
Legends of the Saber-Lords

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Vitoran sat quietly on her large horse. She flipped her long honey brown hair behind her head and stroked it absentmindedly with one hand. The tall young woman wore dark tan riding pants with a matching blouse. In the house before her she could still hear her mother admonishing her older brother Redslar. “There may be soldiers on the road,” her mother said with emphasis. “You mind that you take good care of your sister and don’t mingle around after the meeting is over.”

Like herself, her brother was tall and at twenty, was two years her senior. His half dozen years as apprentice to their blacksmith father had added to the width of his chest. On his saddle was their father’s sword, but Redslar carried a long-handled hammer, a weapon he was more comfortable with. Vitoran handed him the reins to his mount. With one fluid motion, Redslar vaulted into the saddle and nodded to her. With only a slight wave to their mother, standing on the front porch of their home, the pair urged their horses to speed. Their destination was the old amphitheater, about an hour’s easy riding distance away.

The pair rode without conversing for most of the distance. As they neared the ancient structure that in times past had been part of an old monastery, they slowed their horses to an easy walk to let them cool. “We are so busy at the smithy; I don’t see why mother insisted that I attend the gathering this afternoon.”

“Red, she insisted so that you can watch after me. These are dangerous times we live in, even here in central Xentera. Far too many people, including locals are being attacked on the roads. Someone will think twice when they see how large you have become. Besides, I am sure you are anxious to see Loren again, it has been what, almost a full day?”

Redslear just smiled at the mention of his lady friend. As they tied their horses out front of the ancient stone structure, Vitoran noticed there were already almost a hundred people in attendance, and more were arriving every minute. Her concentration was broken as a short black-haired woman of Redslear's age bounded into his strong muscular arms. "If you two want to be alone, you have come to the wrong place," Vitoran said with a laugh.

"Oh, hey Vee," the pretty short young woman answered. "I didn't see you standing there." Vitoran smiled back at her brother's future wife and walked quietly to one side to give them some privacy. All the attendees were between fifteen and twenty and more were still arriving as the sound of a gong coming from the amphitheater caused those not already seated to move into the ancient structure.

Vitoran decided to remain in the back so that she could watch the crowd. The three-sided structure was shaped like a bowl, the sides sloping down to a flat stone stage. The fourth side was a sheer rock wall behind the open arena. In the middle of the stage stood a woman who looked as if she could have attended the grand opening of the ancient monastery. Her white hair was only streaked with a few darker strands and she wore it pulled back into a long tail. Vitoran had known this old woman for most of her life. Her parents had even granted her permission to spend her last two summers studying with the old mage woman.

"Thank you for coming this afternoon," the old mage said in a most commanding voice. Instantly, you could hear a pin drop in the arena. "My name is Ryssa and one of my charges is to travel around Xentera speaking to its young adults. My purpose is to educate you about your ancestry and to prepare you for the future. As I speak to you today, no citizen of Xentera is free; but that was not always the case. Once the free peoples of Xentera were not subject to the oppressive system forced upon us by the Priory of Lansetta and their puppet barons; in short, we ruled ourselves with the help of a company of special warriors. You have all heard these tales as bedtime stories and fairy tales, but I stand before

you today to tell you that what you have heard is true. Once a group of legends called the Saber-Lords overwhelmed the Priory and the people of Xentera were free.”

“You may remember from your childhood that these Saber-Lords were magnificent warriors who each wore a gold signet ring on their right hand and traveled with an enormous Saber-Cat, which were both their friend and Ward. The Priory and the Barons would tell you that the Saber-Lords have all died out. I am here today to tell you this is all a lie. There are Saber-Lords alive today on Xentera and they are planning to free our people again.”

Vitoran looked around as the crowd began to buzz with excitement and muffled conversation. Everyone was instantly silent as the old mage woman held her hand up. “Our struggles will not be easy, and they will not be without tremendous sacrifice. But, fear not, the Saber-Lords have returned, and, in your lifetimes, you will see your freedom. Something your parents and grandparents have never seen.”

A young woman about Redslar’s age held up her hand to ask a question. “My Lady, what can we peasants do to help prepare for that day?”

