

The Quest Chronicles.

The Reclamation of
Truefire

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Chapter 1. The Stormquest

T' was late summer, when the sun burned red on the horizon. Kalen stared at it for a long time. The coming morn would bring the test. The pinkish morning sky would tell him it was time. He was to go out and fight the storm before he would become a true warrior. His faithful little dragon pup, Nitro, sat proudly by his master. Nitro wagged his spiky tail anxiously, sensing his master's firm ambition.

Finally, Kalen blinked for the first time in minutes. He strode nobly back down the small hill and across the spread of grass between the hill and his father's castle, with Nitro close behind.

"Some day, Nitro," Kalen said, "I shall be a true warrior and we shall fight to defend our father's land and the Allied Kingdoms. Tomorrow shall be that day." The little dragon looked up at his master admiringly as if he understood every word. He gave a contented snort.

The next morning, Kalen awoke bright and early for his stormquest. His bed chamber was unusually dark. He had expected the pink morning's light to glitter through the window which faced it. Kalen began to worry. He got out of bed and walked over to the window to see what was happening. The horizon was not pink, but an evil dark gray. The whole sky seemed to have that kind of appearance. The gray color was from the clouds which almost seemed to dominate the entire countryside. They hovered seemingly low as if to descend and crush all that they covered. Though the clouds came in huge,

thick, oppressive masses, there were still a few small patches where the white sunlight shone through. At the first glimpse of the sun, which was white (or perhaps a very pale yellow), it had a look of weakness, as if the clouds themselves absorbed its very energy. It was so surprisingly pale, that you might have thought it would just simply fade out and die.

But what of the stormquest? Was this it? Was Kalen to overcome the oppression of the clouds? Was there more? Nitro stood up and put his front claws on the cold, stone window sill. He looked up at his bewildered master with sympathy. He sensed his pain and disappointment, and thus whimpered. Kalen turned and knelt beside Nitro, who came down from the sill.

“Perhaps today isn’t the day I will become a true warrior, Nitro. Perhaps it is just not my time yet,” Kalen sighed, holding back tears of anger and disappointment.

Suddenly, Nitro perked up his ears and poked his head over the sill.

“What is it, boy?” Kalen asked. He squinted out as far as he could see. Just on the horizon, were two racing figures. The closer they came, the perkier Nitro became. Soon, he was wagging his tail vigorously and hopping up and down. Kalen could see more clearly now. The two figures consisted of two horses each with one rider. They came closer. Now, Kalen figured out that one rider was female and the other was a half naked male with darkish skin. It was none other than his friends Tara from the Southwestern Lands of Caltova and Minn from the Northlands of Truefire! Kalen waved to them, but they did not respond. This worried him further. What business had they come with?

The two riders stopped their horses and dismounted. They hurriedly strode over to the huge, heavy, wooden doors of the castle and knocked. The guard on the other side slid open a small square look-out in the door and said something. Kalen knew that he was asking them entry questions, like who they were and what their business was. Soon, the big doors opened and the two youth stepped in. Kalen and Nitro left the window immediately and raced down to the courtyard to meet his friends.

“Tara! Minn!” Kalen ran across the grass to them, with little Nitro at his heels. They did not smile back at their friend. Kalen’s soon faded when he got to them.

“Why the solemn faces?” Kalen asked.

“Truefire is in trouble,” Minn announced with a sigh.

“What sort of trouble?”

“That’s why we came to talk to your father, the King of the Southlands. We need his help,” Tara explained.

“Maybe I can help,” Kalen suggested, excitedly. “What’s the trouble?”

“The Darkseekers attacked and took over my village,” Minn said. “I managed to escape. On the way to your kingdom, I stopped to get Tara. After I told her what had happened, we decided to come here for help. We both know you and your father, so we figured that you would help us defeat the Darkseekers.” Kalen thought about this. If he went to conquer the Darkseekers - and win - perhaps he could become a true warrior then, since he didn’t get to fight in the stormquest. Sensing his master’s regained spirits, Nitro sat up on his hind legs and held his little chest boldly outward. Kalen looked down at the happy little dragon and said, “I think Nitro, here, is ready.” For the first time, Tara and Minn smiled. So did Kalen.

“Let’s go,” Tara said. “Together.” So they all, including prancing little Nitro, walked into the Main Hall without further ado.

Chapter 2. Journey Through Shadowwood

“Hmmm,” the king pondered after the children had explained their case to him, and Kalen had asked him if he could fight, too. “Very well, son. You may go with them to battle the Darkseekers. Keep in mind all that you’ve learned in preparation for your stormquest.” Turning to Tara and Minn, he announced, “I send with you my most trusted warrior-to-be, Kalen - the Defender of the Southlands.” Honored by the title his father had bestowed, Kalen smiled broadly and bowed. His friends clapped for him. Nitro skipped and jumped around at Kalen’s feet, uttering strange, yet joyous and melodic squeaks and squeals and snorts. It almost sounded as if he were trying to sing. Kalen and his friends laughed at the little creature dancing about. The king smiled.

“Well, that’s quite enough,” the king said. “Now, off with you. Good luck. May you travel safely. My best regards go with you.”

The children and Nitro left the throne room. After packing food and provisions, they set off.

Outside, Tara and Minn mounted their horses while Kalen brought his from the stable in the courtyard. He scooped up Nitro in one arm and pulled himself up on his horse with the other. Soon, they were all riding across the small field to the woods.

It was close to noon, now, and the sky hadn’t changed. They side tracked from the path into a small clearing. The children ate various edibles such as berries from any plant nearby and drank the water from the creek that ran through the clearing. The horses calmly lapped the cool water while Nitro swallowed and slurped at it aggressively. As if for a warning to be more courteous, one horse lifted it’s head from the water and snorted deeply in it’s throat to Nitro. The young dragon looked up sheepishly, and then turned back to the water and lapped it silently.

“How fascinating that the animals understand each other,” Tara thought out loud. She didn’t expect an answer, nor did she receive one. Minn just smiled and nodded and

Kalen looked at his pet in admiration, considering what Tara had said.

In a matter of minutes, they were off again.

“We should be nearing Shadowood, I believe,” Kalen announced, looking slowly about him to support his estimate. “We can be sure of it,” Minn said, following Kalen’s movements. “The trees are beginning to canopy over us. It will become even darker than it is now. Even if there was sunshine.”

“Is it true there are wolves in Shadowood?” Tara asked nervously.

“Can’t be sure, exactly,” Minn answered. “I hear tell of many a wild beast in those parts, though. Considering that, we’d best be on our guard.”

“Right,” agreed Kalen.

They pressed on the narrow path for several minutes without a word spoken. Nitro yawned. Minn’s horse shook its head vigorously for a few seconds to shake a few daring insects out of its eyes and ears.

It got darker. The trees seemed to almost grow as one overhead. The trio came upon a wooden sign that sat lopsided on its foundation. Kalen read the rickety old sign, **“Welcome to Shadowood - if you dare!”** They all looked ahead of them into the deep, silent darkness. Tara shuddered. Nitro growled deep in his tiny throat. The horses stirred uneasily. With a gulp of determination and fear for the unknown, Kalen bravely took the lead and coaxed the others into following him. They crept along together, nearly huddling as they trekked on.

