

Kill Them All

By R. Walt Bailey

Lessan sat quietly in the large thirty-foot boat along with the other kidnapped women. Like the other eleven captives in the craft, her hands were tied in front of her. On either side were identical boats, each filled with a dozen women who would be ransomed if possible or sold into slavery by the renegades that held them against their will. In front of the three rows of captives, two large men manned a pair of large sweeps that propelled the cumbersome boat forward. Behind her bench were two more sweeps along with a single man at the tiller who guided the craft through the complex series of islands and narrows with their tricky currents and sandbars. On the stern of each boat was a talisman flag made from a turtle shell, some feathers, and the bones of a small animal; all strung together with fine cord or vine and mounted on a two-foot-long wooden pole.

Many times, during their journey she watched huge croc'ans slide into the black water as the three narrow draft skiffs made their way deeper into the expansive Loran Mire. She glanced at the prisoner beside her as the woman wiped a tear from her cheek with the back of one of her bound hands. Lessan briefly made eye contact and nodded reassuringly to the woman but did not speak as the prisoners had been warned that no talking was permitted once inside the boats. The Mire was composed of hundreds of small islands dotted with large cypress and gum trees where there was enough high ground for them to gain purchase. The lower limbs of every tree were covered with long sweeping strands of moss and several times during their passage huge snakes slid into the water with a loud splash as their boat moved too close for their comfort. Everywhere the trees were filled with raucous birds that scolded the boats as they passed.

From the position of the setting sun, Lessan could tell their general direction of travel was northerly and deeper into the expansive uncharted savannah. The Mire was the last bastion of lawlessness in this isolated part of Lorain and the root of most of the country's problems. She carried a commission from the King to bring these brigands to justice and part of the elaborate plan dictated that she be taken prisoner and escorted to their hidden base of operations somewhere deep inside the massive swamp system.

Long shadows stretched over the still waters from the huge trees that dotted the large island directly in front of them. The man at the tiller showed no interest in steering around the island and indeed pointed the bow of the stout craft directly towards an open beach that was to be their landing point. With a slight crunch of sand and small stones scraping against the wooden hull, their boat came to rest against the open beach. Quickly, the two men in the bow shipped their oars, jumped over the side, and pulled the heavy craft securely up on the sandy strip of land. "All of the prisoners out of the boat after your bonds are cut," a voice behind her commanded as the first two men each drew a knife from their belts and waded in the shallow water beside the craft cutting the ropes that bound each woman's hands.

Once her hands were free, Lessan used them to steady herself against the sides of the large boat and followed the example of the two women in front of her and stood up slowly, testing her balance. After making her way to the bow, she hopped over the side smoothing her plain dress after her feet were firmly on sandy soil. Each of the boats emptied in the same manner as they came to rest beside the first craft secured to the small beach. She followed the women in front of her as they were directed up the slight incline away from the water. Two of their captors were busy building a large fire and all the captive women huddled together in a semi-circle as the fire gained in size and intensity. The night air was already beginning to chill rapidly.

“You are free to speak and see to your personal needs,” a large gruff man said. “But do not venture far from the beach and never put so much as your big toe in this black water. To do either is certain death.” He held up one of the totem flags from the stern of his boat. “Without these flags, none of us would be alive now. There is an evil that lives here that is worse than the swamp’s creatures.”

Lessan took a seat beside a young woman who appeared to be about eighteen and frightened. “Lessan,” she said making eye contact with the young woman, about six years her junior.

“Gabby,” the pretty young woman answered. “What are they going to do to us? The woman beside me in the boat said that they will abuse all of us during the three days it will take for them to row us to their headquarters.”

“We will be ransomed back to our love ones or we will be sold into slavery,” Lessan answered. “Do you have a family that can pay your ransom?”

“My parents are not rich, and I doubt if they can scrape together more than a gold mark for my freedom. I’m afraid I am to be a slave,” she said with a slight whimper in her voice.

Lessan noticed that several of the guards tending the growing fire were staring at the two of them with evil smirks on their dirty faces. She stood suddenly and left the relative safety of the group of women and approached one of the men tending the fire. “I would like to speak to the man who commands here,” she said in a strong, firm voice.

“That would be Jakob,” the man said through rotting teeth as he pointed to a tall man standing slightly aside from the other fourteen guards.

With only a nod to acknowledge his help, Lessan approached the tall man who was speaking with two of his underlings. “My name is Lessan Ramonth, and I would speak with the leader of this rabble who holds us against our will.”

Looking very disturbed at being interrupted the tall man turned towards her. “Looks like we might have picked up a lady in our net, boys,” the man said with an evil smile. “Name is Jakob, what is on your mind?”

“The women are scared and don’t understand what is happening to them. They are afraid they are going to be abused and mistreated by your men.” Lessan finished staring Jakob directly in the eye and he was the first to look away.

“You are my prisoners and I will do with you exactly as I wish,” Jakob answered her. “And since you are the best-looking bird in this whole flock, that includes you, Lady, ransom or not. As a matter of fact, I just might save you for myself and let the lads have their pick of the others.” With one large hand Jakob grabbed the front of her dress and pulled her close enough that she could smell his rank odor and fetid breath. With his other hand, he snatched the hem of her dress and began moving his fingers up the back of her thigh.

Lessan brought her knee up sharply into Jakob’s crotch. As he doubled over in pain, she smashed her right fist into his nose as she took a half step backwards. She was seized from behind by several pairs of rough hands that held her before the brigand leader while he recovered from his injuries and regained his breath. Through tears in his eyes and blood flowing from his broken nose, Jakob held her in an unbelieving gaze of hate and loathing. “Take her beyond the fire,” he started saying but then thought better of it. “No, you two take her young friend over there,” he said pointing to Gabby. “I want all these women to hear her squeals and think about what is in store for all of them.” He wiped the flow of blood on the sleeve of his right hand as his eyes tried to stare a hole into Lessan.

“Jakob, if you attempt to abuse any of these women prisoners, not enough of your men will survive to row these three boats to your headquarters,” Lessan said in a cool level voice returning the leaders intense stare.

