

Retreat and Victory

By Rhondi Ann

The moment he discovered the truth, Landry rode hell bent from the battlefield. His troops followed his cowardice, all in a headlong scramble for days until exhaustedly grinding to a halt. He hadn't wanted them, but now he had to carve out a sanctuary at the edge of enemy territory. The wounded huddled in blanket and branch lean-tos, with the more able-bodied camped in a ring around them, to give and retain heat. Uniforms blending into the gray and brown landscape contrasted their blood-stained faces. They'd found water but little more than a freshet dribbling through a spindly forest. Exhausted horses sucked at muddy water and immediately put their heads down to pull at trampled grasses.

"Sur, they meant us to die there. Every one of us."

"They did. No witnesses to a resounding defeat." He looked his non-com in the eyes.

Huff had to be as stumbling tired as the rest but stayed on his feet. "What about you, sur?"

Landry paused as he readied to leave the camp. No bedroll for him yet, as it should be. They were his burden. "Food for the pots seems to be next. I'll range about, see what can be foraged. Tomorrow, when we're rested, we'll have a proper hunt." He caught up a gunny sack and tucked it into his belt.

“Stay eyes facing outward, your backs to our own, and bows and spears at hand. Keep the axes and daggers for close work if necessary. Set a watch. And build up a fire.”

“Soup seems most likely then. I’ll be ready.”

“I agree, Sergeant. I’ll be back before dusk.”

They both glanced at the sky. Little time to salvage what he could from the wilderness as winter closing in brought shorter days and fewer harvests to gather.

“This is no land for us, sergeant. I won’t be long.”

His memory echoed uneasily. A vile thing brushed up against his thoughts. *I taste you. I will find you.*

That thing, that repulsive being, had slurped up every death it touched in battle. Landry prayed he’d left it behind. Like a fat, glistening slug ready to burst, it had preened over its victory and remained insatiable. He’d run hard and fast enough to bring them all away. It would be the only redemption for his actions if he had.

“Sur? A’right, sur?”

Landry shook it off. “Right enough, sergeant. Mind our lot, will you?” He had no wish to be about in the dark. The sergeant scratched his half-bald pate.

“Are you plannin’ a re-group, sur? If you don’t mind me asking.”

He wiped the back of his hand across his brow and sketched a fingertip across as well to renew his personal ward as he did. “There’s likely to be no one to rejoin. We are scattered from here to the ends of the country, if anyone else lived.”

“What about the prophecy, sur?”

Landry sucked in a breath. “We did not go to war because of a be-damned prophecy. We came to steal harbors and land and riches, and slaughter another people

who happen to be different from us. There is no prophecy that could defend those actions.”

The sergeant crooked his head to one side. “It’s a gud thing we lost, then, aye? But there’s still a prophecy at hand, bout th’ Lion and th’ Griffon and we were to find ‘em. Save the world, they said.” He tugged at his belt. “Seems a need for that.”

Landry waved the words aside. “Sergeant, we were squashed, well and proper. And now we’re starving. I meant to remedy at least part of that. As for the rest, when they get another army together, our betters will take care of that.”

Landry snugged his gloves tighter, caught up his horse’s reins and set out on foot. His mount blew tiredly at him.

“I know, old boy. You’ll get a bit of rest if I set a snare. I’ll tie you off in a field while I hunt as quietly as I can.” Landry saw then that he’d cast a shoe somewhere, no knowing where it lay between here and the battlefield and he wasn’t about to head back to look for it. The hoof seemed relatively intact and the foot not sore, so he would leave it be. He rubbed his palm over the beast’s whiskery nose. Spot sauntered after him.

As a cavalry horse, Spot proved light on his feet despite his sturdy build, and as fearless as a horse could be trained to be. He’d kept Lan alive more than once and, as he moved across the wilderness behind his rider, stayed relatively quiet.

I will slurp your flesh and suck on your bones.

Lan shivered and cast about. Spot threw his head up, ears twitching and alert, and refused to take another step.

They had traveled a good bit, the camp out of earshot and sight, and if he looked back over his shoulder, the fire's smoke sign trailed only a thin blue wisp above the forest canopy, hardly noticeable.

Am I ahead of you or behind you? Time will tell.

The horse sensed a little of what Landry did. They'd drawn interest. He, and the soldiers with him, might be pursued by more than a voice, a bodiless haunt. He had to hustle them all out of range, and that meant stamina. Hope. He'd find a way to light their will to survive despite the defeat.

Food, first. He dropped the reins while he scouted. Something had been digging about the meadow and he followed, finding disturbed roots and tubers which he gathered up and stuffed into his sack. He wanted meat—his troops, particularly the wounded, needed meat. Even a soup or preferably a stew could be stretched and Sal, bless her barnacled old heart, could be persuaded to open her spice reserves for the good of the others.

If he had a heart, it pinched a bit. Sal might lose her foot. It looked bad, but he'd not wanted to cut away the boot to tend it, hoping that the swelling would go down enough to get the leather off. She'd need the boot if she kept the foot.