Once again you could have heard a pin drop. “First, my name is Ryssa, not My Lady. The question is what you can do to prepare... It will be the job of the Saber-Lords to organize the resistance. To help in that endeavor, you can begin to gather weapons and information. But do not act all by yourselves. You will only get yourself killed and you will die needlessly... No one, including the combined armies of the twenty-four Barons can match the army of the Priory. So, the first mission of the Saber-Lords will be to draw that army away from our homelands, for good. Once that is accomplished, the free peoples of Xentera will begin to take back every Barony one at a time.”

The questions lasted for another hour. It was apparent this assembly of young Xenterans was more than willing to get their hands dirty. When Ryssa finally adjourned the meeting, still, three dozen people milled around the old amphitheater to speak with her privately. Most of those attending could

walk to their homes and gradually, only a few horses remained tied in front of the old ruins. When she had a break, Vitoran walked down to speak with Ryssa, her old friend. When she returned to the top of the old amphitheater, she found Redslear standing next to his future bride.

“What do you think, Loren?” Vitoran asked as she rejoined them.

“This is the most exciting thing I have heard in years,” the exuberant dark-haired woman said indicating her boundless energy. “Ryssa is spending the night with our family in town. I cannot wait to get her alone. She said there may be Saber-Lords actually in our presence right now, but no one I spoke with has the ring on their finger; and I looked thoroughly at everyone, including you, Vitoran.”

“What do you think big brother?”

Redslear smiled at his little sister. “Vee, I think the oppressed people of Xentera will believe almost anything that gives them a glimmer of hope. And, I don’t think they heard the warning Ryssa gave them. This struggle will be both long and arduous and will cost many lives before it is settled. And, all of that is after something pulls the huge army of the Priory away.”

“I hope you are right, Redslear,” the small mage woman said as she walked up behind them, “at least the part about believing and having a glimmer of hope; because, right now, our people need to believe in something.” Redslear looked embarrassed, but Ryssa patted his arm to reassure him she was not offended.

After saying their goodbyes to both Ryssa and Loren, Vitoran and Redslear departed the amphitheater and turned their horses towards their home. Instead of being in a hurry, they walked them slowly so that they could discuss the meeting they had attended. “I appreciate what Ryssa is trying to do,” Redslear said. “But, tomorrow most of these people will be back in the fields tilling the baron’s land for the baron, who will be giving a major portion of his profit to the Priory. Nothing will have

changed in their lives and they will go right on being peasants without any hope. And, I don't share this optimism with you and Loren... Regardless of what Ryssa says, there are no Saber-Lords on Xentera."

"I think you have to look beyond the next few years, brother dear. A change this drastic could not possibly happen overnight."

He never got to answer her as two armed uniformed men of the Baron stepped out of the verge to block their pathway. "What is the meaning of this," Redslear yelled as they brought their horses up short of the men.

"Dismount," the soldier on the right said with his hand in the air.

"Do as they say," Vitoran said. "There are five of them, and one has a crossbow."

Redslear looked towards her with a question etched across his handsome face, but his tall sister had already dismounted. As his feet hit the ground, the apprentice grabbed his hammer, but stuck the handle firmly in his belt. As he walked forward to join Vitoran, three more armed men appeared in the road. One indeed carried a crossbow with a bolt mounted on the string. "Once again, what is this all about?" Redslear asked.

A man with three stripes on his tunic stepped forward. "We are interested in the little meeting you two just attended at the old amphitheater. That alone will get you ten stripes each, unauthorized assembly. I want a list of everyone who was there."

"We did not attend any meeting," Redslear said. "We went into Southbrooke to visit my future wife, Loren. You can ask her if you want. She will tell you the same thing."

"Oh, we know all about you, apprentice, and your lovely sister here. We've been hoping to catch up with her for a while now. It looks like today is our lucky day. I'm going to give you one chance, apprentice. Take that hammer out of your belt and you won't get hurt. Anything else and Ard here is

going to shoot you full of quarrels. Either way, we are going to have some fun with your sister. No sense in someone's getting killed over it.”

Vitoran held up her hands to show that she harbored no weapons. Nimbly she grabbed the hammer from Redsllear's belt and deposited it on the ground at the feet of the guard. When she made eye contact with her brother, she simply gave him a quick wink. “Bind his hands, men,” the lead guard yelled. While three of them grappled with her brother, Vitoran slipped between the two horses so that she could reach Redsllear's saddle.

