

Knight Spirits

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If the suit fits, wear it.

Prologue

"Deploying hydro-accumulator."

First Lieutenant Jesus Gonzales paid little attention to the cockpit notice where the crew of the *Staten Island* prepared to scoop up water in a refueling process. The spaceship had already taken position in a remote part of the ocean where it could skim the surface. He took hold of a stanchion to steady himself when the slight bump rocked through the ship as the scoop deployed. A roaring sound vibrated through the ship as air surged into the scoop to be diverted into a funnel that forced out a compressed stream of air ahead of the ship. The resultant blast of air hit the water creating a fine mist that could be sucked into the same scoop. All the while, the ship collected water that could later be separated into hydrogen fuel and oxygen, not to mention water after some of the impurities were removed. Because only the raised mist of water entered the scoop there was little chance of striking anything in the ocean. To do that, an object would have to protrude well above the water.

That was unlikely though. To anyone who might see the ship, all that remained visible was an extremely fast moving wave followed by a twin rooster tail. Doubtless the sight would cause tales of sea monsters. However, that was why the ship skimmed the surface in a remote location: for the very purpose of avoiding contact.

Then the unexpected impact struck. Gonzales flailed about only to lose his grip on the stanchion as it broke. He staggered toward the closed airlock only to be thrown back as the entire airlock unit burst inward in a shower of shattered pieces of advanced composite materials, wood, and salt water. Gonzales, however, didn't have the opportunity to analyze why there would be wood striking him. Nor did he pay much attention to the cockpit voices. Instead, he doubled over in pain from the broken stanchion that impaled him.

"What hit us?" the co-pilot asked over the ship's com.

"Everyone hang on! We hit something! We're down!" the pilot warned.

The ship rumbled and vibrated in a way that only attempting to ride the surface water at high speed could produce. Gonzales gripped the stanchion as he fought to live. He knew that he could survive if he didn't bleed to death first by opening the wound completely. It was just a matter of getting into the ship's advanced automatic medical ward.

"Where's the damned island?" a cockpit voice shouted.

The crunching sound answered that last question before it was finished. The ship came to a sudden halt amid a burst of spray and sand. Despite his pain, Gonzales held onto the stanchion to avoid further harm.

"Computer, send medical assistance." He waited briefly for the auto-stretcher to arrive and listened for others to report on their condition. Quiet prevailed. "Computer, activate ship-wide com. All hands. This is Lieutenant Gonzales in the Scout Wardrobe compartment. Scout airlock is destroyed. There's wood, water, and sand in the compartment. I'm going to need medical assistance. Computer, report damage."

He listened to a list of damaged and inoperative systems that reeled off as the computer reported using backup power. He knew he was dead when the computer listed the medical ward as inoperative.

"All hands report. Is anyone else alive?" Gonzales asked.

Still, silence reigned with only the sound of lapping waves somewhere outside the ship to break it.

Malidor the Ruthless turned to view the fast approaching object spotted by a lookout. Even the wind had never moved that fast to Malidor's memory. Sailors on his rowing vessel sat transfixed as they pointed at the approaching object only moments before it slammed into the hull. Shattered, the ship sank leaving no time for anyone to salvage anything. Armor, weapons, food, and drinking water went down among the debris and broken bodies.

Malidor shook his head to clear it, as he reacted to the sudden impact that destroyed his warship so quickly and thoroughly. The sound of a second impact came from the direction where the object had traveled after destroying his ship. From his position among the waves he couldn't see what else the object had struck. He could, however, see that the blood in the water would soon draw seateeth to feast upon the dead and dying. Aware that his only recourse was to swim away from the carnage, he oriented himself toward a small island his vessel was in the process of passing on its shield side--the same direction the object had traveled. He cared not about the object. Instead, he knew that if he swam past or failed to reach the island, he'd be doomed.

Fatigued and weary, Malidor staggered onto the sandy beach of an island barren of all but some sparse clumps of grass. Were it not for the black object resting on the beach, the atoll would have offered no shade or other shelter. Instead, the strangely pointed vessel with a tail similar to the feathering of an arrow and two keels lay silent where it had plowed into the sand. He was unaware that it was the other victim of the collision with his own ship. He had no way of knowing that the mast from his vessel had punctured the hull of the never-before-seen black ship, on his world, dealing it a death blow.

After catching his breath Malidor glanced around for a weapon. The best he could come up with proved to be the small knife still tucked in his belt that he used for eating. If he encountered an armed enemy, it would quickly prove inadequate.

Chapter 1

" *Left!*"

Laughter followed the utterance of the one-word joke as it had before while the group trudged along the dirt road. Unlike the times before when the strange word caused others in the group to shout it back until everyone's side was aching from their mirth, the group's joyfulness fell silent, as if a wave had washed over the group from its head to the farthestmost person at the back. Far ahead, their destination had finally come into view though it remained a mere speck. It wouldn't be long until they felt certain that they'd learn the truth instead of the tall tales containing unimaginable foreign words told to them by those who left their destination in defeat.

Kaither caught sight of the imposing, outer castle wall of black granite as he rounded the last bend in the road. The castle had been in sight for hours, except for brief intervals when other hills blocked his view. When he could see it before, the castle seemed smaller. Now that he was almost up to it, there was a marked difference in his perception. Now it loomed like a giant.

Though his travels had been long, he'd not been entirely alone. When he started his journey, he fell in with two men who had already walked many miles. Others later joined the group as he had, gradually adding some color to it as their robes were no longer just the color of a single kingdom. Now fully a dozen others around him walked the same path to Castle High Crag.

