, he headed over to make sure Amy was all right. She was still in the same position he had left her and she didn't look awake.

"Amy. Amy, sweetheart." David kneeled down next to her and held her hand.

Amy had been awake for some time now, but she was afraid to move until she felt David next her. She squeezed his hand for reassurance. "David." Her eyes blinked away the sun and she focused on him. "Take care of the canoe. I think it needs more help than I do."

David nodded and headed over to help with the retrieval. Two of the Guardsmen had walked along the fallen tree and were maneuvering the canoe to shore. The other three men waited patiently.

One of them turned to David. "Is she okay?" He nodded in Amy's direction.

"Yes. A little shaken, but fine otherwise. She had a little fall before she encountered the body." David glanced back in her direction and saw she was starting to sit up.

As the canoe hit the bank, one of the Guardsmen started looking over the body. David was surprised to hear a short muffle as the Guardsmen poked and prodded at the body.

"Guardsmen Litnor, I don't think we should move him out of the canoe. Take that oar and bring him over to the Hearttowne docks. We should be able to deal with him without adding to his injury."

"Looks familiar, doesn't he?" One of the Guardsmen commented as he jumped down from the tree.

"Yes. He should be real familiar. That's Talon Bastian. Let's move it."

David watched them mount up. Once they started moving the last Guardsmen turned to David. "Are you sure she is well enough to ride on her own?"

"Yes. Thank you. Good luck." David turned around and headed back towards Amy. She was looking better than a few moments ago.

The Guardsmen started heading away. "Okay. Follow your Heart." David watched as he disappeared from his sight.

"Now, what do you say we try today over again, Amy?" David cracked a smile and held his hand out.

Amy laughed and accepted his hand. She stood back up and hoped the rest of the afternoon was going to be a little less eventful.

### **Later that afternoon; On the Hearttowne docks**

Three of the Guardsmen were waiting on the Hearttowne docks for the canoe. They decided to send someone back to inform Blackheart about who they had found. Guardsmen Litnor appeared under the bridge and started heading over to the first dock.

The Guardsmen had laid a thick blanket out and were ready to bring him to the castle. Litnor docked the canoe and started barking orders. "He doesn't have any broken bones, so let's move him onto the blanket. Wait! Give me your flask." One of the Guardsmen tossed his flask to Litnor. He poured a small amount onto Talon's lips and let some of the water clean his face. "Okay. Let's move him." Litnor threw the flask back to the Guardsmen and they prepared to lift him. "Watch that arm. I don't want to aggravate that arrow. I can't imagine that's very comfortable as it is."

In unison, the Guardsmen lifted Talon and carried him towards the castle. After stopping a few times, the group arrived at the castle gates. Blackheart was the first to meet them. He ran up to the bundle and then stopped.

"Don't pay me any attention. Let's get him inside." Blackheart replaced one of the men and started towards the barracks in hopes of finding an empty room.

Prince Christopher met up with the group and also relieved one of the Guardsmen. With the Prince and Blackheart's help they found a room and they maneuvered Talon onto an empty bed.

"Guardsmen Litnor, please see to it that a healer knows Talon needs attention."

Guardsmen Litnor snapped to attention. "Yes, sire. At once." Litnor headed out the door.

"He's seen worse, Blackheart. You both have." Prince Christopher placed a hand on Talon's forehead. "He is still warm."

Guardsmen Litnor returned. "Healer Douglas Ivory is en route."

Prince Christopher looked over at Litnor. "What's the full story?"

Guardsmen Litnor being the highest ranked member of the group that brought Talon back related the story to Prince Christopher and Blackheart.

"Blackheart, how long would it take, assuming he came from the docks of Markham, to float downstream?"

"A rough estimate would be closer to three days, maybe two. The current is strong this time of the year. The question would be how long Talon spent under that fallen tree?"

"Agreed. We need to move. I don't want to assume we lost the entire team. Dammit. What the hell happened over there?"

Blackheart started to pace. "Prince Christopher, you know we are ready. The army is ready to go. What are we waiting for?"

"I know. I know. It's time I spoke with my father." Prince Christopher turned and started to walk out. He turned and stopped. "You will know let me know when he comes to?"

"Yes, sire."

Prince Christopher left.

### **Later that afternoon; Minty's Inn**

Marilyn made it back to the Inn long after lunch had finished. She didn't realize it was that late in the afternoon.

