

Vassal of FI



Free Sample

Gloria Oliver

How many times had he fantasized about this moment?

In how many of them had he found her and killed her, found her and loved her, found her and killed himself. And now-now to find she'd been with him all this time, with him totally ignorant of whom she really was.

The irony of it burned him. If not for what had happened the night before, he might have never known. A rough, barked laugh escaped him. He would have never known.

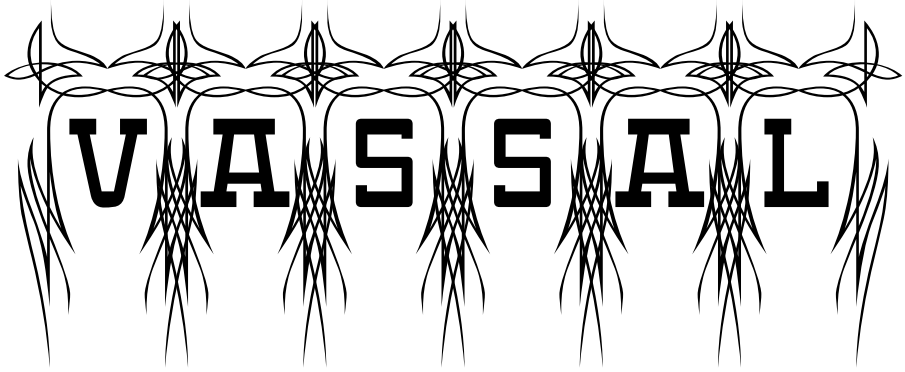
Almost against his will, his head turned so he could look over his shoulder. There she stood, looking concerned and innocent, the catalyst of his current life, the bane of his existence. A maelstrom of emotions swept through him, threatening to drive him mad. Joy, anger, love, hate, triumph, loss-how could he feel these things all at once?

"Torren?" Her arms about herself, looking hurt and confused, Larana took a tentative step toward him.

"Stay back!" He glared at her, his body shaking, a war he'd not expected waging inside him.

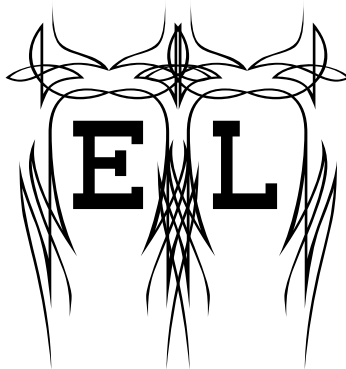
ALSO BY GLORIA OLIVER

In Service of the Samurai
Willing Sacrifice

A decorative Art Nouveau frame with symmetrical, flowing lines and pointed motifs. The word "VASSAL" is centered within the frame in a bold, black, serif font.

VASSAL

OF

A smaller decorative Art Nouveau frame, similar in style to the one above, with symmetrical, flowing lines and pointed motifs. The word "EL" is centered within the frame in a bold, black, serif font.

EL

GLORIA OLIVER

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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CHAPTER 1

RED, EVERYTHING WAS RED. IT OOZED AND DRIPPED AND covered everything. It pressed down over him, stifling him. Moans rang all around. There were shrieks of pain and then silence. Suddenly there were hands, dozens of them, grabbing, pinching, lifting him...



With a gasp, Torren sat up in the tree-deepened darkness. He studied the forest around him, the feeling of those hands still with him as his breath rushed wildly in and out. A few burning embers in the small pit of his fire twinkled back at him, showing him he was alone.

His pack and boots still leaned against the large maple closest to him. His sword was in its scabbard at his side, as he'd left it, within easy reach. His breathing slowed, these facts, one-by-one, calming him. The perspiration on his sun-weathered face and arms turned cold and made him shiver. The last tendrils of the dream left him.

Wiping his face and close-cropped platinum hair, he flicked his blanket aside and climbed to his bare feet. Chiding himself as he took yet another look around to make sure he was alone, he hobbled over to his pack to change his sodden shirt.

The dreams—the memories—hadn't troubled him in more than a year. He'd actually started to hope they were gone for good. They were an annoyance, and a horrid reminder of things he'd rather forget. Not, it seemed, that he ever could.

He wasn't sure if it was because he'd not suffered the

dream in a long time; but this time it had felt sharper, more immediate than ever before. He thrust the thought aside, not wanting to look at it too closely.

Pulling his sodden shirt over his head, he shuddered as the night breeze touched his skin. Setting the garment out to dry over a low branch, he quickly retrieved another out of his pack and slipped it on. He sat down on his damp blankets with a grimace, not sure he could sleep again, and glanced up through the overhanging branches of the maple at the sky.

Two of the three moons were still visible. He sighed, figuring he still had about six hours left before dawn. Tomorrow, if he were lucky, he would run across a farm or other travelers on the road and possibly hear more about the happenings up toward the northern border.