Generations ago, High Crag was a bleak, foreboding wayside best not visited in any season. The castle's only virtue had been its impenetrable defenses bolstered by the high coastal cliff it perched upon. Now it was the most visited location on Caerna, though the countryside remained bleak because of its barren cliffs and a predominance of rocky soil. Each year, thousands flocked to its gates seeking membership among the Knights of the Star, a small Order established a mere century earlier by Sir Private Malidor.

Like the others walking with him Kaither had tried on one of the stiff leather suits molded to the same exact size as the black armor worn by the Knights of the Star. Each copy traveled from village to village, carefully protected from the elements by proctors belonging to the Order of the Star, one of the major religions within the Allied Kingdoms. Kaither had been judged by others in his village as a good fit. More importantly, his friends and neighbors had urged him to seek knighthood. Only those considered pure of heart and fully worthy ever gained the permission of a patron knight spirit, regardless of their own religious beliefs. Certainly, it spoke well of Kaither that his neighbors had convinced him to journey and try. After all, he could accomplish much for them and others if he succeeded.

Of course, there was still the preliminary training he had to undergo before he stood in front of the patron knight spirits and asked for their judgment. Though he still understood very little of the process from discussions in the evenings with travelers returning home after failing, he'd seen the results a few times from a distance. Consequently, he considered it worth his while even though it took him close to a month of walking to reach the castle.

He wondered whether he'd have to wait outside the castle for others to take their turn first. Returning groups had mentioned that sometimes happened. They'd stated that the gate guard maintained a testing order based upon arrival. If the line was long his group could look forward to living for several days in a crude shelter provided by the Order. That was somewhat like their circumstances during their travel. When near villages or towns they'd found themselves welcomed and given a place to sleep. Occasionally, they were given a little food and beverage to supplement what they carried. However, few could afford to purchase much, so they'd often forage along the way to replenish their supplies. At night in the wild they usually found and reused the abandoned temporary shelters of those who'd traveled the trail before them. When necessary, they strengthened the shelters against the elements.

As he and the others drew closer to the castle, shouts of strange words came to their ears amid the sounds of ropes and pulleys in constant use. Several of the others with Kaither expressed their surprise at hearing those words in use. Some returning travelers had mentioned that they'd have to learn strange magic words, a few of which they'd uttered to everyone's laughter. As the trail shortened it became clear that the travelers hadn't been joking for those very words were what the group heard.

A scream and a loud thump pierced the air just as Kaither's group reached the gate. They craned their necks in time to see a man bounce back from hitting one of the castle walls. He dangled limply from the leather harness he wore. After a few moments, he was pulled by an attached rope to one

of the battlements where several burly men and a padded cart waited to receive him.

"Take him out gently!" a black-robed proctor shouted on a battlement.

"Enter and follow that proctor. Do as he instructs or leave," the guard said, pointing to another black-robed churchman standing within the courtyard.

Kaither entered and followed a proctor whose directives were law to visitors like himself. The proctor's stern manner left no doubts about that in Kaither's mind. The proctor gave hand signals that the group should be quiet and follow. They walked to one of the corners of the courtyard and sat down upon the ground at the proctor's guidance. Aside from some scraggly grass where soil had gathered in the cracks, the rock they sat on was bare. The proctor seated himself on a stone bench.

"Keep your voices down so the test attendants can hear."

"What now?" Cheetan, the woman next to Kaither, asked the proctor.

"First, you'll watch how it's done. Good or bad, what those applicants do up there is what you'll eventually go through. You must pass the air test before you may approach the patron knight spirits," the proctor answered.

Kaither stared up as another man high upon the battlement dressed himself in a leather suit with ropes attached. The suit was nearly identical to the one that Kaither tried on in his village, except for the ropes. Several assistants looked the man over as if his life depended upon their keen eyesight and knowledge. In truth, it did. One slip could cause him to fall the fifty feet to the ground where he might be killed. It was solely up to him to avoid colliding with the walls and trees that dotted the courtyard. Carefully, he was attached into a maze of ropes and pulleys meant to give him very close to full three-dimensional movement through the air within the confines of the castle. The specially trained assistants waited for his commands.

" *Five up!*" the man shouted, though the alien words meant nothing to Kaither.

Instantly, a team of strong men strained and yanked on the proper rope to raise the leather clad man off the rampart. Dangling in the air, he alone remained in control of his destiny as he gazed down at his proctor's hand signals for instructions to give his rope bearers.

" *Forward... Left... Forward...Down...Hover!*"

The last command had an urgency underwritten to it that only made sense to those who could also view the spikes beneath the man. Kaither still didn't know what the commands meant, but he assumed that the strange words had something to do with where the leather clad man was pulled and tugged by the various ropes above and around him. Then he realized that his assumption actually came from what his own proctor was saying as the action took place. Gradually, Kaither let his mind's attention linger more on his proctor, leaving his eyes to follow the suspended man.

" *Five up!*"

"He just now gave the magic command to ascend once more," the proctor said in a soft voice.

The ropes sang as the man lifted up quickly, though not as fast as a real knight could do without the use of ropes. Kaither had already seen one fly through the air, though at a distance.

"It's always best to give a spell word of *four* or *five* to your commands to rise and especially to lower yourself. If you do not, you can hit the ground before you can stop. Even experienced knights have been before in that manner. So has their armor. That is why you must pass these tests first. We dare not lose any more of the suits. Remember that *five* is more than *four*. If you give a *four* to rise, do not give a *five* to lower. If you do, you'll probably break both your legs."

" *Right... Forward...Hover!*"

"He just gave a command to turn to his sword side, proceed to his front, and then to stop."