It continued to get darker until there was no light whatsoever. Pitch-black darkness rolled in on them and left them only with their ears and limbs to guide them.

“Just keep going straight and I think we’ll be all right,” Kalen’s voice trembled slightly back to his friends. Silence. The only thing that let them know they were together was the clopp-de-clopp of more than four hooves on the dusty trail.

“I’ve got an idea!” Minn said. “Grab a branch or something and let Nitro light it! Then we’ll have a bit of light to help us see where we’re going!”

“That’s a marvelous idea, Minn!” Kalen answered. He daringly groped out into the blackness that surrounded them and finally took hold of a fair-sized branch. There were several dead leaves dangling from it. Kalen directed Nitro’s head toward the branch and told him to light it with his little fire. Kalen had trained him to breathe his fire when he heard the word “fire”. So, Nitro took a deep breath and was able to puff out a tiny flame. His little belly’s organs and acids weren’t quite as developed as a full grown dragon, yet. However, the flame still caught and before long, they had a nice torch to follow by. He wrapped a scrap of rough leather around the bottom of the branch to make it easier to hold.

By now, sounds of night and darkness began to creep out. They got louder as they pressed on.

Suddenly, there came a long howl. Tara gasped to keep from screaming. She had learned that screaming would attract a creature’s attention. A fierce, deep, yet short growl became very close, followed by a rustle of leaves. Tara began to whimper. Kalen gulped hard to keep himself from shaking or screaming. He knew that whatever it was that was following them would jump out and get him first. He tried to keep as still as possible to make it harder for the animal to sense him. He whispered this technique to Tara and Minn behind him. He silenced Nitro who began to growl.

Another howl and rustle of leaves flew past them. It seemed as if a pack of some animal was... hunting them.

Suddenly, a huge wolf jumped out of the brush and onto the path only five feet from Kalen and his horse. The horse reared and Kalen held onto the bridle and his dragon for dear life. The wolf lunged at the horse. Tara screamed. Behind them swarmed the rest of the pack. Kalen beat the wolf off his horse with his torch fiercely while Nitro huffed and puffed out several tiny flames or just some wisps of smoke. When the wolf gave up on Kalen, he yelled to the others, who were also trying to evade the wolves, to follow him. They flew off with the speed of fear. Faster and faster they proceeded into the darkness of Shadowood. The wolf pack chased after them, snapping at their heels. Kalen threw his

fire as hard as he could behind him. It landed on the ground and caught the surrounding leaves on fire. Some of the wolves skidded to a stop in their fear of fire, while others determinedly leapt over the burning leaves and followed on with the chase.

The group of adventurers now had no light. They just kept on running. They were at the mercy of the path and the nocturnally skilled wolves that still pursued them.

Some time later, surprisingly, a streak of light shot through the trees. Not only were the trees growing less dense, but the morning sun pierced the nightmares and fears of darkness. However, the trio did not slow down. It became lighter, but not too much. Kalen glanced over his shoulder. He stopped the crew and turned around. The wolves had receded; not a single one in sight.

They found themselves in a sunny, green, and sweet-smelling, yet thick part of the woods. It was as if they had crossed the borderline that divided Heaven and Hell. It was just like that. Just ten to twenty feet from them stood the dense canopy of trees and pitch black darkness. This part of Shadowwood was entirely different from the part they had just come from. Birds sang merrily in the beautifully green rows of trees. It was here they decided to stop and rest.

They awoke near noon from their sleep which they hadn't had all the previous night. As they progressed, the trees thinned until there was just a single row of trees on each side of the dirt path. Nitro eagerly jumped from Kalen's arms and onto the ground to run along side the horses. Indeed it did seem to be a beautiful day for a ride. And at that, why ride at all?

"Why not walk on such a wonderfully gorgeous day as this?" Kalen suggested. He stopped his horse and dismounted. In agreement, Tara and Minn dismounted as well. They took their horses by their bridles and lead them along the path on foot. It was invigorating to walk again.

The trees stopped. Nitro dashed out into an open field that stretched as far as you could see on either side of the path. The children led their horses into the field where

Nitro was happily chasing butterflies and dragonflies, dropped the bridles, and ran into the waving grasses. It felt so good to run limitless through the field with the sweet summer air blowing through their hair. They danced and laughed and twirled to their hearts' content. Tara found a bed of wild flowers nearby and sat in their soft concentration and braided wreathes. When she was satisfied with the three she had made, she put one around her neck, one around her horse's neck, and one around little Nitro's scrawny neck. He breathed in the fragrance of his little wreath and then sneezed. A small bit of smoke drifted out of his nostrils. He seemed to smile sweetly and wag his tail. Tara giggled and scratched under his chin. He moved closer to her and seemed to purr.

Soon, they were on their way again. They didn't stop to eat for they had a long way to go that day. They ate while they rode. Nitro gaily trotted beside Kalen's horse with his head held high. He snored proudly.

"You're so silly, Nitro," Kalen laughed. Nitro looked up at him and seemingly smiled. Kalen turned back to the path, which had now become more like a road. It had widened from a small path through the woods to a nicely sized road of some sort. However, it wasn't paved with gravel like the streets of a town. It was still sandy, dusty dirt, and so it would remain for a long while.

Chapter 3. The Search For Truefire

It wasn't long before they came upon an old man pulling a cart with a load of something under a sheet. They stopped the cart and Kalen said, "Good day to you, sir. Tell me, how far until we reach the nearest town?"

The man thought for a while and then spoke in a tired, raspy voice, "I'd have to say t'would be at least ten miles or so 'til Foothillville. T'wouldn't go b'yond thar, though, through 'em mountains. Hear tell of Darkseekers attackin' 'em up'ere. Cain't be a sure 'nough whar they be a hidin' out, but dar bein' mighty powerful bad warrin' up'ere. I'd be careful 'f I were you." The man glanced over Kalen's glorious attire and added with a smile, "For yer majesty's safeness bein'." Kalen was a wise prince and he did not find delight in gloating over what he had that others lacked, such as fine clothes and accessories. He just smiled back at the man, generously handed him some bread he had packed, and thanked him for his information. He gave up the bread easily for he figured if a town was nearing, they would be able to buy food and provisions there, and the man looked as if he needed some sustenance for his journey wherever he was headed. Kalen had forgotten to warn him of the treacherous Shadowwood, but it was a little too late now. He would be nearing it soon and Kalen didn't feel they had the time to run after him and tell him. So Kalen just rode on steadily.