Seeing that her large brother had been deposited on the ground with his hands tied behind his back she sent her empathic thought. “Nobellan, get the archer first.” At the same instant, she ripped the curved back sword from its scabbard on his saddle. As she once again approached the lead guard, she brought both of her hands to the leather grip on the sleek sword and dropped into a classic attack stance. Before the lead guard could utter a word, his soldier with the crossbow was crushed from the side by an enormous tan mountain cat, the huge impact breaking the man's neck.

“My Saber-Cat will kill anyone who flees,” Vitoran said. “Now Sergeant, you wanted to have some fun with me. Here I am.” As three of the soldiers drew their belt swords, the fourth wanted nothing do to with the situation and turned to flee. Before he made ten steps, the huge Saber-Cat had him by the neck. With one shake of his large head, the man's neck snapped. “Defend yourselves,” Vitoran said as she waded into the confused men. Her blade was just a blur as she cut the leader down in two moves. Showing no quarter, the other two men were dead almost as fast. Vitoran pulled the belt knife from the last man and freed Redsllear's hands. She quietly stuck her sword at her brother's feet and went to embrace her Ward. Standing taller than her waist, the huge tan cat was as large as a small pony. As she rubbed his huge head, ears and back, Nobellan began purring loudly and rubbing against her riding pants.

“Well, brother, you might as well get up and meet Nobellan. You cannot sit there with that stupid expression on your face.”

Redslear slowly regained his feet and approached the enormous cat. Sensing his unease, Nobellan flashed his huge canines at him once and then went back to rubbing on Vitoran’s legs. “We have a few things to talk about,” Redslear said placing his hands on the huge cat’s head and ears.

“I’m training to be a Saber-Lord,” Vitoran said leaving Redslear to entertain the huge cat. “I’ve known for two years, that is when I met Nobellan. Since that day, I have trained as much as possible with Ryssa. This year I will go away for good and train full time with her... Mom and Dad know something is up, but Ryssa thought it too dangerous to tell them the truth. I’m going to need your help with that.”

“Where did you learn to handle a sword that way? That was amazing.”

“Practicing with other Saber-Lords, I can best them all. Soon it won’t be that close.”

“So, all the legends are true then?”

“Yes, they are true. There are six others, but I have not met them all, yet.”

“How did you meet your big kitty here?”

“Ryssa has this huge mountain behind her lodge. Every morning I had to run to the top of the mountain and back. Halfway to the top, the most beautiful mountain cat I have ever seen is waiting on me. He tells me empathically that his name is Nobellan and he would be my Ward, if I found him worthy. I can anticipate your next question. I communicate with him by simply thinking what I want him to hear. It is one of the gifts of being a Saber-Lord.”

“I sense that I cannot tell anyone about this,” Redslear said. Vitoran just nodded. “Tell me about Ryssa.”

“She is over a thousand years old and she is a mage-wizard... I know that does not tell you much, but she is on our side and that is all you need to know... Red, I will return in an hour. I’m going home to pack my things and say goodbye to mother and father. Ryssa and Loren will be here before I return. I think you are going to spend your first night at your future wife’s house. Nobellan will stay here to keep you company.”

“How,” Redsllear started to ask, but his sister had already vaulted onto her sleek mare and was galloping away towards their home. He glanced out of the corner of his eye at the huge Saber-Cat that was sitting on his haunches and staring at him. He felt uneasy but could do nothing about the predicament he found himself suddenly in; and besides, Vitoran would not have left him in any danger. Vee, a Saber-Lord, this whole thing was almost more than he could fathom. “Come on there, Kitty. Let’s you and I go through the pockets of the dead while we wait.”

As he walked over to the first dead man, Nobellan silently joined him. “So, you can understand me.” Redsllear sucked up his courage and stroked the big cat across his huge, soft head. He was instantly surprised when Nobellan leaned into his touch and even began a soft purr. “You like that, boy. I guess we all enjoy a little attention, now and then.”

When Ryssa and Loren arrived, they found Redsllear sitting on an old stump with both of his hands around the huge Saber-Cat’s neck. Nobellan was butting him in the chest with his head and purring loudly. “Red, you are not taking that thing home with us,” his future wife said.

“Not to worry, Love. He is already spoken for I think... Ryssa, Vee asked me to go through the pockets of the men she killed, but all I found was a few odd coins. Their saddle bags didn’t contain anything else of value, but their horses are really skittish around Nobellan.”