A range of mountains stood on the boundary between the empire and Galt. For generations, it had helped maintain an uneasy peace between the two, the trouble of moving massive armies over the few passes carved through them, and the likelihood of ambush while doing so, too risky to make it worthwhile.

Recently, though, it seemed matters had changed. Whispers of war were in the air. Forces were supposedly gathering near the border. Weapon sales had increased. If half of what he'd heard so far was true, there was a good chance he'd be able to offer his services in the area as a bodyguard or mercenary and perhaps get a better-than-average wage.

Torren frowned as a slow shadow crossed the smaller of the two moons. He stared at it, the long mass cutting across the bright surface as it drifted through the sky—one of the floating cities of El. The moonlight gleamed off some of its tall spires, making them appear like jewels. The protective field over the island shimmered like stardust.

The aerial cities of El—home to His people, the Chosen. A culture apart, living on their islands and high reaches where no mere mortals tread. A fantasy paradise, if you believed what half of those living on the ground adhered to, though in truth no Lander had ever been within the floating cities.

The empire still spent inordinate amounts of money trying to figure out how to tap the magic that kept the islands aloft and shielded them from the weather. Others tried to worship El instead, since he had supposedly created the islands for his people as gifts before being closed out of the world like the other gods by the First Mother. Neither method had yet to bear any fruit.

He was sure the other empires of the world were probably doing much the same. Though the Shirak Empire had little contact with those across the wide oceans, the Chosen did. Somehow, he doubted those other countries' feelings about them could be too far from those felt here. As far apart as the continents lay, and as treacherous as the waters were, gaining the secret of the islands or their flying ships would be a boon to whomever could replicate them. Then the Chosen would not be the only ones linking the world with commerce.

With a snort, he lay back down and turned from the sight. First the dream and now this—would he never be free of them? He had no need of those places, nor of their inhabitants. Yet, though he'd turned away from the drifting islands, he could still feel the pull of a Chosen city as it traveled across the sky, almost as if it were calling to him. He closed his eyes, trying his best to shut the feeling out, with little success. The island's presence, the fact he'd had the dream again and knowing he was close to the area where—

Torren stiffened, dropping his train of thought as a faint rustling came from somewhere behind him. He sat up and turned, automatically reaching for his scabbard. He'd half-risen, partially drawing his blade, when someone burst from the darkness and plowed into him in a tangle of arms and legs.

He fell back and, using the momentum, grabbed the intruder and flipped him to the ground, pinning him under his weight. He was slightly taken aback as he looked down at the face of his attacker in the dim light and saw a frightened girl.

“What do you think you're doing?” he demanded gruffly.

Wide eyes stared at him unseeing as she struggled in vain to get out from under him. Her breath came in harsh

gasps, her arms and face were scratched and bleeding from running through the brush.

He kept her pinned, wondering what someone like her was doing out here at this time of night. He assumed she came from a nearby farm. Unfortunately, the fire had burned too low to see anything clearly aside from her gender.

Slowly, the girl's struggles subsided; she focused on him for the first time. Tears welled in her large eyes as they locked with his.

"Help me. Please, help me."

He released her, sitting beside her in an attempt to keep her calm. "Are you being chased?"

She sat up, a shudder running through her as she wrapped her arms around herself. She nodded. "I lost them, I think. But..."

Picking up his sword and scabbard, he strapped them on as he stood, staring in the direction she'd come from. If she was being followed, her pursuers couldn't be far behind. There were no sounds heralding their arrival yet, but he knew he'd still have to work quickly if he were to be prepared. Anyone about at this time of night couldn't be up to much good.

"Grab the blankets and go stand by that tree." He pointed over to the maple his pack was leaning against. Turning away, he put on his boots and then, with his foot, quickly pushed dirt over the fire pit. With a faint hiss and rising smell of ashes, the embers were buried, what little light they'd been emitting gone. He then shoved leaves over the newly covered hole and waved at the air around him to dispel any of the remaining smoke.

Still keeping an ear tuned to the muted night sounds around him, he hurried back to the large tree where the girl stood waiting for him. Cloaked in shadow, she was huddled against the massive trunk, holding the blankets she'd retrieved like a shield against her chest.

"Come on," he told her, "time to climb up."

The girl, who barely reached to his shoulder, only stared blankly at him.

Torren frowned. "We need to climb this tree. You don't want to be found, right?"

She shook her head rapidly from side to side yet made no move to do as he'd asked. Trying hard not to let his irritation show on his face, he yanked his damp shirt off the tree limb and shoved it into his pack. Turning to look at her again, he slung the pack onto his shoulders. She hadn't moved, still staring at him intently with her large eyes. He sighed silently—he'd have to do this the hard way.

He grabbed her by her small waist, eliciting a surprised gasp. He ignored it, lifting her. She gasped again and let go of the blankets, raining them down like leaves on his head.

Trying not to become even more annoyed than he was already, he spoke to her again. "Grab a limb and climb up. Do it now!"

