

PROLOGUE

To Hellbourne Manor

“Run, Elsa! Run!”

The little girl’s head snapped up at the shout of her mother’s frantic warning. Galloping up the trail rode a horseman from the King’s Brigade, mayhem in his steely glare. He heeled his mount onward clutching the reins tightly in one hand, an upraised sword in the other. The little girl’s eyes grew wide with horror. Even at five years old she knew full well the danger thundering down on her. Instantly she dropped her freshly picked wildflowers and ran as fast as her small legs would carry her.

In desperation, the girl bolted for the safety of her ramshackle home. The horseman followed suit, veering from the trail on an intercept course. Her tiny legs pumped frantically, propelling the girl along faster than they had ever moved in her short life. Fear squeezed a sob out of the five year old. Somewhere from behind, the little girl heard her mother cry out her name. She snuck a peek over her shoulder only to see a snorting horse gaining quickly, the soldier leaning to the side in preparation to strike her down with his blade.

“Mommy help me, he’s going to hurt me!” Tears spilled down the little girl’s cheeks. She would never make it to her house. The soldiers had come to her village before. They killed people each time. Already she witnessed more than any child should ever have to. She carried many unfortunate memories; the kind of memories that squeeze the innocence from a child like grapes in a winepress. There was still much the little girl did not know, but one thing was certain; she was about to die.

A sneer appeared on the horseman’s crooked mouth as he gripped the hilt of his sword tighter in preparation for the blow he was about to deliver. This will be easy he thought. He might even cleave the girl in two.

“Daddy!” The little girl shrieked. The hoof beats grew louder. She could feel the vibration in the ground. The girl took two more steps then felt a violent tugging at the back of her dress. Instantly she went sailing through the air, her feet flailing wildly as she left the ground.

“You’re safe now.” The little girl heard a voice say from overhead as a gloved hand pulled her into a saddle. The voice rolled its ‘R’s’, the hand maintaining a firm grip on the back of her dress holding her in place. Quickly, the girl swung a leg over the saddle so she ended up facing the stranger. She clasped tightly onto his burgundy tabard. The girl looked up to see a raven haired man with a moustache; his dark eyes fixed somewhere up ahead.

The soldier from the King’s Brigade galloped in pursuit and released a string of vulgar expletives at the stranger. Apparently, the mustached man was interfering with the King’s business.

Scorpyus clutched the girl tight and rode hard for a small farm house on the outskirts of the village. When he arrived he reined his mount hard to the left around the back of the house. The King’s soldier followed, digging his heels sharply into the sides of his mount.

Zephyr heard the horses approaching and drew back her bow. Scorpyus rounded the corner of the house. He was followed three seconds later by the soldier. When Zephyr saw the soldier she loosed her arrow. A feathered shaft appeared in the soldier’s windpipe, and a sickly gasping sound gurgled from his throat. As his mount galloped by, the soldier tumbled from the saddle and rolled to a heap near Zephyr’s feet. Scorpyus reined his horse to a stop and let the little girl down.

“Quickly, you must run and hide in the grain field. Do not come back until we get you.” Zephyr pointed the little girl to a wheat field one hundred yards to the north. The girl smiled and did as she was instructed.

“There are five more. You flank to the left of the village and I’ll flank right. Novak may need some help.” Scorpyus watched Zephyr swing atop her mount and gave her a wink. Zephyr smiled and the two galloped off back toward the south end of the village.

“No! Stop, let me go!” The little girl’s mother swung her arms attempting to keep her attackers hands away. Frantically she scratched and clawed at the brute bearing down on her.

“It’ll do no use to fight.” The man fixed a glassy eyed stare on the woman, a slow smirk creeping over his lips, “though I do enjoy a spirited wench.”

“Stop!” The woman slashed at the man catching him on the face. She repelled his wicked advances to the best of her ability. The man paused momentarily to wipe a spot of blood from his cheek. He looked at the red liquid on his finger tip.

“If it’s a fight you want, it’s a fight you’ll get.” Quickly he snatched the woman by the wrists, forcing her hands to her sides. The woman fought kicking and screaming.

“Ahh, feisty!” The man cackled fighting all the more, tearing the sleeve of the woman’s dress in the process.

A deep booming voice resonated behind the man. “She said stop.”