" *Hover* means stop?" Cheetan asked.

"You catch on quickly," the proctor said. A smile creased his aged face.

"Sounds like a good word to use when approaching those walls," a man said.

" *Left!*"

"He just gave a command to turn to his shield side. He's spinning in place because he didn't give any magic command for *forward* ."

" *Forward?*" a man asked.

"Get used to hearing and using those commands. I already told you that *forward* is the magic command for moving to his front. I'll be using the magic words as much as possible to speed your learning," the proctor said with a tired voice.

" *Forward...Forward...Forward...Hover!*"

The group watched as the man in leather barely came to a halt before smacking into a stone wall.

"Why did he give the *forward* command three times?"

"In real usage with the magic suits it makes you go even faster when a direction is involved. It's most dangerous to use when flying at low levels or heading down. A knight who ruins the magic in his armor risks losing the right to an honorable burial alongside those who've passed before him, or her, as the case might be."

Cheetan smiled at the thought of succeeding as one of the few women to ever become a knight. She knew that there was presently one other woman active as a knight among the Order of the Knights of the Star. She'd heard that there were once three women active simultaneously as knights before she was born. Though it seemed like a small number, it wasn't. The Order rarely held more than twenty active knights at any one time. Two were stationed at the Castle of High Crag. The rest held posts at other distant castles from which they forayed. Most of the time they worked in small teams of two or three. Consequently, they rarely posted knights at more than ten castles.

"So, what do we do now?" a man asked.

"You will watch, listen, and learn. When you feel you know the magic commands, you will be

tested by me. If you pass, I'll train you on how to read my hand signals so that you'll receive a fair test up there," the proctor said, with a nod to the ropes. "When you pass the hand signal test, you'll climb up and be strapped in for your flying test before you're given the final magic words to speak to the hollow suits."

"How many suits are empty?" Cheetan asked.

"Twelve, but four have lost their magic," the proctor answered.

In the few hours they'd been learning the magic commands, two applicants smashed into the castle walls. Another landed hard in the courtyard. Though all three were injured, none would die. Even so, their proctor had already told the group it wasn't unusual to lose a few each week. Certainly, they knew that to be true. They'd seen some of the bodies carried away for burial by those who had tried and failed to master the magic. Hopefully, they wouldn't find themselves all failures with a body or two to carry back home or injured to assist.

"Do you feel you're ready for your signal test?" the proctor asked, upon seeing a raised hand.

"No, sir. Could you point me in the direction of the relief facilities?"

The proctor smiled. "We could certainly use a break now. Please follow me. I'll show you that and our other facilities that you may use. Right now, I can use some water for my tired voice."

Kaither's group stood and followed their proctor to a location above the outer wall where the parapet jutted over the high cliffs facing the sea. A few deliberately placed, wind-sheltered seats featured openings where some basic concerns could be dealt with. After a brief pause there, he led them to a cistern holding fresh water drawn from High Crag's deep well.

If nothing else, the new locations gave them different views of the extensive rope and pulley network arranged above the courtyard. As well, they finally saw the brawny men who reacted to the commands from the applicants. Rows of men worked different ropes from different places along the battlements. Some wore short robes. Others wore waist sashes. All were soaked in perspiration that glistened on their bodies as they strained away with gloved hands to pull the correct ropes when ordered. Near the rows of working men rested more burly men on old woven scraps obviously meant for their comfort. All the while, a few boys and women carried food and drink about.

"Is everyone refreshed and ready to resume our study?" the proctor asked. The men and woman of the group nodded, as the proctor glanced around for their response. "Follow me. If you watch carefully as we return to our area, you'll get a chance to see what you're studying to attain."

The group paid more attention to what was at their level as they descended than to the new man whizzing about above them. True to his word, the proctor guided them to an open hallway at one side of the courtyard where he halted. There, before what was a large U-shaped alcove, stood an actual Knight of the Star guarding the suits meant for worthy applicants to someday wear. He even smiled at them as they paused for a moment to stare in awe at his black suit with its inlaid silver, gold, and white ornamentation and several small, visible god lights. Their eyes soon turned to gaze at the rows of empty suits within the shadows that mostly matched his. A few possessed different ornamentation. Some showed signs of damage. One man opened his mouth to speak, but the proctor gave a sign for silence before motioning the group to follow.

Kaither hesitated for a moment, then stepped closer to the leather suit. The courtyard below seemed farther than he'd expected. The men and women he'd watched before hadn't appeared to be as high.

"You don't have to take this test. No one will fault you for changing your mind," one proctor said in a soft voice.

"I must. I can't let down my neighbors. They promised to do my work in the mines so I could try."

The proctors nodded. They'd heard similar remarks from many of the applicants, regardless from which kingdom they had arrived. Many of the applicants were truly worthy in light of how their fellow villagers felt about them. Even so, very few ever attained knighthood.

"Fine then. Are you ready now?"

"Are we in a hurry?" Kaither asked.

"Not really. We don't mind going slow. It gives the pullers more time to rest."

Kaither stared down from the battlement for another moment. "I think I better get this over with. Otherwise, I'll worry too much about hitting a wall."

Carefully, the proctors slipped the leather suit around Kaither. They pulled snug and tied each lace so that no slack existed through which he might fall toward certain injury or possible death. After all, they had no way of knowing if anyone they lost might have turned out to be a truly worthy individual. Consequently, they didn't rush through procedures as they went about their duties.

Kaither tried his best to breathe naturally. At the same time, he attempted not to show his fear of being hoisted into the air to be pulled about like the wind doing its best to dislodge a seed from its pod on the end of a grass stalk. He noticed the ropes were well worn from heavy use.

