



Prologue - "Trek of Deliverance"

My name is Cedric...Cedric of Chessington. I am traveling with the greatest noble force ever established in the kingdom of Arrethtrae and beyond. We are on a crusade of deliverance, for the kingdom is in the hands of an evil warrior named Lucius. He is known as the wicked Dark Knight. He and his Shadow Warriors control the land...but their days are short.

What lies ahead can only be understood if you know what lies in the past. You may have joined me before to hear the telling of a gallant knight and his quest to fulfill the mission given him by the King of Arrethtrae. It is Leinad's story that brings understanding to the battle I journey toward. I first met Leinad when I was just a boy. His tales of great adventure captivated me. It was not until I was much older that I came to realize that those grand stories of the kingdom were true indeed. It is an honor and a privileged duty to retell the saga of the valiant Sir Leinad.

Surrounded by mounted men of valor and courage, the final leg of my journey affords time to reflect. Come with me back to the time of my mentor, Leinad, Knight of the King. His people were in bondage, but the King had called him to be the instrument of their call for freedom...





Chapter 1 - "A Call for Freedom"

In the desert still of a new morning, the King of Arrethrae knighted young eighteen-year-old Leinad. His people were in bondage under the heavy hand of Fairos of Nyland. Now was the time of deliverance, for the King had prepared Leinad for this very day.

As a boy, Leinad was trained by his father in the art of swordsmanship. His life was simple and filled with the contentment that the love from his father brought. However, one fateful day Leinad's world was turned upside down. While hunting in the forest north of his farm, he was captured by an army of evil Shadow Warriors, vicious men that have sworn their allegiance to the Dark Knight. After narrowly escaping death at the hands of his evil brother Zane, he returned to his farm to witness the horrifying murder of his father by none other than the Dark Knight himself, Lucius. Although grieved to the heart, Leinad and Tess, a young slave girl freed by his father, began a journey of survival. Escaping the destruction of natural disasters and the plots of evil men, they eventually became the slaves of the mighty Lord Fairos of Nyland. Once Lord Fairos discovered Leinad's skill with the sword, he appointed him as trainer of his guards, but Leinad's unyielding devotion to the true King of Arrethrae eventually won him an execution at the jaws of the Moshi Beast. In the desolate Banteen desert, Leinad escaped death once again and found himself under the

protection and tutelage of the only one who could give him what he needed. Here, the King completed Leinad's training and charged him with a mission that no one else could fulfill. His purpose was clear, and his mission awaited him. Though he did not find comfort in his own abilities, he drew assurance from the King's wisdom and confidence in choosing him to be the instrument of bringing the people out of slavery.

The Banteen desert laid a full day's journey from Lord Fairos's castle, Pyron Mid. The King gave Leinad a horse and a mission, one that was reserved for him from his birth. He entered Nyland wearing the garb of a knight and mounted on a white stallion named Freedom. The lush lands were pleasing to see after the many weeks in the desert. No one hindered his approach for he was obviously more than a mere slave, and yet one man did not pose a threat. Fairos often hosted men of importance in his castle, so his arrival did not draw much attention. He slowed his gallop to a trot. Slaves in the field glanced up momentarily from their work as he passed by, but the overseers scolded and whipped them back to their labor.

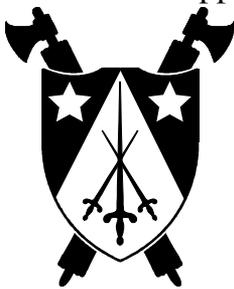
The cries of the slaves awakened the sick feeling Leinad felt in the pit of his stomach. The memories of the years he spent as a slave were not all sorrowful however. The friendships he developed with Quinn and some of the other slaves helped pass the long difficult days. And then there was Tess...Leinad missed her, and he knew that the thought of his death had caused her daily anguish. She was a special friend. The intolerable days of slavery were bearable because of her. He was continually enamored with her kind

heart and cheerful disposition. She was truly a faithful and loyal friend. Their earlier journeys bound them together, and Leinad did not realize how much he relished her company until now. No longer a child and not yet a woman, Leinad found it easy to be her companion. He was the big brother that she never had, and she was the younger sister that urged him to accept the responsibilities of a protecting young man. Her strawberry blond hair and blue eyes that sparkled with life helped to melt away the dreariness of slavery.