After another hour or so, smoke arose from the horizon and mountains came into view. The smoke came from several small houses in the town known as Foothillville. It lay at the foot of the mountains, and from this it got its name. The sun was growing darker as it began to sink toward the horizon. Kalen and his friend were feeling a little hungry. As they nobly rode into town, everyone cleared the streets and all became very quiet. Everyone peered at the three finely dressed youngsters with awe and pure astonishment. This was a very poor town, and rarely did they ever see royalty. Nor did royalty have the desire to even ride through the filthy town. Kalen had never before been there, but heard stories about this place or such like places when his father told him of his

exciting adventures and wars he'd participated in as a young prince such as Kalen. The fact that the people were so poor and to be even frightened at the sight of royalty standing in their very streets astonished Kalen as much as the inhabitancy. The people in his own town or Tara's or Minn's were definitely subordinate to their king and royalty, but surely they didn't cower to them as they strode the streets.

Kalen decided to be brave and spoke out. "Ahem," he cleared his throat. The crowd shuffled uneasily. "My companions and I are passing through on a quest to help the village of Truefire through their time of war having traveled all day and are quite weary. We would deeply appreciate your hospitality and will gladly pay for your services."

"Pay?" Tara asked, raising her eyebrows at her friend.

"Just a coin or two," Kalen replied, turning around to face her. "It pains me to see such poverty and they don't even have a ruler or king. Try to sympathize, Tara. Just look at them. Their streets aren't even paved." Tara just nodded in agreement. Kalen turned back to the people, who were still frozen in awe and fear. Kalen had his doubts on whether they had even heard a word he said. Kalen heard a little voice say, "Look at his clothes, Mommy!" A frantic hush quieted the child. A brave little boy stepped out of the crowd and reached up to touch Kalen's fine apparel. His mother quickly grabbed his arm and yanked him away with a mortified look on her face.

"It's quite all right, ma'am," Kalen smiled. "He can touch me." The woman loosened her grip on the child, but still held his hand. She just stared at Kalen, but he smiled back with understanding eyes. The boy ran a finger along Kalen's velvet pants that came to his knee and covered the top of a high sock. Then, the child put a few more fingers on the material, and finally had his whole little hand stroking the fabric. Kalen dismounted and knelt in front of him. The boy felt all over Kalen, examining every detail. Some other children had come over to get a good look at Kalen. Soon, nearly every child in the small town swarmed all over Kalen. Finally, brushing the dirt off his shoulders and legs, he had to stop them.

“All right, children, that’s quite enough,” Kalen tactfully pushed some of them away. They sprang back in an instant. He quickly mounted his horse and made it rear and emit a loud whinny. The children ran to their parents with fright. Kalen didn’t want to frighten them so, but enough was enough. He glanced around for Nitro. He was missing! Excitedly, a child about six years of age shouted, “Look, Ma! Now we have a crocerdiller for yer crocerdiller stew!” The girl held poor little Nitro as high as she could by the tail. Kalen sprang off his horse and charged at her, yelling, “Hey, give me back my dragon!” He quickly jerked Nitro from her hand and backed away in a hurry. He clutched his dazed pet tightly in both arms. He had had quite enough of these poor people. He grumpily mounted his horse once again and pushed through the mass of villagers. Never had he had to be so hostile with villagers before. Now he knew why royalty was mortified to pass through such pitiful towns as Foothillville. He was surprised the Darkseekers hadn’t taken it over yet.

He led his friends through the town and found an old inn. It was incredibly small and made it hard to believe it could bear to hold up to house a customer.

Surprisingly, it did. If Kalen took out his aggravation in this inn, the whole thing would surely collapse. Tara, Minn, and Kalen cautiously crept up the stairs, checking each stair for frailness. They finally reached the top. They opened a door upstairs and walked in. A thick cloud of dust welcomed them.

“Don’t -ugh- these people -cough, cough- take any pride in their appearances?” Kalen coughed up dust and waved his hands about his face. He didn’t expect anyone to answer his question. When the dust cleared, they saw that the only beds were two moldy, old mattresses thoroughly coated with dust. Kalen kicked the nearest one. A cloud of dust rose off the top of the mattress. Tara sneezed.

“Even the ground is cleaner than this. Let’s just sleep outside, tonight,” she suggested. The two boys agreed, and so the three friends and Nitro carefully made their way back down the rickety old stairs.

They set up a camp just beside the town in the soft grass. Again they could breathe in fresh, wholesome air.

They soon fell asleep under the beautiful summer's night sky.

They awoke bright and early the next morning and rummaged around the town for food. They packed the food that was clean and fresh. After eating a light breakfast, they started off on their journey again. After a while, the ground began to rise and become steeper. They were soon in the mountains and proceeded on their way to Truefire. They reached the first peak by noon and peered down at the paths awaiting them. They scanned the endless mountain range for any signs of life. All appeared to be gray, black, dark, and dead, until Minn shouted, "Look yonder at the horizon! Look! Look!" He nearly jumped up and down on his horse. Kalen and Tara squinted at the horizon hard. They new Minn's eyesight was much greater than their's.

"I see nothing," Kalen said, still straining to see in the morning light.

"Do you not see the smoke?" Minn asked, in nearly a whimper. Nitro looked hard as well. He then perked up and panted excitedly, much like a dog. Then, Kalen saw it. A tiny sliver of smoke curled up ever so slightly over the far rise of rock. Tara saw it, too.

"It is the village! We have found Truefire!"

Chapter 4. Revenge of the Darkseekers

They proceeded through the twisting, turning, winding paths of the mountains. As they trekked on, the paths became narrower. They came to an old bridge. They could either follow the path around the ledge or take the bridge. They chose to cross the rickety old bridge, for it lead north toward Truefire. The path would not only lead them to a traitorous nowhere, but off course. The bridge was too old and not strong enough for the horses, also. They dismounted and strung the packs of food and other necessary things across their chests and around their necks then threw whatever was not needed over the ledge to make them as light as possible.

Finally, leaving their horses behind, they crossed the wobbly bridge slowly and with great caution. Kalen had to carry Nitro, for he would not cross, the poor little thing. They tried each panel like the stairs in the inn. However, there were strong patches of planks that stretched for several feet. The bridge swayed in the eastern winds. Below them, Kalen knew, there was an endless drop into the steep canyon, thus he dared not look down. There was a particularly long stretch of planks that Tara overlooked. It stretched to the end of the bridge. She started across at a great speed before the two boys could caution her. All of a sudden, she hit a small weak patch in the middle and fell through the opening with a blood curdling scream.

“Tara!” Kalen yelled in horror. She caught onto a plank and dangled helplessly above the canyon. “Don’t look down!” Kalen ran to her. At that moment, her hand slipped. Kalen caught her just in time! Kalen laid on his stomach and held both her arms with all his strength. They looked into each others eyes. The earth was silent. Enchantment seemed to surround the two. They saw each other in a new light. Without realizing it, the two became closer to each other. Just when they were about to touch lips, they were awakened from their haze by a long cracking sound. The front plank which supported them split and broke! Minn caught Kalen’s feet and pulled with all his might. Kalen was forced to gaze down into the canyon. He blinked hard and gulped. He tried to

focus on his dear Tara. Beside Minn, Nitro stood whimpering and peering down at his helpless master and Tara. Minn's foot slid a bit and his arms shook. Minn turned to the little dragon and said, "Nitro, get my rope from my pack." Minn nodded toward his back. Nitro obediently climbed up the hard rope railings to the bridge and opened Minn's pack. He stuck his snout into the opening and dug out the rope. He hopped down beside Minn again.

