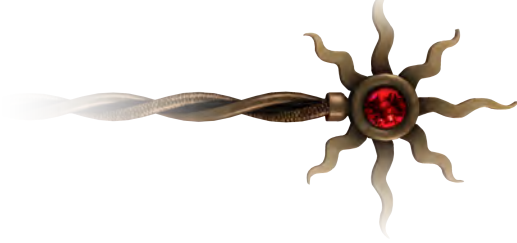


TSALIX SILVERTHORN AND
THE SCEPTER OF DESTINY

RICHARD M. SIDDOWAY

DAGGER
CRYELLE

TSALIX SILVERTHORN AND THE SCEPTER OF DESTINY



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44349 Lowtree Ave Ste 114
Lancaster, CA 93534
www.CayellePublishing.com



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Tel: (833) 229-3553 ext. 813 or email: Freedom@Cayelle.com

Cover Art by Robin Ludwig Design, Inc.
Interior Design & Typesetting by Gessert Books
Edited by Ashley Conner Editing
ISBN: 978-1-952404-18-4 [paperback]
ISBN: 978-1-952404-19-1 [ebook]
Library of Congress Control Number 2020941308

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CHAPTER 1



Tsalix wedged himself into the cleft in the rock, placed his ear against the smooth obsidian wall and listened. Above him on the steep hillside, huge polished slabs of stone perched precariously. Through the rock he could hear the footfalls of the approaching riders on their enormous wolacs. Tsalix listened intently, trying to read the signature of the heavy, armored six-legged beasts. Each one had a slightly different gait, and someone with an experienced ear could identify each wolac by its tread.

Tsalix grimaced as he thought he recognized the footfalls of Nash Doitsoh's wolac. The hoof beats were drawing nearer, and the young warrior forced himself even further into the crack in the rock wall at the base of Mount Jinee. He shed his breastplate to lose another couple inches, but still he felt as if his ribs were cracking from the pressure of the obsidian against his back and chest, until the crevasse widened and he popped into a small cave. He plummeted to the floor and took deep breaths, ignoring the pain in his bruised ribs, then reached back through the crack and retrieved his breastplate, sword, and knapsack. He could see his footprints outside the opening, but knew he had no time to obscure them.

Tsalix turned around and viewed his surroundings. In the dim light that filtered through the opening, he could see the cave's roof was just slightly higher than he was tall, and the room was about six feet in diameter. He pressed himself against a side wall when he heard the wolacs stop outside the narrow channel that led into the cave. They were breathing

hard and whistling through their gaping mouths that were bracketed with two sets of enormous pincers.

Tsalix had met many men on the field of battle, but had never had the pleasure or the misfortune to have crossed swords with Captain Doitsoh, Prince Abadon's lion-headed henchman, although he had witnessed his ruthlessness often. Tsalix's mind raced as he tried to think what Nash Doitsoh's move might be. But before he could think further, a double-edged battle ax, a tsenil, was thrust through the cleft until it touched the back wall of the cave. Slowly the blood-red steel head turned and twisted as Doitsoh probed the cavern.

Tsalix slid silently until he forced himself against the front wall of the tiny cave next to the opening. Above the entrance in the dim light, he could see a narrow shelf of rock. Carefully he raised his body from the floor, and with his muscles straining, pulled himself onto the shelf. The head of the tsenil twisted and moved back and forth as much as the narrow opening allowed. It looked almost alive and as if it were trying to sniff out Tsalix's scent.

Nash Doitsoh's voice roared into the cave. "You are trapped, Silverthorn. Your footprints condemn you. There is no way you can escape. I know you are in there. Come surrender to me, and I will let you live."

The wolacs keened their approval.

Tsalix forced himself to lie silently on the rock shelf. His heart was beating so loudly he was afraid Nash Doitsoh would hear it.

One minute passed. Then two.

"I will count to three, Tsalix Silverthorn, and then my offer is withdrawn—and you will die!"

Tsalix tried to calm his heart and mind as he lay motionless on his stone bed. He knew if he surrendered he was a dead man anyway, despite Doitsoh's proffered amnesty.

"One."

The commotion outside the cave subsided as the other warriors silenced their steeds, watched, and waited.

"Two."

One of the wolacs stamped a foot and screeched a plaintive cry that echoed in the cave.

"Three."

The head of the tsenil was withdrawn from the cave.

“So be it. You have made your choice and sealed your fate,” growled Doitsoh.

The sound of steel on stone rang loud and clear as war hammers pounded on the hillside, and a shower of rocks began to rain down into the opening of the cavern. With a shout from the men outside the cave, a slab of rock broke loose and thundered into place blocking Tsalix’s exit and sealing his tomb.