Feeling her finally obeying, he let go of her, pulled the blankets off his head and settled them on his shoulder. After a moment, he climbed after her. The scent of the tree's bark was strong.

"Keep going. You need to get up into the thickest part of the canopy."

Without a word, the girl scurried into the higher branches without much trouble. The leaves barely rustled as she passed.

"That's far enough." He was forced to reach out and grab her by the ankle, since it looked as if she would keep going until she reached the top of the tree and beyond. "Sit there."

Timidly, she drifted back down and nestled where he pointed. Three limbs jutted out from a thick central branch, making a seat Torren hoped she'd have a hard time falling out of.

Making sure she was secure and looked to be staying put, he found a place for himself.

"Here, cover yourself with this. It'll make you harder to see." He handed over one of the blankets, though he already had trouble making her out amidst the foliage. The girl quickly wrapped herself in it, her teeth chattering softly.

Shaking his head as he watched her, he took the second blanket and wrapped up in it. When he was done, he ig-

nored her, instead concentrating his senses on the wooded landscape below. If the girl was being chased, her pursuers were late. With luck, she'd lost them in the brush, but it was best to make sure.

After several long minutes, the crickets, which had grown silent at her abrupt arrival and later started up again, went suddenly silent once more. A curse echoed through the small clearing.

"Why would she have come this way?"

Torren stiffened at the sound of the annoyed voice, not having sensed the stranger's presence until then. He glanced over at the girl and saw her duck her head inside the blanket in fear.

"She's stupid? How should I know?" said a second voice, sounding even more annoyed than the first.

"She won't be running through all this for long, though, that's for sure." The first one snorted. "Never seen anyone run so fast."

"Fear's a great motivator." The second man paused. "I think she may have gone this way."

The two men drifted closer. More curses colored the night as they were forced to deal with the brush.

Torren silently removed his sword from its sheath, then the large knife hidden in his boot. He considered giving the girl the dagger in his pack but rejected the idea. She was more likely to hurt *herself* with it than them.

The two men shoved their way out of the bushes into the small clearing and stopped. He watched them, not able to make out much in the dark. One scrunched closer to the ground.

"Which way?" asked the other.

The first was silent for almost a full minute as he tried to study the ground around him. "It's too dark. The signs aren't clear."

"Dek is *not* going to want to hear this."

The first snorted. "You don't know how lucky we've been to be able to follow her this far."

The other grunted in reply, not at all happy. "What now?"

Torren tensed.

The first rose to his feet. "We go back. What else? If

Dek still wants to find her, we can try to pick up her trail in the morning.”

“So much for this being an easy job.” The two men started back the way they’d come.

Torren slowly let himself relax. The fact they’d been able to track her at all from the road at night meant they were good. If they’d brought a light with them they would have surely been able to tell where she’d gone, and he’d have had no choice but to fight them.

The girl was likely a farmer’s daughter—the closest town was a few days away—so why would people of such skill be after her?

He shook his head. It didn’t matter. What did was that they’d be back. Once they examined the area in daylight, they’d realize the girl had run across someone. This would change the rules of the game. Depending on why they wanted her, they might decide to take offense at the fact he’d helped her. The more distance he could put between himself and these men before they came back the better.

“It’s time to go.”

The covered lump that was his unexpected companion didn’t move. For a long moment, Torren considered just leaving her there. He knew he wouldn’t, but he considered it, all the same.

With an irritated sigh, he got off his perch and reached over to remove the blanket from her head. As he threw the corner of it off her, she jumped in her seat with a small squeal.

“If you don’t want them to find you, we have to go. Now.” He pointed to the ground; and after a moment, she scampered down away from him with wide eyes. Though she wasn’t what he’d call graceful, it looked as if she’d had experience climbing trees.

Following at a more sedate pace, he descended, going over their options. Traveling through the trees at night would be difficult, and he didn’t know of any convenient streams nearby they could use to hide their passage. If he wanted to get away, it seemed they had no choice but to use the road. There would be nothing there to trip over, and the packed surface should hide any traces of their passing. Even better, he would use the pursuers’ own trail

to get back to the road to make things even more difficult for them in the morning—that would work just fine.

Torren glanced over at where the girl stood waiting for him, still huddled in the blanket. “Stick close to me. We’re going to make our way back to the road.”

She stiffened, her face looking wan in the moonlight. “No...”

His brow went up. “Suit yourself. You can stay here if you want. But they’ll definitely find you in the morning.”

He shrugged when she said nothing and started on his way, not caring one way or the other. If she didn’t want his help, so be it. He hadn’t gone far before he heard her struggling to catch up.

In less than ten minutes, they were at the road. Though not one of the empire’s stone-paved highways, it was broad and followed a well-used route. Before stepping onto it, he glanced up and down to make sure the girl’s two pursuers were nowhere near. Spotting no one, he left the shelter of the trees and started north. The girl left the concealment of the trees a minute or so later and followed.

