

## The Kings Lyric

By R. Walt Bailey

The statuesque woman sat her tall horse with an ease and grace that came only from years of practice. On either side of her rode the king and crown prince. Above them drawing lazy circles in the sky her Ward glided almost effortlessly, his ten-foot wingspan easily catching the morning thermals.

“Is that your dragon circling above us?” the ageing King asked.

“Zair is a Weyr-Drake, Your Majesty. He would be honored to meet you, but your horses are not conditioned to such an exotic creature and they would certainly panic when he landed. Perhaps another time, say when our mission has been completed.”

“Speaking of this mission how will your team make contact with the highwaymen who are plaguing our roads?” the Crown Prince asked.

“By posing as a young couple traveling alone by covered wagon to the capital; my Rangers are very capable and can take care of themselves. When we get one of these highwaymen alive, then we can directly ascertain who is behind this activity.”

“Is it true if a Ranger is killed, his Weyr-Drake will commit suicide?”

“The bond between us is for life. If one partner is lost, so is the other.”

“Where do you think this attack will take place?” Prince Vansell asked.

“We anticipate somewhere on the far side of Ellington. Your Majesty, Prince Vansell, I need to return to my Fair and see to the next phase of our operation.”

“I’ll return to Ellington with you, Commander,” the King said. “I’m too old for these early morning jaunts Vansell takes every day. You have my commission, Commander Ramonth, to bring these brigands to justice.”

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The young couple rode slowly through the open countryside. The gently rolling hills were covered by a mixture of open grassland and large tracts of deciduous forest. Perfect hiding places for the outlaws they hoped to encounter. What passed for a road in this lawless country was the only viable means of travel between Rodham's largest city, Ellington, and the larger city of Durset, the capital of Elvendar. Their covered wagon creaked as the wheels shifted from side to side, attempting to find purchase in the ruts of the well traveled freeway.

"What makes you think they will attack us," the pretty young wife asked flipping her long mousey brown hair over her shoulders.

"They won't be able to resist you," the tall brown-haired husband answered. "A single wagon traveling without an escort, throw in a beautiful woman for the taking; I'm surprised we have made it this far."

"Have I told you how much I hate wearing this dress?"

"Not in the last five minutes, you haven't."

"I hate it. I can't get in or out of this wagon without showing my butt to everyone."

"I think that is the general idea, dear. It just wouldn't have the same effect if I am the one wearing the dress."

"Very funny, where are the children?"

"Riding the thermals, high above us," the husband answered. I might need to send Meer away to scout for a good place to camp for the night.

"A'ven says there is a rider coming up fast behind us."

"This may be one of their scouts," the husband said reaching behind the seat and touching his curved backsword concealed under a blanket in the bed. "Make sure that he gets an eye full."

“He is just a few hundred yards behind us and coming on fast,” the pretty wife added as she looked through the covered wagon.

Reyn could just hear the hoof beats of the overtaking horse as his make-believe wife pulled her ankle length dress up to expose six inches above her knees. Vanessa also put her feet up on the running board of the wagon to expose even more of her shapely legs. The sounds of the approaching horse slowed as the rider reined in to match the pace of the large wagon. “Good afternoon,” the sunburned man said in the way of a greeting. “Ma’am,” he added, his eyes riveting on Vanessa exposed legs.

“Afternoon, how much further is it to Ellington?” Reyn asked, making eye contact with the large man.

“A night and a bit for you and your wagon,” he answered “but, there is a good campsite about a league ahead by a large lake with plenty of water and grazing for your animals.”

“Won’t you join us for supper, stranger? I appreciate the information about the lake.”

“Perhaps another time, neighbor. I have pressing business this evening in Ellington.” With a tip of his hat and a lingering glance at Vanessa, the large man kicked his horse into a gallop and sped away.

“What do you think?” Vanessa asked pulling her dress back down to her ankles.