"Good boy, Nitro!" Minn said. Minn then instructed Nitro. By the time he was finished, Nitro had tied a knot attached tightly to a railing. Then, Minn told Nitro to throw the rope down to Kalen and Tara. Nitro did as he was told. The board under Minn's feet creaked.

"Grab hold!" Minn shouted to them. "Hurry!" Tara dared to let go of Kalen with one arm and snatched the rope. When she had successfully shimmied up beside Minn, Kalen clutched the rope and did the same. Kalen climbed up beside the two.

"This is no time for words," Minn said. "The winds are getting stronger and we must cross quickly. Do like me." Minn grabbed the top railing on each side and put his feet on the bottom railings. This is how the three crossed the rest of the bridge. Little Nitro rode on Kalen's strong shoulders.

They collapsed on the other side. They hugged and patted each other on their backs. Nitro bounded around the happy group and barked and snorted with glee. After a time of peaceful rest, they started on their way again. Nitro trotted along behind them, with his tiny claws click-click-clicking on the hard, rock path.

It had been at least an hour since they left the bridge. All of a sudden, a black shadow swooped over them. It was far too fast for them to catch exactly what it had been. They glanced about the sky nervously, but saw nothing. Then, Minn let out a yell of fear.

"The Darkseekers!" Minn screeched. Kalen hushed him and told everyone to creep along the wall of the path.

"Perhaps they won't see us," Kalen said, whispering. A swarm of black dragons with bright red bellies and hooded riders dashed overhead. They must have been scouting

the area for intruders. 'I hope they don't see our horses,' Kalen thought. Nitro growled deep in his throat. Tara hushed him and held his little green body close. Kalen spied a cave not too far away. If they could only make it before the Darkseekers returned. He told the other's his plan. It was quiet again. At that moment, they stood up and ran for it. They scurried across the wide land bridge to the cave. They were nearly there, when a dragon whooshed down out of the sky and picked Tara right off her feet. She dropped Nitro. Her screams made the two boys look up. Nitro was roaring his little roar and huffing and puffing as high as he could in attempt to free Tara. The great dragon ascended. Minn shot an arrow at the dragon. With a loud roar of pain, he dropped the girl. Another dragon quickly swooped under him and his rider caught Tara. The pair then flew swiftly away.

"Kaaaleeeeen!" Tara bellowed at the top of her lungs.

"Tara!" Kalen yelled back. The other dragons began to swoop at them now. The boys and Nitro fled for the cave. A rider pulled out a bow and arrow and shot at Kalen. The arrow struck Kalen's calf and brought him to the ground. Groaning in pain, he beckoned to Minn, who slung him over his shoulders and ran the rest of the way to the cave. He set Kalen down, panting. Suddenly, a huge, snapping head gnashed at them through the opening. Minn dragged Kalen back. The head advanced. Then, it receded to the call of its master. After a short minute, Minn cautiously looked out of the cave. Not a sound was heard. He daringly stepped out into the open. Not a single dragon or rider was to be found. He turned around. Nothing above the cave either. They had all fled. It was a silent and peaceful as if they had never come. Still, Minn felt tense. He came back into the cave and tended to Kalen's bleeding leg.

"Are they gone?" Kalen asked, feebly.

"Every single one of them. It's amazing!" Minn told his friend. Kalen winced as Minn spread some sort of medicine on his wound. Nitro sat whimpering beside his poor master. He laid his head on his shoulder.

"Good, Nitro," Kalen smiled. He turned to Minn and said, "What about Tara? How are we going to save her, Minn?"

“I do not know, Kalen,” answered Minn, “but I do know we will save her- one way or another.” Minn wrapped Kalen’s wound in a strong cloth and pulled his tall, torn, blood-stained sock over it. Kalen stood up and flinched as he put his weight on his hurt leg.

“You need rest, my friend,” said Minn, “but time is unforgiving. I have no stick for you to lean on. It may hurt for a while, but in time it will heal. As my mother once told me when I was young, ‘It has to hurt if it’s to heal’. I’ll be your crutch until you are strong enough to walk again. Lean on me.” So Kalen put his arm around Minn’s neck and balanced his weight on Minn and his able leg.

Chapter 5. Courage... at the Wall of Fire

The light began to fade as they pressed on into the cave. It seemed as if the cave descended. Nitro took the lead and tried to keep a constant flame. The tiny spurts cast light for only a few seconds, but it helped. Slowly, it began to get hotter. The temperature rose as they walked on. The cave inherited a reddish glow. That did well for light. Minn began to sweat, along with Kalen and Nitro. The perspiration made Nitro’s little scales glisten in the red light. Suddenly, it got brighter and before they knew it, they confronted a huge red dragon!

“HOW DARE YOU CROSS THE PATH OF DROCOMA!!!!!” the creature boomed. The earth shook and the three adventurers fell to the ground.

“I am Kalen of the Southlands and this is my friend, Minn of Truefire!” Kalen unsheathed his sword. “We seek passage to Truefire to save them from the Darkseekers!”

“Ah, ha, ha! You shall not seek passage until you...!” the dragon, Drocoma, stopped. “Wait a minute. You don’t look like any warrior I’ve ever seen.” Turning behind him, he called, “Fire cease!” It got very dark. The huge dragon lit a pile of logs for light. He brought his head closer to Kalen.

“Why, you’re just a kid! How dare you try to cross my path! I can not allow a child to pass! That will be the day! You shame me!” he threw his head back and laughed. Nitro leaped forward and growled and barked fiercely. This amused Drocoma further. Kalen advanced and struck the dragon’s toe smartly with his sword, forgetting about his leg. Then, he fell back in pain and clutched his leg. Drocoma stopped laughing and tenderly rubbed his toe. He glared at the little prince. He bent his head down toward him, watching him helplessly holding his wounded calf. Nitro growled and stood firm by Kalen’s side, ready to protect his master. Minn aimed an arrow between the beast’s eyes. He held that position to ready himself for when it was necessary to fire.

“Lay down your weapon, boy,” the dragon said calmly. Strangely, Minn did just that. He stared at Drocoma. The notorious dragon looked concerned about Kalen’s leg.

“What are you going to do with us?” Minn asked.

“Well,” Drocoma thought out loud, “it would be too easy for me to see you burn at The Wall of Fire - which you have to do anyway to pass - nor are the three of you a suitable meal. What else could I do with you?”

“You could help us save our fair lass and Truefire from the Darkseekers,” Kalen suggested. Drocoma was repulsed by this.

“What?! Save your maiden and Truefire from evil? That’s preposterous! **I am evil!**”

“Or pretend to be.”

“What? Do you say you doubt my evilness?”

“Of course. If you didn’t feel sorry for us, you would have eaten or killed us by now.”

“Feel sorry?”

“Yeah. You were examining my wounded leg just a minute ago. It was concern I saw in your eyes, not evil.”

“Well, I...”