"Uncle. He are the goods."

Minty thought she looked a little less preoccupied than before she left, but only time would tell. "Thank you. Do you mind taking care of the customers while I put these away?"

"Not at all, Uncle." Marilyn handed Minty the goods and headed over to the first table.

There was an older couple sitting by the front window and a younger couple, who were engrossed in a heavy conversation, occupied one other table. Marilyn stopped at the first table so she wasn't intruding on their conversation. "Good afternoon, folks." Marilyn listened to the older couple's order, but she couldn't help but over hear the younger couple's conversation.

"Amy, I'm sorry I left you, but that guy needed help!"

"It's all right. Where is he now?"

"I don't really know. After I got the Guardsmen, I kind of focused on you. Though I did hear one of them say he knew the man. Sounded like he said the man's name was Talon Bastian or something like that. I guess he is back at the castle. I can't imagine why they would take him anywhere else."

Marilyn wasn't sure that she just heard that. Did they just say Talon Bastian?

Unconsciously, she stopped listening to the older couple and moved to the younger couple's table. It was a tad rude, considering the older couple weren't done ordering, but Marilyn didn't notice. "Excuse me. I don't mean to pry, but did you just say Talon Bastian?"

David looked surprised, but answered her. "Yes, I mean, I think that is what the Guardsmen said. Why?"

"I, uh, well I know him." Suddenly she realized David had said Talon had needed help.

"What happened? You said he is at the castle?"

"Well, yeah. We found him in a canoe up the Teal River. He was in pretty bad shape."

Minty walked out of the kitchen and noticed the exchange. Marilyn looked concerned.

"Marilyn, what's wrong?" Minty circled the bar and headed in her direction.

"Uncle...they...Talon's back. He's at the castle." Marilyn turned back to David. "How long ago was this?"

"Um, I guess it was late morning, maybe around lunch time."

Minty overheard the last part and watched Marilyn turn a sickly shade of white. Minty came up behind her and held her arm in case she fainted.

Marilyn's head was reeling. She whispered to herself, "This morning. Talon."

"Marilyn, maybe you should go to the castle. Do you think you will be all right on your own?"

It took a moment for Marilyn to decide that she needed to go. Absentmindedly she replied.

"Yes. I will be fine." Marilyn glanced at Minty and started for the door.

Minty watched and hoped she was going to be okay. After she left he returned to the customers and silently said a prayer.

## **Blackheart's Trial**

Blackheart quietly closed the door and left Healer Ivory to do his work. Blackheart knew he wasn't going to be able to get back to work, so he paced back and forth in front of the barracks. It seemed like an eternity had passed since the healer went to work. The door finally opened and Healer Ivory walked out.

"Oh. I didn't think you were still here, Blackheart."

"I just couldn't pry myself away without knowing his condition. What's the verdict?"

"Well, I think he is a very lucky man. He wouldn't have lasted much longer in the sun. He is dehydrated and weak, but I cleaned, dressed, and stitched him back together. I will need a set of loose fitting clothing for him. I had to cut most of his other clothing off of him. I will need someone to administer water to him, small amounts of course, but on a regular timetable. I would give him two day or three days and he will be well on his way to being back to normal."

Blackheart heaved a sigh of relief. "As good as can be expected considering how he looked when he came in here. I will take care of the water myself. Is there anything else he is going to need?"

"If you can spare someone, I would like to have someone around him for the next few days. Just in case he wakes up."

"Someone will be with him. Thank you, healer."

"Just doing my job. I will be back with some treatment for him after dinner." Healer Ivory took one last look in Talon's room and then left the barracks.

Guardsmen Litnor walked back into the barracks to find Blackheart standing by Talon's room. "Sir, how is he?"

Blackheart looked up. "Healer says he is going to make it. He just needs some rest. I need to set up a watch for him. Healer wants to have someone here at all times for the next few days. Can I get you to wait here until I am able to round up a few bodies for that?"

"Yes, sire. Take all the time you need"

Blackheart was relieved to have the chance to get some fresh air. Even from outside the door he could smell whatever ointments the Healer used and they were rather potent.

"Thank you, Guardsmen." Blackheart placed a hand on the Guardsmen's shoulder as he walked out. The sun was starting to dip in the sky, but there was still plenty of day left. The first thing Blackheart needed to do was tell the Prince. He took a moment outside the barracks to silently pray for Talon.