Both the soldier and the woman paused in their struggle. A puzzled look creased the man’s brow. The voice didn’t sound like one of his comrades. He slowly turned while maintaining his grip on the woman’s wrists. Behind him loomed a hulk of a man with a black cloak and a bronze helmet.

“This is none of your business. Be on your way.” The soldier ordered.

Novak didn’t budge. He only glared at the man.

The soldier became wroth. “I’m a soldier in the King’s Brigade. I said be on your way!” He released the woman and drew his weapon.

Novak was unimpressed with the man’s title. “You leave...or face the consequences.” Novak drew his sword.

The man flew into a rage and swung at Novak. His blade smashed into Novak’s buckler. The soldier then swung down on Novak’s head. Novak blocked the blow with his blade, and then stepped into the man. He brought a bracer into the soldier’s chin. The force of the blow snapped the man’s head back and caused him to stagger rearward a step. Novak followed up with an elbow to the chest. The force knocked the soldier to his haunches. He cursed Novak as he scampered to his feet.

“You can still leave.” Novak taunted and gave the soldier a big smile.

The man flushed crimson and lunged at Novak with a series of erratic blows. Wrath clouded his reasoning and induced hastiness. And the hasty stroke often goes astray. It’s what Novak counted on.

Novak smacked the wild swings away effortlessly. This enraged the soldier even further, his bloodshot and watery eyes bulging with hatred. The soldier raised his weapon high overhead intent on bringing it down on Novak’s skull. Novak took advantage of the soldier’s exposed torso. Well muscled arms ripped Novak’s sword through the air catching the soldier in the ribs. An audible cracking sound like someone crushing a walnut emitted from the man’s side.

The soldier’s sword arm dropped to cradle his ribs. His face went pale, a wheezing gasp hissing from his mouth. Novak paused from a follow up blow. The soldier gasped painfully for air and sunk to his knees. A blotch of pink frothy sputum percolated from his mouth. With a groan the soldier teetered backwards and fell over, mortally wounded and no longer a threat. Novak’s blow didn’t penetrate the man’s chain mail, but it was powerful enough to break his ribs. One of the fractured ribs must have been driven into the soldier’s lung.

Novak turned to the woman. “Go hide until we finish.”

The woman was numb with horror. She nodded her head rapidly and swallowed hard, clinging to Novak. “Thank you,” she cried gratefully.

Shouts erupted from a nearby farm house. Novak shot a glance in that direction and then back to the woman.

“You’re welcome, but go quickly.” The woman ran towards the woods after prying herself from Novak’s arm.

Zephyr also heard the shouts and decided to investigate. Scorpyus rode to the other side of the house. Both dismounted and approached from opposite directions. Zephyr crept toward the front door and Scorpyus toward the rear.

The farm house was a small rectangular structure made of dried sod with a straw thatched roof. The front door stood ajar. As Zephyr neared the door an elderly man came crashing through the opening. He tumbled to a stop, a nasty welt on his forehead, bleeding from the nose. Following him stomped a young soldier carrying a small leather pouch that jangled with coins. When he saw Zephyr his jaw dropped and then he jumped back into the house kicking the door shut behind him.

“Someone else is here!” The soldier reported to an accomplice.

Zephyr notched an arrow. Standing to one side of the door she slowly pushed it open with her foot. It creaked as it swung on its hinges. Inside the structure echoed the sounds of a clattering ruckus.

Zephyr cautiously entered the residence. Inside laid an overturned table and shards of pottery scattered on the dirt floor. A man in his forties lay unmoving by the table. Quickly she scanned the room. A cauldron simmered over the fire, and a barrel stood in a corner. The sounds of the struggle emitted from behind one of the two doors along the opposite wall.

As Zephyr walked toward the door on the left, the right door opened with such force it slammed against the wall. A soldier with an upraised mace exited. It was the same young man who just ran in. A full panic gripped the man and he didn't wait for introductions. He immediately charged Zephyr. Before she could lose her arrow, he brought his mace down hard. Zephyr ducked and rolled out of the way. The mace slammed into the sod wall sending clods of dirt everywhere. Zephyr sprang to the other side of the room and drew back her bow. The soldier turned and rushed her. Zephyr loosed her arrow only to see it graze her opponent and imbed itself in the wall.

The soldier brought his mace down again. Zephyr dove to the floor landing face down. The mace smashed into a barrel sending its contents of salted fish erupting like a volcano.