Shadows played in the moonlit darkness to either side; but Torren ignored them, keeping his senses primed for living threats. They traveled for more than an hour and saw nothing and no one. Figuring he’d gone far enough to distance them from his old camp, he stopped and waited for the girl. He watched as she came up and almost bumped into him, stooped as she worked at putting one foot in front of the other.

“We’re getting off,” he informed her.

The spot he’d chosen was bare of bushes or small plants, and the surface looked to be hard enough they wouldn’t leave much of a trail. Unless her pursuers had brought sniffers with them, which he doubted, they’d be hard-pressed to find where their quarry had abandoned the road.

“Step where I step.”

He stared hard at the ground, trying to choose their path carefully. He avoided plants or areas of soft earth, for a cracked branch or indentation would give them away to anyone with tracking skill.

When he felt they’d gone far enough away from the

road, he searched for a place to stop. Finding a likely spot, he gratefully let his pack fall from his shoulders.

“We’ll be staying here until morning. I suggest you get what sleep you can.” He stepped over to a nearby tree and sat down to keep watch for a while.

The girl didn’t move from where she’d stopped, just slouched down onto the ground, curled into a ball in the blanket and fell asleep. He shook his head then stared off into the night.

CHAPTER 2

AS THE SUN ROSE AND ITS LIGHT PERMEATED THE TREES, Torren stood up and stretched. His dream might have driven all thought of sleep from his head, but keeping guard through the rest of the night had let the time pass effectively. He'd long ago gotten used to sleeping little.

He reached for his pack and brought out some wrapped cheese and bread he'd bought from a farmer a couple of days earlier. This part of the empire was filled with farms and small towns, running almost to the border. The residents were usually willing to part with some of their stores for coin or labor. The prairie fields farther south produced most of the grain; wood, vegetables—mostly corn—as well as fruit were the contributions of this area.

Taking the food, he walked over to the blanket bundle on the ground and hunkered down next to it.

"It's time to wake up." He nudged her with the back of his hand then jerked back in shock as the blanket exploded and she sat up with a start. The girl darted her eyes in every direction, looking totally disoriented. Panic covered her face as she finally turned to look at him, and she appeared as if she might bolt.

"Forgot me already, have you?" he asked her with some sarcasm. "Run off, if you want, though I would have thought you'd rather have some breakfast." He tore off a piece of the hard bread and popped it into his mouth.

"You...You're the one who helped me?" She eyed him warily, as if afraid to believe this might be so.

He studied her, half-amused and half-annoyed, thinking surely he didn't look *that* bad. There were a number of

women who thought him quite handsome.

“Do you want food or not?”

Slowly, as if afraid of committing herself, the girl nodded. He tore a chunk off the bread and part of the cheese and held them out. After a moment, she took them, making sure she didn't touch him. She got up and, dragging the blanket with her, shuffled several feet away before sitting back down to eat.

Torren ate his own meal, surveying his impromptu company fully for the first time. She was young, so much was obvious—no more than fifteen summers, was his guess. Her hair was long, tied in a disheveled braid, its sandy color much darker than his white-blond. Her face was narrow, her mouth and lips small. She possessed long, gangly arms and legs.

Her skirt was made of homespun and went down to her ankles; but the cotton shirt was of better quality, with sleeves that reached to her elbows. She also wore a vest of dark brown with red flowers stitched around the border. A blue clip at the end of her braid caught the light and looked expensive.

Though a little better dressed than he would have expected, she still looked like a farmer's daughter. Overall, she was unassuming and average-looking, her large sky-blue eyes the only feature about her that stood out at all.

Nothing he saw explained why men would have chased her into the night. Not that it mattered.

“Could I...Could I have a little more?” Her fear and hesitation were quite clear.

He tore another piece of bread for her. “Thirsty?”

She nodded as she gingerly came forward to reach for the offered bread. She took it and scooted back as he rose to his feet. He felt her staring after him.

Torren took a deep drink then walked over to hand her the waterskin. She took it eagerly. He stepped back, watching her drink, wondering what he was going to do with her.

“So, why were those men after you?”

The girl choked at the question, her gaze darting around as if the mere mention of her pursuers would bring them.

“Well?” He tried not to sound impatient but was having a hard time of it.

The girl set the waterskin down and stared at her lap. “I—I don’t know.” Her whole body tensed. “I was sleeping and my...my aunt, she woke me up and...and told me to dress. I asked her why, but she wouldn’t tell me, she just told me to hurry.”

Now that she’d started talking the words came out faster and faster.

“When I was done, I started toward the door, but she stopped me. She...She told me to go out the window.”

Her eyes filled with tears. Torren suddenly felt uncomfortable.

“She pushed me toward it, telling me she loved me, telling me to hurry. She was whispering. She sounded afraid. It scared me, so I did as she said. When I had climbed out the window, she told me to run.”

He frowned, not liking where this story was going. He told himself again this had nothing to do with him.