I will find you. And then I will inhale your soul and your power.

Landry sighed. He had no cure for his fears. He thumped his forehead. Perhaps he only imagined his past catching up with him.

His horse whuffled behind him, ranging with him step by step, cropping as he came. He could feel the horse's heat wash over his back and found a certain comfort in it. He felt bone-weary and haunted, those shadowy thoughts overlying his own. He hadn't

been for the war, had fought the discussions of it tooth and nail and been demoted for his dissent. The troop here had no idea they fought under a demoted and disgraced grand-major. He was a captain to them, and he'd operated as one the moment they'd been given under his authority.

His jaw hurt and he found himself with teeth clenched so tightly he could hear them grind. Landry put his hand out and flexed it while breathing deep. It did not do to mourn before he had to. Bad luck, in fact, country folk like the sergeant would tell him. He could tell them of what bad luck could truly be, but he had no desire to break them any more than the retreat already had.

On the air, light as a song, he heard a full-throated river and turned toward it, hoping for water fowl, perhaps, fish, or even frogs. The wash and gurgle drew him. They had camped by a freshet but this, this, was the river it fed, gray with cold and a finger or two of ice along its banks. Landry stretched his hand over the liquid and, even through the glove, he could sense its quality, sweet water, clean and good. This was where they needed to move camp. He smiled tightly at that, just before the tears came. They ran down his cheeks unbidden and he ducked his head in both surprise and shame.

They'd stayed with him, even in full retreat. All of them still a-horse and alive enough to realize that he had no intention of making them stand where it could not hold or advance the front, of making them fight to the last soldier for no good reason. They deserved better and had thrown their lot in with his. Landry dipped a hand up and wiped his face and tears away.

He dampened his power quickly. He had not believed any of the spies bringing back early word to the war council (the ones who were able to send back or return) about

a rising sorcerer. Such a magic worker consumed lesser souls as power was most easily gotten by absorbing the weak, a despicable practice. Or, it could be had by years of wisdom and study. He had not chosen either with no ambition eating away at him, content to be what he was. Still, Landry had not been able to place credence in the reports. Wanton wildfires were the result of careless poachers or lightning strikes, and in a few cases, those lunatics who delighted in flame. They were not a “campaign of sorcerous endeavor”. Mysterious poisonings were as often as not the result of bad meat and even worse cooking preparations. Counterfeit coinage was the endgame of thieves and scoundrels. The abduction of a royal remained most often an inside job for ransom or a leg up on the ascendency. He could go on about the fallacies, and had, before his abrupt dismissal and demotion.

The spies had no real idea for what they searched. He could have told them. Storms that walked backward. Ill-gotten creatures that rose from swamps and marshes. Restless dead that would not stay in their graves unless burned. Sweet water that suddenly became undrinkable. Those were the signs he could read.

Yes, Eskariel had its share of bad fortune. All the more reason to stay clear of the kingdom. But heads other than his prevailed, especially upon news of a plague tearing the countryside apart. It would be weakened. Ripe for the taking, Eskariel a plum too rich to be ignored.

Politics and raider economics drove their war machinery. And now he had proof he had never wanted. A wing of swift water splashed lightly on him, washing away his thoughts and sensibilities.

Landry straightened on the riverbank and that's when he caught sight of it: two bodies locked in mortal combat and both as still as death.

The feather body lay on top, a bird of prey with wings still outstretched and talons sunk into its rival, but its competitor wore thick fur. He approached cautiously and regretted what he saw. A fine looking raptor of copper, crimson and cobalt blue feathers and a scrappy russet colored tomcat born to ground beneath him, claws hooked into one another, beak and jaws stretched wide for biting, both succumbing to this battle. Meat for the pot, undoubtedly, but two warriors he would rather not have taken for food. The bird, twice the size of the cat, had taken him down, one talon still caught at the edge of the cat's eye, blood dried there. The tom had his teeth sunk into the raptor's throat, with crimson drops and feathers decorating his jaw in a fierce encounter. No lesser warriors than his own troopers these two, but meat was meat. He reached down to separate them so he could fold their bodies into his gunny sack when the cat blinked.

Green eyes tempered with gray, the one pinned open by the bird's claw, stared at him. He touched the beast and found it still somewhat warm; for all that it lay on the cool ground, unable to free itself from the hold and weight of its rival. "Now there," Landry said softly. "Let's see how bad it is."

He moved to gather up the bird, folding the wings carefully and then that beast struggled in his hands a bit, and he found himself with two fighters still alive. The great predator piped at him, startling Landry who had thought of stripping his gloves off to tend to the cat and decided he was better off against that beak and those talons to keep them on.