“If you had shown him anymore, he probably would have proposed. I think this is what we were hoping to find. Even now, he is beating it for Ellington to report to his higher-ups about the single wagon, with no guards, and the good-looking bird sitting next to the driver.” Reyn looked away in deep concentration as he sent an empathic message to his Weyr-Drake. “I’ve sent Meer to shadow him into the city.”

They made the campsite by the large lake about an hour before nightfall. Reyn cared for the team of horses while Vanessa started the fire and began preparing supper. “Everything is clear,” Vanessa said. “Do you want to go for a swim before we eat?”

“Yes,” Reyn replied already beginning to come out of his boots. When the tall Vanessa joined him in the water, she tossed him a large bar of scented soap. After washing from head to toe, he returned the soap to her and dove deep into the cool, clear, lake to remove the soap from his hair. The beautiful sleek woman placed the soap on a rock and dove into the deeper water after him. She easily pulled herself up on his lap and as she wrapped her long legs around him, she kissed him deeply. They were interrupted by the sounds of an animal back winging in to land on the edge of the lake. Best resembling a small dragon, the silver creature dove like a large otter into the cool water, coming to the surface almost right between them.

“I’ve missed you too, A’veen,” Vanessa said as she stroked the sleek creatures head and neck. Just as quickly the silver Weyr-Drake was off to pursue the slick trout that lived in the lake. When they left the cool water, it was dark, and they dried themselves by the warmth of the large fire. They were almost dressed when a second Weyr-Drake back winged in to land by the fire.

She head butted Reyn in the chest as he stroked her head and scratched around her eye ridges. After a few moments greeting, the lighter colored creature made a dash for the cool water to join her male friend. “Meer has the building marked where our traveler had his important meeting tonight.”

“How do you think this will happen?” Vanessa asked as she combed her long hair by the fire.

“It depends on the other traffic on the road, but if I was them, I would hit us right here. They can leave Ellington and gallop here in about an hour. This close to our destination, they won’t expect us to be up and leaving early.”

“Do we still need one of them alive?”

“Yes, we need to pin down which Merchant house is sponsoring these highwaymen and double check it with the house where Meer tracked our fellow traveler tonight.”

“How can command be so sure it is one of the large Merchant Houses?”

“It just makes sense,” Reyn answered. “In order to operate in this environment, each merchant must hire a large collection of arms men to protect his caravans. In time he ends up with a small army. Soon, he or members of his army figure out that it is more profitable to just steal from the honest merchants than try to out trade them. In short, he becomes exactly what he hired his arms men to protect him from in the first place.”

“Why do you think they are interested in us? We don’t have but one wagon and we surely don’t look very prosperous.”

“That is where you come in, dear. You have value and are very marketable to them. They can sell you as a house slave to some baron down in Mothray or somewhere else south of here. You are worth your weight in gold.”

“What about you, my handsome pretend to be husband?”

“No such luck for me. They will probably just kill me outright instead of trying to take me prisoner to be sold into slavery. Strong backs are just not as valuable as nice legs these days.”

Well before dawn, Reyn and Vanessa were up and getting prepared to meet the men who were going to ambush them. Both A’ven and Meer were off to locate the men riding from Ellington. When neither of the Weyr-Drakes reporting sighting, any armed men traveling from the capital; they were left in a quandary and waiting patiently as the sun rose over the hill to the east.

“The only thing that is moving is a lone wagon coming up behind us,” Vanessa said. “A’ven sees nothing else on the road for miles.”

“Something is wrong. If this wagon is legitimate and not our attackers, we might have to rethink our plan. Maybe the highwaymen got wind of us setting a trap for them?”

“You and I were the only ones outside of our Fair who knew about this plan. What do you think we should do?”

“We check out this approaching wagon, and then pack up our belongings and finish our trip to Ellington.”