## **Marilyn's Discovery**

Marilyn made record time in getting to the castle and was relieved to see someone she knew working at the front gate. She recognized his face, but was having a hard time remembering his name. As she neared the front gate, she dismounted and walked towards the guard. At the last possible moment, she remembered his name. "Good afternoon, Guardsmen Riker." Once Marilyn had heard Talon was at the castle she left without thinking that they might not let her in.

"Good afternoon, Marilyn. How can I be of service?" Andrew Riker grew a little concerned and wondered how to handle this. Obviously there was only one reason she was at the castle.

Not sure what to do, Marilyn decided to stick to the truth. "Guardsmen Riker, I...well...um...I just talked to someone who claimed Talon is back and is very hurt. If it's true, would I be able to see him?" Marilyn hadn't realized how important it was to her until she said it. Now she was doing everything she could to keep from crying.

Andrew wasn't sure how to do this. "Please call me Andrew. Why don't we find Blackheart and I will let him answer you." Andrew turned around and called into the guardhouse. "Jake, I will be back in a little bit." Andrew turned back to Marilyn. "Please follow me."

Andrew escorted Marilyn into the castle. At this time of the day, he was likely to find Blackheart anywhere in the castle, but decided a good place to start was his room. They headed towards the courtyard when Andrew heard his name being called.

"Guardsmen Riker. Guardsmen Riker."

Andrew turned to see Blackheart standing at the entrance to one of the barracks. He was relieved to find him so quickly. He led Marilyn over to him. "Good afternoon, sir. I think you know Marilyn Stevens." Andrew took a step back. "She has some questions and I didn't feel that it was appropriate that I answer them."

Marilyn couldn't wait any longer. "Blackheart is it true? Is Talon here?" Marilyn thought she was going to cry.

Blackheart breathed heavily, but knew he had to answer her. "Guardsmen Riker, would you see that her horse is taking care of?"

"Yes, sire. May I?"

Marilyn handed the reins over to him. Before he could leave, she laid her hand on his arm. "Thank you, Andrew."

Andrew nodded and left with her horse. Marilyn drew her attention back to Blackheart.

"Follow me, Marilyn." Blackheart led her inside the barracks.

Guardsmen Litnor was surprised to see Blackheart back so soon. Nevertheless he snapped to attention.

"Guardsmen Litnor, could you excuse us?"

"Yes, sire."

Before Litnor could leave, Blackheart stopped him. "Excuse me, Marilyn." Blackheart walked Litnor to the door. "Do me a favor and inform the Prince of Talon's current condition and let him know Marilyn Stevens is here."

"Yes, sire."

"Thank you." Blackheart returned to Marilyn's side. "How did you find out?"

"I overheard a conversation at the Inn from the man who found him earlier this morning. So it is true?"

Blackheart didn't want to answer and found himself wishing it wasn't true. "Yes, Marilyn. I'm afraid it is true." Blackheart walked her to the front of Talon's door. He decided to show her rather than tell her. He opened the door. "Are you...okay?" Blackheart realized how pointless the question was. He watched as a small tear escaped out of her eye. With nothing else to say he led her inside.

Marilyn walked inside. She found Talon on a bed in the far corner. She walked over and kneeled down next to him. He looked pale and she started to notice the amount of visible scars. She lost count of how many dressings she saw. His arm was wrapped tightly against his body and his breathing was shallow and faint. Marilyn could feel Blackheart behind her and she couldn't bring herself to cry in front of him. She stood up, and forgetting about her early promise, fell right into Blackheart's arms and cried.

Blackheart was surprised by her reaction. He hadn't realized how close Talon had become to her. Not entirely familiar with this kind of situation, he just held onto her until there was a knock on the door. Marilyn looked up at Blackheart who started to let her go. "Uh."

"Go ahead, Blackheart. Would it be all right if I stayed?"

Blackheart could tell she was serious and he decided he couldn't think of a better person to be with Talon until he was better. "Okay. There will be a Guardsmen outside the door should you need anything." With one last glance Blackheart headed to the door. He left Marilyn to her vigil.

Marilyn returned to Talon. She kneeled down next to the bed and settled in. She wasn't going to leave until Talon came to.