"You're suited up now. You can begin giving commands when you're ready. Then take instructions from your proctor in the courtyard as you were taught."

"Have these ropes ever broken before?" Kaither asked.

"These are new. If any break, it won't be held against you. You'll be permitted another chance to qualify."

"If I survive, you mean?" Kaither asked.

One of the proctors grinned weakly and nodded.

"Is he ready?" the proctor shouted from the courtyard.

"He's ready. Give him a chance to get his courage up," one proctor shouted back down.

"*Five up!*" Kaither commanded, in the manner he'd been taught. His breath felt squeezed out of him as his body shot upward into the air. "*Five forward!*" he gasped.

Over the edge of the battlement, Kaither flew. No longer was there anything close beneath him. If he fell now, the results would be serious. He glanced down and spotted his proctor. He hadn't expected his proctor to appear so small. Perspiration broke out on his forehead as Kaither watched for the hand signals he'd spent hours learning.

" *Forward...Forward...Forward...Hover!*" Kaither shouted, as the wall approached much faster than he believed it possible for the men to move him.

Even more important was the unexpected appearance of sharp spikes that pointed in his direction. No one told him where to expect those on the wall. His movement came to a halt just before one of the spikes entered his legs, as the spikes were located only where he might be injured and not killed. After all, the tests weren't designed to kill anyone. The deaths that did occur were the results of accidents and blundered magic commands. Kaither felt with outstretched toes for the oncoming battlement, as he gave one last command.

" *Land.*"

After a few moments his toes felt the stony parapet once more beneath his feet as his test came to an end. The proctors moved around him and unlaced the leather suit he'd sweated inside of for what felt like an eternity. Actually, it was only enough time to wear out two sets of rope pullers. He staggered toward the edge as he regained his footing and balance. Before he could fall, a proctor grabbed him.

"Steady there. We don't want to lose you now. Not many make it this far."

Kaither didn't need that explained to him. He'd seen several men come unglued after very little time in the suit, and cry to be brought back in. They'd had enough and were willing to flunk themselves rather than risk injury. Some couldn't even make it past the first few commands. They would freeze up a few steps away from the parapet after giving the first forward command. Eventually, they'd be hauled back to the battlement and removed from the suit by proctors who tried to be compassionate in following the same creed used by the knights.

Another proctor loosely looped a knotted cord around Kaither's hand.

"What's this for?" Kaither asked.

"It's your pass to the Sacred Hall. Present it to the knight on duty. He'll permit you entry. Once you are inside, sit and meditate upon the meaning of this responsibility you would carry upon your shoulders. When the sun drops, your proctor will arrive and teach you the last of the magic commands for your final test to determine your inner worthiness. Reflect not upon the wrongs you might have performed before. Those can be forgiven. Concentrate on what you feel you can do that will be good for our people. Whatever happens, good luck to you."

Once more, the attending Knight of the Star smiled as Kaither approached. He stood aside to permit entry upon seeing Kaither's pass. Inside, there were only three other applicants waiting. Like them, he sat down upon the bare stone floor and gazed around at the suits amid hopes of qualifying once he learned the final magic commands. After a short while of moving his eyes in reverent awe from one suit to another, particularly the ones with tiny god lights showing, he remembered his instructions. He bowed his head and closed his eyes, as he tried to demonstrate a proper humility and goodness worthy of knighthood.

"I see we have a larger group than usual, Lee."

Kaither opened his eyes from his meditation to stare at another knight entering the hall along with many proctors. He was unaware that there were at last seven candidates waiting for a chance at knighthood within the hall, so quietly had they entered. As he glanced about, he noticed that only the woman, Cheetan, from his group had passed the flying test. The others were already on their way back home. If not, then he'd leave with them in the morning should he fail the last test. He wondered if she was right about it being her destiny to become a knight.

"Listen carefully. Each suit has its own magic command for recognizing the knight it will serve. After you learn each command, you will be permitted to use it before the proper suit. If you are deemed worthy by possessing an inner goodness, the suit will open and welcome you to put it on. Should that happen, you may do so. After which, you'll be escorted by Sir Private Van Dyke to our most sacred ground to be sworn in as a Knight of the Star."

The applicants turned their eyes toward the two knights, aware that one was the leader of the Knights of the Star. The proctors, who outnumbered the applicants, moved about so that two flanked each person. One proctor held a torch that reflected light off the shiny black suits. They lined up with the second proctor guiding the applicant by the elbow. Whispers buzzed about within the hall as the proctors instructed each applicant as he or she came to the first suit. Kaither found himself standing before an empty suit.

"The magic spell for this suit is *Private Williams*. Combine it with the rest of the magic command thusly. *Activate Private Williams suit*. If you want to hear it again, I'll repeat it. Otherwise, go ahead and practice saying that. When you feel ready stand closer to the suit, and speak the command into the helmet pike. If it doesn't work, all is not lost. Many knights were not recognized by the first suit they tried. Some did not become knights until they reached the last suit. It might be a way for the suits to test your inner strength. We simply understand too little of the ways of god to know how these suits test our souls."

"*Activate Private Williams suit. Activate Private Williams suit. Activate Private Williams suit*," Kaither repeated with excitement.

"Slow down. The suits will not harm you if you fail a test. Nor will we."

Kaither repeated the magic command slower a few more times before stepping closer to the suit and doing his level best to state the command distinctly. When he did, nothing happened.

"Am I allowed to try more than once?"