“I didn’t run,” the girl said, sounding utterly miserable. “I tried to argue with her. I knew something wasn’t right, and I just couldn’t go. That’s when the door to my room slammed open, and my aunt turned around and attacked the stranger there.” She took a tattered breath. “He...He hit her. She fell. And then...then I...I ran and ran, until...”

She stared at her hands, her voice shrinking to nothing.

“What’s your name?”

She glanced up at him, looking surprised. “Larana.”

Torren nodded. “And do you know where you are now, Larana?”

She stared at him for a long moment then slowly shook her head.

“All right, then,” he said, folding his arms across his chest. “I’m heading north, in the direction of Caeldanage, and I’m willing to have you along until we either run across your home or come across a farm or town where we can find someone willing to take you.”

Larana just stared at him, saying nothing.

“Of course, if you prefer, you can go wherever you want on your own.”

She looked away, shaking her head vigorously.

He nodded. “By the way, my name is Torren.”

Though she flinched as he came close, he paid no attention to her reaction and retrieved the waterskin. He went back to his pack. “If you’re up to it, we should get going.”

Larana nodded quickly and rose to her feet. After dusting herself of leaves and dirt, she grabbed the blanket she’d slept in the night before and briskly snapped it in the air twice before folding it neatly and then meekly bringing it over to him. “I’m ready.”

He took the blanket without comment and wrapped it into a roll with the other, attaching them to the bottom of his pack. He glanced up past the trees, getting his bearings from the rising sun, and set off north.

He didn’t lead them back to the road but stayed in the lightly forested area. The going was harder this way; but Larana didn’t complain, though it was obvious at times she was hard-pressed to keep up.

When he called for a stop hours later she dropped to the ground in relief.

“Stay here.”

“Where...Where are you going?” Larana straightened up, fear flooding her face as if she thought he meant to leave her.

He gave her a quizzical and slightly irritated look. “I’m going to lay a false trail. I’ll be back soon.”

She sat looking alone and forlorn as he left to take care of business. He hoped this wasn’t an indication of a long and nerve-wracking trip.

He set about erasing as many signs of their passing as possible. Backtracking, he set off in a different direction, leaving clues that could be followed but not making them too obvious lest their pursuers realize what he’d done. As soon as he reached an area where a trail would be hard to find, he went back a different way, being as careful as he could not to leave any trace.

When he returned to where he’d left the girl, he found her pacing, scanning the area around her intently. As soon as she spotted him, her face lit up with relief.

“You’re back!”

Torren scowled—he’d told her he’d return. He retrieved the waterskin from his pack and took a long swallow. As an afterthought, he offered it to her. In her eagerness to get it, she almost tripped over herself. His scowl deepened, but he said nothing as he handed it over.

Larana drank the water gratefully, her cheeks touched with red. “Thank you.”

He shrugged and took back the skin. “Let’s go.”

After a short while, the leaf-strewn floor gave way to a small path intersecting their current direction. Torren stopped and glanced both ways then prepared to cross it.

“Wait!” Larana jumped forward and grabbed his sleeve. She immediately let go as he turned to glare at her.

“What is it?” he demanded.

His annoyance grew as the girl hesitated, staring up and down the trail as if looking for the right words.

“I—I think I know this path. It’s a shortcut.”

He waited for her to elaborate, but she didn’t.

“To where?”

He watched as she bit her lower lip and glanced up and down the trail again, looking unsure.

“It’s a shortcut to the stream,” she said finally. “It’s where we get our water.” She pointed to the left side of the trail. “My home is this way.”

Torren glanced down the way she pointed. “Are you sure?”

She bit her lip again. “N–No.”

He studied the path. Though he suspected the men last night were even now trying to pick up her trail, there was a chance one might have stayed behind, waiting for her at her home to make sure she didn’t return. Then again, it was almost as likely he hadn’t. If her family was still there, though, he could leave the girl with them, freeing him to go on his way. Whatever problems her people were having with these men they could sort out themselves.

“All right. We’ll follow it for a short while and see if it grows more familiar.”

Larana nodded in thanks then took off to lead the way. He followed at a more sedate pace, shaking his head.

They’d not gone far before the girl turned around, a

bright smile on her face. “This is it! I’m sure of it now.”

She ran, showing more energy than she had so far. As she moved farther and farther ahead, Torren slowed. A strange smell tainted the pervading scent of growing vegetation. Was that smoke? And what about the other, more subdued odor mixed in with it?

“Larana!”

He sprinted up the path, a sense of dread rising inside him.

After a long bend in the path, the trees opened into a clearing. He slowed as he spotted the girl at the end of the trail. She stood unmoving as he came closer, what she was staring at gradually coming into his field of view. The smells that had first alerted him something wasn’t right grew stronger.

In the middle of the clearing, charred beams reached toward the sky, resembling broken, crippled fingers. Thin trails of smoke rose from the ruins.

Larana panted as she stared at the destruction.

“Is this...?” He left the question unfinished, knowing it could be nothing else.