“Vitoran will fix that problem when she returns,” Ryssa said. “Until then, I want the two of you to take bundles of brush and wipe out all of the tracks that lead to or from your home.”

“Yes Ma’am,” the large young man replied.

They were almost finished when Vitoran rode into their area from the direction of the town. Both Loren and Redslear stopped what they were doing and just stared at the tall blond woman. She was now dressed in all brown leather with her hair pulled back into a warrior’s pleat. Her knee-high brown boots made her seem even taller than before. Across her back were a back sword and a quiver of arrows. Attached to the saddle of her horse was a beautiful recurve hunting bow.

“I cannot believe that you are a Saber-Lord,” Loren said softly. “But I have to admit that you look every bit the part dressed in those tight brown leathers.”

“While you two finish up with the tracks, I am going to introduce the horses to Nobellan. Once he touches noses with them, they won’t fear him anymore.”

“I wish I could say the same thing,” Loren said quietly to Redslear. “That is the largest mountain cat I have ever seen and the way his canines protrude below his upper lip gives him an evil look. He is as large as a pony. I sure don’t want him mad at me.”

When the future husband and wife were finished, they rejoined the old Mage-Wizard and Vitoran around the horses. “Redslear, you are to go to Loren’s house tonight,” Ryssa said. “Vitoran and I will take all the horses and make our exit at the East Thorn Ferry crossing just before dark. Whatever you do, don’t go home until noon tomorrow.”

“You want them to follow you,” the apprentice replied.

“Yes,” Ryssa answered. “I don’t want you or Loren involved in this. The Baron’s men will follow us. We will leave enough tracks that a blind man could track us. You and Loren decided to spend the night together under her parent’s roof. Vitoran decided to return home and she and I are responsible for the deaths of the Baron’s soldiers.”

“The Baron will send a small army after the two of you,” Loren said.

“We will be fine,” Ryssa replied. “We will have a half day’s head start on them and once we are across the river, I know a few tricks that will give us the edge.”

Vitoran embraced her brother and kissed him on the cheek. She next turned to the much shorter Loren and hugged her for a long moment. “It may be a few years before I return. Mom and Dad have been preparing for this day, so it was not a big surprise to them. Take good care of them for me and, Loren, you take good care of my brother.” The shorter woman did not reply, but instead hugged the taller woman again.

“Vitoran, are you ready?” Ryssa asked.

The tall sleek woman vaulted into the saddle aboard her large gray horse. “I am ready,” she said as she picked up the leads from several of the horses.

With much less fanfare, the older woman mounted her mule and gathered the remaining leads to the soldier’s horses. With only a nod to Loren and Redslar, she turned her mule easterly towards the river and the ferry crossing, Vitoran followed along behind her leading the other mounts.

It took them less than an hour to reach the ferry and the Baron controlled river crossing. Six soldiers sat lazily on two long benches beside the large ferry constructed of whole tree trunks. A seventh stood to the side and ran sloppily through a series of forms with his sword. All of them looked up as the pair approached leading the string of horses. One of the men with three stripes on his sleeves walked past Ryssa to examine the horses. He seemed particularly interested in the black gelding that Ryssa led.

“This gelding belongs to Ard,” the grizzly older man announced. “How did you happen to come by him?”

“If this Ard was a friend of yours, I am sorry to tell you that he is dead,” Ryssa announced. “If it is any consolation, you may keep the gelding. He will make a terrible pack animal and we must be across the river and on our way.”

“How did Ard die?” the suddenly very suspicious man asked as his eyes lingered on Vitoran and the other horses.

“Vitoran killed him and all of his men when he threatened to assault her,” Ryssa replied nodding in the direction of her companion. “The exact same fate that awaits you and your men; that is Sergeant, if you don’t move out of the way and allow us to proceed.”

“I would not be much of a soldier if I allowed an old woman and a girl to best me and my men.”

“Do you believe in the ancient legends of Xentera, Sergeant?” When the man did not respond, Ryssa added, “Specifically in the Saber-Lords of old.”

“Those are nothing but bed-time stories for children and old-wives’ tales,” the brash young soldier who had been brandishing his blade replied before the older Sergeant could respond.