“I know you really want to help us, but just don’t want to admit it.”

“How dare you say such a thing!”

“You’ve never had anyone talk to you like this before. You’ve never faced a knight or warrior that wanted to be your friend and ally. They always strive to kill you, or you them.”

“You want to be **my** friend?”

“That is true - friend.” Kalen’s words touched the frightful beast deeply. No one, it was true, had ever talked to him so. Everything the boy had said was truthful. A tear rolled down Drocoma’s rough jaw.

“You got me, kid. You win. Pass. Go! Go on! Shoo! And... and never come back! That goes for your little dragon, too!” So Kalen, Minn, and Nitro walked out of the cave.

“That was terrific!” Minn said when they were out of ear shot. “How did you do it?”

“Reverse psychology,” Kalen replied. “Father’s old wizard used to pull it on me all the time when I was young and headstrong.” The two boys laughed. Nitro barked in delight to see his master smiling again.

When they came out of the cave, they had a very unwelcome sight. The Darkseekers stood poised upon their dragons! They must have been waiting there for them all along. But how did they know they would survive. They must have heard Drocoma yelling. Before they could do anything else, they were gagged and hoisted aboard one of the dragons and flown away.

Chapter 6. Forbidden Fortress

They were thrown into a dark prison cell.

“Guys, is that you?” a girl’s voice broke the silence.

“Tara!” both boys jumped up and ran to her. Kalen jumped up and fell again for the pain in his leg. He would get plenty of rest here. He crawled across the straw to Tara, Minn, and little Nitro, who barked for joy and licked Tara’s face. She giggled. Then, when she saw Kalen, she asked, “What happened to your leg, dear Kalen?”

“I was shot with an arrow by a Darkseeker,” he replied as he laid his tired head in her lap. She stroked his sandy-colored hair gently.

“You poor thing,” she sympathized. Minn told her how Kalen bravely talked to the dragon, Drocoma. When she looked down at Kalen to congratulate him, he was fast asleep. It had been a tiring day for him. Too much excitement for one day. Nitro nestled in beside Tara and did the same. Minn kicked over some bones in the nearby corner and fell asleep there in the silent dark. Tara slowly drifted off as well.

Jingle, jingle. Screeeeeach! Whoosh, splat! Slam! Jingle, jingle... clink... clink... clink... The sound of the guard fiddling with his keys, unlocking and opening the cell door, throwing their food into the cell, closing and relocking the heavy door and leaving awoke the foursome. Nitro skipped over to the pile of green mush and stale bread and sniffed it. He stuck his tongue into the mush and quickly pulled back, repulsed. He turned his back to it and kicked dirt onto it and trotted over to Kalen. Kalen yawned and stretched.

“Where... where am I?” he asked groggily.

“We’re still in the dungeon of the Fortress of Ba-Taan,” answered Tara.

“Ba-Taan?!” Kalen asked, surprised. “The great and mighty city of Ba-Taan?! The Darkseekers were able to take over the Khan-Dijuo and his undefeated army of samurai warriors?! That’s impossible! How could they...”

“Shhhh!” Tara hushed him. “Yes, it’s the sad truth. The poor Khan-Dijuo has to rename his fighter’s, ‘the once defeated army of samurai’, now.” Kalen looked at the floor in dismay.

“Do not loose hope, Kalen,” Minn encouraged his friend. “We’ll get out of this yet. We will succeed.” Kalen looked up and smiled.

“You really think so?” Kalen asked.

“I believe it.” Minn smiled back at Kalen.

Later, Kalen had an idea.

“Nitro,” he said, “I want you to slip thought those bars in the window in the door and fetch the keys for us.” Nitro did so. He dug his claws into the wood of the door and climbed up to the window (where the only light shone through), squeezed though the bars and leaped to the floor. Now all they had to do was wait.

Nitro had seen what a key looked like before and knew what one was used for. Whenever he saw a key, and heard the term “key,” whenever someone was using the strange tool, he finally learned that the word meant something you open doors with - which could be anything - anything that opened a door by sticking it in a hole. So, when his master had pointed to the door and said “key,” Nitro knew it meant the door was locked and to go find something to unlock it.

The little dragon finally came upon a long, slender, stick-shaped, scrap of metal. “This must be a key,” his little brain registered. So, he scooped it up with his long, forked tongue and carried it back to Kalen.

When they heard claws climbing up the door, Kalen, Tara, and Minn hopped up looked up at his master proudly. Kalen didn’t want to disappoint little Nitro, so he decided to pick the lock with the piece of metal.

After ten minutes of twisting the piece of metal around in the lock, he heard foot steps. He quickly backed away from the door. The guard slowly walked by on his inspection to make sure no one had escaped or was making an attempt or any other

suspicious activity. When he had gone all the way down the hall and out of sight, Kalen began picking again.

He began to recline against the door. Just when he was about to give up, the door screeched open, nearly throwing him on the floor. He quickly backed in and shut the door when he heard the guard coming back. The guard sneered at them hatefully and then walked on by. The three waited for five more minutes to go by. Then, they all silently crept out the door, shut it to remove some suspicion, and tiptoed against the wall. Kalen carried Nitro to keep his claws from making noises on the stone floor. Minn had once showed them how to creep without a sound. It was a good technique for hunting.

Suddenly, Kalen was jerked up by the front of his shirt and a loud, harsh voice shouted, "And where do you think you're going, brat!"

Chapter 7. Escape from Ba-Taan

Kalen's eye's grew wide with fear and his heart pounded. Nitro, now on the floor, took a deep breath and blew the biggest, constant flame he could on the guard's tin armored foot. With a yell, the guard dropped Kalen. Kalen scooped up his pet and the three ran for it! They flew up a flight of stairs leading to the ramparts. Behind them, they heard the guard bellowing, "Seize them! Guards! Don't let them get away!" They ran faster. Suddenly, Tara slipped and fell. The wind was knocked out of her and her lip was bleeding. Minn picked her up and slung her over his shoulders like he had done for Kalen. That's when Kalen's leg reminded him of it's wound. He didn't let that stop him. The boys kept racing up the spiral of stairs. Kalen thought he might be dizzy from running up spiral after spiral. He stopped to catch his breath and listened. Guards and the sound of clanking armor ascended to his ear. Minn and Nitro heard it, too. They began running again.

When they reached the top, Minn set Tara down and pumped her chest to get her breathing again. She finally came around. The blood on her lip was nearly dried.

“Minn, I need help with this door! It’s stuck! Hurry!” Both boys pulled at the door. The guards were getting closer. In a daze, Tara ran after the boys on the ramparts. Guards reached the top of the stairs and chased them. As they reached the other tower, guards met them there, too. They turned around, but the guards left them nowhere to flee! They were completely surrounded! The only option was to ... jump! Suddenly, a huge red figure swooped out of the sky and before they knew it, they were high above Ba-Taan. The huge red thing was none other than Drocoma!

“Drocoma! Oh, Drocoma!” Kalen shouted. “It’s you! You saved us! Why?” The dragon turned it’s head to look at Kalen on his back.

