

Part I: Bonds Frayed and Forsaken

For a fire is kindled in mine anger, and shall burn unto the lowest hell,
And shall consume the earth with her increase,
And set on fire the foundations of the mountains.
I will heap mischiefs upon them;
I will spend mine arrows upon them.

- *Deuteronomy 32:22-23*
(*King James Version*)

A light snow fell from the obsidian sky, dusting the trees as well as the cloaks of any unwary travelers out on such a night. There was no wind to speak of, thankfully; for December gales often brandish razor-sharp fangs and claws. Overhead, a full moon presided over a solitary farmhouse, the welcoming yellow glow of firelight from within a beacon of hope in the otherwise dark and deserted forest.

It was less than a month before the Solstice and the Nativity, and even out here, preparations for the holiday feasts were already underway—meager though they might be. Large pine wreaths adorned the humble farmhouse, as did a garland of evergreen trimming the eaves. In the nearby stables, the horses were all bedded down for the night, fed and groomed, and awaiting their next burden to bear. In the adjacent barn, the cows were also settled and asleep, at least until their early morning milking. The few remaining pigs that had escaped this season's slaughter huddled together for warmth in their hay-laden stalls. And the sheep sporting their winter wool were blissfully unaware of their impending spring shearing.

Bustling activity from inside the farmhouse shattered the dense stillness of the pristine winter night. Amid muffled shouts and raised voices, two cloaked figures emerged from the

house, revealing a yellow rectangle of light through an open door. One of the figures darted toward the stables, promptly returning with two horses. Then a third cloaked figure burst out of the farmhouse, gesturing wildly, shouting in an old woman's voice.

“You can't leave at this hour—it's too dangerous!”

“The baby won't wait,” one of the two other figures replied in a male voice. He was helping his cloaked companion into the saddle of one of the horses.

“Please don't go,” the old woman's voice begged. “We'll deliver the baby here.”

“No. She needs a midwife.”

“She needs to be at home.”

“There's no time to argue,” the male voice growled. “We've lost too much time already.” The rider punctuated his declaration by leaping into the saddle of the other horse and snapping its reins to urge it onward, the second rider following closely behind.

It wasn't until they were well beyond the haven of light offered by the farmhouse that two other riders emerged from the surrounding blackness like viscous shadows and took up pursuit.

The two lead riders sped through the ancient forest, winding around the skeletal trees that almost seemed to reach out for them with their gnarled limbs. The thundering hoofbeats of their mounts sent up sprays of fresh snow in their wake, the horses' muscular legs rippling with almost preternatural efficiency, shaming the forgotten steam and combustion engines of old. The riders drove the beasts on with a sense of urgency—though tempered by caution. Their pursuers, however, were not so encumbered by such a concern, and they were closing the distance rapidly.

It did not take long before the two mysterious riders clad in black caught up to their prey, surrounding them on either side and keeping pace, their horses' manes rippling in the breeze of their passage.

"Halt!" Commanded the leftmost black rider from alongside his male quarry.

"Never!" The male rider shouted above the galloping and panting of the horses. He urged his horse on a little faster—as fast as he dared; the almost impenetrable wall of stout trees on either side of them was a blur.

The black rider then reached from within his cloak and withdrew an old and rusted pistol. "Halt now!" He screamed. His accomplice on the opposite side drew a similar weapon.

Directly to the right of the male rider, a moan escaped from his female companion huddled in her vast gray cloak as she cradled her belly. To his left, his cloaked adversary thumbed back the hammer on his clumsy firearm and aimed it past him in the general direction of the woman's stomach. From within the gunman's black hood, a mirthless crooked yellow smile gleamed in the pale moonlight.

Realizing that their pursuers were without conscience and beyond reason, the male rider pulled back on the reins of his horse to slow it down, his companion and their adversaries following suit as the quartet came to a gradual halt. The gunmen began to circle their prey, all four horses loudly panting plumes of white steam in the stillness of the night.

"Dismount!" The lead gunman commanded.

The couple began to climb gingerly down from their respective saddles, the woman suddenly losing her footing in one of the stirrups and collapsing to the ground with a muffled cry.