The proctor nodded. "It is allowed. Nervousness sometimes causes problems. There have been times when the suit opened on the second or third try. Go ahead, if you wish."

Twice more Kaither tried, but the suit didn't respond. He stepped back with disappointment evident in the way he held his shoulders and turned to face his proctors.

"We'll try the next suit. We believe each looks for different inner qualities within its wearer. Perhaps you will match with one of the others. This suit responds to the *Private Yakamata* command. Go ahead and practice saying it."

Again and again Kaither practiced before stepping up to suits as he worked his way down the line. He reached the eighth suit.

"This is the *Private Stravinsky*. Practice a few times and then step up to it. This is your last test."

"I won't test for the other four suits?" Kaither asked.

"They no longer have any magic. Again, we know not why. Perhaps they were dishonored. Perhaps each mourns the knight whose life was lost while in its care. Regardless, we still honor them by not discarding their suits to the dung heap. Those were honored suits once and remain entitled to our respect."

Kaither nodded. It made sense to him. Even he could see that the four suits didn't have any tiny god lights showing. Some also possessed visible cracks. He practiced repeating the newest magic command several times trying to accustom himself once more to strange words that held no meaning to him. Finally, he stepped up before the suit and spoke with as clear a voice as possible while ignoring Cheetan's higher pitched voice a few steps away as she spoke to the Corporal Nigel suit.

For the eighth time in a row nothing happened. Kaither stared with a sinking feeling in his chest as the suit failed to respond. He tried to mouth the magic command once more, but his voice cracked. Almost immediately, another proctor hurried over with water. Kaither accepted the drink and nodded silent thanks through misty eyes as he contemplated failing again. Deliberately, and as closely as possible to how the proctor pronounced the command, Kaither once more intoned the magic words.

After several tries the proctor gently guided Kaither away from the suits to stand with three other men who had similarly failed to gain knighthood. As he moved aside, Cheetan stepped over to what would be her last try while two other men followed in her footsteps. So far, not a single applicant had succeeded.

"This is not unusual," one proctor whispered. "Many try and fail. Usually, only one or two succeed in any given year. Just remember that failure doesn't mean you're bad. Though we can't say for certain, we suspect that some are pre-selected by god to become knights. Perhaps it is meant to straighten out their lives as happened to the first Knight of the Star, Sir Private Malidor. Getting this far might be god's way of inspiring you to work harder when you return home."

Kaither nodded while trying to surreptitiously wipe his watering eyes. When he dropped his hand back to his side with the knotted cord clenched within his palm, Cheetan was being guided over to stand beside him after a similar failure. Shock appeared upon her face as if it was impossible for her to not become a knight.

"I want to try again!" Cheetan said.

The proctor beside her shook his head. "Quiet, please. Let the other applicants finish. They're entitled to the same consideration you received."

Cheetan nodded twice to show she understood. She then stood quietly as each of the other two men similarly reached the eighth suit and failed.

"We're sorry that none of you..."

"I still want to try again," Cheetan said. "I know I'm meant to become a knight. Our village seer told me so."

"We are all tired. It's been a long day. You each had a fair trial by the suits."

"What about the other suits? You keep saying that you know so little, yet you seem positive that there's no longer any magic within them. Why won't you let me try those?"

"Anyone can see there's no power left in them. Their god lights are extinguished, presumably forever. Will you be satisfied if we let you try the other suits?"

"Are you asking if I'll accept the results if I fail again?"

Beneath the glow of a nearby torch, the proctor nodded. Cheetan stared at him for a moment before nodding her response. At a signal from him, her two proctors escorted her to the first of the remaining suits.

"This is the *Sergeant Waleski* suit. A valiant knight died wearing this suit during the time of the original Sir Private Malidor. Since then it has failed to respond. We believe it could be in mourning if its magic isn't gone completely with its wearer. Some within the Order still believe that the magic resides both within the suit and the wearer."

Cheetan practiced whispering the magic words several times before stepping up to face the suit so that her mouth was nearly touching the small frontal pike that extended from one side of the attached helmet. "*Activate Sergeant Waleski suit.*"

Immediately, the suit's god lights began to glow. The proctors stepped back in astonishment, as a murmur of gasps came from them. Cheetan hesitated for a moment before she stepped forward and turned within the suit's opened embrace while slipping her arms into the appropriate gaps.

"Sir Private Van Dyke, it appears that you'll have special duty tomorrow escorting soon-to-be Sir Sergeant Waleski to be sworn in and trained," Sir Private Lee said. He reached over to close the Sergeant Waleski suit around Cheetan.

"Yes, it does appear so."

One of the other male applicants exclaimed, "I want to try the remaining suits, too!"

An aged proctor glanced at the men who stood at the hall exit. "It seems fair that we permit the other applicants to try these other suits. We were wrong about the Sergeant Waleski suit. Let us not chance being wrong with those. Bring your charges to the remaining suits."

Kaither found himself fourth in line among the six applicants as he contemplated his chances for one of the remaining three suits. His proctors escorted him to the first, the second, and then the final suit.

"This suit responds to the *Lieutenant Gonzales* command. Please practice saying the magic command. Then go ahead and try when you're ready."

Kaither stuttered, as he practiced speaking the strange command. After several minutes, he stepped up to the pike and spoke.

" *Activate Lieutenant Gonzales suit.*"

" *Repeat please,*" a feminine voice sounded from the suit.

The hall became suddenly still. Every eye and ear focused on Kaither and the suit he faced.

"God speaks through the suit to him? Is he another chosen?" Lee asked.

"Try again. Speak more to it," Van Dyke said.

"What should I say?" Kaither asked.