“I couldn’t miss all the excitement! You know how old Drocoma looooves excitement!” Drocoma made his excuse for a slight fondness of the boy. Kalen knew the real reason Drocoma had saved them, but he wasn’t going to rub it in. He was really a good dragon at heart.

Tara hadn’t the slightest idea what was going on. She wasn’t nervous because she had heard all about Drocoma when the boys were thrown into the cell, but she was still a bit light headed from the fall. She felt her still puffy lip. The blood was dry, now. It still hurt a bit when she moved it.

“How’s that leg o’ yours, son?” Drocoma asked, trying to sound gruff.

“Oh, it’s getting better. It still hurts a bit, but I’m all right,” Kalen explained.

“Good, good,” the dragon said quickly. He landed on a wide, yet immensely tall plateauish rock to rest and settle for the night. The sun was sinking slowly. The plateau had two levels: the first level and then another level that was about four feet higher. Drocoma settled on the top level and Kalen, Minn, Tara, and Nitro settled on the bottom level.

Just as the children were about to settle down under the stars, Drocoma stretched out his neck and made a long, loud moan that sounded like a call of a whale, a creaking

door, and a fog horn (only higher). He added a low growl to round it off. A few seconds later, another very similar call came back to us. It was much farther away, though.

“What are you doing?” Kalen asked.

“What, lad? ’Tis the call of the dragons. Every so often, at this time a day, all the dragons in the land come out of their dark, hideaway dens and call to each other. We sing.”

“Is that dragon singing?!” Tara gasped in fascination. “Young lady, what did I just say?” Drocoma answered. He made a loud, long honking sound, now.

“My aunt told me about hearing the dragons sing when she was little, but for the longest time, they stopped. I’ve never heard a dragon sing before.” Tara said.

“Well, then, this is your first time,” Drocoma said. He made a high-pitched, long squeal, like that of a whale’s.

“Why did you stop?” Tara persisted. This time, Drocoma turned his huge head toward her.

“Dragons migrate, dear,” he said gruffly. “Where was your aunt?”

“In the province of Beckleven near the Southwestern Lands of Caltova, where she grew up and then moved to Caltova.”

“We were indeed here in that era. We did not sing. The Darkseekers were roaming the area at the time. We were evil, but we allied with no one. It’s not our policy. The dragon fights alone. We stayed in our caves most of the time to avoid them. We didn’t much like humans - or any other creature that did not have the blood of a dragon - thus we sort of hibernated. There! You happy?”

“You know of the Darkseekers? Tell us about them,” Kalen said. With a heavy sigh of irritation, for he wanted to sing with his colleagues, he decided to answer all their questions now so when they fell asleep, he could sing.

“The Darkseekers obey their leaders, however, if one is killed, which is rare for they are very skilled at combat, the others are disciplined to take over and continue fighting. They keep fighting until they win. The trouble with Ba-Taan was that the head samurai

was killed and the other samurai either ran for their lives, or tried to defend themselves. They've been told what to do and did it for generations, so when their leader was killed, they were helpless. That's one thing about them. I know of no weaknesses. However, the present leader is searching for a suitable wife. You were lucky he hadn't got a chance to get to your girl, here. If you were to rescue her, you'd either be dead, or fighting with every single trick of swordsmanship you know. Keep this in mind. They have strong armor which is barely penetrable by any blade. Only extreme heat, and at powerful force, such as full-grown, full-force dragon fire can melt them. Torches are useless. Take advantage of any open skin area. A hard slice to any open wrists will prove useful, but won't stop any of them completely. It will buy you some good time, though. That is all I know about them. The rest you'll have to discover for yourselves. Need I say more?"

"No, friend Drocoma, that is good enough," Kalen said, settling down to sleep. Drocoma waited a while before he began singing again. He watched over them for a while, finally breathed a deep sigh, and joined in the chorus of hoots, whistles, honks, and what ever other sounds were involved in dragon singing.

Chapter 8. Truefire

Kalen awoke with a mighty stretch and a yawn - and an aching back from sleeping on the ground. Nitro, beside him, got up, yawned and shook all over. Kalen found that shaking was indeed invigorating. His friends were rising as well. Kalen turned around to find the upper level empty! Drocoma was nowhere. Suddenly, three goats dropped and splatted onto the rock. Kalen staggered back in shock. Drocoma landed carelessly on the upper level, shaking the ground.

"The goats are fer yer breakfast, kids. I already supped up mine," Drocoma announced, licking the blood from his lips and teeth.

In no time, Minn had a fire going and the legs of two of the goats roasting over it. They couldn't tag a full goat behind them, so they gave the last goat to Drocoma, who

tossed it into the air, caught it in his mouth, crunched it once, and unceremoniously swallowed it. He licked the excess blood from his chops once more. Tara grimaced and turned her head down. Drocoma chuckled deeply seeing her reaction.

“You’ll get used to it, lassy,” he said. “If you choose to live with dragons, and let God be praised if ye try and survive, you’ll learn to eat, sleep and sing like one.”

“Oh, will you teach me to sing like a dragon, Drocoma?!” Tara said, excitedly. The mighty dragon threw back his head and laughed.

“Aar, haar, haar! Ho, ho, ho! Lassy! In case ye didn’t know, you have to be a dragon to sing like one! There is no way on God’s fine earth I’m teaching you to sing like a dragon! One, it would be an embarrassment for a human to sing with dragons; two, it’s impossible! Humans have such dull vocal chords.”

“Oh, yeah!” Tara bravely challenged. “Just watch me!” She took a deep breath and made the best imitations of the strange howls and growls and hoots that she heard last night. Kalen wanted to stop her from making a fool of herself, but she would have to find that out herself, from the way she was acting. He thought he might hurt her feelings and make her mad, too. There was no use in fighting when they had to stick together on this journey.

When she had finished, Drocoma laughed even harder than before.

“Heavens, what was that?!” He laughed, uncontrollably. Tara crossed her arms. “It goes like this!” He made his call. Tara winked at Kalen. He got the message and gave her a thumbs-up with a wink. When he finished, she tried again. He showed her how to place her head and neck to make the sounds and projection. She tried again. He still wasn’t satisfied. He gave her exercises to work her lungs and vocal chords.

After nearly the entire morning, she almost had it.

“Not bad,” Drocoma complemented, dryly. “Not bad at all. For a human. Like I said, though, dragon’s have sharper vocal chords than humans. Humans have dull vocal chords. But, you made a good effort. I don’t know where you’ll use it, though. To most uncreative people, it’s just a bunch of noise. However, if you’re ever in need of help - and

I mean REAL help, like you're about to be killed - just hoot once and whistle three times, several times (if you see it necessary), and I believe help will come to you."

"Do us one more service before you leave, old friend," Kalen pleaded.

"And what is that?"

"Will you fly us to Truefire?"

"I can do that, but then I must leave."

"Why are you going to leave us?"

"I SAID I'D HELP YOU AND LEAVE!" Kalen fell silent. He felt foolish, now.