With a resolute nod to Vitoran, Ryssa shook her head slightly. “Is this insolent pup the best of your men with a blade, Sergeant?”

“Yes,” the older man replied as Vitoran threw her right leg over her horse’s head and dropped lightly to the ground.

“If Vitoran disarms him, your men will drop their weapons and pull us across the river?”

“Agreed,” the Sergeant said. “And if Biffle can best your Saber-Lord, we get your horses and anything else we desire.” The expectant looks on his men’s faces left no doubt as to what they intended.

“Make this quick, Vitoran. We are in a hurry.”

Vitoran handed her horse’s reins to the older woman as she passed. She took an appraising glance at the young soldier who stood before her. He was thick through the middle and only slightly taller than her. He nervously juggled his sword in his right hand as his eyes darted back and forth from Vitoran to his mates. “To the first touch,” Vitoran said standing easily ten feet from her advisory.

“It doesn’t matter,” the brash young man said. “There is no bitch on Xentera that can best me with a blade. When I have finished with you, you will be bleeding, but not from my sword,” he laughed and glanced to his fellow soldiers as they joined in.

She picked up the tension in his face just a heartbeat before he rushed her. The young soldier swung wildly, but his sword only cut the air as the tall young woman rolled easily to one side. Feeling foolish for attacking in such a sneaky manner, the soldier approached her more cautiously for his second attack. Twice the man tried to strike her with more deliberate overhand cuts, but each time the lightning quick Saber-Lord moved out of the way.

“Your footwork is pitiful,” Vitoran said. “If you are one of the best of the Baron’s men, the pheasants should have little trouble overthrowing you.”

This comment seemed to inflame the hothead and he attacked once again. Just as before, Vitoran easily moved out of the way before his blade could touch her. With almost contemptible ease, Vitoran smoothly drew her blade and attacked for the first time. He managed to block her first few strikes but the soldier was quickly overwhelmed and dropped his sword as her razor-sharp blade came to rest against his exposed neck.

Vitoran smoothly returned her blade to its back scabbard. “Now, we would like to be ferried across the river with no further delays.” She turned her back on her defeated adversary. Instead of picking up his sword, the young man darted to his right and grabbed a bow and an arrow hanging from a quiver neither of the women had noticed.

As he knocked an arrow, a sinister smile crossed his face. “Now, we’ll have everything we want from you, just as we planned.”

“You obviously should have listened to the old legends of Xentera,” Ryssa said. “A Saber-Lord always travels with their Saber-Cat.” Nobellan charged in from the man’s left, the impact knocking him

to the ground. With a huge growl, he seized the soldier by the neck and viciously shook his head. The sound of his neck breaking could be heard by everyone. “Now, drop your weapons, all of you,” Ryssa said in a loud commanding voice.

With only a nervous glance at his men, the Sergeant said, “Do as she says, we don’t want to lose anyone else.”

“We are leaving all of the horses with you except for my mule and Vitoran’s mount, plus two we will take as pack animals. Do with them as you wish. Now, we would like to be underway,” Ryssa said as she led her mule towards the ferry. Nobellan was the first to leap onto the transport and took his place atop a large crate that was already loaded with some other supplies. In short order, everyone was aboard, and the six men began pulling on the two long ropes that stretched across the quarter mile wide river. They each glanced nervously at the large cat who sat looking very content as Vitoran stroked his huge tawny head.

“Just get us to the other side,” Vitoran said, “and Nobellan will not bother you.” She did not think the men looked very convinced but kept her hands on the large cat just to ease their concerns. When the cumbersome craft reached the far bank, Nobellan led the two of them off and onto the sandy shore. “I am going to cut the two ropes anchored to this side,” Vitoran announced to the soldiers who had remained on the huge raft. “We will wait until you are well underway on your journey back across the river.”

The men did not need any encouragement and began pulling on the guide ropes immediately. After the raft was two hundred yards from the bank, they each began working on one of the large ropes securing the ferry to the bank. Each popped with a loud crack as the tension was suddenly released. “That will take them a half a day to splice new ropes and re-rig the pulleys and supports on this side,” Ryssa said as she prepared to mount her mule, Sara.