The man made a move to rush to her aid, but the spray of snow from a bullet fired at his feet halted him in his tracks, the report piercing the pristine silence of the old forest.

The two gunmen chuckled malevolently. The thug who seemed to be the only one capable of speech spoke up again, clucking his tongue as if addressing a misbehaving child, waving the barrel of his pistol like a warning finger.

“No more sudden moves like that, now...”

The man looked up at them pleadingly, his face partly hidden in shadow from his. “But she could be hurt!”

The woman remained doubled over in a crumpled heap, a shapeless form in her vast cloak.

The lead gunman holstered his firearm and dismounted theatrically, lowering his hood to reveal a bald scalp and three silver hoops pierced through one ear, marking him as a Brigand: a nomadic thief that roamed the provinces, preying upon and terrorizing the populace. Though the Brigand population had been in steady decline over the past several years—due largely to the disappearance of the mysterious Black Count, as well as the increased militia policing organized by Lady Vasperan—many still remained and were becoming more difficult to track down. Most residents of the provinces likened Brigands to cockroaches; just when you thought you had them all stomped out, another would come scuttling out from the shadows. And it seemed to many that their ranks were on the rise again.

The Brigand swaggered over to the woman, rubbing a hand across his mouth and licking his lips lecherously. “Well, I may have something here that’ll ease her pain...” He swept back his cloak and began fumbling with his belt and holster in a lewd gesture.

The man made a move forward again, his face a mask of despair. “No!”

The second Brigand, still astride his horse, cocked his pistol and swung his arm in the man's direction. The woman continued to moan loudly, still hunched over and kneeling on the ground.

The man hissed rage. "I swear to the gods, if you so much as touch her..."

The Brigand barked laughter from over his shoulder as he continued to approach the woman. "You'll what?"

Suddenly the woman rose to her feet.

Both Brigands whirled their gazes in her direction.

The man smiled and folded his arms. "I'll gladly step aside and watch while she kills you both."

In a blur, the woman had shed her cloak to reveal a figure that was not at all pregnant. And before either Brigand could comprehend this unexpected turn of events, the woman withdrew an ancient-looking dagger from her belt and hurled it at the mounted Brigand. The knife spun hilt-over-blade, whistling through the night air, and pierced the thug's throat. He clawed at the knife, gagging and gurgling on his own blood for a few heartbeats before tumbling from the saddle face-first into the snow.

The other Brigand—momentarily paralyzed by his surprise—was finding what passed for his wits and reached for his pistol. He even managed to fire off an awkwardly aimed shot, which by mere chance, somehow wound up closer to its mark than it should have been.

The woman still dodged the shot without much effort as she made a quick dash to her horse. Reaching within the folds of the saddle blanket, she unveiled her more trusted and true weapon: a relic from a bygone era of honor. Gleaming with an almost ethereal inner glow in the pale moonlight, its painstakingly polished wood was intricately carved and crafted with

meticulous detail by the skilled hands of one of the most accomplished Archers ever to bear the esteemed title—though his promising career was cut lamentably short. This weapon of old was the bow of the late Archer Gideon, now brandished by the young woman who had boldly sworn to carry on his legacy.

In one swift, fluid motion, the woman withdrew an arrow from the quiver on her back, nocked it, and fired it into the Brigand's forearm, causing him to collapse to his knees in pain.

As he instinctively reached for the arrow to pull it out, a silhouette suddenly materialized before him, eclipsing the meager moonlight and throwing him into an even darker shadow.

He looked up to find a smoldering pair of keen green eyes that hinted at a wisdom beyond their years.

“Never again will you prey upon the innocent and the helpless,” the woman hissed through bared teeth.

Then she paused, lowering her bow, her face suddenly twisting in a grimace of rage.

“NEVER!” She screamed, swinging the bow like a club in a smooth arc, bludgeoning the Brigand's nose with it, and sending up a crimson spray of blood, the dark droplets a stark contrast against the virgin snowfall.