“Sleep well,” Nash Doitsoh roared, although Tsalix heard it only faintly through the pile of rock.

Through the stone, Tsalix’s ears picked up the muted raucous laughter of Abadon’s men as they turned their wolacs and rode away. One of them pounded the butt of his tsenil against the stone slab as a final goodbye. It sounded like a bass drum as it reverberated through the cave.

Tsalix waited a few minutes, hoping his eyes would adjust to the darkness of the cave, but it was black and he could see nothing. He slipped off the shelf, to the floor. Rocks the size of cobblestones had bounced through the opening, and he had to tiptoe to keep from stumbling over one or stepping on them and turning an ankle. He put his hands in front of him as he moved around the small room. There was no opening he could find except the fissure, which was now covered. He thrust his sword through the narrow gap against the rock slab, but there was no give. All the cave’s walls felt like polished glass.

Despair filled his heart. He sank to the floor and rested his head in his hands. *How did this happen?*

The walls seemed to press in against him as he struggled to swallow the panic that threatened to fill his throat. It was all he could do to keep from screaming.

Air. I need air! Tsalix sprang to his feet and pressed against the polished wall.

After what seemed an eternity, he gave up and sank back to the floor. From some unknown spot, a feeble breeze alerted him that even though he might starve to death, at least he would not suffocate. The thought of food made his stomach rumble. He searched in the darkness until he found his knapsack. Opened it and retrieved a crust of bread and some hard cheese, and nibbled on them.

It was difficult to keep track of time, but at last he slipped into a fitful slumber. When he awoke, he could not tell whether an hour or a day had

passed. He rose to his feet and shuffled across the floor with his hands stretched in front of him. Tsalix pushed several small stones out of his way with the sides of his boots until his hands felt the crevasse through which he'd entered the cave. By turning sideways and extending his arm, he could feel the slab of rock that blocked his exit. Again he tried pushing against it, but it was as solid as welded steel. Panic welled up within him, and he choked down the scream that filled his throat.

At length he cleared a space among the cobbles and sank down to the floor again. Although early on the battle field he accepted that death was inevitable, Tsalix had never thought it would come while he was so young, nor had he thought it would come without the feel of steel against his skin.

As he sat in the uncomfortable silence, his mind wandered to more pleasant days of the past. He was home in Aravah, eating dinner with his father and mother in the kitchen of their cottage. His mother had baked his favorite bread, and Tsalix dripped honey and melted butter onto its savory, soft center. In the darkness of the cave, Tsalix reached for the phantom feast before he sank into total despair.

What had brought him here? He had been summoned by the king to meet with him at his palace on top of Mount Deschee, near the center of the kingdom. Although the distance was normally only a three- or four-day journey, the way was treacherous because of the battle that raged between the two princes—Abadon and Johona—across the land. Nevertheless, upon receiving the summons from King Elosha's messenger, Tsalix had begun preparations for the journey. Everyone in his tiny hamlet of Aravah was aware of the dangers that faced travelers who left the safety of their homes, but Tsalix was determined to respond to the call of his king, no matter how dangerous his odyssey might be. His father had taught him well the need to obey.

He had returned to his home from the battlefield only two weeks before. The two years he had served in Johona's forces had toughened his body, but left him weary in mind and spirit. As much as he would have liked to have spent more time with his family, upon receiving the request from Elosha, he polished his armor, oiled the leather straps that held his breastplate in place, and sharpened his sword. He stood just over six-feet tall and was muscled from his time in the field. Twice during his time of service, he had to lengthen the straps to accommodate his growing body,

and now his breastplate was almost too small. Nevertheless, he adjusted the straps once again.

His mother had watched quietly in the kitchen, with tears running down her cheeks as she watched his preparations, while his father sighed deeply and stroked his chin. Knowing the distress they felt, Tsalix decided to avoid a tearful farewell. Once his preparations were complete, he walked outside the humble cottage and took a long look at their farm. In the glowing moonlight, he could see that plants were beginning to emerge although it was still early in the spring. The two cows their family owned were muzzling the hay he had forked into the manger. He entered the barn and stroked the flank of the cow nearest the door. She shuffled her feet, turned her head toward him, and moored, her breath perfumed with grass. A wistful smile crossed his lips as he patted her again before leaving the barn. He glanced at the house and saw his mother watching him through the open door. With a lump in his throat, he smiled at her and walked back into the cottage.

“Be careful, my son.”

“I will, Mother. I’m always careful.”

She wiped a tear from her cheek before she hugged Tsalix. Her head barely reached his chest. He put a protective arm around her and returned the hug. His father pushed himself to his feet from the bench on which he’d been sitting, and took halting steps toward the two of them.