"Give the magic command, again."

" *Activate Lieutenant Gonzales suit.*"

Tiny lights flashed across the front of the suit. " *Nano-tech repairs eighty-five percent complete, Lieutenant Gonzales.*"

"The suit still holds magic! Speak to it, again!"

"Repeat the magic spell."

" *Activate Lieutenant Gonzales suit.*"

" *Overriding nano-tech repairs as primary default instruction. Placing repairs on secondary status. Checking status of combat team.*" Lights flashed on the suit once more.

"By the gods above. My god vision is behaving strangely," Sir Private Lee exclaimed.

"As is mine!" said Sir Private Van Dyke.

"Sir Private Moto is reporting the same over our god voice," Sir Private Lee said.

"You don't have to tell me. I can hear him," Sir Private Van Dyke said.

" *Combat team is sixty-seven percent active. Relayed communication check indicates wide dispersal beyond normal communication range.*"

" *Activate Lieutenant Gonzales suit,*" Kaither cried, with excitement bursting from his voice.

The suit sprung open. Kaither stared in astonishment at the sight of the suit welcoming him into its embrace. It wasn't until he felt one of his proctors gently shove him forward with a friendly hand on the back that he advanced and turned to feel with his hands in the dark for the gaps where his arms were meant to pass through. He barely got his arms in place when Sir Private Lee closed the suit. The helmet descended into place on his head just as had happened for the unit that Cheetan wore. Kaither barely had time to sweep his long hair back from his face before the helmet closed into position.

"I've spotted another green light! It's at the top! God has given us two knights!" Sir Private Van Dyke exclaimed.

"Two knights in a single day! God stands with us even stronger this year!"

Kaither stepped over beside Cheetan while the remaining applicants tried the last two suits. Unfortunately, no more succeeded. The proctors escorted the applicants out while Lee and Van Dyke escorted Cheetan and Kaither to their new quarters.

"You have one last command to learn. Most of us find it difficult to sleep inside a suit. Use the magic command word of *deactivate* instead of *activate*, and your suit will open for you," Van Dyke said.

"*Deactivate Lieutenant Gonzales suit*," Kaither said. Instantly, his suit opened so that he could slip it off. "Do I give it to you now?"

"No, it's yours to guard for the rest of your life or until you retire. Get some sleep. I'll see you in the morning. By the way, welcome to the Order."

"Thank you," Kaither said.

"No, thank god. I haven't given you anything."

Chapter 2

"Why the rope?" Cheetan asked.

Her new black robe given her by the Order removed the last vestige of newness from her appearance so that she resembled the other Knights of the Star. Similarly, Kaither resembled a veteran knight for the same reason. Only the rope tied around their waists broke the illusion.

"So you won't fly off and get lost before you're sworn in. Besides, you still have much to learn about your armored suits," Sir Private Van Dyke replied, as he looped the center of the rope around himself.

Kaither asked, "What if one of us takes off before the others?"

"That's why we're using a long rope. For now, just give the same magic spells that I use. Do exactly as I say, as quickly as possible and you'll be all right. *Five up* !"

Sir Private Van Dyke rose almost to the limits of the rope that led from him to Cheetan and Kaither. Within moments, both followed up into the air to find themselves a few airish steps away from him. Kaither gave some thought to the presence of the rope and felt some small relief. If the magic in his suit failed, then he wouldn't fall too far. He would just have to hope that he wouldn't drag down Sir Private Van Dyke to his own death.

"*Forward*."

Cheetan and Kaither immediately repeated the command. They soon realized that they were flying over the cliffs holding up the castle and over the ocean. Several flying shore birds dipped down out of the way.

"There's nothing but water below us. Where are we going?" Cheetan asked.

"Can't swim, huh?" Sir Private Van Dyke said.

"I can swim. I just want to know where we're going."

"We're going to an island some distance away."

The trio cruised at an altitude that gradually reduced until they were just as high above the water as they were above the ground when they started out. The height equaled that of the lowest wall around Castle High Crag, though they were unaware that the suits were following the overall topography. As it was, the nearness of the water gave Kaither less reason to fear what would happen if he fell. He had jumped feet first into water from tree branches that were half as high as he was flying. Sometimes the plunge stung, but there was little danger. He then realized they were flying considerably faster than the best the rope pullers had ever managed. He couldn't help but look around just to make certain there were no walls to avoid, as a collision at that great speed surely would have more serious consequences.

"I hope now is a good time to ask. What are all these lights I see inside my helmet?" Cheetan asked.

"We don't know what they all mean. We do know that a green light comes on every time a new knight is selected by a suit. We also know a yellow light comes on whenever a knight takes his armor off. The green returns when the suit is placed back on."

"What about the red light that just came on?" Kaither asked.

"No, dear god, no!" Sir Private Van Dyke exclaimed.

"What's wrong?" Cheetan asked.

"One of our brethren just died," Van Dyke sobbed. "The red light is god's notice of death. Sir Private Cardin has just met our maker. Royal, Wong, Jones, find out what happened to Sir Private Cardin."

Three knights' voices responded over what Kaither had learned was the god voice that permitted the knights to communicate even though they weren't in sight of each other. Looking in the two tiny god visions his helmet possessed showed Kaither that none of those other knights were behind him. It had taken some getting used to having two little spots to the sides of his eyes that reflected what was behind him as clearly as the reflection off a calm lake or a highly polished bronze sword like the ones each knight carried. It was said among the people that no one could sneak up on a knight who was fully awake. Now he knew why, even though he didn't understand how it was possible. Certainly, the god visions weren't made of polished bronze. They certainly weren't made of tiny pools of water, either, for those would have drained away because of the angle those were held.