With the back of his bloody hand, Jakob backhanded her across the face. She could taste the coppery residue of blood in her mouth where her lip had split. “Put this bitch back with the others so she can appreciate the screams as my men use her friend.”

Lessan was shoved back towards the circle of women as two of Jakob’s favorites bodily picked up young Gabby and carried her away from the fire and into the darkness. The young woman put up a valiant struggle, kicking, biting, and scratching the whole way but the men were just too strong for her and soon she tired. Lessan was roughly thrown to the ground near the fire and one of the captives offered her a handkerchief to stem the flow of blood on her lip. “I’m afraid all you have done is incite them further, My Lady,” the woman said as Gabby’s struggles could still be heard coming from behind the group.

Lessan looked up to see the quarter moon just now beginning to rise in the east. “Zair, make at least one of them yelp,” she thought empathically.

As Lessan was returning the woman’s handkerchief, a loud blood curdling scream penetrated the night. The women were all sitting silently, but even their captors stopped speaking at the unexpected outburst. “That wasn’t Gabby screaming,” the handkerchief bearer said.

“No,” Lessan said stoically. “That was one of her attackers coming to a most painful and unexpected demise.”

The screams transitioned into a moan that was so powerful, several of the captive women put their hands over their ears. The men standing on the far side of the fire all stood around looking at each other wondering what was happening out there in the darkness. The intense spell cast over everyone was broken as Gabby ran back into the firelight and fell heavily in beside Lessan sitting on the sand. From the same direction, the screams reached a new crescendo in intensity. “A small dragon saved me,”

Gabby said. “Before I left, he bowed to me and then went back to killing those two men. I have never seen a creature so fierce, but I strangely felt as if he was my friend.”

“Listen to me carefully,” Lessan said. “You did not see what attacked those men. They forced you to your knees and pulled your dress over your head and were pulling your small clothes down when the attack began. You pulled your clothes back on and ran for the safety of the fire without looking back.” She looked Gabby directly in the eye. “Do you understand?”

“I’ve got it,” Gabby said a slight smile flashing across her pretty face.

The entire camp was in an uproar as the moaning and screaming continued from out in the darkness. “End it, Zair, they will be coming to investigate in a few minutes.” Suddenly the sounds of the night birds and other creatures along with the gentle breeze blowing over the island were the only sounds that could be heard.

Jakob stomped into the circle of women, several men right on his heels. Turning to his men he said, “Several of you make torches and find out what happened to those two brothers. It sounds like they rambled into a croc’an’s nest by mistake.” Turning to Gabby who was now standing beside Lessan, he asked her what she had seen. The young woman faithfully kept with the plan and insisted she had witnessed nothing. Jakob seemed dissatisfied but walked with his men back to their side of the fire. Meanwhile a half dozen of the captors improvised torches from cypress limbs and went to investigate.

Lessan could not see what was happening clearly on the other side of the fire, but it was soon evident that something was disturbing the men greatly. One of the women seated closest to the men eased over to Lessan to report. “The two who were sent to abuse Gabby can’t be found. All that is left is a huge amount of blood. Jakob thinks their bodies were dragged into the water by some swamp animal. But there is something else. Two more of their men are missing,” she finished saying with a smile.

No one offered the women anything to eat or drink that night. From the bow of each boat they were given moldy blankets to sleep on, but that was it for accommodations that first evening. By daylight the death toll among the men had reached eight.

The seven remaining men under Jakob's command searched the island at first light but found only blood and drag marks where bodies had been pulled by something into the water. Lessan approached Jakob the next morning as he shared a cup of tea with his men. "The women have had nothing to eat in over a day. Some of us are going to have to row your boats for you and we cannot do that on an empty stomach."

"Pass out some travel rations and water," Jakob ordered over his shoulder his eyes never leaving Lessan's. "Somehow, I think you are responsible for this," he said. "Things will be different when we reach the ruins."

Lessan did not respond but thought to herself, "You are assuming you will live that long, Jakob. That might be stretching things just a bit."

Most of the women were slightly younger than Lessan but not as physically fit. She organized them into teams to take the places of the missing men on the oars and saw that they rotated every half hour. The second night they again stopped on the wide beach of a small island. This time Lessan took charge of seeing everyone fed from the provisions packed in the boats. All the men seemed very nervous and none of them attempted to attack or molest any of the captives. When she was satisfied that the women had been cared for, she sat down beside Gabby to share a cup of tea she had taken from the guard's supply. "You were very brave yesterday," she said making eye contact with the pretty young woman.

"Does that silver dragon belong to you?"

"His name is Zair, and he is a Weyr-Drake not a dragon. He is my Ward and I am his Warder."

“You are a Valdarian Ranger,” the woman sitting beside Gabby said. “I am from Elvendar, very close to Valdaria. Their Rangers are legend and they are reputed to be the finest warriors in all of Rythmar.”

“Are you a Valdarian Ranger?” Gabby asked.

“Yes,” Lessan answered.

“How did you get taken prisoner?” Gabby asked.

“I didn’t,” Lessan answered. “I joined your little band on my own so that I could find their hideout. Prince Sandol will bring the entire army of Lorain down on them once we locate their lair. We needed someone on the inside to see all the women escape unharmed.” Their conversation was interrupted by a loud scream that permeated the night air. “It sounds as if another guard has met Zair.” Most of the women around her smiled and nodded their heads. “Tell the other women to rest well tonight; we are soundly protected, and nothing will harm them.”

By daylight only five guards remained alive from the original fifteen. Those seemed nervous and on edge continuously and remained to themselves giving the women complete run of the camp and the island. Without asking permission, Lessan helped herself to their larder of supplies. Jakob’s demeanor remained sullen and he never spoke to anyone except his surviving cronies.

Their third day together was much like the first two. Daylight was spent rowing and they once again camped on one of the hundreds of available islands in the huge savannah at dusk. Two more guards disappeared during the night, leaving only enough for one of them to pilot each of the boats while the women handled the oars. By noon of the last day in the boats they reached the Lorain ruins, the hiding place of the bandits and Lessan’s true destination.