He murmured to both of them as he untangled them, soft words to keep them still and quiet, cursing himself silently for not just wringing their necks and taking them back for dinner but he couldn't do it. They had struggled just as hard to survive as any of his soldiers. Now, if he could not keep them alive, that would be another matter. But as he unwound them, he found that fang and claw had only penetrated superficially, and the worse wound on either of them was the tomcat's one eye, and he hoped that was only the edge, the lid. A good cleaning and a bit of honey might handle that. It was sheer fatigue that had brought the fight to a halt. Over what...eating each other? He could not tell. Winter made desperate foes as well as allies.

Landry stood, finally, and shrugged off his jacket to hood the bird which instantly ceased to struggle, even when he put it back on the ground, wrapped in the garment. The tomcat had more grit and hissed at him until Landry finally stripped off one glove and laid bare skin on it.

Then the russet and cream furred beast turned to look at him, squinting with the one eye half-closed, as if evaluating him.

"Aye, you've the right of it. I have a bit of power," Landry admitted.

The cat squirmed out of his hold anyway but stayed by his feet before letting out a harsh meow and trotting off. He looked after it. The tom stopped with a swish of his tail.

"Want me to follow, do you?"

The tail swiped the air again. Landry shrugged a shoulder and stepped off after.

About thirty good strides away, he could see where the fight had started. A wild boar, a young one, lay in the bracken. It had been attacked by both bird and feline it seemed, and a fine kill it had been. Then, the pair must have turned on each other. Or,

more likely, the cat had gone for the throat of the boar at the battle's end and the bird had dived in, thinking both good prey.

Landry smiled. At least he could spare either victor from the cooking pot, for this boar would fill troop bellies for days. The russet cat jumped atop it and glared at him.

"Fair enough. I'll throw you a haunch. That do you?" He looked at the squint-eyed tom, with his crumpled ears and scarred flanks, a tough old guy if Landry was any judge, and took out his knife. The haunch, when separated, proved more than the tom could drag and Landry got the look again.

"Fine, fine. Which way?"

The cat trotted off. He found rocks across the river, getting his paws little more than dampened, and Landry enjoyed the same steps. Into the edge of a darkening forest they went until a great, hollow log crossed the path. The cat me-rowed again and, from under the log, out pranced another miniature version of himself, complete with white paws and long, white tufted ears, then scampered a black shadow, and a neat little calico. Behind them came their soft-coated brown-striped mother. Landry tossed the haunch to them.

"You fought for better reasons than I," he told the tom. "Now I've my own to tend." He turned on heel.

The curious copy followed him a bit, stopped to confer with his father, whisker to whisker, and then scampered up to Landry. Before he could react, the kit had scaled his trouser leg with sharp little needled claws and perched on his shoulder, purring loudly in his ear. The rest of the family turned away dragging the meat with them. "Wait here," Landry sputtered. "You've forgotten one."

The squinty-eyed tom halted, sat on his butt, and wrapped his bushy tail about. He groomed a paw for a moment before sending a merp up to his kit.

The kitten on Landry's shoulder answered back, just as mildly, but less of a questioning note. The kit tapped his ear.

"Asked and answered," Landry said. He added, "I'm still not taking you with me." Landry reached up and caught the creature, purring and all, and set him firmly on the ground. He turned on heel and made great strides as the trees threw long shadows and he was suddenly eager to get back to camp before dark.

He didn't know the kitten galloped behind him until they hit the river and the little guy missed the second stone step. Swept into the cold water and fast current, the kitten spun away with a terrible cry. Landry jumped after him, water swallowing him up over his knees. Only the cream and russet head stayed above water as he pawed futilely to stay afloat. He dove after the animal, reached out and snagged him up. The soggy kitten burrowed into his chest, little heart thumping like a quick-march drumbeat.

Landry looked back at the forest and then ahead at the open meadow. Long shadows speared both. "I'll take you back tomorrow." He stuffed the wet thing inside his shirt and spent his time hauling the carcass back to the bird, still quiescent in his jacket, catching it up, and whistling for Spot.

Jaws dropped when he rode into camp, little light left to expose his passengers and catch, but enough. The kitten shoved his head out, his whiskers flared.

"Well, captain," the sergeant managed. "How many pots?"

"One big one will do for tonight, I think. We'll journey wrap the rest after a roast. Sal awake?"

“Aye, and we got her boot off. The foot looks bad enough but we think she’ll heal. If we can keep her blood from fevering.”

“Get some pepper and salt from her if you can, and let’s get this boar butchered, for spit cooking, and in the soup pot. I see Darnett’s built a nice fire ring.”

Huff quirked a brow. “And the—ah—kit? And whatever is in your jacket?”

“There’s roots in the gunny sack to add to the soup pot and as for these two, one owes me a rescue debt...come to think of it—” Landry hauled out the still damp russet body. “Both do. And I intend to collect.”

The kit brushed a paw, claws velvety, across his nose. The sergeant choked a laugh back and began to bark orders about the campsite. “Look alive, boots! We need spits for a wild pig roast!”