He searched for her in the mass of working slaves as he neared the castle, but the castle was so large, and Fairos now owned so many slaves that his efforts of searching were rewarded only with images of distraught faces. Some were familiar—most were not. The slaves kept their eyes lowered and on their work. No one recognized Leinad, the former slave.

Fairos's grand castle stood like a monument—a witness to the expansive power he wielded. Nyland was Nyland because of Fairos. He was the most powerful man in all of Arrethtrae. Along with the growth of his influence grew his pride and arrogance.

Leinad stopped at the drawbridge and took in the view of the majestic castle Pyron Mid in its entire splendor. The gate towers stood tall as if to proclaim that it was an impenetrable fortress, which no army in the kingdom could ever hope to seize. If Fairos were to fall, it would be for one reason only...the King wanted it. Such was the case, and so it was that Leinad was chosen to accomplish the



impossible. Unsure of the future but obedient and confident in the King, Leinad was willing to be the King's sword. So, in silence, alone, and atop a gallant white stallion, Leinad prepared himself to challenge the mightiest force in the entire kingdom. In his heart he knew the King was with him.

The moments passed and his stillness began to draw attention. Normally, a visiting nobleman would cross the drawbridge and announce himself to the gate guards. Leinad waited beyond the threshold, a clear message of insult never before witnessed at Pyron Mid. The keeper of the gate called for another guard. After a short exchange between the two, he called down to Leinad.

“Sir, state your name and your intentions. We shall herald your arrival to Lord Fairos.”

Leinad paused before speaking. “My message is for Fairos only,” he called. For a nobleman to omit the title ‘Lord’ was a more blatant insult than his refusal to enter the castle grounds. Slaves, overseers, and guards within listening distance stopped and gazed at Leinad in growing curiosity.

“*Lord* Fairos is not expecting visitors, and he will not come dancing to your whims, sir,” the guard replied. “I suggest that you depart at once.”

“My message is from the King, and I will wait here until Fairos hears it!” Leinad called back.

The gatekeeper and the other guard exchanged words again, and the guard disappeared. Word of the stranger's message for Fairos spread quickly between overseers, guards, and slaves alike. Time passed, and Leinad waited. Fairos was in no hurry to respond to

this rude nobleman and thus sent a message in return by his delay. A general movement of people toward the front of the castle was evident as word of Leinad's arrival spread. A group of slaves under the close watch of an overseer was returning to the castle with a supply of more bricks. As they passed, an adolescent boy caught the eyes of Leinad. He smiled with compassion at the young lad whose face revealed the weariness and total submission of a slave without hope. He recognized the lad, and the lad recognized Leinad. In a moment of transformation, the lad's face illuminated in hope and disbelief. He turned to the slave next to him.

"It's Leinad!" he exclaimed in an excited but hushed voice.

"Leinad's dead, boy," the man retorted, "and this man's a dead man too." The man turned to look, but the overseer shouted and cracked his whip above their heads. Not all of the slaves knew Leinad, but his name and rumor of his return spread.

Fairos finally appeared on the gate wall above Leinad with an air of authority and arrogance. Keston, who was the captain of the guards, and five of his men appeared in the gate below a moment later. Fairos glared down at Leinad who was still too far away to be recognized.

"Tell me, sir," shouted Fairos, "who is it that insults me with his presence and an absurd message from a make-believe king?"

Leinad sat tall upon Freedom. "My name is... Leinad, and I come by the authority of the King and by the might of his sword. I do not wish for harm to fall

upon you or any of your men. Hear the words of the King, ‘Let my people go!’”

Fairos did not move or respond, but the people did. An audible rumble of voices flowed like a wave around the castle. Keston responded too. His earlier humiliation at the hand of Leinad when he was Lord Fairos’s trainer had never fully abated. Thinking Leinad to be dead had quelled his desire for revenge, but now before him stood the very man that was the icon of his embarrassment before his own men. His anger was obvious—he drew his sword and advanced with the five guards. Part way to the drawbridge, Fairos spoke.

“Hold, Keston!” He paused. “Well, you certainly are not a nobleman, but rather a slave with no name in Nyland.” When Leinad was stripped of his title and authority as the trainer of the castle guards, Lord Fairos forbade all people to speak the name of Leinad.

“I am no slave, but I *am* a servant...a servant of the one true King and his people,” Leinad countered.

By now all labor had ceased, and most of the castle guards were on the wall or exiting the gate below to see the activity beyond.

“Kill him, Keston!” commanded Fairos.