The wagon that joined them at the lake campsite turned out to be just another young couple journeying to the capital. Vanessa greeted the woman warmly and Reyn helped the man haul water to his team as they rested. Reyn judged them to be slightly older than either he or Vanessa. The couple said they had a small farm a few miles off the main road and were interested in getting an early start for their monthly trip into the market. They met each other while serving in the army. Reyn noticed they carried two swords and two longbows and quivers of arrows in the covered bed of the old wagon. After watering their animals and refilling a barrel tied to the side, the handsome couple said their goodbyes and resumed their journey. “It appears we don’t have any choice but to hitch the team and resume our journey as well,” Reyn said.

“Let’s call the Weyr-Drakes back.”

A league from the lake, a large spot of blood on the side of the road caught Reyn’s attention. After setting the brake on the wagon and grabbing his sword, he jumped down to investigate with Vanessa. “There is another spot over here,” Vanessa said as she pulled her backsword from its scabbard. The increasing blood trail led them into a large park of mature oaks. There they found the two farmers, each pierced by three arrows. “They never had a chance,” Vanessa said sadly. “But where is their wagon?”

“Whoever ambushed them is in it.” Reyn looked skyward for a few moments, “Meer will locate the wagon and follow it. It has a distinctive tear in the canvas on the right side. Let’s you and I see if we can sort this out.” Neither spoke for twenty minutes as they systematically combed the area looking for clues. “I read this as about six men without mounts. That means someone dropped them off in this spot a few days ago. They have been eating cold rations so as not to give their position away.”

“But, why did they kill these two farmers. They could not have had much coin with them. It just does not make any sense.”

“Yes, it does,” Reyn said. “They thought this couple was us. These men were sent here to ambush you and me... Think about it, they were about the same age and were traveling armed. If it had been anything but an assassination, they would have tried to take the woman alive. But, both of them were shot from concealed positions on either side of the road while they sat on the seat of the wagon. They thought they were taking two Rangers dressed as farmers.”

“Someone knew the details of our mission,” Vanessa said as she handed Reyn one of the shovels retrieved from the back of their wagon.

“Exactly,” Reyn agreed. “These men went out of their way to remain undetected by the Weyr-Drakes. This large stand of oaks would have concealed their position from the air and there is no evidence of a fire anywhere.... There is something else. Meer has the wagon spotted and she will trail it into the city. I’ve asked her to get close enough that she can identify at least one of them as they reach their destination.”

By early afternoon Reyn and Vanessa had settled into a large room at the Blue Goose Inn. They thought it better to keep the Weyr-Drakes out of the city until they were needed. While Vanessa concentrated on getting a hot bath, Reyn visited the local archery shop to order some replacement shafts and to get some information.

Meer had tracked the wagon from the air to large warehouse in the middle of Ellington. Unexpectedly, it was not the building used by the man they encountered on the road just the day before. As he made his way to Grinnard’s Archery Shop, Reyn detoured slightly so that he could examine the huge warehouse complex from the street. Just to be safe, he pulled the hood of his jacket over his head

as he walked past the impressive structure. After circling the block, Reyn discovered the warehouse had only one entrance.

“Burtram Brothers, Captain,” Mr. Grinnard said. “They are the largest merchants in Ellington. Must employ at least a hundred people, and that warehouse takes up an entire block.”

“Are they respectable?”

“Used to be,” Mr. Grinnard said. “But that was back when the old man was alive. He wouldn’t put up with any shady dealings like his sons have gotten into... Now, they are into smuggling as well as employing a small army of highwaymen. No one has ever been able to figure out how they do it without getting caught by the Kings Guard.”

Reyn looked around at the racks of bows that lined the walls of the shop. If you stayed here long enough you could taste the sawdust as well as smell it. Between making longbows and recurves, Grinnard’s also specialized in custom arrows. Something was always being sanded or finished by one of the dozen employees. “I’ll have your arrows ready tomorrow morning, Captain.”