Landry found a stout piece of log and loaded the bird onto it, stripping the jacket away. It fluffed up proudly and eyed him, beak clacking. A warning but not an attack. “I see you,” Landry told him. He still had one glove on and one off, so he removed the second and tucked it away with the first. No sense losing another pair of gloves. He’d had his field duffel sliced away from his saddle days ago, and no spares. He stroked the bird with one hand while distracting it with the other. It seemed, other than terribly thin, in relatively good shape. It held no sign that it had ever been handled but it also held no fear of him, so it might have been once, when quite young. Perhaps it had been flown and never returned to its handler, trading security for freedom. He got some bloody strips of meat as the boar went through butchering and carried them back to feed.

He noted, as he tended the bird, that the voice in his head had gone quiet. A figment of his imagination, no doubt, fueled by his own cowardice. But he could be brave enough here and now, taking care of his own.

The raptor took the strips quickly but daintily from his fingertips, turning one amber eye and then another upon him. The russet kitten sat down next to him, watching, and caught up scraps that both Landry and the bird let fall.

Landry had never seen a raptor as large and handsome as this fellow. Perhaps a female, actually, because of the size but not necessarily from the coloration of the feathers. He ran a hand down its breast. "You should be free," he murmured to it.

The bird bent its head down to stroke its beak over his hand. As it touched him and raised its head, Landry's head dizzied and for the barest of moments, he looked at himself, although a bit oddly, the focus not quite right. Gray streaked his hair at his temples, the dark brown growth otherwise a bit ruffled from wind and his own habit of running his hand through it, his eyes shadowed and bruised by fatigue, a dark purple mark across his jawline where a saber haft had bashed him but he'd stayed a-horse, and his cream shirt disheveled with great damp spots upon it. He had never looked less like a grand-major. Even so, that title was certainly not the one his family thought he'd earn when they sent him off to join the service. They'd hoped he'd get training to make his talents bloom, but he'd chosen to hide them instead, a battle sorcerer being an abomination as he saw it, no matter in what army. Nonetheless, a blue aura surrounded him, like a crown, shocking him to see it.

And then he was himself again, the bird nibbling at his fingers seeking more bloody shreds, and he told himself he'd imagined it. He fed it slowly, unwilling to give it

more than it should have, hungry though it had been. He knew it unwise to overfeed it until it gained strength, and with that practical knowledge came another realization: they had bonded. He had not willed it, but there it was, nonetheless, a string between them. One where, if he wished, he could let the creature fly and share its vision.

He watched the bird gobble down another piece. “Where were you when we needed to know how the enemy advanced, eh?”

Elsewhere. Winged free. Even if it could answer him, it had no language for past time and regret.

The kitten hauled itself onto his thigh and nuzzled its way into a comfortable spot, before closing its own smoky-jade eyes and drifting into sleep. “And you,” Landry told it, poking a fingertip into its ribs, “Definitely go back tomorrow.” He moved it to the ground and returned to his soldiers as he tugged his jacket back into place. More than a few beckoned him toward Sal’s bedroll, and she sat up on an elbow, and gave him a half-smile as he folded his legs to sit next to her.

She patted his knee. “Got us out of there, you did.”

“I ran. The rest of you just followed me.”

“You ordered a retreat. We all saw the signal.” Sal’s dark eyes glittered a bit, as if daring him to nay-say her. He thought it wise not to. “What plans have you now?”

“Find a port. Get us passage on a ship home.”

“Made of money, are you?”

He ran his fingers along his jacket. “I’ve got enough gold buttons to finance us. We might have to sell the horses. I haven’t thought that far ahead yet.”

“That would be a sorry thing to do but understandable. How long have we got?”

“I can give you a day or two and then we have to move on. We should be able to get that boot back on without too much hurt.”

She nodded. “I’ll be riding one way or another then.” She shifted and a small moan escaped her. He immediately put his hand out to help and she slapped it away gently.

“Enough of that, captain. None of us can turn soft.”

He stood. “You’re right at that.” He put his hand down to touch her forehead, a kiss from his fingertips. She burned. “Good night, Sal. Darnett, get a jug of cool water over here, Sal needs it.”

The smell of sickness, as well as dinner cooking, followed him.

His troops ate well. Sang a bit. Made plans.

Old Sal passed before the fire died down, and they buried her by the smoky half-light of torches, away from the camp and under a bush that would flower in the spring. Huff wept a bit and Darnett searched her saddlebags for her little pouches of herbs and a few words were said. More plans were thought of for the next day.

But tomorrow never came.

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The kit, who’d burrowed into his blankets and under one arm as if it thought it still slept under a great, hollowed-out log, nudged him insistently with a well-whiskered and very wet nose. Landry pushed him aside with a grumble.

The kitten pounced back. It made a little growling noise deep in its throat and Landry lifted his head to look at it. In stalking mode, on belly, with whiskers now flattened and ears back, it flipped a paw at him.