Blackheart opened the door and headed into the foyer. Prince Christopher was there with Guardsmen Litnor.

"I apologize for disturbing you, but the Prince wanted to see you."

"Think nothing of it Guardsmen and thank you." Blackheart turned his attention to Prince Christopher. "You have been informed?"

"Yes. Litnor filled me in on the way over. How is she doing?"

"I...well, to be honest, I didn't realize the extent of their relationship. She is in there now."

Prince Christopher walked over to the room and carefully opened the door. He could see Talon laying on the bed with Marilyn kneeled down at his side holding his hand. The Prince closed the door. "I've seen enough. Guardsmen, I want you to provide Miss Stevens with every and anything she needs."

Guardsmen Litnor snapped too. "Yes, sire."

"Good. Blackheart we need to talk."

Blackheart nodded to the Prince and followed him out of the barracks. Blackheart had the feeling this was going to be a long meeting. Prince Christopher was mad.

### **Three days later; Muster on the Parade Field**

Four hundred Guardsmen stood at attention and in their newly formed ranks on the parade field. It was early in the last morning these men and women would have for awhile in Heartfelt. All eyes turned to watch as the back gate opened. Newly appointed Royal Man Daniel Knight called to his troops. "Guardsmen, attention." He smiled to himself as he heard the sound of three hundred and fifty men and women in unison.

The back gate was halfway open.

Knight continued. "Royal Guardsmen, present honors." Fifty of his finest knelt down on one knee. Knight turned and faced his Guardsmen. Seeing everyone was in position, he turned back around to face the dignitaries. He knew his position in life and knelt down on one knee as the gate finished opening.

Prince Christopher and Blackheart walked through the gate, followed by a small squad of Guardsmen. The entourage walked until they stood in front of Royal Man Daniel Knight. The squad broke in half and created a wall. Prince Christopher and Blackheart each took one side. After taking their places both men knelt on one knee.

King Heartfelt stood at the gate and gazed out at his four hundred Guardsmen. The King walked through his squad of men and stopped by his son. "Rise my, son. Royal Man Blackheart, rise and show me your army."

Prince Christopher stood and waited patiently as Blackheart rose. "I will be more than happy to show you your army, my King."

King Heartfelt laughed. "Nonsense, utter nonsense. Although you flatter me Blackheart, I won't take up much of your time. I would venture to say the army has better things to do then entertain an old man."

Blackheart looked over at Prince Christopher for guidance and maybe a little help. Of course, the Prince wasn't about to let him off that easily. "Shall we show him your men, Blackheart?"

Blackheart bowed to both men and received a wink from Prince Christopher. He turned and stepped back to let the King walk over to the army. Blackheart took his place behind the Prince.

King Heartfelt walked up to Royal Man Daniel Knight and laid a hand on his right shoulder. "Rise, my son."

Royal Man Knight rose to full height. "Your Guardsmen await, your Majesty." Knight turned around to face his army. He uttered the last command before the tour would begin. "Rise." Knight felt a surge of pride as the Royal Guardsmen stood and assumed control of each segment of Guardsmen.

King Heartfelt started to walk up and down the ranks. Royal Man Knight fell in behind Royal Man Blackheart. The procession continued this way for each member of the entire army. The King would occasionally stop and speak with members who had been around awhile. The procession finally returned to its original position.

King Heartfelt spoke. "Today, I am asking you to leave your homes, your families, your friends, to return Valerica back to us, to Heartfelt. One land, one people. Each and every one of you will be in my thoughts, my heart and my prayers. Until your return, lead with your Heart." The King turned and started to head into the castle walls.

Royal Man Knight had planned this surprise for quite some time. He raised his voice and yelled for all to hear, "To Heartfelt."

The King turned and was rewarded by the sound of four hundred voices yelling in unison, "To Heartfelt." The army did this three times and then returned to attention. King Heartfelt raised his hand and cried, "To Heartfelt." With that he abruptly turned and walked to the gate followed by deafening applause.

Prince Christopher walked on the King's right side. King Frederick felt strong after the inspection. "My son, Markham tomorrow, then, shortly, Valerica will be ours.

Prince Christopher looked back to see the army that would win back the land.