Reyn thanked Mr. Grinnard and returned to the large common room of the Blue Goose where he found Vanessa briefing their Fair leader, Commander Lessan Ramonth. Reyn embraced his commander and then took a seat at the table with the two stunning women. “Vanessa has been bringing me up to date. She is convinced that someone laid a trap for the two of you and this innocent couple walked into it by mistake.”

“Lessan, both of us would be dead now if that unfortunate pair of farmers had not been in a hurry to get to the markets of Ellington. The killers were waiting on us and were looking for a young couple with a covered wagon. Meer tracked them to a warehouse owned by Burtram Brothers and can identify all six of the assassins.”

“What should we do next?”



“We catch one of them alive,” Reyn said, “and, we make him talk. The names of the other five members of his team for starters, and then we run down how they knew about our mission.”

“I have a feeling that we are not going to like where this is leading us,” Lessan said. “What is our first move?”

“Meer is on the roof of the warehouse directly across the street from Burtram Brothers watching. All of our killers are inside now.”

“You two change into your leathers. It is time for a few answers around here. An innocent husband and wife died, and I want the name of the person who leaked the information.”

“Where are the other three members of our Fair?” Vanessa asked.

“They are stationed around the city, waiting on my instructions. It might prove necessary to cause some type of diversion before this is through. By the way, your horses are saddled and in the stables behind the inn. I suggest we ride down there and walk in the front door,” Lessan said with a smile. “We carry a commission from the King to run these murderers to ground. Let’s go and do our duty.”

Like wraiths dressed in all brown leather, the three Rangers vaulted into the saddles aboard their sleek horses. Reyn patted Rust on the neck as he followed Lessan and Vanessa out into the streets of Ellington and into the bright afternoon’s sun.

Two dozen horses were tied to a series of rails outside of the expansive warehouse. The shade provided by the huge complex itself kept the area cool. Troughs for water were kept full by a young lad of no more than ten. He tipped his hat to the strangely dressed Valdarians as they dismounted in front of the only entrance to the huge depot. Because of their training, there was no need to secure their horses to the rail. All three stood tall and proud with their ears standing alert, each watching their rider intently.

As the Rangers stepped onto the wooden floor of the huge warehouse; all of the bustling activity came to a halt. Immediately to the left of the large entrance they found the covered wagon with the torn canvas on one side. A large man wearing a black vest approached them with a questioning look on his fat face. "My name is Todd Burtram, what is the meaning of this?"

"Mr. Burtram, my name is Lessan Ramonth, and I carry a commission from your King to bring to justice the highwaymen who are plundering the innocent travelers on the Elvendar Road. To begin with, I need to see the six men who brought in the wagon to my left this morning."

"Those men are not here. They left at noon with a caravan heading for Strom."

"I see," Lessan said. "Then you won't have any problem lining your men up so that my eyewitness can inspect them."

Burtram looked around uncomfortably before speaking with his foreman. Slowly at first and then more steadily, men began coming from the back of the warehouse and forming a line behind Mr. Burtram and in front of a huge rack of wooden crates. "Twenty-one," Reyn said. "There are at least three hiding in the warehouse."

"We are very busy today, Ma'am," Burtram said, "can we just get on with this."

Behind the line of Rangers, like silver pieces of the sky, three Weyr-Drakes swooped in to light, each with a graceful back wing. The collective gasps from the assembled men were evident as was the stark terror that was etched on their faces. At the arrival of the three exotic creatures, all of the horses began screaming and pulling against their halters. All except the three belonging to the Rangers. One by one their leather tethers snapped under the strain and the panicked horses ran with abandon out into the city of Ellington. Looking behind her, Lessan smiled and noticed that only their three trained mounts remained. "It seems as if your horses don't like our Weyr-Drakes," Lessan said. "Meer, would you please identify those who brought in the wagon."