Landry reached out, got it by the scruff of the neck and tossed it a few feet away. It hissed faintly in protest and came bounding back, only for Landry to catch it up again, his own face furrowed in dislike as well. The kit wrapped his jaws about the knuckle of his hand, needle teeth poised to sink in, but they did not. He held on determinedly.

Landry opened his mouth to scold it, but a dragging noise caught his attention. He instantly looked up and about, his own bedroll on the outer circle, away from the fire ring, giving up comfort to the wounded. A scraping came again, something being hauled over the ground laboriously. Then, a shadow came between him and the glow of the coals still flickering in the fire's bed. A tall, man-sized shadow hobbled steadily towards his sleeping troopers.

Landry stumbled to his feet, grabbing for his saddle and the sword sheath lying next to it. Old Sal walked the campground, uncaring if one foot twisted aside uselessly and she wobbled, stepping on ankle bone on one floppy foot and listing back again. She did not curse in pain or moan for breath but she did make a noise, a low hissing through her open lips, as if the night wind skidded over and through her jaws.

She moved stealthily and steadily toward those who slept in peace. Dirt rained from her body and clods of grass and brush. Her teeth clacked. She would maul and tear flesh, claw and contaminate whatever she touched. She did not smell...yet. Her clouded gray eyes could see only distorted forms, for she reacted to them, Landry couldn't be

certain how. He had little training in ghouls. Perhaps she smelled them. Or felt their body heat. Unerringly, she drew nearer. Thump and drag, step and drag.

He pulled his sword loose and yelled at those two closest to Old Sal. “Darnett, Linnea! ATTENTION!”

A soldier would have to be dead to the world not to react. They jumped to their feet, startled but alert and then Linnea screamed as she saw Old Sal reach for her. Others began to rouse.

“Hold steady,” Landry ordered. “Forward face, I’m bringing up the rear! Hold your course for my action!”

Drilled into them for years if not decades, the two held their positions, shaking, faces pale in the dim moonlight, dead certain in front of the ghoul. Sal swiped again, scant inches from Linnea’s stricken face. Landry lunged up behind and swung his sword, cleaving Old Sal’s head from her neck and she toppled, convulsing until finally her body stopped flopping.

“G-good one, captain.” Linnea put her hand over her chest to steady herself.

“We need to burn the body or it will rise again. Head, as well.”

Huff marched about, his shirttails bouncing over his drawers, bowed legs exposed to the night and everyone else. “You and you. Get ropes, lash it around, touch as little as you can. Take it to the grave, it’s bare enough there. Walson, get kindling and branches. Darnett, bring along a coal or two to light ‘em. No fussing from any o’you, this’s no longer our Sal.” He began to kick the head along the ground in front of him, aiming to what would become a bonfire. He’d gone to bed pantless but never bootless.

Landry's great bird flung its wings akimbo, despite the hooding blanket it bore, and he pulled the garment off. The bird hopped into the air but he'd fashioned jesses, of a sort, and it could not soar free. Agitated, it skipped along its perch. He brushed the back of his hand along it.

"Fly," he told it. "Into the night like an owl, above the trees and look for another." Without words then, he told it what else it must sense. He freed it and lifted it with a toss of his arm. It circled above him twice and then went to do his bidding.

Pulling his pants on and fastening their buttons, Huff rejoined him. "Burning will do for that thing, aye, captain?"

"It will."

"We said words for her soul again."

Landry looked at his subordinate, hearing the unsteadiness in his voice but reading nothing in his expression. "That will undoubtedly carry her onward."

Huff nodded abruptly. "So, cap, we was all wondering—how safe is it to be burning that great bonfire?"

"Safe as it can be. We've already been spotted or Old Sal would not risen." He turned his eyes to the sky. "We'll see if the bird can spot the enemy."

Huff spat to one side. "We've fight left in us, though I hain't sayin' how much if it be sorcery."

"I know. We've a good group here. We brought them in, we'll take most of them out."

"Yessur." Huff ran his hand over his head, scratching at the small tufts of hair still sprouting here and there. "One of the green boots says that there is a sun eagle,

sometimes called a griffon. Rare in these parts. She says it's a powerful totem where she comes from. It's no nightflyer, though."

A rookie recruit. He had not that many women in his unit, so he'd sort out later who had spoken and learn what more he could. The russet kit scaled his leg again, nails popping in and out of his trousers' fabric as he did. Landry looked down ruefully. He'd have little clothing left if the beast kept at it.

The russet hunkered down on his shoulder, rubbed his head against Landry's jaw, purring. Huff eyed him.

"Can't say as he looks like summit could tackle a boar, even with that great raptor's help."

Landry had told the story over dinner. "Oh, wasn't him, but his sire."

"Ah. Musta missed that bit when I was crackin' open my bones for th' marrow." The sergeant reached over and rubbed the creature behind one ear. The purr grew louder. "Looks to be a warrior. Blood will tell, eh?"