Soon, they were packed and off to Truefire. The sun was high, now. Drocoma set them at the gates of Truefire and bid them farewell. Kalen thanked him and he flew off. Down below, in the canyon, Darkseekers had hundreds of tents set up as their camp on either side of Truefire. Truefire was on a plateau like the place they stayed last night, however it was a hundred times bigger. There were two Indian guards standing by the gates. Minn said something to them in some fast language and they bade us passage into the village.

It was a quaint little place nestled safely behind the tall, bamboo wall that encircled the entire village. The children walked through the village in search of a familiar face. Hardly anyone was about. Only a few wives stood just outside their huts, which were surprisingly large for a hut, washing clothes and bringing in baskets of things. A friend of Minn's came up to them. He was a tall, broad-shouldered young man with only a single cloth wrapped around his waist, making a kind of skirt.

"Wanea, Coltua," Minn greeted him. Coltua began speaking in a worried tone in that fast language. "Please." Minn indicated his friends. The Indian slowed down and spoke English.

"No one id 'loud ou'side, Minn," he tried to speak so they could understand him. "Anyone caught ou'side while di Darkseekers are about, will be shot down. Their leader specifically ordered dat. You mus' take you friends inside, now." Minn rushed everyone into his family's hut. He asked his mother what was going on.

“The leader of the Darkseekers has taken the chief down into his tent. We haven’t heard much yet. We’ve secretly been sending messengers down to keep an eye on him. Only one came back. From what we know, this is “silent hours.” No one is supposed to go outside until the Darkseeker and the chief return. I know not what the Darkseekers are planning. I do know that it’s something evil,” she explained.

“I’ll go down,” volunteered Minn.

“No, Minn!” Kalen protested. “It’s far too dangerous.”

“I have a plan!” Tara blurted out, suddenly. She whispered her plan to the boys.

“All we need,” she finished, “is a Darkseeker’s costume.”

“How will we get one of those?” Kalen asked.

Tara stayed behind while the boys ambushed and killed a Darkseeker guard. She didn’t want to see the head being taken. It was the only way the two knew of to kill one silently, quickly, and without a fight.

Dressed in the black uniform, both Minn and Kalen, one on top of the other for height, stalked into enemy territory. They walked easily without being stopped until they got to the leader’s tent.

“Halt! What business have you with the master?!” one of the guards said, snarling viciously. Making his voice as manly as possible, Kalen answered from beneath the hood and armor, “Important news for the master.”

“What sort of news?” Kalen thought fast. These guards weren’t going to let him in so easily.

“News about an advancing army, perhaps much stronger than ours.” The guards got silent and took upon worried expressions. An army much powerful or stronger than they?

“You must tell the master immediately!” The guard thrust open the flap and shoved them in. Minn struggled to keep his balance. He safely succeeded. Whew!

“Important news for his highness!” the guard shouted gruffly.

“More important than what the chief and I are discussing?!” the leader of the Darkseekers stood from his chair.

“Perhaps, for our sake, sire!” The Darkseeker looked us over quickly and said loudly, “Sit!” Minn carefully sat on a hard, roughly carved chair near the chief.

“Well?!” boomed the man.

“Well, sir, an army much stronger than us is advancing upon us and will soon attack,” Kalen tried.

“An army much stronger than us? Ha! That’s impossible! We are the strongest remaining army in the land! You know that, soldier!” he laughed.

“Oh, but, sir, they claim to come with demons and spirits conjured from the very devil himself! They are witches, I tell you! We’d best move!” Kalen was getting into this conversation. Minn reminded him quietly not to overplay his bluff.

“Ha! The Darkseekers run from no one, no matter how powerful! Demons or no demons, we shall stand and fight until we win or die!”

“But, sir...”

“Out of my tent, you vile agitator! How dare you come to me with such piffle! Out with you, now! Out! Out! OUT!” Minn stood up abruptly, accidentally, knocking Kalen off balance. He toppled down to the ground with the clanking of metal. He quickly emerged from the costume with Minn and headed for the door.

“Traitors! Get them!” the captain raged. The guards outside the door seized the boys and brought them back in. The chief stood up.

“Harm them and our deal is off!” he shouted, raising his hands. The captain sneered and grumbled, but sat down again. ‘Deal? What deal?’ Kalen thought. He looked at Minn, who as if he had read Kalen’s mind, shrugged.

“To kill them would to be breaking your end of the deal. I see them as my people and thus expect them to be treated so. As long as you want me, you must respect my rules as well,” the chief said, sternly.

“Set them free,” the captain mumbled in a low, disgusted tone. “However, I want them to be watched. As long as the have heard our conversations, they must not escape

their home with it. Go with them.” He dismissed the boys and the guards who tightly grasped them.

That night, the guards kept a close watch over the hut. They whispered all they had found to Tara and Minn’s mother.

Secretly, there was a separate golden eye being kept upon the village, watching everything that moved within the gates.

Chapter 9. Flight of the Raiders and the Defenders of Truefire

Morning came. The guards still stood starkly staring - cold and unfeeling. While eating breakfast, there began a loud shouting. Swarms of Darkseekers took flight and seemed to be chasing a yellow bellied, bright red creature. It must have been Drocoma! They disappeared in the distance. Another dragon of the same color came into the village. Kalen knew this was Drocoma when he heard his voice.

“Every last man and woman in training all aboard!” he said. About ten men emerged from all over the village. Kalen, Minn, Tara, and even Nitro came out of the hut.

“What are you doing here?” Kalen asked.

“Just pickin’ up the last warriors,” the dragon replied, modestly.

“Warriors?” Kalen grew excited.

“Yeah. To polish up for the big fight.”

“There’s going to be a fight?”

“Chief’s getting ready to ditch Baron Mallusk, so we’d better get ready.” Kalen took it that Baron Mallusk was the Darkseeker leader.

“Can we come?”

“Sure. You rookies could use the training.” So, the tree boarded onto Drocoma’s back along with the other warriors in training.

The Darkseekers became tired of chasing their victim and turned back for the camp.

On the way to the secret training area, which was underground, Drocoma explained the interactions with the Baron and the chief.

“See, being the chief’s guard dragon, and I’ll explain later, I get to hear these things. For a while, now, the Darkseekers have been secretly communicating with the people of Truefire. They’re not secret anymore. The Baron got a bit bolder. He wanted to take over all the lands so he could create one, big, powerful communism - which he really planned to later tricking the people of his “oneworld” into nominating him as their leader (dictator, really). Then, he would be too powerful to be defeated. He would soon take over the world if someone didn’t stop him.

“Well, when he got to Truefire, he admired the chief’s spirit and wisdom and leadership, so he talked the chief into a sort of truce. The Baron promised to share the land and never harm any of the chief’s people if the chief joined up with him. Well, hanging around that camp, the chief got hold of some info he wasn’t supposed to hear. The Baron didn’t want to break up with the chief - because he wanted to use him. The chief realized a sudden advantage he had over the Baron. He could have his soldiers secretly training, while he egged on the Baron. That chief’s got more to him than meets the eye, I tell you, lads.” The dragon landed near the side of a canyon and unloaded passengers.