Instead of beaching their craft, they instead landed at a well-maintained system of docks outside of a walled citadel. A dozen brigands took charge of the prisoners as they exited the boats. They were

roughly shown inside the fifteen-foot-tall stone walls that surrounded the ancient ruins of what once was a satellite fort. Once inside they found themselves standing in an open courtyard. Above them on an open balcony Lessan could see Jakob energetically engaged in conversation with a huge man whose animated gestures seemed to indicate he was not pleased by his lieutenant's report. More than once Jacob pointed towards the thirty-six women prisoners standing in the old courtyard.

Her concentration was interrupted as an older woman wearing a tattered red vest spoke to the prisoners. "Follow me please," the older woman said and walked towards a large opening in the stone walls where a newer metal barred gate had been swung aside to allow their entrance. Once inside Lessan found they were to be quartered in a large room with adequate bunks for all the prisoners. "My name is Mycelle," the woman said. "Please form a line against this wall," she said indicating the outermost stone wall of the large room. "I will need your name, where you are from, and the names of any family members who might pay your ransom. You will be housed here for about a month. Those who cannot be ransomed will be transferred to the slaver's wagons in a few days... Those of us wearing red vests are prisoners just like you. If the men want you, it would be better if you don't fight them, but that is up to you. I am sorry for the predicament we find ourselves in. We will try and make this as easy on everyone as possible."

When Lessan gave her name, Mycelle's head snapped up in recognition. "How many guards in the compound," Lessan whispered.

"Your reputation precedes you, Lessan, and about twenty. It seems as if Jakob blames you for the deaths of a dozen of his men. Vael is furious about it. He is the leader of this rabble."

"How long have you been here?"

“Six months and my time is running out. I manufactured some story about a rich relative who could pay my ransom, but the truth is there is no one. When Vael realizes that, I am on the next wagons out of here.”

“We will be gone long before then,” Lessan said. “I need an exact count of the number of guards. Can you help me with that?”

“Yes, there are two red vests who manage the kitchens. They will know exactly how many they are feeding.”

The prisoners soon learned they were allowed the use of the expansive courtyard enclosed by stone balustrades. They were locked up at night behind the new iron barred door. They however were not permitted inside the citadel itself. Lessan counted the guards on duty patrolling the walls and noticed that at least four were on duty around the clock. These ancient ruins had been partially restored by someone. Built on the end of a peninsula that jutted out into the expansive Lorain Mire, the fort was almost completely surrounded by water on every side. From their arrival and her communications with Zair, she learned the only access from the Lorain mainland was by means of a long causeway that was wide and well maintained enough for wagon traffic.

A guard came to obtain her late in the afternoon of her second day inside the expansive compound. As she stood and smoothed her wrinkled dress, Gabby grabbed her hand. “Don’t worry about me, I will be alright,” Lessan assured her friend. “When I come back, we will be free.”

The guard that escorted her was six inches shorter but much broader across his expansive chest. He was armed with a short belt sword as well as a belt knife. Both remained in their respective scabbards. He walked beside her but did not speak as they approached the main doors leading into the three-story main structure of the inner citadel. A lone guard smiled at them as they climbed the ten-foot stone stairway up to the entrance. Her escort’s hand found its way to her rear end as they reached the top

of the stairs and entered the open door held by the guard. As they passed through the entrance, the outside guard firmly closed the door. With all her strength, Lessan slammed her elbow into her guard's nose. As the man staggered backwards, Lessan ripped his belt knife out of its sheath and held it against his whiskered throat. "If you ever touch me again, this will find its way up your ass... Do you understand me?"

A quick flash of fear crossed the squat man's eyes and he nodded his head after wiping the blood from his nose with the back of one sleeve. "Yes," the guard replied and wiped the blood from his nose again. Lessan flipped the knife in her hand and returned it to the guard hilt first all the while staring him directly in his beady eyes.

"I will follow you," Lessan said boldly, "lead on."

She followed the smelly man up two more flights of stairs until they reached two large ornate double doors. The guard slammed his fist against the door twice and waited for permission to enter. Lessan could hear a bolt being slid aside and the door on her left opened. Holding the door was a beautiful young woman of about her age. She wore a red vest and nothing else. The guard followed by Lessan entered the expansive room as the huge door was moved aside. "The prisoner Lessan, as you ordered, Sir."

Seated at a large ornate desk was a huge man. He had black hair and a neatly trimmed black beard. Even his eyes were dark colored. To the right of the desk sat Jakob in an exquisitely upholstered chair. To Jakob's right a large fireplace burned brightly. To either side of the large man two more red vested servants stood quietly. Each wore nothing but the vest. Beyond the two servants Lessan could see the opening to a large bedroom. Behind the expansive desk, a windowed door opened to a large balcony that looked over the Lorain Mire. "What happened to your nose?" the large man behind the desk asked.

"Vael, she caught me with an elbow when I wasn't looking."

“More than likely you had your greasy hands on her butt. Get out and shut the door behind you.”

The guard did not respond as he turned and left the large room. Lessan heard the door shut and bolt slam as the girl servant slid the locking mechanism back in place.

Vael sat quietly behind his desk looking at Lessan. Her eyes riveted on his and never wavered. They locked in that position until Vael broke the contact by glancing at the pretty woman of about eighteen on his right. The young woman looked helplessly at Lessan as the man’s large hands ran up the insides of her thighs. “My name is Vael. Jakob says that you are a witch and you are somehow responsible for the deaths of twelve of his men... I’ll give you one thing; you have managed to intimidate all my men just by sitting in your locked enclosure downstairs while not lifting a finger. ...Just what the hell are you, Lessan?”

“Just a woman who wants to be free, not unlike all the others you hold here against their will.”

“How would you like to wear one of my red vests? I can be very generous if you behave yourself and treat me kindly.”

“By behave you mean submit to you the way these three are forced to endure your physical abuse?”

“Why don’t you sample some of my hospitality before you make up your mind? You three fetch hot water so Lessan can take a hot bath.” All three of the women moved to her left and pulled apart a heavy drapery that concealed a large tub and bathing chamber. She could hear them pouring water from large containers into the tub and the smell of scented soap filled the humid air.

“I have to admit that the idea of a hot bath really sounds good,” Lessan said as she began unbuttoning the front of her dress. Very quickly she stepped out of her soiled dress and threw it beside her on the floor. Almost as quickly she was out of her small clothes and stood naked before the two strange men, who were suddenly speechless.