Landry felt the sergeant grow faint beside him, and the cool air of the night grow fierce, buffeting him, the scent of trees and warmth of smaller birds nesting in them filling his senses. He put a hand up to stay Huff from talking any more and gave himself over to riding the sun eagle.

From unexpected sights of the darkened forest, suddenly a vision welled up and he turned the eagle away abruptly before she could be sighted or sensed, though he doubted that would be entirely possible. Another fire bloomed on the ground, small, built for one because the ring of undead about the fire builder needed no heat. Or light. Or

anything but a sorcerous command and a desire for fresh flesh. Only the being seated in the center had a need for warmth.

Landry tumbled back into his body, pulse thumping so quickly he felt certain that Sergeant Huff heard it. The kitten did and wrapped tail and a paw about his neck. He cleared his throat, thoroughly shaken.

Huff saw his reaction. “Find somethin’, captain?”

“We need torches. Make up two each, with spares, for us to carry.”

The sergeant looked to where the sun eagle had flown. “It cannot wait till daylight?”

“This enemy does not know night from day, or care. If we want to survive, we have to go and meet it.”

“And what will we be meetin’, sur?”

“The restless dead.”

“Like old Sal.”

“Yes, and like Sal, they will have been soldiers once, with all their guile and skill, and they will be formidable.”

“The torches are for burning ‘em.”

“I know fire works, sergeant. I just don’t know how many we have to face before we’re done.”

Huff held out a hand to shake.

Landry blinked, once, in surprise.

“Grand-major Landry,” the sergeant said as their callused palms met. “It’s an honor serving under you.”

“How did—” but Huff had sprinted away, shouting orders for torches to be made and soaked in boar grease to make them hold flame against the night wind, and he even kicked the wounded awake, those who could sit up and wind blanket strips about for torch heads. They grumbled and he snarled back at them, tough old military dog, but it settled their mettle down.

Landry made his own preparations as the sun eagle returned. He fed her again and the kit, too, until both of them refused another bite. He whistled for Spot and went over the wintery coat, brushing it down and checking the horse’s legs for heat. He felt sound. Nevertheless, he took a shirt from Sal’s kit bag and tore into bandages and wrapped the horse’s front legs. He didn’t know what they would face if they got through the undying. Darnett came by and dropped a pouch at his feet.

“Salt,” he said. “From the kit. Sergeant said you might need it. There’s half another for cooking, and what do we need for food that tastes good? Soup is soup.” He paused a moment and then wrenched something with a bit of difficulty from the fingers of his right hand. He pitched that, too, at Landry who caught it in mid-air. Time and wear had blackened it as he examined it on his palm. “Wedding ring,” Darnett explained. “Silver, under the tarnish. You might need it, aye?”

“I might, but—”

Darnett shook his head. “Keep it, sir.” He disappeared as Huff bellowed for the troopers to work double-quick as time was a-wasting.

There are troops trained to attack and those trained to defend, but all begin with both skillsets before they are separated by their instructors to match their strengths. Torch-making would normally be left to defenders, but Huff strode through their ranks

barking orders and reminding his veterans of what they might have forgotten. In short order, they had a pile of more than forty torches. Each would carry one and a spare, and several would carry an arms pack filled with the extras. Scarcely a candle mark had passed before Huff had them fully field-armed and in front of Landry, ready for deployment. He and Huff marked out a grid for their assault, based on what the sun eagle had surveyed. It ranged away from the home of the brave old tom and his kit's siblings, heading into deep forest on this side of the river. He smiled at them.

“We have experience on our side. Agility. Many of them will be hampered by their own morbidity and the wounds that killed them. Lop off their heads if you can and set them alight. Run on, and attack the next. I haven't numbers but I can tell you this: the dead will be from the battlefield we just left, and you will recognize uniforms now and again. Do not be fooled by their aspect. What we knew and valued when they lived is long gone.”

“Aye,” growled Huff lowly. “They're nothing more than jaws and skin suits full of evil. Take them down, my lovelies.” He put them into a march, each leader in the line with a torch already lit.

The kitten clambered up Landry again. He already had the sun eagle on a makeshift perch to the saddle's front. He reached a hand up to scratch the cream and russet chin. “Scamper home. Danger walks tonight.” He found the scruff and pulled the reluctant rider off, and deposited him on the ground. “You've paid your debt to me.”

The kit jumped back, catching Landry about the knee and scaling him quickly. This time Landry could not reach about and grab him as he dodged and clawed his way

over his shoulders and clung at center of his back between his shoulder blades. “Stubborn beastie.”

He swung up into the saddle as did Huff. They were only taking the two horses, leaving the rest for the wounded and survivors to use for another retreat, or even meat, if necessary. If their leader and comrades did not last the night. If there were no victory whatsoever to be found in this country.

As soon as he settled in the saddle, he could feel the kit climb down and find purchase on the saddle blanket behind him. Landry put an unlit torch in the holster meant for a lance or spear, and slipped his axe in with it. He filled his right hand with his sword, unsheathed. Spot shook his head vigorously, mane flapping. He knew a military advance when put into one.