After the pair had ridden for two hours, it was completely dark with the quarter moon just beginning to rise in the east. They trotted easily on the well travelled road that gradually turned north as it veered away from the bed of the river. Vitoran judged it was well after midnight when they turned from the main road along an old woodland path that had not seen much traffic in many years. To her surprise, after an hour they came to a collection of old ruins that had once been an old fort. Ivey covered most of the battlements that were from what Vitoran could tell in the dark, mostly in the shape of a large horseshoe. Both the gates that had once secured the front of the fortification hung ajar on rusted hinges and were unusable.

“Are we stopping for the night here?” Vitoran asked, seeing that the Mage-Woman had already dismounted.

“This is where we will meet the Baron’s soldiers. There are stables over to your left with plenty of hay for all the horses.” When Vitoran just stared at her, Ryssa continued. “Our disruption at the ferry will only dissuade them for a day at the most. With the pack horses and my mule, Sara, we stand no chance out running them. If we must fight, best it is in a place of our own choosing... Come, there is food and drink as well as shelter inside. I have been preparing this place for many years now. After a good night’s sleep, we shall organize our defense strategy in the morning.”

With Nobellan keeping watch on the old fort, Vitoran slept extremely well and much later than usual. After a cup of tea with Ryssa, she walked around the ramparts of the ancient fort with the huge tawny Saber-Cat right by her side. “This place was obviously built for defense, Nobby. With a little luck, a few men could hold off a whole company of attackers here.”

Ryssa wants me to leave at midday to check on the ferry and those pursuing us.

“I’m thinking we will have company pretty soon.”

After studying the fort from both inside and out, she and Nobellan rejoined Ryssa back in the stone walled room where they had spent the night. Looking at the details around the converted armory, it was soon obvious that someone, probably the old Mage-Woman, was using this place on a regular basis. “With a few more arrows and a dozen people, we could hold off an all-out attack for a week. The walls are tall enough that they cannot be scaled easily; at least without ladders.”

“There are sheaves of arrows sealed in that barrel by the door. As far as reinforcements go, we will have to depend on each other with some help arriving day after tomorrow, perhaps a little earlier with some luck.”

“How many men are coming to help us?”

“None,” Ryssa replied. Ryssa walked over and rubbed Nobellan’s large head for a few minutes. When she was finished, the huge tawny cat left the room abruptly. “I’ve sent him to watch the ford and report on both the repair activity and the size of the detachment coming after us.”

“Ryssa, how are the two of us going to hold off a platoon or more of men? You don’t even own a sword.”

“That does not mean that I don’t know how to use one,” Ryssa shot back at her. “But I have always enjoyed archery.” The Mage-Woman removed a blanket from one of the wooden tables revealing a short recurve saddle bow and a quiver of matching arrows in her draw length. Effortlessly she strung the short bow against the instep of her boot. While you are finalizing our plans and defense, I have some time to practice.”

Vitoran concentrated first on the front and only gate. One of the old wooden doors fell from its lone remaining hinge when she moved it slightly. With some effort, she could prop the gate lengthwise against the left wall and close off two thirds of the opening. The badly weathered gate was full of dry rot and would not be much of an obstacle against a determined attack. Two large wagon wheels and some

other debris filled the opening, but she knew they would not amount to much of a deterrent. While moving the wheels she discovered arrow slits built into the stonework on either side of the main entrance, something they could take advantage of. At best, her efforts at closing the opening would provide only a minor obstacle.

Lastly, Vitoran walked completely around the horseshoe fort examining the walls for vines or encroaching trees that might be climbed. She cut down several with her sword that might have been scaled, but the out-sloping walls made that extremely unlikely. When she rejoined Ryssa, she found the old woman shooting her short bow into a bag of rags. “Well, what do you think?”

“Is this a test?”

“Your whole life is a test, young lady. You are training to be a Saber-Lord. Men and women twice your age are going to look to you for leadership. You were born with gifts they will never possess... Now, how do the three of us defend this old fort?”

Vitoran thought for almost a full minute before answering. “We don’t,” she said calmly. “A platoon of the Baron’s men could keep us bottled up in here forever. This fort is defensible but eventually they will either make ladders or will send men back to the Barony for ropes and grappling hooks. Either way, in the end, we lose. So, we take the fight to them... Somehow, Nobellan and I need to figure out how to get out of here once the soldiers think they have us bottled up inside. Then we will have the advantage.”