The girl took a half-step forward, seemingly unaware he was even there.

“Aunt Ban? Uncle Zed?” Her call reverberated around the clearing, but she received no answer. “Aunt Ban! Uncle Zed!” she called out again, her voice fraying at the edges. “It’s me, Larana. I’ve come back.”

No answer disrupted the silence.

Torren felt his jaw clench, already knowing what she was yet unwilling to accept.

“They’re...not here.”

The girl turned on him, fire in her eyes. “They are! They wouldn’t leave without me.”

Turning from him, she ran into the clearing, heading toward a small shed on the far side—the only thing still standing. “Aunt Ban!”

He didn’t follow her, instead approaching the burned-out shell of the house, sure he knew where the girl’s relatives could be found. Following his nose, he moved carefully through the rubble until he found the source of the telltale odor mingling with the reek of smoke.

“Aunt Ban! Uncle Zed!” Larana’s voice had grown shrill, filled with dawning panic.

He stepped out of the ruins. “I’ve found them.”

She stopped where she was and turned to look at him, a hopeful smile on her face. He watched her look past him and said nothing as the smile slowly crumbled with inevitable understanding.

“No.” She shook her head slowly from side to side. “No.”

Her expression despairing, she cut past him. He didn’t try to stop her. He didn’t watch as she stumbled into the rubble and shortly found the two burned and twisted bodies, which had, not long before, been her family.

“No!”

He turned at her cry, despite his original intentions, and saw her fall to her knees. He stared at her back as sobs racked her body. Without a word, he turned away from her pain and strode to the shed on the other side of the clearing.

Setting his pack outside, Torren searched inside and came out carrying a shovel. Not once glancing in the girl’s direction, he proceeded to dig a hole not far from the side of the small building. Perhaps he could do for her what he’d not been able to do for himself.

Sometime later, he wiped his sweaty brow. Climbing out of the hole, he set the shovel aside and reentered the shed to retrieve several large pieces of sackcloth he’d noticed.

Larana still sat where he’d last seen her, her eyes red and swollen, soot covering her clothes and face, dark tracks showing the path of her tears.

“I’ve dug a grave for them,” he told her.

She slowly turned her head toward him, her expression slack, her eyes glazed. It was hard to look at.

“If you’ll move back, I’ll wrap them up in this.”

The sun was high in the sky, shining down on the manmade clearing. The stench from the bodies was growing stronger. Her face vacant, Larana blinked several times then crawled to her feet to get out of his way.

What debris there’d been over the blackened bodies was gone, though pieces of the corpses had come away

with them. Suddenly, not wanting her exposed to this any more than necessary, Torren quickly laid a cloth over each one. His mouth a thin line on his face, he knelt, respectfully tucked the cloth around the body of what he presumed to be Larana's aunt and lifted it in his arms.

The stench of the charred flesh multiplied as the body shifted. Momentarily, he closed his eyes, unwanted images flashing through his mind of another time. When he opened them again, his vision was clear but his expression grim. At least these two would have the benefit of a proper burial.

Larana followed him automatically to the grave. She knelt in the grass, staring into the hole as he set the wrapped body inside it. Glancing once in her direction, he left her there as he went to retrieve her uncle.

After he'd settled the second body, he took a deep breath and spoke. "What gods did they believe in?"

She only stared at the grave.

He waited to see if she'd respond at all, but she said nothing. Sighing, he bent down long enough to take a handful of dirt and gently sprinkle it over the bodies. "May the First Mother take you to Her bosom and care for you."

He picked up the shovel and started filling in the hole. Larana said nothing as he worked, but fresh tears streaked her soot-covered face.

Once he was done, he took a deep drink from the waterskin then took a small piece of sackcloth from his pack. After dampening it, he used it to mop his face.

"How far is the stream down this path of yours?" he asked.

She stared at the mounded earth as if she could yet see the bodies lying within. She said nothing.

He shook his head and turned away. Taking a spare set of clothes from his pack and a pail from the shed, he headed across the clearing without another word.

Following the path, he soon came across a respectable stream. Setting the pail and his clothes to the side, he stripped and crouched in the cool water. Small fish nibbled his toes, but he paid no attention. As he washed his body and his dirtied clothes, all he could see was the soot-

covered gangly girl staring at her relatives' grave.

When he returned, Larana was exactly as he'd left her. Frowning and pushing back his damp hair, he studied her from the corner of his eye as he set the full pail he'd brought inside the shed. He came back out to loom over her, his expression blank.

"We'll need to leave soon," he said darkly. "We've already been here longer than is prudent." No reaction. "I've brought some water so you can wash yourself."

She gave no indication she'd heard what he said.

He reached down and grabbed her arm, yanking her roughly to her feet.

"We don't have time for this! They're dead. Deal with it." His voice was thick. "You've had time to mourn. That time's now over. Go clean up."