“That is the most impressive thing these eyes have ever seen,” Vael finally said, eventually finding his tongue.

“What is that medallion hanging between your breasts?” Jakob asked, speaking for the first time since she entered the large room.

“A valuable heirloom passed down in my family,” Lessan answered as she lifted the gold chain and medallion over her head and approached the seated Jakob. She held the pendant by its chain and laid the medallion in his outstretched hand. As the coin-sized gold object touched his palm, Jakob screamed in pain as if a white-hot branding iron had touched his flesh. As the man recoiled from the touch of the medallion, Lessan grabbed his belt knife and plunged it into his neck. She slipped the razor-sharp blade to the left before removing it from the man. In one smooth motion, she flipped the knife in her hand and threw it at the form of Vael who was just rising from his ornate chair. The six-inch blade buried itself to the guard in his chest just slightly right of dead center. The huge man slumped back into his seat as the life drained from his black eyes.

“Help me,” Lessan said sharply as she grabbed Jakob by the collar of his tunic and began dragging him towards the glass door leading to the balcony. Initially stunned, the other three women began moving to help her. Two grabbed Jakob’s legs as the third opened the glass door. Once outside, with their help Lessan was able to get Jakob’s body up to the stone ledge and push it over the edge. It impacted with a loud splash as his dead body hit the water. It took all four of them to move Vael and they accomplished that feat by carrying the chair he sat in. His body made a louder splash as it hit the water.

“What do we do now?” one of the women asked.

“I’m going to take a bath,” Lessan said. “Don’t unbar those double doors for any reason and see if you three can find something to wear; you cannot run around with just those vests on.”

“Won’t the guards on the ramparts above us have heard the splash?”

“The sentries have been dead for an hour. As I take a hot bath for the first time in almost a week, I want you to tell me as much as you can about this old fort, the slavers, and the remaining security. My first mission is to kill them all.”

After bathing Lessan wrapped herself in a large fluffy towel and comb dried her hair by the fireplace as she continued to listen to the three women and ask them additional questions. “I am sorry, My Lady, that we did not have time to wash your soiled dress and small clothes,” the oldest of the three named Brea said.

“Throw them in the fireplace and burn them; I won’t need them anymore... Brea, would you step out on the balcony and bring me the two bundles Zair left for me.”

“Is that a magic medallion you carry, My Lady,” the young woman named Andrea asked.

“How much do you know about the history of Rythmar and the northern continent?” When the young woman just shrugged her shoulders, Lessan continued. “Ten thousand years ago three sibling deities fought for control of Rythmar. In the end, the good Lord Vanatee won out and banned his evil brother and sister from Rythmar. But, not before each of them had hidden powerful talismans for their followers to use to regain power and restore them to greatness. Vanatee also left objects of power for his followers in the form of seven medallions made from the guard of his sword ‘Royal Blood’ to ward against the evil that would once again threaten the world. The medallion I carry is one of the seven and has been handed down in my family for thousands of years.”

“Why did it burn Jakob’s hand when he touched it?” Brea asked as she sat down two large leather bags she retrieved from the balcony.

“The Medallions can be freely given, but they can never be taken. It sensed Jakob’s evilness.”

Lessan opened the smaller of the two leather satchels and removed her skin-tight leather uniform. From the other bag, she retrieved her back sword, bow, and a quiver of arrows.

“You are a Valdarian Ranger?” Andrea stated matter of factly. “Is your Weyr-Drake here?”

“Yes, and yes,” Lessan said with a smile. “He has killed all of the guards on the ramparts, now it is time for us to deal with the rest.

“How will you do that?” Brea asked. “There must be almost a dozen of them still out there.”

“The next shift of guards comes on in about a half hour. We will take them then, by using stealth and another property given me by the medallions.” Lessan smiled as she reached inside of her tunic and held the medallion in her right hand. With a gasp from the three women she vanished. A few seconds later she appeared standing on the other side of them. “Invisibility is one of the more useful gifts the medallions give the bearer... I want you three to remain here until I return for you. Lock the double doors after I leave and open them only if someone says my name first.”

“Zair, I am on my way to the ramparts. Have you disposed of all the sentries?”

They were six of them and they are dead. When is the change of the guard?

“According to Mycelle the changing of the guard takes place at midnight. They will know something is up when they find their fellows not on duty.” As Lessan finished her last empathic thought, she climbed the last step that placed her on the open horseshoe shaped ramparts. Except for a knee-high stone rail, the mire side of the rampart was completely open and surrounded by water. She looked away from the expansive savannah bathed in moonlight at the whistle of wings as the graceful silver Weyr-Drake banked in to land beside her. As she placed her loving hands on his head, neck, and eye ridges the sleek creature began to purr loudly and butted her in the chest with his head. “I’ve missed you too, Zair. Where are Jake and Leida?”

About a day's march away with the Lorain Army, in position but waiting for the slaver's caravan. They want to trap them on the causeway.

“That means we are going to have to hold this fort with just the aid of about forty women, none of which are warriors.” Lessan looked away for a few moments. “Alright, first things first, we deal with the sentries and then the rest of the garrison.” With a last loving scratch about the ears, the Weyr-Drake leaped into the air to take his position circling over the ancient fort.

Lessan only had to wait for a half hour. She was alerted to the changing of the guard by the ringing of a bell out in the courtyard. She touched her medallion and instantly felt the warm glow that always accompanied her becoming invisible. Leaning quietly against one of the inside ramparts, she watched as the new guard marched up the broad stairs from the courtyard to her level at the top of the abandoned fortress. They paused for a second as one man was dispatched to the right towards the far end of the horseshoe shaped structure and a second man was detailed to stand watch at the head of the stairs. The remaining five men turned left towards her. “Zair, take the first two anytime you can do it silently.”

She sat still as the five men marched loosely past her talking among themselves. “If those bastards have gotten a few of the new women out of the lockup before our watch has a chance, I’m going to kick someone’s ass,” a man said. “Vael said no one touched them for two days.”

“Shut up, Hawkins, I’ll sort this out when I get downstairs; but someone’s ass is mine for abandoning their posts.”