"Will we have to fight?" Cheetan asked.

"Our duty at present is to swear you both into the Order and then proceed with your training."

Once you learn how, you might be called upon to fight. Until then, your brethren will deal with whatever has taken place."

Kaither was unsure what the blinking lights reflected inside his visor meant, but certain patterns had repeated twice. Then he spotted the first sign of land just after the strong glint of sunlight flashed in his eyes. The flash was larger and brighter than the frequent flickers among the waves he passed over.

"We're almost there. Be ready to quickly repeat the magic spells I use. I don't want the two of you dragging me across the rocks."

"What is that strange bright object?" Cheetan asked.

"That is Castle Staten Island, our destination."

Kaither asked, "Are those the graves of the fallen just beyond the toppled tower?"

"Yes, that's where we bury our dead. Whenever one of us dies, most of the active knights gather here out of respect and honor. Though you're here to be sworn in, you'll remain here until we receive Sir Private Cardin's body and give her a proper burial."

A figure walked out of a gash in Castle Staten Island. He looked up and waved at the trio of flying knights, as Sir Private Van Dyke gave his instruction loud enough for the two initiates to hear and repeat quickly.

"*Land!*"

"Welcome, Sir Private Van Dyke and honored knights-to-be," the man said, as the trio found their footing after their long flight.

"Thank you, Sir Corporal Smith. I guess it won't be quiet here for much longer. Besides swearing in these two new knights, Cardin just died," Van Dyke replied, as he reached out to steady both of the initiates.

"He's a knight?" Cheetan asked, upon noticing that the man wore no armor.

"He's retired because of his injuries. Now he's conducting research into the mysteries of our Order. Perhaps you're unaware, but some of the proctors at Castle High Crag are retired knights," Van Dyke said.

"Cardin's dead? That's a pity. She was a good knight, just as I once was. Old habits are hard to break. Some still address me by my old title instead of Proctor. When we're too old to chase evil, some of us train the new knights or do our feeble best to learn more. There are so many mysteries inside Castle Staten Island that it's almost impossible to determine what is useful knowledge. Sir Private Malidor spoke to the first knights of what he saw here. However, few of those things can be found, such as the other rooms and the artifacts within them. We just don't know what to look for or how to open any of the doors. Regardless, some of us still make the attempt. We must, or we would be failing our god who sent us these tools to better the lives of our people," Smith said.

Kaither could already see that large portions of Castle Staten Island were black like his suit. He squinted against the glaring sunlight that reflected off the shiny surfaces to peer inside the gash that Proctor Smith entered. Just inside, Kaither felt positive that he could see small colored lights similar to

some of the lights he could see just inside his visor.

"We might as well get on with the swearing in ceremony. Go ahead and take the ropes off first. Then follow Sir, I mean, Proctor Smith into Castle Staten Island. Be careful not to incant any of your spells while you're inside. There's no room for flying and you could be injured easily," Van Dyke said, as he worked at the two ropes attached to him.

Kaither followed Smith inside the jagged opening to stand in what was more brightly illuminated than he imagined it could be without any windows. Colored lights seemed to flit about on some parts of the wall. Cheetan followed behind him to stand by his side a moment later.

Smith said, "Sir Private Van Dyke, please proceed with the oath."

"Cheetan, approach the wall before you and place your hand on the image of the Knights of the Star," Van Dyke said.

Cheetan stepped over to the wall and placed her hand so that the palm was flat against the wall. She pulled her hand away when she felt the slight vibration.

"It won't harm you. Please put your hand back in place," Van Dyke said.

Cheetan placed her hand once more on the image.

"Repeat after me. On my honor, I will uphold the law and obey the orders of those appointed over me. Whenever possible, I will do my utmost to assist my fellow beings and improve conditions for all, be they friend or foe. I will remember that all life is sacred and should not be taken except when only absolutely necessary. I will always champion the cause of justice, no matter what personal consequences I might suffer. All this, I do swear before all I hold dear."

Cheetan carefully repeated the oath, much of which had been coached to her along the way out to the island.

"From this day forward, you will be known as Sir Sergeant Waleski, the name of your patron knight spirit. Perform your duties faithfully and know that you will receive burial with honor, and one day serve at the hand of god in heaven. You are no longer known to us as Cheetan. Any sins belonging to Cheetan are now absolved with her oath to god. Kaither, please approach the wall when Sir Sergeant Waleski moves out of the way."

Kaither stepped aside for Sir Sergeant Waleski and then stepped over to the wall. He placed his right hand immediately upon the image.

"*Your orders, sir?*" the room intoned.

"What was that?" Waleski asked, as she glanced around for the source of the voice.

"God? Is that you speaking?" Smith asked in a surprised voice.

The men and woman glanced around in hopes of seeing what more would happen, but nothing else changed and they couldn't understand the few words that came from within one wall. After a few more moments of uneasiness, Sir Private Van Dyke administered the oath, which Kaither faithfully repeated.

"From this day henceforth, you will be known as Sir Lieutenant Gonzales, the name of your patron knight spirit. Perform your duties faithfully and know now that you will receive burial with honor, and one day serve at the hand of god in heaven. You are no longer known to us as Kaither. Any sins belonging to Kaither are now absolved with his oath to god."

Duke Plesso entered his office within Castle Verata, noticed Sir Tacchon waiting, and turned to close the door. As usual, his son wore his red velvet shirt over white leggings, both indicative of his status. It didn't matter that he hadn't been actually blooded in battle yet. As a Royal Knight he was entitled to wear the red of combat and the white of nobility.