A Weyr-Drake was best described as a small dragon. Six feet in height, it had a ten-foot wingspan. Zair and A'ven were males and were slightly darker than the lone female, Meer. She first walked over to her Warder, Reyn, where she received a few loving scratches on her ears and eye ridges. Next, she went to Lessan where she received a few more loving strokes. Lastly, Meer began on the right end of the line of men and slowly and purposefully walked the length of the line, examining each of the men with both her amber eyes and her keen sense of smell. Reyn walked right behind her. Four times she stopped and growled, her raptorian feet tapping the wooden floor with ivory talons when she moved. Each time she stopped, Reyn instructed the selected man to drop to his knees; sometimes with a tap of his sword across the man's shoulders.

“Those of you men still standing are dismissed. Leave now and find your horses,” Reyn said. Those Meer had not selected did not have to be asked twice. All of them ran into the streets and began frantically looking for their mounts. “Meer and I will take the far end of the warehouse,” Reyn said. “Vanessa, will you and A'ven take the other side?”

Reyn and Vanessa along with their Wards began hunting down the men who were hiding, just another big game to the Weyr-Drakes. Lessan took the opportunity to address those men who remained. “Those of you on your knees are under arrest for murder. Anyone getting off their knees will die a most painful death.” The words were hardly out of her mouth before the last two men in line began a desperate escape attempt. In the blink of an eye and the swipe of one razor sharp claw, the first man was quickly hamstrung. The second was less fortunate and was caught by the neck. With his throat torn out, the man's lifeless eyes stared at the ceiling of the warehouse as Zair drug him up to lay in view of everyone. “Back inline and on your knees,” Lessan commanded. “The alternative is the same fate as your friend.” Crawling on one leg under the watchful eyes of Zair, the man quickly rejoined his mates.

It took about twenty minutes to find those who were hiding, but they were no match for the keen sense of smell possessed by the Weyr-Drakes. In all Meer and A'ven discovered five more people, including the missing two from the attack on the farmer's wagon as well as the other Burtram brother, Alyn. From his saddle bags, Reyn retrieved sets of handcuffs and quickly bound the kneeling men's hands behind their backs. With the exception of the foreman and both Burtram brothers, the remaining men were released into the streets.

"You have one dead and five murderers in custody, now my brother and I need to get back to business," Todd Burtram said.

"First, we need a few answers," Lessan said. As she walked in front of the men, Zair walked right beside her, purring as she lightly scratched his head. "I am going to ask you a few questions. If you don't answer or I don't think you have answered truthfully, Zair is going to eat a part of you. You see, Weyr-Drakes prefer their food still alive. And, being men, you just won't believe which parts they like the best. I promise you it is something you are going to miss." Lessan stopped while Zair showed his impressive teeth to the five kneeling men.

The first man was already sweating, and the day was pleasantly cool. "Who sent you on the mission to waylay the wagon on the Ellington Road?"

"Alyn Burtram, Ma'am," the man said forcefully and for emphasis nodded at the second brother. Alyn's eyes darted around for a way to escape, but the blade of Vanessa's backsword was quickly at his throat. She caught a pair of handcuffs from Reyn and smoothly secured the man's wrists in front of him.

"What exactly were your orders?" Lessan asked the second man in line.

Without hesitation the man began speaking. "We were to kill both the man and woman from ambush with three arrows each. They were the finest warriors on all of Rythmar and could not be taken alive."

“Who gives Mr. Burtram his orders?” Lessan asked the third man.

“We never had a name, Ma’am,” the man stammered out. “But everyone knew about the agreement with the Royals. We even joked about it.”

“Shut up you idiot. We’ll all hang if you don’t clam up,” Alyn Burtram screamed.

Lessan dropped down on one knee before the next to last man with Zair looking over her shoulder. “Are these Royal’s another Merchant House of traders?”

“No, Ma’am,” the last man answered. “He means the Royal family.”