The sun eagle had flown back along the forest, low and clean, the river edging it. The path of approach he and Huff had staked out followed that same river bank. At their backs, the sun would rise on the horizon. Ahead lay darkness gathered by more than simple night, and it tore at Landry as if it wished to sink its hooks into him. The bird fluffed her feathers, head turning back and forth as she watched their passage.

The kit stole around his hips to take up position across the front of the saddle. He began a rough and loud purring, a defiant song of his own as they rode out to meet the enemy. Landry brushed the front of his coat and a loose button caught on his palm. He pulled it off rather than lose it. Landry looked at it, solid gold and stamped as a proper officer’s button should be, and smiled ruefully. Demoted in all but buttons, it seemed. The aspect of a grand-major’s badge reflected dimly at him. His troopers had known, every one of them, that they followed a busted officer. None of them—none except

Huff—had said a word or balked at any order he'd ever given. He tucked the button into a pocket and pulled at the long thread which had come loose. More than a thread really but less than a cord. He dropped the reins and strung it out in front of him, before fetching out Darnett's tarnished silver ring. He hung it on the heavy thread and then tied it about the kitten's neck. "Silver should keep you safe if you run fast enough. You do that, hear? The thing reaches out for me, and the two of you must run for it."

The russet kitten yawned at him as Landry regained the reins.

Huff had lit his torch, the light giving his skin a ruddy glow. He marked their passage and left Landry's side to circle their lines, scouting quietly, his own horse moving with head snaked down and ears flattened. They had only ridden far enough to be away from the bonfire's smoke when Huff let out a piercing whistle and all the torches burst into flame one by one as the lines passed the igniter across.

They all heard the hissing of the night as it passed through gaping jaws. The front advanced to meet them.

His soldiers made noise. The restless dead did not, save for the crunch and crackle of their attack through brush and shrub. The troopers cut and cleaved their way through ranks, bodies on fire falling before them to be kicked aside, heads rolling, swords dropping from blackened hands. The troopers did not bother to be quiet, shouting directions and scores to one another, and Landry pitched his eagle to the sky but caught little from her vision except that the wilderness ahead teemed with enemy. He wished he hadn't seen it. He would not tell his troop of the overwhelming numbers. He had but one choice. One victory and the dead would fall. Just one.

He let out a cry of defiance, a battle cry, that keened over the sergeant's orders and over the whoops of those already engaged, and he put his heels to Spot's flanks. He bellowed after, "Scorch the earth and run!"

Only the river could stop that kind of destruction.

The sun eagle rose to the skies as his horse lunged forward.

They did as bid, putting torch to winter-dying and dead shrubs, the flames firing about them, and they fought. The evening wind died off, to keep the fire from feeding and growing, and Landry could feel the sorcerer at work. He galloped Spot to where the sun eagle glided overhead, waiting for him, sparks eddying through the air after them, and the kitten stood up at the front of the saddle to yowl.

The sorcerer ringed himself with protectors, three deep, as he stood at his campfire's edge, head thrown back, silver blond hair glinting, his clothing of deepest and most expensive indigo making him part of the shadow thrown by the night.

"I'll have you," the sorcerer cried and raised his hands. Gems glimmered from be ringed fingers. "Finally."

Landry gave his horse the signal to charge, at all costs, and Spot answered. They burst through the restless dead as if they were nothing more than kindling and Landry swept a hand about him to ignite them. Making fire had always come easily to him even when he could barely walk. His reserves, though, were low—but that mattered little. He only had to open a clear pathway. Landry drove in and then swung Spot about. He threw a leg over and jumped from his saddle, sword in one hand and throwing axe in the other.

Grand-majors did not use small arms like axes but captains did, and he'd been a quick study. Spot reared and kicked, clearing a patch, charred forms falling away. He

threw the axe and dodged as the sorcerer went down on one knee, the axe buried deep in his chest. With a grimace, he pulled it free.

“Not enough. Cold iron hardly touches me.” He bared his teeth at Landry and readied a spell. “I shall enjoy eating you.”

But Landry wasn't there, not any more. He'd left a blurred image in his place, and darted to the side. He flanked his opponent and swung sharply, to take the sorcerer's head off.

The edge caught and slid along what appeared to be a chain-mail gorget, worn tightly at the most vulnerable spot and hidden under his garments. The sorcerer grunted, pivoted and caught Landry, wrenching the sword from his hand and taking him down. They rolled on the ground, punching and wrestling, energy sparking about them in great bursts and Landry could feel the other's strength. He grappled in the dirt and mud and ash like one of his troopers in a tavern fight. Gems flashed as fingers aimed at his eyes and he ducked away, only to catch a knee in his groin that took the breath from him.

A dagger scraped along his collarbone, too high for the heart, and he'd clenched his teeth against the searing pain. Landry put his head down, and then came up with a hard butt to the other's jaw. A grand-major seldom indulged in bar fights but a captain often waded in to join his soldiers. The move rewarded him with a snap of teeth and a dazed grunt.