“And we kill them all,” Ryssa said. “Nothing but their horses must return to the river ford.” She smiled at the younger woman with a pleased look on her face. “Come on, I will show you where the escape tunnel is located. While I am holding the front gate, you and your Saber-Cat will have to kill all of those attacking us.”

“You make that sound easy.”

“It should be, for a Saber-Lord. By the way, Nobellan says they have just repaired the rope cables to the ford. We should have company by sundown if their trackers are worth their salt.”

An hour before sundown, Nobellan easily jumped the makeshift barricade blocking the entrance to the ancient outpost. *Twenty-four riders are a half mile behind me.* Vitoran knew that Ryssa heard the Saber-Cat’s report at the same time she did. Without a word to each other, they each picked up their bows and moved to the arrow slits on either side of the entrance. As the Baron’s men reached the small opening before the old fort they stopped and spread out into a line facing the old structure. Vitoran scratched Nobellan’s large head as she watched the men who had stopped at the extreme range of her recurve bow. She didn’t have to wait long.

She could not hear what was being said, but from the hand gestures of a bearded soldier in the middle of the column, she assumed he was their leader. Six riders separated themselves from the line and moved their horses slowly towards the barricaded opening. At seventy yards, they stopped briefly, and all the men drew swords. On command, they began an all-out sprint to storm the barrier. When Vitoran released her first arrow, one of the men was already down. Her deadly shaft took her target directly in the chest, as did her second shot. Three horses and riders jumped the makeshift obstacle and gained the courtyard inside.

Nobellan took the third rider from the saddle just as his horse landed. Ryssa’s arrow took the second man in the back. As the lead rider wheeled his horse around, Vitoran’s arrow hit him high in the chest and shoulder. The wound was probably fatal, but the man remained in the saddle and he kicked his horse for speed in an attempt to re-jump the barricade. Nobellan took the soldier out of the saddle two strides before the obstacle, his sleek horse making the jump without him. Next, he chased the rider less mounts around the open courtyard until the panicked horses crashed through the barricade to escape to safety. In plain view of the remaining soldiers and with Nobellan at her side, Vitoran did her best to

make repairs to the broken obstacle that closed the entrance to the fort. “They won’t try that again,” Ryssa said giving her a hand in rebuilding the barrier.

It took Vitoran almost an hour to traverse the three-hundred-yard narrow escape tunnel. She held on to Nobellan’s tail until they reached the end and kept her other hand on one wall. Ryssa had prepared her for the exit, which was carefully hidden in the deadfall of an ancient tree. They emerged just as the moon was rising in the east. She stood expectantly beside a large tree in the deciduous forest and listened to the sounds around her. She judged her position to be on the forts closed side opposite the horseshoe citadel’s only entrance, three hundred yards from the wall.

Two men coming from the right; do we take them?

“We will never get a better chance than this. Let’s ease towards them and see if we can get in position.” As the thought left her mind, she and the huge cat began closing the distance towards the old fort. The leaf litter covering the open forest was damp from the evening dew and made their passage swift and silent. Using the larger trees for cover, they easily closed the distance to the edge of the fifty-yard opening around the fort. She stopped suddenly as Nobellan crouched behind a small screen of brush.

From her right two men were walking towards them. Their total concentration was focused on the ancient ruins as if they expected an arrow to be shot at them any second. Vitoran quietly removed an arrow from the quiver across her back and knocked it on her bow string, simply by feel. “Don’t move until you hear the sound of my bow,” Vitoran thought the silent message to the huge cat, crouching slightly on her left. She focused on the trailing man’s head and neck and when the two soldiers were exactly opposite her position, she drew and shot the trailing man perfectly in the neck. He was dead before he hit the ground and just as quickly Nobellan had seized the leading man and broken his neck.

The Saber-Cat carried his victim into the woods with only the slight rustle of a bush as he passed. It took Vitoran a little longer to drag her man away from the opening, but no one took notice.

“The horses are next,” she said empathically to the huge cat and they both started moving in the shadows towards the front of the ancient structure. Nobellan’s crepuscular vision allowed them to circle almost back to the main gate before they were forced to seek cover among the large trees. The Saber-Cat eased ahead and into the wind to get the lay of the soldiers’ camp. The men had built a large bonfire where the road joined the opening before the fort, two hundred yards from the barricaded gate. Their horses were strung on a picket line a hundred yards behind the fire, right on the old road. Best of all there was only one sentry guarding them.