###

## About the Author



Dustin De Felice wrote The Heartfelt Saga when he was in his early twenties and he was floating throughout the North Atlantic and the Caribbean with the U.S. Coast Guard. Today Dustin De Felice is a graduate student pursuing his Ph.D. in Second Language Acquisition and Instructional Technology (SLA/IT) at the University of South Florida. He is progressing through the doctoral experience while trying to assume his new role as a researcher. Dustin has more than a decade in the Adult Education field and has taught in Tampa, Florida, Chicago, Illinois and Cuernavaca, Mexico.

His current research interests include formal address systems in the Spanish language, language acquisition in polyglots, and endangered language documentation and pedagogy. His work with a native speaker of the Nahuatl language is available and he is always willing to share a copy of his multimedia CD entitled "Un pequeno vistazo del idioma Nahuatl," where you are

able to hear the language once used as the lingua franca throughout Mexico and still spoken today by roughly 1 million speakers.

He hopes you have enjoyed this novel and might look forward to the next book in the series. If you are interested in the next book in the series, feel free to contact Dustin at his personal email address: [dustindefelice@yahoo.com](mailto:dustindefelice@yahoo.com)

## **Dedication**

This book is dedicated to readers everywhere; for if they enjoy this book, then I have done my job.

## **Acknowledgments**

I would first like to take a moment to thank the woman who made this possible, my mother, Lois Anne De Felice. I owe my life and this book to her. While I was still in my tour with the Coast Guard and during one of the numerous phone calls I made home, I complained to her that I was bored. Her only reply was, "Write a book!" Not realizing I would take that seriously, she nonetheless can claim full responsibility for the following pages. My mother is an avid reader who passed the same love down to me. Thank you from the bottom of my heart Mom. I love you.

I think it is impossible to thank my mother without including the other reason why I was able to write this book, my father, Wayne Alan De Felice. From the day I was able to walk, I only wanted one thing in my life; to make my father proud of me. This book is for everything you have done for me and everything that you will do for me. I love you, Dad.

I have to give credit for numerous parts of this story to my brothers and sister. I used the relationship I had with them to create the bond each of the members shared as they went through their adventures, just like we did when we were kids. Of course, I also used my sister's name throughout the book. Elizabeth is a beautiful name and was given to her for a reason. Thank you for everything guys, Wayne, Nick, Elizabeth and Sean.

My Uncle Tony was my backbone and support throughout the books conception. If it wasn't for the long distance phone calls and the care packages, I don't think I would have had the will power to see the project until it's end. I found the inspiration to continue each time we talked and he would ask for an update. I leaned heavily on him, since I never told the rest of the family about my book. Thank you for your patience and understanding.

Throughout life there are people who come into your life and do nothing but enrich what you have. Numerous people have done just that with me. I wouldn't be where I am today without each and every one of them. First off, I want to mention a dear friend, Bob Boyd, who I know will be one of the first people to buy a copy. It never ceases to amaze me that our friendship never stops no matter where we both are. I love you, man!

For the last few years of my life I was lucky enough to be stationed with Brett Rouzer. I told him a long time ago what his dedication was going to be, so here it goes Brett, "With your help, I would have never finished this book." Seriously, I owe you a lot and I plan on incorporating Brett Stryker, Master Swordsman, in the next volume. Of course, I can't mention Brett without mentioning his lovely wife, Carol (whose name I also used) and his beautiful daughter, Chloe. Thank you for making me a part of your family. I love you guys!

This book wouldn't be in the shape it is without the constructive tampering of William Fisher, who tried his best to place as many sex scenes as he could throughout the novel. His interest in the novel was undying and his creative expertise was endless. Even though he is



disappointed that Talon never got laid, I still owe him a lot. I spent many nights with him on the basketball court and just as many with his family. I want to thank his beautiful wife, Genie, and his great children, Paul, MaryCatherine, and especially my favorite, Jocelyn. I miss you guys! I would like to mention a few other people, Steve Pothier and his family, Max Ferrer, and Eric Gage and his family. Thanks for everything.

During my tenure aboard the USCGC Vigorous I was blessed with an assortment of characters, friends and some of the funniest people I have ever met. I dedicate this book to their efforts for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

A number of members from the Vigorous had a direct hand in the creation of this book. First and foremost, I would like to thank Jack Bradley for the use of his first name and for being a good sport about my use of the name Jack. Just remember that whenever you don't know someone's name, just call them Jack. I almost gave up on the book towards the end when I turned in a business letter to William Segelken, who proceeded to bring me down to earth by declaring my grammar an atrocity. I owe him a deep thanks for making me take a good hard look at what I was writing. This book is better because of him.