Keston and the five guards resumed their advance toward the drawbridge. Leinad dismounted and drew his sword on the far side of the bridge. When Keston reached the bridge, he halted his men.

“Stay here—I will finish him myself!” he ordered.

Leinad walked onto the drawbridge toward the castle. Keston’s gait was sharp and full of fury. He was

anxious to execute final vengeance on this slave that would not go away.

The two met near the middle of the bridge, and Keston did not break his stride nor offer the greeting of mutual respect normally exchanged before such a fight. His sword struck first with intense aggressiveness. Although Leinad had seen Keston train and fight, he learned from his father never to underestimate his opponent. He parried Keston's barrage of cuts and slices and studied him. Keston's frustration mounted as he attacked with combination after combination against an opponent whose defense was flawless. Leinad matched Keston's speed and power while he held his ground.

"I have no quarrel with you, Keston," said Leinad. "It is Fairos I must face."

"You will only face Lord Fairos on your back...bleeding and dying after I am through with you!" said Keston in rage. "That sword will belong to me once and for all!"

"Very well, Keston, the choice is yours," Leinad warned.

Leinad deflected Keston's last offensive cut...and his last cut it was, for Leinad began an advance that amazed even the onlookers. Increasing his speed and power, Leinad's sword sliced through the air faster than Keston could counter. With each break in Keston's defense, Leinad made precision cuts in his flesh. First, Keston felt the tip of Leinad's sword cut through his left shoulder—then his right thigh—then his abdomen. Within a moment, Keston was bleeding from a dozen places on his body, but his sword arm

was still whole. Leinad's dominance was obvious and Keston was growing weak from exhaustion and loss of blood. His rage turned to submission and defeat.

When the fight turned in Leinad's favor, Fairos left the gate wall and made his way to the drawbridge. As he went, he violently pushed guards and onlookers aside. His anger grew since the people normally would show their respect by stepping aside and bowing as he passed. However, the guards and people were so enthralled with the duel between Keston and Leinad that Fairos's movement was ignored.

In a last chance effort, Keston tried to deflect a chest high cut and lunged forward with a thrust at Leinad's chest. Leinad easily parried the thrust to his left and executed a powerful bind on Keston's sword that forced it from his grip. Without a sword, and bleeding from all over his body, Keston knew he was finished. He fell to his knees before Leinad with his arms open wide.

"Have mercy, Leinad," Keston pleaded, speaking the forbidden name. "My life is in your hands."

Fairos finally broke through the crowd in full rage and started across the drawbridge.

Leinad stood before Keston with his sword pointed at his chest. "As I said, Keston, I have no quarrel with you. Swear that you will raise no sword against me or the King's people, and you shall live."

"I swear it—," his breath was interrupted by a sword that cut through his chest from behind.

"You have disgraced me and all of Nyland!" Fairos withdrew his sword from Keston's body. "No one does this to Lord Fairos and lives!"

Keston fell to the ground and died. Leinad stepped back in horror, amazed that Fairos was capable of such ruthlessness to one of his own. Fairos raised his sword to Leinad with hatred in his eyes and vengeance in his heart.

“You are a worthless slave, and I will dispense with you once and for all.”

The last time Leinad fought Fairos, he faced death at the edge of his sword, but that was before he met the King. The time was different, and so was Leinad. His sword belonged to the King, and so did his mission. He remained silent and prepared himself for the fight, for he knew that Fairos had shut his ears to words.

The two men engaged each other. Both were extremely skilled—both were very aware of the other’s mastery. The arrogance of Fairos was obvious, and he made an offensive advance to probe Leinad’s abilities. The swords screamed through the air, steel to steel. Fairos brought a powerful slice across Leinad’s torso. Leinad met the sword with the flat of his blade and countered with a quick cut across Fairos’s chest. Fairos could not regain protection with his sword in time and jerked his body backward to escape the deadly edge of Leinad’s blade. Seeing that Fairos was off balance, Leinad brought another slice from the right. Fairos pulled his sword across his body to meet Leinad’s sword, but the force of impact was too much to counter, and the razor sharp edge of Leinad’s sword cut into Fairos’s left shoulder.