Her eyes widening with the pain in her arm, she stared at him without comprehension. Torren hauled her away from the grave and pushed her into the shed. He grabbed a piece of sackcloth, and after dunking it into the pail, thrust it into her hand.

"Clean up."

When she still did nothing, the water dripping from the cloth in her hand to the ground, he took her hand and raised it and the cloth to her face. She gasped as the wetness touched her skin, her eyes focusing for the first time.

"Clean up." He kept his eyes locked on hers, moving the cloth across her forehead. "Clean up."

She pulled her hand free, looking at the wet cloth held in it. "Yes."

She blinked several times, as if becoming aware by inches of her surroundings.

"I'll wait for you outside." He felt strangely relieved to see life coming back into her face.

Larana answered with a single nod, bringing the cloth back up to her cheek. He nodded back and exited the shed to give her some privacy.

He waited for her in the shade of a large oak by the shed, studying the land and wondering why so many farms were built the same. From the remains of the house, he knew it'd had no more than three rooms. It would have had a thatched roof, whitewashed sod walls

and a central hearth for preparing meals and heating the house in the winter months.

A small garden in the back would have been for common vegetables, the actual crop fields farther off. A chicken coop would have been built against one side of the house; and perhaps they'd owned a few goats or a mule, though there was no sign of either now.

How similar it was to the place where he'd spent the latter part of his youth, a place that had been both a prison and a haven to him.

Shaking himself out of the strange, misplaced mood, he pushed away from the tree as he spotted Larana exiting the shed. Her face and arms were clean again, her hair damp and in place. Though she'd obviously also tried to clean the worst of the stains off her clothes, aside from wetting and smearing the soot, they didn't look much better.

She approached him rather meekly. "I'm done."

He nodded and studied the sky. "We still have a few hours of daylight left, so we should cover as much ground as possible before it gets dark."

She followed as he retrieved his pack. Though she appeared more like normal, he noticed the dark circles growing beneath her eyes.

"Do you have any other relatives near here?" he asked her.

She looked away, her eyes turning sad. "No. I have no other family." Her gaze strayed to the mound where her aunt and uncle were buried. "I—I'm a foundling. Aunt Ban and Uncle Zed found me on the road."

Torren felt his right eye twitch. This story was starting to sound just a little too familiar for comfort. "I take it they had no relatives, either?"

Larana shook her head no.

"I see." He felt the odd mood overtaking him again. "Let's go, then."

He hefted his pack higher on his shoulders and set off the way they'd come. Once they reached the point where they'd originally found the path, he didn't leave it but instead followed it to the stream. Once there, he took the time to refill their waterskin.

“Do you know if this connects to a river, or a road?”

Larana nodded quickly. “Yes. There’s a road that runs east to west, some ways down. I wasn’t allowed to go that far, but I did it once.”

She looked guilty at the admission.

He had traveled through this area a number of times over the years and thought he had a pretty good idea where the stream would take them. “Come on.”

He stepped into the water and followed its course upstream. It reached about halfway up his boots. Larana hesitated long enough to remove her slippers then waded in after him.

Though the afternoon was warm, the girl was shivering by the time he called for a short break. Her teeth almost chattering, she slipped on a rock while stepping out and fell to her knees, getting her skirt and legs wet as well as the shoes she’d carried. He frowned at her bumbling even as she looked up at him, her cheeks coloring.

After a moment, he went over and offered his hand to help her up. As they touched, he felt a tickling in the back of his head, and something akin to gratitude.

“I’m very clumsy. Sorry for the trouble.”

He let go of her hand as soon as she was on her feet, shaking his head at the strange feeling. “I think we’ll be able to reach the road before nightfall.”

Larana nodded, trying her best not to look cold. The circles he’d noticed under her eyes earlier were noticeably darker.

He made a decision, and the slight scowl that was his normal expression disappeared. Though he wasn’t aware of it, it erased years from his face.

“We haven’t eaten since this morning. Why don’t we stay here a bit longer and eat something to hold us over until we make camp?”

The girl nodded eagerly. “Yes, please.”

He rummaged through his pack and pulled out a hunk of meat wrapped in waxed cloth. With his boot knife, he cut portions for both of them. She wolfed hers down after the first tentative bite. He was thinking of giving her more when she enthusiastically licked her fingers but

hesitated as she abruptly stopped and tears formed in her eyes.

He knew loss was never easy, but it was best to just deal with it and then forget.

“I’m sorry about your aunt and uncle, but you need to put their passing behind you. There was nothing you could have done. Nothing will bring them back no matter how much you want it. For your own sake, just forget about them.”

Larana turned to look at him, her face filled with shock. “How can you...?”

He stood up and slung his pack over his shoulder. “We’d better get moving.”

In less than an hour, they found the place where the stream crossed the road. Thick planks had been set to make a small bridge. He climbed up, staring long and hard in both directions as Larana moved to join him, her still-damp shoes making squishing noises.