The Brigand howled in pain and reeled backward, raising a hand to his broken nose, the arrow in his arm now temporarily forgotten. Relieving the thief of his pistol, the woman quickly tossed the weapon aside with an expression of disgust—as if she had just handled a dead rat. She then began circling the wounded Brigand like a prowling cougar, her black leather boots crunching in the fallen leaves and fresh snow. She was clad in a midnight blue tunic and leggings, her shoulder-length chestnut-colored hair pulled back in a compact ponytail with a few

strands fallen loose. From a smooth oval face, her piercing eyes continued to glare down at her adversary with an unquenchable inner fire.

The young man who had been her riding companion had retrieved the Brigand's pistol and was now emptying it of its bullets while watching her with uncertainty. "Serena, what are you doing?"

The young woman turned to face him, but she remained silent.

"Let's go," he urged. "We finished what we set out to do." His ordinarily smooth brow was wrinkled with concern.

"No, Cade," she spat. "This one needs to suffer a bit more, first." Then she swung her leg back and aimed a kick in the Brigand's groin, causing his groaning to rise an octave.

"Threatening to rape a woman with child..." She continued to pace restlessly, her eyes aflame with anger. "You are a seeping pustule on the hindquarters of the lowliest scum-sucking maggot-ridden bottom-feeding—" She cut off her own tirade by hauling back and kicking the Brigand again, her long and slender leg arcing high in the air, the toe of her boot this time connecting with the thief's jaw. Both she and her companion watched as the thug's eyes rolled back in his head before he tumbled over onto his back with a meaty thud.

Throwing down her bow, Serena spun on her heel and strode quickly over to the dead Brigand sprawled out in the snow. With one boot, she rolled him over onto his back and with a quick tug, yanked the dagger free from his still seeping throat and headed back to the other thug, who—while unconscious—still drew breath.

Realizing her intentions, Cade quickly intercepted Serena, stepping between her and her quarry. His arms were folded across his chest, the night breeze rippling his shaggy blonde hair, his soulful blue eyes determined but wary. "No. You can't do this."

Serena stood her ground, leveling her gaze at him. “What?”

“I said, ‘no’—this is not how it’s supposed to be.”

She leaned in closer to him, her face now mere inches from his. The color was still high in her cheeks, and a stray strand of hair hung down over one eye. Though Cade would have been reluctant to admit it—especially now—something about her appearance made her seem even more alluring than usual.

Lethally beautiful.

“It’s better than he deserves,” she spat. “And who are you to tell me how things are supposed to be?”

Even though he had about ten centimeters in height and at least twenty-five kilos in weight over her, the young man resisted the urge to back up a step. He kept his feet firmly planted and his eyes locked with hers. “Serena, please...”

Her eyes narrowed to smoldering slits. “When you’ve lost as much as I have to these barbaric savages, I will gladly take suggestions from you.”

They both continued to hold each other’s gaze for several more heartbeats, the tension between them almost palpable. Then Serena sheathed her dagger and turned to walk away, scooping up her bow as she headed back to her horse. Cade ran a hand through his hair, sweeping the dusting of new fallen snow from it. He shook his head slowly and thoughtfully.

“I still cannot kill an unarmed adversary—no matter how despicable he may be,” he called after her. “It makes us no better than they are.”

Without breaking stride, Serena whirled around, nocked an arrow and shot it into the unconscious Brigand’s throat. The man’s eyes sprang open briefly, almost wide enough to pop

from their sockets, his arms and legs spasming; then he lie still, staring into whatever fate awaited him in the next world.

Cade looked up to find Serena's icy stare leveled back at him now, the expression on her face one of cold finality. "Discussion over. We need to get back to Diana. Hopefully our diversion bought enough time..." She gestured back behind Cade. "Retrieve my arrows, if you would, please."

He continued to stare after her once she had turned away and climbed into the saddle of her horse—a tawny-colored palomino mare she called Whirlwind. Then he dutifully did as she requested, carefully withdrawing her arrows from her latest victims. He handed them to her in silence before mounting his own horse and following her obediently as they rode back to the farmhouse from which they had just fled.