Lessan stood suddenly, “Vanessa, start going through the files in the office.” Lessan looked at the foreman who was standing beside Todd Burtram. “Mr. Foreman, what do you know about all of this?”

“Ma’am, my job is to run the warehouse and handle the paperwork. I have nothing to do with what happens outside of these walls.”

“Is this true about the Royal family?” The foreman did not respond, but instead just nodded his head. “Go in the office with Vanessa, Captain Bardo rather, and show her where to look in the files.” Lessan turned her attention back to Todd Burtram. “Explain what you know about this operation with the Royal family.”

“We get our goods duty free into Ellington,” Burtram said. “That gives us a seven percent advantage over our competition right off the top. We kick back half of that to,” the man never finished his sentence; instead he nodded in a direction towards the royal palace.

“What do you know about the murder of innocent people on the Ellington Road?”

“I’m guilty of fraud and receiving stolen property, but I never ordered anyone killed.” Lessan nodded to Reyn who snapped a pair of handcuffs on Todd, binding his hands in front like his brother.

“I think this is it,” Vanessa said as she emerged from the office with the foreman by her side. “I have two dozen payment vouchers to a ‘PV’.”

“Prince Vansell,” Lessan said. “Mr. Foreman, you need to leave. Burtram Brothers is out of business. The rest of you outside in the street, and those of you with your hands in front help your wounded friend.” From a rack beside the office, Lessan took a full lantern and a striker. She quickly had the lantern burning and threw it with all her might into the back recesses of the storage facility. When she joined Reyn and Vanessa outside, they were already mounted. “I’ve asked all the Weyr-Drakes to spook every horse in Ellington. It will help the citizens deal with the fire we have just set and see that it does not spread beyond this block.”

The next morning at dawn, Lessan and all five Rangers in her Fair met with the King in his private dining room for breakfast. Prince Vansell walked through briefly on his way to the stables for his early morning ride. The King was accompanied by his youngest son, Jason who was thrilled to be in the company of six of the famous Valdarian Rangers, especially Vanessa. The King for his part looked as if he had aged ten years in the last day. “Thank you, Commander Ramonth, and thank you to each of your Rangers who risked their lives. You have fulfilled your commission and put Burtram Brothers out of business.” He held a number of vouchers in his hand. “I don’t know how to deal with this. The proof is undeniable, but I cannot bring myself to accept what it tells me.”

“The small army funded by the Burtram Brothers will evaporate without a payroll to support it,” Lessan said. “It might raise its ugly head again, but now you will know what to look for... As for the other problem of fraud against the government of Roldham, that is a burden that only the King can carry.”

The king thanked them all profusely again and again. Vanessa excused herself early and took Prince Jason to a secluded open courtyard so that he might meet her Weyr-Drake A'ven. "What types of games does he like to play?" the excited prince asked as they left the room.

Three hours after breakfast, the six Rangers were leaving through the eastern gates of the city. A large commotion at the gate drew everyone's attention and Reyn approached the Captain of the Guard to discover the nature of the problem. In a few minutes, the tall Ranger rejoined the others and gave his report. "It seems as if Prince Vansell has had a riding accident. Fell off his horse and broke his neck, imagine that. He was dead when a patrol found him about a half hour ago."

On the first hill outside the gate Lessan held up her hand for the Fair to stop. Above them six Weyr-Drakes rode the morning thermals in a tight kettle while they playfully snapped at each other's tails. "The King is weak as you all have seen. He does not have the stomach to deal with his corrupt merchants, much less his oldest son's avaricious exploits. He had all the people we took yesterday executed, not only because they were murderers, but because he would have to silence them to protect Vansell."

"How many Weyr-Drakes did you send to dispatch the Prince?" a Ranger asked.

"Just Meer and Zair," Lessan answered. "Balled talons to the back of the head result in a broken neck that is indistinguishable from a fall.... No one, including royalty, orders the deaths of members of my Fair and lives to tell about it. Now our commission is finished, and we can go home."