“Let’s keep going just a little longer,” he said after a minute. “Then we’ll get off the road and set up camp.” He eyed her; she nodded and said nothing.

They hadn’t gone far before he turned off to the side. He penetrated the tall grass and brush just enough to get them out of sight. “This should do.”

The girl sank down by a tree with a sigh and removed her shoes so she could rub her tired feet. He chose another tree nearby and removed his pack before sitting. He unhitched the blankets and tossed one to her. He then removed the remainder of the meat as well as more hard bread and cheese, dividing most of it between them.

As they ate, the sun disappeared from overhead and everything plunged into deep shadows before being swallowed by darkness. He was caught off-guard as Larana, a mere lump of deeper shadow across from him, whispered, “Have you...Have you lost a loved one, too?”

He said nothing, not liking the question. There were things he didn’t enjoy thinking about, let alone speaking of to a stranger. He grabbed his blanket and spread it out on the ground.

“You’d better get some sleep. We’ll be starting out early in the morning.” He lay down and turned his back to her,

hopefully cutting off any further conversation. He stared into the darkness, listening to her settle in before eventually drifting off to sleep.

CHAPTER 3

A HEAVY WEIGHT CRASHED FROM ABOVE, PINNING HIM AND the others down. Dark-clad bodies descended on them from the closing gloom. Grinning bloodlust; answering fear. His father cut in front of him, blocking his view—hastily trying to push him back. His angry expression changed to one of abrupt pain. His father falling on top of him, forcing him down, warm liquid splashing on his face and arms.

Panic, madness. Screams from the others yet no way to escape. Pinned, not able to breathe. His fellows dying, others wounded. The dark men crippling them as they laughed at their predicament. Why are they doing this?

Suddenly, freedom is his; but before he can flee, they close in, pushing him this way and that. The hands—the hands reach for him, tearing at his clothes, at his body, drowning him with pain...



Torren sat up, his breath coming in harsh gasps. Fear chilled him, the echoes of past pain flooding him. Slowly, very slowly, the true night congealed before him, reality reasserting itself. The dream dissipated into the past where it belonged.

With shaking hands, he pushed his clammy hair away from his face. It had come again. Why? It made no sense. It had been almost a year since the last episode, and now he'd had the dream two nights in a row. Would he never be rid of it?

He twisted where he sat, his sweat-soaked shirt clinging to him. Angrily, he shoved his questions aside and

pulled it off, feeling in his pack for another. He didn't put the new one on right away, though, letting the night air cool him. When he felt calmer, more like himself, he slipped his arms into the sleeves. He was about to bring it up over his head when a soft touch caressed his back.

Goose bumps rushed up his spine, a strange tingling sensation suffusing his body. A queer combination of feelings rushed through him: worry, curiosity, sadness. For a moment, it was as if his body were paralyzed while his confused mind ran in frenzy through a dozen scenarios of bandits or creatures running across him in the night.

Then, he was free, the touch leaving him as unexpectedly as it had come. A strangled sob came from behind him.

Torren whipped around, his hand slipping out of his shirt and automatically reaching for the sword he'd left sheathed beside him.

"Those scars..." Larana's sorrow-filled voice was barely audible, yet it froze him as if he were in the grip of whatever had just happened again. He could barely see her outline in the darkness, her words coming as if from a disembodied voice.

He shook his head, struggling to free himself of his paralysis as he tried to make sense of what was happening. "They're nothing."

"That's not true!" She leaned forward, her voice filled with grief. "Pain...there was so much pain." She hid her face in her hands and wept as if his anguish were her own.

Torren stared, not knowing what to make of it. What kind of girl was this? How did she know these things?

"What did you do to me?" The question came out as a harsh accusation.

She didn't answer, weeping quietly before him. He reached for her arm, making sure not to touch her exposed skin.

"Answer me!"

She looked up; and though he could not see clearly, Torren felt her gaze cutting through him. He let go of her. Confused and angry, he moved back and half-turned away from her.

“What did you do?”

After several long moments, Larana finally gave him an answer.

“I—I’m not sure. It’s just something that happens sometimes. I didn’t mean...I didn’t mean...” Her hand shook as she reached as if to touch him.

“I suggest you don’t do it again,” he said gruffly. He moved even farther away from her and slipped his shirt on. His mind in turmoil, he lay down with his back to her once more, willing her to leave him alone.

She scooted away, sobbing softly. He wasn’t sure if it was because of his anger, the loss of her family or his past pain. Why did he even care? He lay awake until the sounds of her weeping finally faded away.

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Thank you so much!!!!

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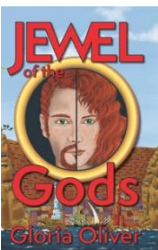
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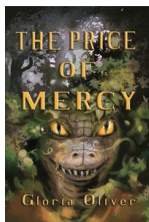


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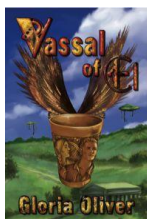


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