Fairos recovered and paused. The flesh wound was not deep, and Fairos did not flinch from the pain, but as the blood trickled down his arm, the blow to his

pride cut deep. He glared at Leinad and then at his arm. Pure shock mixed with his existing anger. He was also becoming aware of an emotion that he had not felt for many, many years...fear. He tried to deny it, but the amazing skill and speed he saw in Leinad was something which all of his former foes did not possess. Leinad allowed Fairos his moment of reflection and was thankful himself for a break to regain his breath and his composure. He was strained but not exhausted. The King had not only trained him beyond mastery, but he had conditioned him as well. The few times Leinad fought outside of training, he dealt with fear himself. Now, however, there was no fear within him. He was not fighting for his life—he was fighting for the King and for the people. He carried the mission, the sword, and the skill of the King with him, and so he did not fear.

By now the castle and all of the people were nearly still, watching two masters fight to the death. Those on the fringes of the scene were compelled to draw closer.

From the heights of the castle gate wall, Lady Fairos and their son watched with apprehension. “Kill him, Father! Kill him!” screamed the boy.

Leinad readied himself for the next engagement. “The King demands the freedom of his people,” Leinad said sternly to Fairos. “Release them and no one will die.”

“You are a fool to believe that I would give you that which has made me great,” retorted Fairos.

Fairos attacked with the renewed fury of a battle warrior fighting for his life and his reputation. Leinad’s mind was focused and his determination set. The sound

of the clashing swords broke the silence of the awestruck crowd. Their fight moved from one side of the drawbridge to the other. Leinad became more aggressive and advanced on Fairos relentlessly until he was nearly off the castle end of the drawbridge. Both men were beginning to tire, but Fairos was becoming desperate. He returned an aggressive combination to put Leinad in retreat. As Leinad moved back, he forgot about Keston's body. He stumbled backward and fell onto the drawbridge decking. Fairos, seeing an opportunity to finish the fight, brought a two-handed cut from above his head down on Leinad who was now lying face-up. Leinad knew that he could not stop the powerful blow in this position, so he rolled to the side. Keston's body prevented him from rolling to the center of the drawbridge, and he was forced to the edge. Fairos's blade tore into the wood of the decking, just missing Leinad's shoulder. Leinad's rolling maneuver threw him off the drawbridge, and he was just able to stop his plunge into the moat by grabbing the edge with his left hand. He kept his grip on his sword, but he knew Fairos would be on him in an instant. He placed his sword and right hand on the deck of the drawbridge to lift himself, but Fairos slammed his foot down on the flat blade of Leinad's sword, pinning it to the deck. Leinad looked up into the sneering face of Fairos.

“Well, slave, it looks like you have failed again. I am king here. Your death will be my proclamation!”

Fairos raised his sword to deal his final blow to Leinad. In an instant, Leinad used his left elbow as leverage and pulled with all of his might to yank the

sword from beneath Fairos's foot. The smooth steel of the blade slid easily on the decking. Because Fairos had placed most of his weight on the sword, his foot slid forward with the blade, and he fell backward onto the drawbridge near its edge. Leinad threw his sword onto the drawbridge a few paces to his left, swung his body away from Fairos and onto the decking. Fairos was preoccupied with keeping himself from falling into the moat, which allowed Leinad enough time to reach his sword. When the scrambling was over, the two men once again faced each other.

The fight wore on, and the people were amazed at the relentless blur of the two swords. The onlookers continued to assemble and position themselves for a better view. Tess was with a large procession of slaves returning with a new load of bricks for the castle when she first saw the unusual crowd gathered about the drawbridge. Barak was leading the group.

Barak was the head overseer and the primary exacter of punishment meted out to the slaves. It was his whip that had sliced into Leinad's back ten times before his exile and supposed execution in the Banteen desert. Many slaves had died at the hands of Barak. He ordered the overseers to maintain control, but he soon realized that this was an event that had captured the attention of all. Tess was intrigued by the fight but was too far away to see who the men were.

Leinad's back was now to the castle and Fairos's was to the country beyond the moat. Leinad drove the fight hard, and Fairos could only defend and retreat. The endurance of the prime of youth, the masterful training of the King, and the sword of deliverance

overcame the ruthlessness of a battle experienced warrior and his arrogance. Leinad's continual barrage of powerful and precisely placed cuts eventually drove Fairos to the ground and onto his back. His sword was still in hand, but there was no more fight in it. He was beaten and everyone in that odd battle arena knew it. With one final massive crosscut, Fairos's sword was blown from his grip. It skidded across the drawbridge and plunged into the murky waters of the moat below.

The mighty Lord Fairos lay helpless before his 'slave'. Both men were breathing hard and sweat poured from their faces.