Lessan silently drew her sword from its back scabbard. As each man was positioned at his post, she waited until the retreating guard was at least forty yards away, the sounds of their boot heels drowning out any noise she made. The first two went perfectly. She caught them looking over the outside wall down into the water of the mire. An almost silent slice through the neck and a swift kick in

the back toppled the dead guard off the ramparts and into the water below. The third guard heard something, what she never knew, but he called to his leader. "Hey Manly, I don't see Hawkins."

Lessan dropped to one knee and returned her sword to its back scabbard and in one motion drew an arrow and knocked it on her bow string. "Zair, take one of them, I will get the other two." She drew her arrow and placed the index finger on her right hand in the corner of her mouth. The three men were spread out about ten yards apart. She heard the whistle of Zair's wings as the Weyr-Drake hit the middleman in the head with balled talons, breaking his neck. Lessan focused and released on the farthest man's chest. The guard staggered and fell backwards holding his chest. Lessan quickly knocked another arrow as the last man turned around to investigate the noise of his comrade hitting the stone ramparts. The arrow took him in the back of the head, and he fell stone dead.

"Zair, make sure they are dead and then help me throw them off the ramparts." Lessan ran to the last man she shot. With a little effort, she was able to retrieve the broad head from his skull.

The other two are dead.

"Help me throw them over the battlements."

In only a few moments they had disposed of all seven guards and any trace of their attack. She sat on the outside wall scratching Zair's ears and eye ridges. "If my math is correct, that is fifteen of them; there should only be five more... I want you to circle over the courtyard while I go and find Mycelle. It won't do if we don't account for everyone."

At the base of the ancient stone steps, Lessan encountered two more men standing slightly to the side against the inner wall of the expansive courtyard. She eased her sword from its back scabbard and dispatched them quickly. One of the men carried a ring of keys which she secured and placed in the pocket of her tunic. Mycelle's quarters turned out to be beside the larger cell holding the balance of the prisoners. It took the older woman a few seconds to recognize Lessan, now wearing her brown leathers.

As Mycelle rubbed the sleep from her eyes, Lessan stressed to her the importance of accounting for all the men. “We have killed seventeen of them; I need to know exactly how many men were fed tonight.”

“Nineteen,” she answered, “counting Vael and Jakob; I am certain of it.”

“Show me to their quarters.”

Mycelle led her deeper into the old citadel and down a torch lit corridor to a large wooden door that was slightly ajar. Peeking inside, Lessan could make out the sleeping forms of two men among the two dozen beds. As Lessan started to ease the door open further, Mycelle grabbed her shoulder with one hand and her belt knife with the other. “You younger women are not the only ones they have abused.” The first man died without uttering a sound, but the second thrashed around knocking over beds as the older woman stabbed him a half-dozen times. Lessan assumed Mycelle was settling an old debt and only nodded to her as she returned her belt knife. The sky was just beginning to show the first signs of pink in the east as they returned to the open courtyard.

“Do they have something like an old armory where they keep extra weapons and equipment?”

Lessan asked.

“Yes, we passed it going to the barracks. It’s the first door on the left, but it has a lock on it.”

“Not to worry, I have a ring of keys,” Lessan said patting her tunic pocket. “I’ll take a quick inventory while you get the women up and see they are fed properly for a change. Get the women from Vael’s quarters by knocking and saying my name.”

The double doors to the armory were secured with a pad lock that opened on the third key she tried. Lessan borrowed one of the torches from the corridor and ignited a half-dozen lanterns arranged in sconces around the large one room armory. Racks of swords and pikes were arranged running lengthwise perpendicular to the entrance. Spears and shields were arranged against the left-hand wall, but on the right wall she discovered what she was looking for.

Lessan joined the raggedly dressed group of women in a large dining room used by their captors. The former captives were obviously enjoying a hardy breakfast of eggs, bread, and ham. Some of the women were taken back by her leather uniform with a quiver of arrows and a sword over her back and the recurve bow she carried in her left hand. In only a breath she could hear a pin drop. She looked at the women seated around the room and was pleased to see the three women from Vael's office had changed clothes and joined them.

“For those of you who don't remember, my name is Lessan Ramonth, and yes, I am a Valdarian Ranger. I joined your group to run these slavers and kidnappers to ground and put them out of business under commission from the King of Lorain. Most of you are raggedy and dirty. Brea and Andrea can show you where the bathing facilities are located and help you get clean garments or wash the ones you have now... We have slightly over forty women and we are going to have to hold this old fortress for two days before any significant help arrives. We expect the slavers caravan to arrive in less than two days but until that time, we are on our own.”

“You're not completely alone,” a man's voice said from the open door behind her. Lessan smiled at the familiar friendly voice and turned around to see a handsome brown eyed warrior standing in the doorway.

She ran to the warrior dressed in gray leather and threw her arms around his neck and kissed him passionately. Sheepishly at first, she looked back at the assembled women and said, “This is Captain Jake Tyrell of the Ahnveil Army, a Star-Man of Abyssalia, and my husband.”

A collective gasp from the seated women announced the arrival of Jake's ward, Leila. “That's the largest wolf I have ever seen,” someone said.

“Her name is Leila the Brown, and relax she is on our side.” Lessan spent a few minutes talking privately with Jake before addressing the women again. As she passed the huge brown Dire-Wolf, she

gave her a playful scratch about her head and ears. “Please take this morning to see to any personal needs you have. Take a hot bath and get clean clothing. After lunch, we must start preparing to defend our new home.”

“When can we expect the slavers caravan?” Lessan asked Jake as they walked together across the open courtyard.

“They will be here in two days; about fifty strong including drivers and guards.”

“Is there any chance of additional soldiers joining us from your team?” Lessan asked.

“Five more by noon this day,” Jake answered. “Unfortunately, that is all the Army could spare.”

“These women are not warriors, Jake. I understand the Prince wants to trap the slavers on the causeway between our two forces, but we are kidding ourselves to assume forty untrained women can hold off fifty determined men trying to breach our defenses.”

“What do we have here we can work with?”