One other ship will live with me in my memories for years to come: the United States Coast Guard Cutter Bittersweet. She has been decommissioned, but I will never forget the days I spent on her decks.

I wish all the sailors from the Vigorous and the former Bittersweet the best of luck with the future and of course, Fair winds and Following Seas! Semper Paratus.

For those I forgot, keep heart, I still have at least two more volumes until I consider the saga complete. My most important thanks goes to the person reading this book right now, you, the reader. May you enjoy the journey, the friendships, the characters, and the life I have written. Thank you!

## **Don't miss the next volume: The Heartfelt Saga: Book 2-Coming Soon!**

Please enjoy the following excerpt from the second installment in the Heartfelt Saga trilogy:

*The air around Valerica sparks with energy as the sides of the battlefield are drawn. The damage has been done. The war that once sat on the horizon is now filling the land with dread. The North has made the first move in the game and now the South is prepared to die in order to reunite the kingdom. King Heartfelt and the Heartfelt army are moving north in response to the rebellious vassals.*

*In Elizabeth Towne, Confidence Trynn proceeds with his duties to the King. His unit of elite Guardsmen is the first in a long line of support that will flow freely from his Vassal. The Unit is one day away from making the trip to Markham and combining forces with the Heartfelt and Redderin Guard.*

### **May 5th, 770; Confidence Court, Elizabeth Towne**

“Announcing Elizabeth Towne Unit One leader, Brett Stryker.” Sir Monad stepped back as he opened the door to allow the young man passage. As he pulled the door fully open he bowed in respect.

Unit One leader Brett Stryker walked a few steps into the Confidence's Court and stopped just inside the room. He let his eyes wander the court until they met with Confidence Trynn's. The Confidence nodded his head and motioned silently with his hand. Brett took a small breath and resumed walking. He felt the eyes of the court on him as he approached the seat.

When Brett was within five feet of the seat he knelt to one knee and bowed his head. “Your wish my lord?”

Confidence Trynn stood. “You have answered my call to service once again. Duty bound to the crown. Long live Heartfelt.” The Confidence walked down the stairs until he stood in front of the kneeling warrior. Placing his right hand onto the man’s shoulder he released him to rise. “Look me in the eyes my son!”

Guardsmen Stryker stood and looked his Confidence in the eyes. “My unit has been assembled and is ready to do your bidding.”

Confidence Trynn smiled briefly and clapped Brett on his shoulder. “With the court’s blessing and the backing of King Heartfelt may you restore peace in the land my son.”

Confidence Trynn nodded his approval. “Tomorrow you will depart for the units from Heartfelt and Redderin are already on their way. For now please invite your men to a feast to take place in the honor of this occasion. Tonight we shall celebrate the victory we will undoubtedly bring to the crown.”

“Your wish is my command.” Brett bowed deeply and held his position. “I am honored by the coming feast.”

### **See the stunning conclusion in The Heartfelt Saga: Book 3**

Please enjoy the following excerpt from the third and final installment:

*The sound of a charging horse is one I will not soon forget. As I lay here within earshot of the path, the hoof steps continue to go by. I am not sure I can move or at least that is what my body tells me. I think I have broken my back. I can hear my horse struggling to move, but I think she took more from the fall than I did. At this point I can safely say I have failed to complete the last task that was placed before me. I left a mere three months ago, with no idea I would end up two hundred yards away from completing my role. I can vividly see Prince Christopher waiting for me in Blackheart's quarters. Blackheart isn't due back for another few hours, although neither was I. Ironic that the one time I was early in my short life I wind up paralyzed on the Pendlewood forest floor. It won't be long before my horse gives in. Her breath has become swallow and the kicking has all but disappeared. I wonder what will go first, her spirit or her strength. Can it be I was naive enough to believe this was ever going to work? My father once said I was lacking in common sense and Prince Christopher often joked that my common sense is sitting on the mantel patiently awaiting my return. As I lay here in Pendlewood forest I see the sun is reaching its peak and once it passes, I will never see the same world I knew again. All of my life will be gone.....signed Michal Talon Bastian*