"I will not plead for mercy like Keston, slave," Fairos said with disgust between breaths.

Leinad stood over Fairos with the shining blade of his sword aimed at his chest. "Let the people go, Fairos," Leinad commanded.

"I will never let them go. You will have to kill me!" he said with contempt.

Leinad knew that the next action he took would be critical. He looked at the captivated guards, overseers and slaves, all stunned—waiting for his action. He didn't want any more bloodshed. If he killed Fairos, his loyal guards could turn the scene into a total massacre of the slaves. He needed Fairos to order the release of the people. It would be the only peaceful way to free them. He looked down at Fairos and stared into his eyes.

"No, Fairos, I will not kill you. I will do something far worse than that to you...I will let you live. You will live with the shame that a lowly 'slave' on a mission from the King defeated you." He withdrew his sword

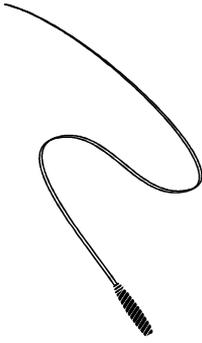
and held it high in the air. He turned and faced the people.

“People of Nyland,” he shouted. “Let it be known that by the might of the King’s sword, mighty Fairos was defeated. I challenge Fairos to another contest tomorrow. If he defeats me, I will serve as a slave under his hand until my heart beats no more. If I am victorious, let this be proof that the King reigns and that he will bring judgment upon you for enslaving his people.”

Leinad sheathed his sword and glared at Fairos once more. “If there is any honor left in you, meet me here tomorrow.”

“I will meet you and kill you, slave!” Fairos said with vehemence.

Leinad walked past him to his horse, Freedom. As the slave caravan moved closer, Tess had watched the last sequence of the fight between the two men and sensed something familiar about one of them, even from a distance. She tried to move faster, but the nearest overseer detained her. Her mind dared not think the impossible, but she could not quench the hope that was rising within her heart. For weeks, she had mourned the death of her dearest friend. When Leinad spoke to the crowd, she felt as though her stomach had flipped within her. She broke from the other slaves and ran toward the drawbridge in spite of the severe punishment she knew she would receive. The mere thought that Leinad might still be alive was all she needed to abandon caution and seek out the truth.



Leinad finished speaking as she passed Barak at the head of the slave caravan.

“LEINAD!” she called.

Barak released the coils of his whip and unleashed a vicious lash toward her back. “Back in line, slave!” he bellowed just as the tip of his whip tore into her back.

She screamed and fell to the ground in pain. Barak took a couple of steps forward to execute more punishment, but Leinad heard her call and her scream. He drew his sword and quickly covered the distance between them. Barak’s whip split the air again, racing to tear more flesh on Tess’s back. Leinad precisely crosscut with his sword just above her head and cleanly severed one third of Barak’s whip. Leinad slowed his approach but continued toward Barak with the wrath of a protective tiger. No one around dared challenge or stop him, for he had just beaten the best swordsman in all of Nyland. Barak retreated a few steps in fear. He pulled back what remained of his whip and directed another lash toward Leinad this time. Once again, Leinad precisely sliced the next third off of the whip. Barak now held a useless strap of leather. In sheer panic, he threw it at Leinad and fell back against a cart full of bricks.

“Stop him!” he yelled to the other overseers, but they did not move for their own fear.

Leinad closed in on Barak and pressed the tip of his sword into the fat of his neck. He glared into Barak’s pale white face with fire in his eyes. Barak’s obvious

cowardice made him appear like a frightened cornered rat.

“Many slaves have died at your evil hands, Barak,” said Leinad. “If you ever harm another slave, I will hunt you down and bring justice by the edge of my sword. I swear it!”

Leinad turned back to Tess. She was already on her feet and ran to him. She leapt and hugged him with both arms locked around his neck.

“Hello, Sunshine,” he said calmly and gently returned her embrace.

“I thought you were dead,” she said tearfully, still clinging to his neck.

“So did I,” he replied, “but the King brought me back.”

She stepped back and looked into his face to reassure herself that he was real.

“Let’s get out of here, Tess,” he said, and they walked to Freedom.

The commotion across the bridge gave Fairos a chance to recover himself. He walked to Keston’s body and picked up his sword. The humiliation he experienced fueled his anger with every step. When he reached his guards across the drawbridge he stopped. He read the loss of respect in their eyes and exploded in rage. He pointed to one.