“That may be the only good news I have for you. Someone, probably the leader of this rabble, thought it important to keep the old weapons oiled and maintained. Pikes, spears, and swords are of no use to our band of women, but they have dozens of well-maintained crossbows downstairs in the armory.”

“What about bolts for them?”

“Barrels of them, sealed and in good condition,” Lessan said with a smile. “The other thing in our favor is this place was designed for defense. Between the tall crenellations across the top of the wall facing the causeway, the architect had arrow ports installed. They even have ledges to rest the front of the weapons.”

“So, we have two days to make half of our force competent with a crossbow and the other half proficient at cocking them.”

“Something else is bothering me, Jake. When Zair and I took the guards, they were stationed on the very top of the battlements, but not guarding the approach from the causeway. They were protecting this old fort from something in the swamp.”

“Why would they do that? Sure, the creatures in the swamp are dangerous, but as long as they stayed out of the water, what possible danger would affect them from the savannah itself?”

“I don’t know, but we had better find out, and find out in a hurry.”

“All the guards are dead; who are we going to ask?”

“We will start with those who were closest to Vael and the other leaders.”

Lessan and Jake quickly assembled the red vest women from Vael’s quarters, Mycelle, and Lanna, an older woman who ran the kitchens, in a small room with an oval table near the women’s quarters. “Jake and I need to ascertain what is going on here. Which of you has been here the longest?”

“That would be me, My Lady,” Lanna, a woman who appeared to be in her middle forties said.

“How long have you been a captive, Lanna?” Jake inquired.

“Two years, Sir,” she replied.

“Lanna, tell us why Vael’s guards were stationed on the parapet on the swamp side of the old fort at night?” Lessan asked.

The woman with premature gray hair looked very nervous as she glanced all around the open courtyard. “Forgive me, My Lady; but there was nothing I could do about it.”

“Don’t worry about the past right now, Lanna. Just tell Jake and me what is going on here.”

“This old swamp harbors an ancient evil. It is older and even fouler than this ancient citadel around us. Vael had some arrangement with these creatures that allowed him to establish his hideout here. They protected him.”

“What was this arrangement?” Jake asked.

“He gave them two women during the peak of the full moon each month. Those he could not ransom or sell for a good price to the slavers, he offered up as tribute to them. For this payment, his boats received free passage in the swamps, and the caravan’s free passage along the causeway.”

“The full moon is tonight,” Lessan observed. “Just who or what are these swamp creatures?”

“I never saw one, My Lady. But, Vael was terrified of them and never wanted to be late in paying them their tribute... I spent a while as a red vest in his quarters before he sent me to the run the kitchens.”

“How were these women offered up in tribute?” Jake asked.

Lanna just shook her head and all the other women around the circle did likewise. Lessan looked at each of the women. “Can anyone tell us anything else that might be useful?”

The pretty woman named Brea was the only one who spoke up. “I think that talisman flag in Vael’s quarters has something to do with it.”

“Each of the boats had a flag of sorts on the stern. It was made from turtle shell, feathers, and bones of some small animal,” Lessan said.

“That’s it,” Brea said. “There is a larger version up in Vael’s quarters.”

“Alright,” Lessan began, “thank you for your help. Everyone back to crossbow practice, I think proficiency with these weapons is now more important than ever.” When the other women left, Lessan and Jake returned to Vael’s expansive quarters to find the totem flag. It was carefully stored away in a small closet just off the main room. When Lessan walked out on the stone porch, she stopped cold.

“Jake, you had better come and see this. We have had visitors.”

There on the stone balcony were a series of huge wet footprints, coming and going from the shear wall down into the swamp. “What do you make of these?” Jake asked.

“I’d say it walks on two legs and has extremely large feet since those wet prints are roughly twice the size of yours even with your boots on.” Lessan paused for a minute looking off over the western horizon. “I’ve called Zair back. The slavers caravan has just started towards us on the causeway, right on schedule... After the women finish their practice and have their evening meal. Rotate your men to guard them tonight. I’m going to signal our unknown friends out in the swamp that we want a meeting.” She noticed that on the left side of the old balcony wall a mounting hole had been carefully drilled into the stone. The wooden staff of the talisman flag fit perfectly.

“They are coming,” Lessan said as she sat back in one of the comfortable chairs by the fire in Vael’s old quarters. It was late afternoon and she and Jake had not been forced to wait for long. “Zair says there is only one boat and three occupants... I guess we are about to find out what has feet that big.”

“I wish I had Leila here with us,” Jake said. He had sent the huge Dire-Wolf with his men to guard the women down on the ground level.

“Unless I miss my guess, this first encounter will not be hostile,” Lessan said. “This is a face to face and feeling out meeting. Leila might provoke something, and I would prefer to get us out of here without endangering any more lives.”

“You’re the boss, Lessan, but I would still feel better if we had a Dire-Wolf up our sleeve, just in the case of emergency.”

“I think it smarter to keep Zair and Leila a secret for now. They might prove to be a nice surprise, if we need one... Our guests have arrived.” The large balcony outside of Vael’s old headquarters faced west. Limned against the light of the setting sun, two enormous creatures slipped over the stone balcony. They each had to duck their huge heads to enter the central room of Vael’s old headquarters.

Seven feet tall and olive in color, each of the beings dripped water from their extremities. Both Lessan and Jake were on their feet and at Lessan's cue they bowed slightly to their guests. Each of the creatures wore what appeared to be a skirt of moss around its waist as well as living vines that extended across their shoulders with extensions up into their thick hair and beards. It was difficult to tell where vines ended, and hair began. They each had a long cudgel made from a cypress or gum tree root tucked under a leather belt.

"I am Lessan Ramonth, a Knight Commander in the Valdarian Legion. My companion is my husband, Captain Jake Tyrell from the southern continent... As you can see, Vael no longer commands here; I do."

The two impressive beings looked at each other briefly, but it was the one on the right that spoke. "My name is Trenlock and we are the Wyfaren. This is our swamp, and to live here you must pay our tithing each month."

For the very first time Lessan noticed the black medallion Trenlock wore on a black chain around his neck. Coin sized it had a rune engraved on one face. "I see you wear the medallion of Karshee, 'Dawn'. Does that mean you are one of his followers?"