Zephyr drew her dagger and rolled to her back. The soldier towered over her and brought down his mace again. She threw herself to the side just as the spiked weapon tore into the floor where she had been. Zephyr rolled back and stabbed her blade into the soldier's thigh. With a holler the soldier stooped to clasp his punctured leg. He scowled at Zephyr with a deep hatred. Like lightning, Zephyr sat up and swept the soldier's throat. Crimson gushed down the soldier's chest as he collapsed on the floor.

Zephyr released a heavy sigh. She had come dangerously close to being pulverized by the mace. After a few seconds she regained her bearing and entered the room the soldier had darted from. Inside laid the corpse of a soldier from the King's Brigade. In the corner a woman cowered low to the ground. Scorpyus cut the leather cords binding her wrists and ankles.

“Shh, you'll be safe now.” Scorpyus consoled the woman who was sobbing uncontrollably, but relieved her ordeal was over.

“Are there any others?” Zephyr asked.

Scorpyus shook his head in the negative. “Not in here. There was only the two when I came in through the window.” He pointed to the shuttered square cut in the wall of what appeared to be a bedroom. A straw mattress and a few articles of clothing were along one side of the room.

“I will check the other room.” Zephyr slipped out and was back seconds later. “It is empty.”

“By my count there should be one more soldier here somewhere. We better check on Novak.” Before Scorpyus could say any more his large friend came bounding through the door. Novak was relieved to see his friends were alright.

“We were just talking about you,” Scorpyus smiled. “There is still another soldier out...”

Novak interrupted, “No, he fled like a jackrabbit into the woods.”

“Well that accounts for all of them.”

“Thank you, thank you all so much. I shudder to think what would have happened had you not helped us.” The woman was rubbing her wrists. Suddenly her eyes grew wide. “My husband...is he...” The woman fled abruptly out of the bedroom and knelt beside the man lying next to the overturned table. She was soon joined by the three knights. The man groaned when she lifted his head.

“Is he hurt badly?”

Zephyr inspected the man's wounds. “Do not worry Madame. I tell you he will be fine. His nose is broken, and he will have a headache for a while, but he will recover.”

“My father...” The woman glanced worriedly around. “I don't see him.” She ran to the door and looked outside. Fear of the worst overcame the lady. She frenziedly paced about to burst into tears when Novak approached her.

Novak clasped the woman's shoulders in an effort to calm her. “He was outside when I got here. He's hiding now. He's alright.”

Relief swept the woman's countenance. "Thank you. Thank you all so much. We have heard of you. You saved our village."

Then suddenly the woman became embarrassed. "I'm sorry. I wish there was some way I could repay you."

"You owe us nothing." Scorpyus replied.

When the small gathering exited the house, the other villagers were starting to regroup and gather near the well. Zephyr retrieved the little girl.

Scorpyus looked over the gathering, perhaps forty in all. His heart went out to them. These people were impoverished. Their cloths were well worn, their possessions few. A week earlier rogue elements of the King's Brigade paid a visit to the village. One of the villagers was murdered, and the villagers' only two milk cows seized. The loss was tremendous for the poor village. They were barely able to keep up on their tax payments as it was.

Two miles from Saltwater, the village consisted of nothing more than nine little homes and a barn. The people scratched out a living farming the ground. Yet, they were a resilient, close knit bunch. Despite their lack of sustenance, a villager tried to force two chickens on Novak as payment for the knight's assistance.

"No, keep them; you need the chickens more than we do." Novak waved the villager off.

"Je regrette, we were happy to help." Zephyr smiled warmly.

Scorpyus walked up with the horses. He handed Novak and Zephyr the reins to their mounts. "We better hurry. It's almost midday," he replied as he glanced toward the sun.

The villagers shook hands with the trio, repeatedly thanking them over and over. Scorpyus and Novak swung atop their mounts. Zephyr paused to pull something from her saddle bag.

"This is for you." Zephyr handed the little girl an apple. The child's eyes lit up as if she had been handed a precious gemstone.

"Thank you!" The girl couldn't contain her excitement.

"We have to be going." Scorpyus waved goodbye as Zephyr swung into the saddle. The villagers waived and watched the trio ride off before returning to their lives. They would never forget the knights.

"We better hurry," Novak smiled and heeled his horse. "We don't want to be late for Cad's wedding."