“You! Draw your sword!”

The guard hesitantly drew his sword, and Fairos attacked him. The guard defended himself as best he could, but Fairos quickly ran him through, and he fell dead at his feet. Fairos pointed to another.

“Draw your sword!” he commanded.

Again, another fell. Then another, until all of his guards cowered before him and his fury was abated. He threw Keston's sword to the ground.

"I am Lord Fairos! Tomorrow he dies!" He screamed. "Double the work shifts of all slaves!" Fairos turned and entered the gates of his castle.

Leinad mounted Freedom and pulled Tess onto the horse behind him. "Have faith, people," he called. "The King will set you free...have faith!"

Leinad took Tess to the sanctity of the countryside to let her taste freedom once again...at least for a day.





Chapter 2 - "Hardened Heart"

Leinad and Tess found shelter within a quiet grove of trees a few hours ride from Pyron Mid. During the ride, Tess asked Leinad about his experience in the desert and his training with the King. Leinad dismounted near a brook that meandered through the trees. He helped Tess down from the horse and saw her flinch from the pain in her back.

"How's that cut, Tess?" he asked.

"It'll be fine. It's just a scratch," she said and shrugged, but Leinad turned her so he could see the wound more clearly. It was on her lower back on the right side. Most of the bleeding had stopped but it looked painful.

"It's not just a scratch," Leinad said, wishing he had stopped and dressed the wound earlier. "We need to wash it and cover it. Come over to the water."

Leinad washed the dried blood and cleaned the cut. Barak was an expert with the whip...Leinad could testify to that. Although the cut was not too deep, it was as long as his hand. He was quite concerned since he knew that unattended wounds could fester and even cause death. He applied some of the sweet smelling salve that the King gave him.

"What's that?" asked Tess.

"It is an ointment made from a rare spice found across the Great Sea," replied Leinad. "It is called the Life Spice. My father once told me about it, but I never saw any until I met the King."

Leinad wrapped a clean cloth around her waist and covered the gash.

“It feels better already...thanks!” She grabbed his arm and looked into his eyes with a heart-warming smile on her face. Tess kept her hair tied back and out of her face. It was necessary to work efficiently. She swept back a few loose strands of hair from her soiled face.

“I missed you, Leinad. I still can’t believe you’re alive.”

“I missed you too, Tess. Everyday, my hope was that you would be all right until I returned,” he said, returning the smile. Their temporary separation coupled with the possibility of never seeing each other again caused them both to realize how important and deep their friendship had become.

Tess washed up in the cool water while Leinad built a fire and fixed some food. They enjoyed their meal together and talked at length about the King and their future.

“Well, Leinad, here we are again. The two of us with the whole kingdom to explore.” Leinad read concern on her face. She looked earnestly at him. “I want so badly to just leave this wretched place...I don’t want to lose you again, Leinad...please don’t fight Fairos tomorrow.”

“You know I have to go back, Tess,” he said sympathetically. “The King’s people will die there unless I do. We are part of them now. Don’t worry...the King will deliver all of us from the hand of Fairos.”

Tess looked solemnly at the ground. "I know we must go back. I couldn't leave them either. I just wish there was a better way than to see you face Fairos again."

Leinad looked sharply at Tess. "*We* are not going back. *I* am going back and *you* are staying here where it is safe until I return," Leinad said emphatically.

Tess narrowed her eyes at Leinad. "I will run all the way to Pryon Mid if I must...I am going with you!"

Leinad shook his head and looked upset, but he loved her courage. "Get some sleep, Tess. We both need it."

The weariness of slavery had taken its toll on Tess, and Leinad was exhausted from the swordfights earlier that day. Tomorrow was going to be another very intense day.

The next morning, they ate their breakfast in silence. "You're not coming with, Tess," Leinad finally responded to her unspoken thoughts. "I don't know how Fairos will respond, and it might get brutal. Yesterday he demonstrated just how barbaric he can be."

Tess looked at him sternly. "I suppose you're right. It is much safer to leave a young helpless girl in the wilderness all alone."

Leinad couldn't help the smirk which turned into a smile that crossed his face. "You are an ornery lass and have been from the first time I met you."

Tess's ability to state the obvious when he missed it kept him humble. He just didn't like it to happen too often.

They made their way back to Pyron Mid and arrived just before noon. The cool morning air was quickly consumed by the sun of a cloudless day. At the castle, the entire entourage of guards, overseers, servants, and slaves were gathered around the drawbridge. Leinad and Tess dismounted.