“How did you hook up with the chief?” Kalen asked.

“He fear-trained me to guard the passage to Truefire. I thought he was all mean and nasty, so I sort of stereotyped all humans to be the same. But that was a long time ago.”

“What?!!!” Baron Mallusk thundered. “What do you mean they’re all gone?!!!”

“Nearly the whole village was gone when we came back from chasing that dragon, sire,” the guard nervously explained. The Baron pounded the table in front of him, splitting it in half.

“The chief tricked me, the traitor! I offered him the chance of a lifetime and he blows it by refusing! Prepare the men! We’re going to war!”

“Wow!” the children gasped when they entered the huge room full of training warriors. There were men from their late teens to about their fifties swishing swords, stabbing fake victims, exercising, running, and women dashing around doling out food and water. It was all hustle and bustle like a hive of bees. It was a sight that gladdened Kalen’s heart. He couldn’t wait to start training!

Darkseekers at the camp prepared for war.

“When we’re ready,” the Baron announced, “we’ll stand silent and ready to attack. We’ll ambush them. Element of surprise. We’ll catch them unawares.”

“But what if they never return?” asked a soldier. The Baron angrily sliced off his head.

“Let that be an example of soldiers who choose to talk back to their leader!”

After several hours, Kalen had learned many new techniques that he’d never seen and tried them out. He practiced with the warriors for a long time. Minn and Tara couldn’t help picking up a few things either. Kalen finally sat down to rest. A woman offered him some warm bread and water. He took a glass and a roll from her basket. The bread was delicious and the water felt good going down his throat. When he had finished, he handed them to a passing woman who soon returned to the kitchen with the empty glasses of many other warriors.

Kalen felt ready to fight now. He polished up on some of his newly learned moves. Kalen was satisfied. He remembered his father’s words to fight with all his knowledge of a warrior. He smiled.

Chapter 10. Battle for Oneworld

The next morning, all the men and women boarded several dragons and headed back for Truefire. Awaiting them were the Darkseekers. With the Baron's signal, they all sprang out and attacked them full force! Immediately, some of the Truefire warriors were hit or stabbed and fell into the canyon. They rose higher to avoid the next full force blow. This time, the warriors got some of the Darkseekers. The dragons landed and let all the warriors off. The Darkseekers did this as well and this began the combat. From above, Darkseekers dropped rocks, sticks, spears, and harpoons down on the battle. Two could play at that game. Some Truefire warriors mounted dragons, flew off into the air, and began dropping a miscellaneous of the same kind. Sometimes the two sides would hit their own warriors or soldiers. Most of the time, they hit their opponents.

Kalen fought to the best of his abilities. He used some of his favorite kicks and new moves. To his satisfaction and delight, they worked. He would occasionally glance over at the boisterous, yet beautiful Tara. He very nearly had his head chopped off if it weren't for Drocoma frying the enemy.

"Watch what you're doing?!" he scolded. Embarrassed, Kalen went back to fighting. "For a girl" Kalen thought, "Tara's not too bad at this."

The sides fought into the night. Kalen had many scars and gashes on him, some still fresh. The Truefire warriors were outnumbered by nearly twenty men. Despite this fact, they kept on fighting. A surprisingly good number of Darkseekers had been taken down as well. It was easier to kill, yet harder to defend for both teams as the darkness closed around them. Fire was being used not only as light, but as a weapon at this point. It was also harder to dodge the dead bodies, because of the numbers that had fallen and the darkness.

Suddenly, a new army ran in screaming and yelling and waving their weapons! It was the Ba-Taanians! They must have gotten together since the Darkseekers were all over in Truefire fighting! Nearly two-hundred men joined the warriors! The Darkseekers were now outnumbered! The stubborn Darkseekers kept on fighting. They were falling swifter, now.

By morning, it was nearly impossible to move with all the bodies lying about. The Darkseekers, surprisingly by command of their leader, suddenly fled the battle field. A cheer went up! "But have we won?" Kalen thought. He had the feeling it wasn't the last of the Darkseekers he would see.

Chapter 11. Time in the Balance, by Love Compelled

That morning, they all went to the Khan's palace in Ba-Taan to celebrate their victory. There was the finest banquet you ever did see, with all assortments of wines and cheeses and whatnot. Kalen saw Tara and pulled her over to the side. He invited her to the balcony with him. She accepted.

They talked for a long time.

"Thank you for saving my life on the bridge, Kalen," Tara said.

"Oh, it was a pleasure - I mean, to save you, not to have the crisis," Kalen said, modestly. "I think I'll be able to rest better now that I don't have so much on my mind."

"Me too."

"I thought it was strange, however, that the Darkseekers would just leave like that. They must be up to something."

"Now that I think of it, Kalen, you're right. You were very brave, though, fighting through the night. I bet you were tired. We were lucky to have the Ba-Taanians join us." Kalen agreed with a smile.

Without really realizing it, the two ended up side by side with an arm around each other. This led to them actually holding each other. They nearly unconsciously stood there together, in a dreamy state - between reality and fantasy. They stood there and gazed at each other as if time would never end as long as they were together. Before they knew what was happening, they were kissing. Tara became mentally conscious again, realized what was happening, and quickly pulled away. She half smiled at Kalen for a moment, not knowing what to do next. She finally left him there and went to her temporary room.

Later that evening, after playing games with Minn and Nitro, Kalen became curious about Tara again.

When he found her, she was in a silk night gown and staring out her window. Kalen laid a hand on her shoulder. She turned around abruptly, apparently startled. Kalen pulled his hand back in embarrassment.

“I’m sorry, Tara. Where you resting? Did I disturb you?” Kalen apologized.

“Oh! Oh, no. No. Uh, ahem! Be seated... please,” she said nervously.

Minn finally went up to see what was keeping his friend. He found the two asleep on the canopied feather bed, looking as if they were hugging in their sleep. Tara shifted peacefully. Minn smiled.

“By love compelled, the lamb sleeps with the lion,” Minn mumbled to himself as he closed the door.

Chapter 12. The Last Out Post of Freedom - Triumph at Cho-Sin

The following morning, everyone awoke to good news. The Khan announced that the Darkseekers had attacked one of the most powerful cities, Cho-Sin. Gasps of horror arose.

“However,” he continued, “they did not succeed! The Cho-Sinians beat them last night! I think the Darkseekers have learned their lesson!” Loud cheering began. Another, shorter celebration began.

Kalen and Tara, and Nitro, decided it was time to go home, after the celebration of course. Drocoma offered to fly them home. So, they hugged and kissed their friends good-bye and said they hoped to meet again some day and flew off.

When Drocoma dropped them off, Kalen said a special thanks for all he had done for them. Drocoma blushed and said it was nothing.

“I’ll hope to hear you a’singing when you hear us call,” Drocoma winked at Tara. She smiled politely. When all the good-byes were said, Drocoma flew off back to his lair deep in the mountains.

Walking to Kalen’s castle, Tara asked, “So, Kalen. Are we in agreement?”

“Sounds good to me. We’ll just have to see what my father thinks about marriage.”

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