Landry caught the dagger hand of the other even as the sorcerer aimed it again, their bodies jammed up against one another, breathing harsh and loud as bellows. Spot whinnied shrilly as only a horse in pain and fear could and Landry caught a glimpse of dead closing in on them. He could feel the strength and immense hunger of his opponent.

His wards, light as they were, faded to nothing. His reserves began to shred. He could feel his own desperation drumming in his chest.

Then a russet streak. Landry had little sense for more, his hands closed tightly on the other, fighting to keep him from striking again. He worried about a second dagger, waiting for it to be buried in his gut. The sorcerer freed a hand from the struggle for the dagger and began to close it about Lan's throat. His breathing choked.

The kitten attacked. Yowling and hissing, he went for the sorcerer's face, claws racking and needle teeth chomping. His target tried to thrash away, loosening his throat, but Landry held him close, even as he began to lose the fight for the dagger. The three of them tumbled about, knotted in struggle. One victory, only one, but desperately needed. This thing, if it took him, would rise like a black and corrupt flood over the country and take his troops with it. Landry squeezed his hands tighter as he shook his throat free.

The sorcerer wrenched his arm free to pound and tear at his determined feline attacker. Landry heard bones crack and the cat shrill in pain, but he dug his claws in, shredding as he did. With a sucking noise, an eye tore free and the sorcerer gave a cry of pure pain and hatred.

The sun eagle screeched as she dove down and tore at the back of the sorcerer's head. She came up with a bloody scrap of scalp in her talons before winging off, and the kitten scratched deeper. With a curse, the sorcerer got a hold of the kitten, flinging him into the rocky ground, where the little body went limp. Hot blood splattered him and Landry suddenly had the strength to turn the dagger as the sorcerer lost his grip.

He sank it deep and twisted it across, slicing deep. He could feel the body clench as the dagger severed the cords of life. The sorcerer flopped away from him. He could

feel its soul and power rise, tempting him and Landry reeled to his feet, away from it, abandoning it, letting the corruption dissipate to wherever the King of night took its dead. Then, at the last moment, he hooked a bit of the power and brought down a rain from the mists crowding the forest. Fires began to smother.

He wobbled on his feet and pushed that last smidgen of power away. As he looked down, a glint of silver caught his attention. He leaned over and saw that a tarnished and silver ring winked from the bloody socket where an eye should rest. Little wonder that the sorcerer had suddenly lost strength.

About them, the ghouls collapsed, bereft of the spark that drove them, and he could hear his soldiers whooping. He staggered to his feet. Landry found Spot, and hung onto the saddle to keep to his feet, murmuring words of comfort to the horse as blood and gashes scored his flanks. The bandages had been torn away but the legs seemed relatively clean. Overhead, the sun eagle gave a scree of triumph. A sunrise fought to break through the smoke and mist. He could feel its power gleaming over them, even if they could not quite see it yet.

Landry steered the horse aside to the broken russet furred body resting among the rocks. He swallowed tightly and bent over, thinking that he should have returned the creature to its litter. He reached for it but Sergeant Huff got it first.

“Sur, we’re burning the last of the ghouls now. Even in this fog, they’re going up like tinder but nay spreading. And this little guy, well he gave better than he got, aye?”

“He did.” Landry crooked a finger to stroke the matted fur. As he did, a weak but steady purr answered. His heart answered and he lost words for a moment.

Huff jerked a thumb toward the sun rise just beginning to break the edge.

“Orders?”

“Beat out the fires if needed, once the ghouls are burnt. We gather our wounded and move to the river itself. Take a day or two for healing. Then we find a way home.”

“All good.” The sergeant offered him the kitten. “Needs naming, he does, if he’s to be one o’ us.”

“Hold him a minute,” he told Huff. “Your tail,” Landry remarked to the animal, “appears to be broken.” He reached out and gently straightened the russet brush. He foraged for and tied two relatively strong twigs about to secure the mending. “Leave it be and it should heal. Would not want you without a proper swish if we are meant to be warriors together.”

The kit stared up at him. He retrieved it from Huff. “Your paws are raw. Your claws broken and shredded, but they’ll grow back. Your spirit, however, is as magnificent as ever, my little Lion.” He settled the russet body in the crook of his arm, whistling to Spot for the horse to follow, the Sun Eagle riding the perch of the saddle. Rays struck its feathers, augmenting its bronze and striking cobalt, and it looked as if it had been birthed from the sun itself. Landry rubbed an eye tiredly and wondered what he must do with himself, and them.

He walked back to camp, followed by most of his troopers, as they whistled and laughed and told stories about the night’s work. They had a victory to celebrate.

“I should set you two free, but it seems we share a fortune. No one should go to war because of a prophecy,” he informed his new companions. “However, it is well known that it is bad luck to ignore one.”