"The Wyfaren follow no one," Trenlock said in a raspy voice. "It is only an old relic of our past. The leader of our society wears this trinket to signify his rank, nothing more."

"I understand Vael paid for his safekeeping in your swamps with the bribe of two women each full moon?" Trenlock nodded his head but did not speak. "And how many of these women are still alive after six months in your care?"

"That is of no concern to you!"

Lessan stared the huge creature in the eyes until he looked away. “If I am sending someone to their certain death, it certainly is my concern.” Once again Trenlock looked away from her and did not answer.

An eerie silence overtook the large room and the only sounds that could be heard were the crackling of the fire. “Come back tomorrow when the sun is highest overhead,” Lessan said. “I will give you my answer then.”

Trenlock looked furious at being summarily dismissed so abruptly. “I see that a demonstration of our strength and resolve will be necessary, until tomorrow then.”

The two huge creatures turned and left the room, disappearing over the stone wall of the balcony. “That was certainly interesting,” Jake said. “Are you really going to consider their offer?”

“Of course not,” Lessan answered. “But, Zair will track them to their lair tonight and have an accurate count of how many of the Wyfaren there really are for us in the morning... Unless I miss my guess, Trenlock knows the slavers caravan is on the causeway and will be here tomorrow afternoon. I expect he will waylay the caravan and destroy it for us to demonstrate his strength. That will cut off our only avenue of escape and force us to meet his terms.”

Neither of the couple got more than a few hours sleep that evening. They rotated with Jake’s men guarding the women and placed Leila the Dire-Wolf on top of the ancient battlements, just in case some of the Wyfaren snuck past Zair and tried to approach the old battlements during the night. All those precautions proved to be unnecessary. Lessan kissed Jake on the cheek and handed him a hot cup of tea just as first light was breaking.

“Zair found their encampment and just as we thought yesterday, they are moving their entire force towards the causeway to ambush the caravan this morning.”

“How many of the Wyfaren did he count?”

“Three dozen with the main body of their force, add a handful more scouting and tracking the caravan; no more than forty-five... There is something else. He saw no evidence of their women prisoners, but considerable evidence, skulls to be exact; they are being killed and possibly eaten after these creatures grow tired of them.”

“How are they moving around in this huge savannah so quickly?”

“By a uniquely designed boat; it is made from a long hollowed out tree trunk. Very narrow with a sharp bow and stern; but it has outriggers to provide stability. I’m interested in seeing one firsthand.”

Lessan helped herself to another cup of tea before taking a seat beside Jake on the bed. “Jake, I think we are missing something here. The Wyfaren are big and scary but they are not the evil that permeates this expansive mire. Whatever is driving them is the real evil. I would be shocked if they are all not vegetarians.”

“How do we find the driving force behind them?”

“The key is the medallion Trenlock wears. We are going to have to get a closer look at it, and we may have to kill him in order to do it.”

Three large wagons pulled up to the main gate of the old fort from the causeway almost exactly at noon. Forewarned by Zair, Lessan was waiting on them. Just for insurance, that side of the ancient compound was manned by the five-armed rangers as well as one of the women with a crossbow at each of the shooting ports. The teams of horses were being led by one of the Wyfaren. Trenlock walked in front of the small convoy and at his signal everything stopped. Only Lessan and Jake stood before the locked gates to the ancient fort. Lessan wore a back sword while Jake wore a belt sword but carried his longbow with an arrow knocked.

“I see that you have eliminated the slavers for us,” Lessan said with a smile. “Although you lost four of your men in the ambush,” she finished saying and the expression on Trenlock’s face said that her

remarks had hit home. Before he could answer, she continued. “You are the last of your breed, Trenlock. It is one thing to spring an ambush on an ill prepared, unsuspecting caravan, but attacking a fixed fortified position will cost you most of your men, even if you can overwhelm our defenses.”

He slowly pulled the long cudgel from the leather and vine belt he wore. “I have no choice, My Lady, if you won’t agree with our demands.”

“There is always another choice, besides fighting.”

“Not in this case,” he said and charged. Smoothly, Lessan drew her back sword and easily parried his cudgel to one side. As the seven-foot tall creature’s momentum carried him past, she swiped her razor-sharp blade across the back of his right leg, dropping the giant to his knees. Before he could regain his footing, her blade was at his throat.

“Do you yield?” she said in a loud clear voice. “Don’t throw your life away, Trenlock. Let me see if together we cannot solve this problem.” Trenlock turned his huge head so that he could make eye contact with her and nodded his agreement. Before he could regain his feet, Lessan lifted the medallion and chain over his head with the tip of her sword. Black in color, the rune on the face was something she had seen before. “Where did you get this?”

“From the Wraith,” he answered, “the Lord of this mire.”

“How is it you serve him?”

“He holds the surviving females of our species hostage. If we fail to serve him, he kills them in the ceremony, just like the women we receive from Vael.”

“Tell me, Trenlock, of this ceremony.”

“Each month he visits our island. It is the only time we get to be with our women. There the two humans we received from Vael are sacrificed. The Wraith consumes their flesh and bones, leaving only their skulls.”

“Why don’t you fight him?” Jake asked.

“We’ve tried, but our weapons are of no use against him.” Trenlock looked away discouraged.

“The last time we revolted against him was ten years ago. He killed half of our women in retaliation.”

“When is this ceremony to be held?” Lessan asked.

“Sometime during the three-day peak of the full moon each month; we signal him with a large bonfire, and he comes, along with our loved ones.”

“While Jake binds the wound on your leg,” Lessan said. “I want to introduce you to two friends of ours.” At a whistle from Lessan, Leila the brown Dire-Wolf emerged, padding forward out of the marshy grass surrounding the edge of the mire. Jake and Lessan both scratched her on the head as she passed, but stopped at the sound of whistling wings, as Zair gracefully swooped in and lit with two back-wings.

“That is the largest wolf I have ever seen,” Trenlock said. “But, in my two centuries of living in this mire, I have never seen a creature like that,” he finished pointing at the silver Weyr-Drake.

“They are our friends, and they are going to help us free your women. Jake and I will accompany you back to your island. Have your men prepare for the Wraith Ceremony tonight.”