She grabbed the man from behind, her left hand covering his mouth while she brought up her belt knife under his rib cage. He collapsed immediately, but she kept his mouth covered as he fell to the ground just to make sure that he could not sound the alarm. She cleaned her knife on his tunic after the man stopped breathing and began cutting the long rope the soldiers had used to make the picket line. Every twenty yards, they had double wrapped the rope around a tree. As she moved among the horses, she could tell Nobellan was moving in up wind of her position by the whickering and snorting. By the time she reached the closest point to the bonfire, none of the mounts had to be urged to flee and the panicked horses thundered away towards the river.

Against the back light of the fire, she could see two men walking towards her position. Crouching just inside the wood line beside the road, she waited until the men were twenty yards from her before shooting. Her arrow centered the first man in the heart, and as she knocked another shaft, Nobellan was just a blur as he took the second man. Vitoran pulled her victim out of the road; the Saber-Cat had already removed his prey.

“Our luck is due to run out pretty soon,” Vitoran said as she stroked the tawny cat’s huge head. “Let’s ease our way closer to the fire and get as many of them as we can before giving ourselves away.”

Another man is coming to check on the horses. I’ll take him as he walks past us.

Nobellan rejoined her as she took up a position as close to the fire as she could get without being seen. By the light from the fire, she noticed he had blood on his muzzle. Vitoran concentrated on the men, now nervously milling around the fire. Their attention was now split between the old fort in front and the road and woods behind them. Three of the men carried crossbows and they would be her first targets. As she began to settle her concentration on the first crossbowman, she was interrupted by her Ward as he put his nose in the air to pickup additional scent.

Others are here.

“Other soldiers, where are they?”

No, other mountain cats are here. They have come to help. Shoot the bowmen, we will get the rest.

Vitoran pulled three shafts from her quiver and stuck two of them in the dirt at her feet. The third she mounted on her bow string as she returned her concentration to the bowmen milling around the fire thirty yards away. Two were on the left and one on the extreme far right. She took a deep breath before drawing the bow and placing her index finger in the corner of her mouth; her concentration never wavered from her target. The shot always came automatically when the sight picture looked right. Her shot was true, and the arrow centered the man perfectly. Her second shot caught the second man on the left slightly lower than she would have liked, but he was down and would not be a danger. The last bowman on the far right turned and began sprinting away from her. Her final shot at the running man was low, but it took the soldier in the back of the right leg and he went down. He was hardly on the ground before a large mountain cat was on him, shaking the unfortunate man by the neck.

The remaining soldiers had seen enough. The nine ran to the left to escape into the woods in that direction. Vitoran pulled her sword to finish the downed bowman by the fire, but Nobellan beat her to the prize and then turned to charge after the fleeing soldiers. He was quickly joined by the wild mountain cat from her right. When Vitoran looked towards the barricaded gate to the old ruins, she could see Ryssa's small frame walking towards her.

"Looks as if I let nine of them escape to the woods," Vitoran said. "I'll get my horse and be after them."

"That will not be necessary," the old woman said. "Nobellan, Soryan, and their four friends will make short work of those men. Their best chance was to stay in the open, but they panicked and ran for cover. Right into the other cats; they will hunt them down before the moon is overhead... It is all a big game to the cats. It is very important to see who gets the most."

"Is Soryan a friend of yours?"

"Yes, one day soon she will bond with a Saber-Lord. The others will remain wild, for now. I hope that she and Nobellan like each other and one day they will be a mated pair... But, enough of that kind of talk; I have something for you." From the pocket in her tunic, the small woman produced a gold ring with a seven-sided star engraved on the face. "Kneel and give me your right hand."

Vitoran dropped to one knee and handed Ryssa her right hand. The old woman slipped the gold ring on the third finger. "Rise, Saber-Lord Vitoran," she commanded. Vitoran towered above the small woman, but she could not help but smile as she admired the ring.

"I guess I need to dismantle our barricade," Vitoran said.

"That won't be necessary," the old woman said. Ryssa pointed her finger at the obstacle and a bolt of lightning from her hand destroyed the makeshift obstruction.

"You could have destroyed those men anytime you wanted to," Vitoran exclaimed.

“Yes. There are plenty of the Baron’s soldiers to go around. But, Saber-Lords are pretty hard to find.”