“Promise me you will not die, Leinad,” Tess whispered to him earnestly. She felt sick to her stomach and nearly wished she had stayed behind now.

“I promise, Tess,” he said calmly. “The King will be my strength and my assurance.”

Tess took Freedom aside, and Leinad walked through the aisle formed by the crowd leading up to the drawbridge. The slaves looked more worn than usual. Leinad tried to encourage them with a determined smile, but most of them looked weary and empty. The younger ones responded enough to fuel Leinad’s drive. He walked to the middle of the drawbridge and waited.

Fairos soon appeared and approached Leinad on the drawbridge. “As you can see I have gathered everyone so that they may witness your death today, slave. Your futile attempt to rescue these pathetic people is over, and so is your life.”

“The King demands one thing from you, Fairos,” Leinad replied with authority. “He made a promise to free these people. If I die today, you can be assured that another will come who is much more powerful than I. Either way, your time is short unless you let his people go.”

“I am king here,” said Fairos, “and I swear by the power of my sword that I will never let these slaves go!”

Fairos drew his sword to emphasize his statement. Leinad drew his sword in response and took a swordsman's stance.

"Then you swear in vain," replied Leinad.

Once again, the sound of clashing swords filled the Nyland countryside. The blazing speed of the razor-sharp steel captivated every soul present. All eyes were fixed on the duel between castle lord and former slave. The fate of all onlookers depended on these two men and the outcome of their battle. Both men knew their opponent's strengths and weaknesses well. It was not necessary to feel out the fight. Their engagements were intense and direct.

The fight raged on—positions changed, tactics changed. Leinad focused on a seamless defense and a powerful, precise offense. Though Fairos held nothing back, the fight turned against him once again. In spite of all of his skill, experience, and rage, he could not bring Leinad down—exhaustion was approaching. His cuts came slower and his parries were slightly delayed. It was all Leinad needed to open the fight to his favor, and he pressed in hard. Fairos felt the fight slipping away so he gathered his strength for one last offensive advance. Leinad saw Fairos initialize his attack and feigned an opening in his defenses. Fairos brought a combination crosscut and slice followed by a powerful thrust at Leinad's chest. It was a last chance effort, so he put his entire strength and weight into the maneuver, hoping to sink his sword deep into his opponent. Leinad ended his ploy by quickly parrying the thrust and stepping aside. Fairos stumbled forward and fell to the decking of the drawbridge. Leinad

quickly covered him with his sword to prevent him from rising, but there was no fight left in Fairos.

“End this misery for everyone and let the people go, Fairos,” Leinad said as rivers of sweat ran from his brow.

Fairos worked hard to catch his breath, “I will not yield to a slave.” Fairos slapped Leinad’s blade with his own and began to rise. “And I will not free my slaves.”

Leinad let him pass to return to the castle. The humiliated and hate-filled castle lord strode with his chin a little lower than normal.

“I challenge Fairos to another contest tomorrow so that all may see the work of the King!” Leinad shouted for all to hear.

Fairos stopped at the far side of the drawbridge and turned to face Leinad. His face projected the hate that was within him. He did not respond to Leinad but turned instead to Barak.

“Barak!” he yelled loud enough for every slave to hear. “Cut all of the slaves’ food rations in half!” He then turned and walked to the gate of his castle. Those he passed kept their eyes to the ground.

Though he was victorious in the swordfight, Leinad stood on the drawbridge feeling completely defeated. The moan of the slaves crushed his heart and his hope. He walked to Tess and his horse. The other slaves revealed their disgust.

“Some deliverer you are, Leinad,” said a man by the name of Garrin. “It looks like all you’ll deliver is a bunch of dead slaves.” Garrin was a man who would compromise anything or anyone to better himself.

Because of his overbearing personality, some of the slaves looked to him as a leader, and he despised Leinad's encroachment on his influence with the people.

"Leave us alone. Because of you, we're overworked, and now we're starvin' too," came a rebuttal from another man.

Leinad and Tess mounted Freedom and left the castle grounds under jeers and taunts. They rode in silence. Tess felt his pain but knew that words were best left unsaid. What should have been a day of celebration became a day of oppression. Leinad felt responsible for it all.

How many will die today because of me? he asked himself. The horse's rhythmic bounce seemed to pound that question into his mind over and over.