“You’ve always been a great help to me.” As he tried to control his emotions, he looked at their humble cottage. “I wish I could have given you more.”

Tsalix released his hold on his mother and took his father in his arms. “You’ve given me more than enough. I vow that I will never do anything to bring shame to you.”

They sat at the table and ate their simple dinner. Then with a final hug, retired to their beds. Tsalix lay awake, staring at the ceiling. Moonlight filtered through the window and danced on the wall. A spider web in one corner of the room reflected silvery strands to his weary eyes. At last he drifted off to sleep.

Before the sun rose the following morning, he slipped out of his house before his parents were awake, and crept along the path that girdled the foothills of Mount Jinee. Its black flanks extended through the low-lying clouds which always seemed to hide the top of the peak. Flashes of light-

ning forked from the clouds onto the side of the mountain, followed by kettle drum claps of thunder. Through the filtering layers of clouds, the sun rose and sent feeble light down on the lone figure lurking along the trail.

By noontime Tsalix had covered a considerable distance and slipped into a copse of pine to rest and eat his meager lunch of bread and cheese. As he peered through the trees to the plains below, a flash of light in the far distance caught his eye. The first flash was followed by a dozen more, and he realized the sun was reflecting from drawn blades as a battle raged. He shrank back into the cover of the trees, although he was that aware the battle was a dozen miles away and it was not likely he could be spotted. He was so weary of fighting that he could not stomach the thoughts of being pulled into another skirmish.

After an hour the flashes stopped and Tsalix wondered who had won and who had lost the encounter. The obsidian war had raged for decades, and it still was not clear who would emerge victorious.

He drank deeply from a small spring that coursed down the flank of the mountain, and prepared to continue his journey. He had but a few miles more on the foothill trail before he'd have to leave the cover of the pines and start across the valley floor, on the trail across the Plain of Wondsi which led to King Elosha's palace on the summit of Mount Deschee. It was there between the two mountains that he felt peril was greatest, since there was so little cover and he would be exposed to prying eyes.

Slowly he raised to his feet, adjusted his breastplate, and shouldered his pack. His sword hung from its sheath on his left hip. As silent as a whisper, he slipped out of the pines and continued his journey. The sun slipped behind banks of clouds, sending ghostly silhouettes across the plain below. Tsalix had not taken a dozen steps on the trail before he heard the distant squealing cry of a wolac behind him. He broke into a trot and sought cover. Although Abadon had tolerated the village of Aravah on the flank of Mount Jinee, on whose side he'd built his palace, he was quick to mete out punishment to those who left the confines of the town.

A cleft in the rock appeared ahead, and Tsalix forced himself into the cave and found himself imprisoned in inky blackness. A blackness so thick he could feel it seeping into every pore. In despair, he again pushed his sword through the gap and felt the steel blade flex as it met the resistance

of the slab of rock that entombed him. Frustrated, he sat and tried to think of any way he could escape from his prison, but no plan emerged. Although he had never been one to give up in the face of insurmountable odds, he felt powerless to find a solution to his predicament.

I wish I had awakened my parents before I left. They will never know how much I loved them, nor will they know what happened to me.

The thought sent a chill down his spine. He could think of nothing worse than never knowing what had happened to a loved one. He had never been good at farewells, and thought he had done his parents a favor by not waking them. Not only had he not said farewell to his parents, he had ignored his friends, Asur Longtooth and Kwercus Strongheart, who had been like brothers to him. They had invited him to sup with them the night before he left—*was that last night*—but he had chosen not to join them, wanting to spend time with his family. *How long have I been locked in here?*

“All because I followed the king,” he whispered into the darkness.

Tsalix stood, faced the wall, placed his hands against it, and began to sob as emotions flooded over him. A slight tremor ran through his hands, followed by a stronger one. He wrinkled his brow in puzzlement, and then a stronger shock passed through the cavern. He lifted his shield over his head to ward off any falling stones when, with a mighty quake, the slab of obsidian that sealed the passage was thrown away from the cleft and a rush of fresh air filled the tomb. Cobbles fell from the ceiling and bounced from his shield.

Tsalix scurried across the floor and tried to wedge himself through the opening with a deep-throated groan, when the mountain heaved again and Tsalix was thrown out of the cave. More fist-sized stones cascaded down the mountain and bounced off his shield for several minutes, until the avalanche stopped. He pushed himself to his feet as another temblor shuddered across the trail, and another cascade of rocks bounded down the mountainside. He tried to jog down the trail as the earth heaved and buckled beneath his feet, and more than once he tumbled onto his knees and struggled to regain his footing.

Then, as quickly as it had begun, the quake ended and the earth became peaceful again. Tsalix looked through the trees at a quarter-moon that hung high above him.

How long was I trapped?