Jake, Leila, and Lessan shared one of the sleek watercraft of the Wyfaren with Trenlock and three others, as they propelled the fast boats with long spade shaped paddles. For the first time, she noticed that Trenlock’s hands as well as his feet were webbed. “Have your people always lived in this expansive mire?”

“Yes, it is our ancient home. But thousands of years ago, the Wraith came. We have been forced to his will ever since.”

“And he speaks to you through this medallion,” Lessan said holding the black medallion in front of her.

“Yes, but I have not heard his bidding through the medallion in almost a year. Now he commands us only when he visits our island for the ceremony.”

Lessan returned the medallion to Trenlock. Absentmindedly, he placed the chain over his head. “Trenlock, Jake and I will be tonight’s offerings. Please don’t change a single thing from the ordinary.” The look in his eyes spoke of sorrow and disappointment, but he slowly nodded his huge head that he understood. “Describe this Wraith for us.”

“Very similar to your silver Weyr-Drake, but perhaps three times as large with a reptile head and a barbed tail,” he began. “It is dark brown in color instead of the beautiful silver of your Ward. It wears a black medallion around its long neck like the one I carry.”

“It sounds like a Wyvern,” Jake added, “most certainly a creature of the Dark Lord from ages long past.”

“I think we are ferrying you to your deaths,” Trenlock said. “How is it you believe you can kill this creature where our peoples have been unsuccessful for thousands of years? Its retribution against the Wyfaren will be both swift and horrible.”

“All indications are the Wraith, this Wyvern, is invincible because of the magic contained in the medallions you both wear... The source of that strength was destroyed about a year ago. Both Jake and I were present at the time. I’m gambling this loss of magic is the factor that keeps it from communicating with you empathically now, like it has in the past. It will be dangerous under any circumstances, but it is no longer invincible.”

The Wyfaren village was located on a large island that had been stripped of most of the natural vegetation. Large, extensive gardens reinforced Lessan’s theory that these people were vegetarians. Large racks that held the drying skins from croc’ans and huge snakes were situated everywhere. Almost immediately upon their arrival, a large extensive bond fire was built in almost the exact center of the

island. Just before dark boats began arriving carrying the females of their species; the happy reunions seemed suppressed because of the oppressive ceremony that would be carried out when the full moon rose in the east that evening.

Both Lessan and Jake were handed two long white capes they were to wear and were shown to two large tree trunks set upright in the ground, close to the huge fire. In an ominous portent of the past, the entire ceremonial sight was surrounded by skulls mounted on smaller trees set in a circular pattern in the earth. They both concealed their swords at their belts and hung their bows and quivers of arrows on the back side of the large trunks. Lessan slipped the white cape over her head and fastened two buttons to keep it in place.

When the moon began to show itself over the eastern horizon, they moved into place. Trenlock had explained the Wraith would arrive just as the moon cleared the swamp to the east, and he was correct. Slightly smaller than a dragon and reddish brown in color, the Wyvern lit before them with two graceful back wings. In the center of his scaled chest was indeed a larger version of the black medallion of the deposed dark lord, Karshee. “This moon’s feast looks young and appetizing,” the creature hissed as it eyed both Lessan and Jake. “Once again the Wyfaren have served their master well.”

“They have served you and your evil master for the last time,” Lessan said ripping the white cloak from her shoulders.

The Wyvern looked to one side to make eye contact with Trenlock. “When I am done with these two, I will slowly strip the flesh from your wife for this treachery.” It turned with a menacing snarl and a flash of its huge teeth.

“The days of Karshee and his evils are past,” Lessan said flipping her quiver of arrows over her head followed quickly by her bow. “The magic of Vanatee now rules all of Rythmar,” she said pulling her gold medallion from under her leather tunic. With a smile at her immense adversary, she vanished. As

always, she was surrounded by the warm glow that always accompanied her using the medallion in this manner. The huge Wyvern snarled and looked in every direction. It roared as Jake began pumping arrows into the creature's chest. As she ran past on the animal's right side, she could see its hide was too thickly armored for a lethal hit from the front. Jake's arrows were only penetrating just past the broad-head points. She quietly pulled her sword from its scabbard and waited until its swishing tail came close enough for her to strike. With both hands, she drove her blade into its flesh just above the venomous spike at the very base of the whipping tail severing its primary weapon.

With a deafening roar, the large creature whipped around searching for her. Lessan moved quickly to one side and stuck her sword in the sandy soil. She quickly retrieved her bow and knocked an arrow on the string. "Now Zair," she said empathically. The diving Weyr-Drake hit the Wyvern with its balled talons in the back of its large head. The strike was more bothersome than injurious, but the reddish-brown creature roared its anger and snapped at the speedy Weyr-Drake already well beyond its reach. "Again", she thought as she released her cloak of invisibility. As she came into view once more, the Wyvern turned to attack her. With a half-dozen arrows protruding from its large chest, it closed for a killing strike. Zair's second impact was totally unexpected and the Wyvern actually stumbled as it temporarily lost its balance.

Lessan waited patiently, dangerously close to the huge creature, for the right opportunity. Zair's third impact with its head seemed to turn the tide and make up its mind. As it spread its large wings to flee, Lessan drew and released her arrow. The sharp missile buried to the fletching just at the base of the wing root, its only vulnerable spot. Raising its large wings, a second time, Jake buried another arrow into its opposite side. Unable to fly and bleeding from its muzzle, the Wyvern crashed to the sandy soil of the island. It kicked and thrashed for a few moments and then was still.

Lessan flourished her sword once to remove the blood and returned it to her back scabbard as she approached Jake. As a small group of the Wyfaren approached them, Zair returned and lit with two graceful back wings. Lessan lovingly scratched him and then silently thanked him for his help. “Thank you from all of our people,” Trenlock said, smiling for the first time Lessan had ever seen.

“Prince Sandol and his legion will arrive tomorrow. What you do with your lives now is up to you,” she said. “He is an old acquaintance of mine and I would be happy to provide you with an introduction. After all, you are going to be neighbors. You should get to know one another. I expect he would be interested in all the leather products this mire can produce. From the looks of the clothing your people wear, some of the Wyfaren are true artisans in leather craft. I expect Sandol will be your first customer.”