"How did it go, Father?"

"He refuses to disenfranchise the Knights of the Star. Nor will he elevate the Royal Knights to their rightful position in the defense of the land," Plesso said.

He turned and headed for his desk. The desk was equal in size to those used by the kings and queens of the Allied Kingdoms. However, none of the governing royalty knew of that.

"We should be the ones responsible for determining tactics when raiders appear. Did you propose the test?"

"Not this time. Grand King Vimma fears the people more than all the nobles of the Allied Kingdoms."

"You didn't? Surely, he can't fear the people that much."

"I'm afraid that he does. He notes their numbers on the roads to High Crag each year and compares that with the number of Dukes and Squires. If this gets much worse, we might as well admit that the people rule instead of us."

"They're incapable," Tacchon said. "Doesn't he see that? Of all the Knights of the Star, only one is literate. All of the Royal Knights can read and write!"

"Will the Royal Knights support me if I can engineer a change?"

"Will we return to our place of honor as is proper for the sons of Dukes and Squires?"

"I can think of no other place where they could properly support my efforts."

"Then I will convince the others. They're fatigued by this false continuance of superiority."

Chapter 3

The procession was small, though unique for it was the only flying funeral procession on all of Caerna. Because circumstances permitted, nearly every active knight within the Order was present. Only two could not attend as they guarded the suits still held within the Sacred Hall at Castle High Crag. If circumstances necessitated, one or both of them would fly away with the empty suits rather than risk their capture by anyone else. After all, two knights could not be expected to defeat an army even though the castle they held had never been taken. Wise men had long ago decreed that the knights should never feel themselves to be invincible. Events had proven the wise men correct more than once. The funeral provided ample proof once more that they weren't invincible, even though their godlike powers were limited enough that they often needed no reminder that they could fail.

As it was, two columns of seven Knights of the Star flew in close order while suspending a solitary body among them within a tightly-bound shroud, as a precaution. There had been times when such was necessary to prevent the loss of body parts. At other times, the precaution had been for the purpose of preventing the loss of suit parts.

Upon learning that a grave needed to be dug, Gonzales and Waleski volunteered to dig the pit. When the funeral party arrived, a neat three-foot deep open grave waited for Sir Private Cardin. Gonzales and Waleski had learned that the shallow burial in loose soil, sand in their case, made removal of the suit easier, as the body would decompose quicker. Until the suit could be removed and carried back to Castle High Crag, one of the knights would remain on the island.

"This is how Sir Private Malidor first buried god's knights who were sent to show us the way to enlightenment. We honor god's wishes by following those instructions diligently for each follower within the Order. Each of us may now silently send out thoughts to god reminding him that here lies a servant who did her best as a Knight of the Star."

Gonzales remained to cover the body. He was startled moments after he started moving the sand to cover the enshrouded body of Sir Private Cardin when another stood beside him and tossed more sand with another shovel.

"Two of you in one night. We're fortunate to have you both even though we've now lost a fine knight. I'm Sir Private Wong."

"Kait...I mean, Sir Lieutenant Gonzales."

Wong flashed a brief smile. "You'll get used to your new name. We often shorten our names to just the last part since that's usually the part that's different. Your name, though, is the truly unique name among all the knights, though none of us know why."

"How's that?"

"Well, of all the suits, most begin with the magic spell word of *Private* . Three begin with *Corporal* , and two with *Sergeant* . Only yours uses *Lieutenant* ."

"How come you know that?"

"During your training, you're required to learn every other name in case you have to restart the Order should we ever meet with a catastrophe. It almost happened twice while the Order was being

established. Had we lost Sir Private Malidor when he was seriously wounded, there'd probably be only four or five knights in the Order now. Fortunately, he recovered and heeded advice from others about expanding the Order to as many knights as possible. With their counsel, he convinced King Teeno that the Order could become a very good service. King Teeno lived to see Malidor's words come true when the Kron Empire attempted to later invade. The King's forces were all positioned in the best places. They cut down the Kron army only because Knights of the Star were on alert and communicated with each other to send our forces to where they were truly needed."

Gonzales paused. "Yes, I know about that war. It's still sung about in my village how smaller forces won the day."

"It's sung about in nearly every village. I'm just telling you why they won. The people fought hard and their efforts counted, because we directed them to the right places. The soldiers in those battles deserve all the recognition given them. It doesn't matter that our part wasn't mentioned."

"But why not?"

"Why not? Well, because we're here to do what we can according to our oath. I didn't take an oath stating that I'd do good only if people cheered me."

"Um, no, I didn't, either. However, I've heard much good about the Order. I just didn't know that it was involved then."

"More might have been said about our participation then. However, King Teeno was still uncertain in his heart about Sir Private Malidor considering that he used to be Malidor the Ruthless, a troop leader in the Kron military."

"I was taught that Malidor the Ruthless died in a battle at sea."

"Malidor the Ruthless lost a battle at sea not far from here. He survived and washed up on the beach facing Castle Staten Island. It was here that he met the only survivor sent by god to enlighten our people. It was here that he was tested and sworn into service as a knight. From that day on, he worked fearlessly to do only good for the Allied Kingdoms. We're finished now. Let's put these shovels back where they were stored. One of these very shovels was actually used by Malidor to bury the original Knights of the Star sent down by god."

Gonzales stared down at the shovel in his hand. "I've never seen metal like this before. It seems harder than our swords."

"You're right, it is. Perhaps it's meant as a lesson from god that war only destroys while graves and buildings are more lasting. In fact, I might decide to research this when I retire. Perhaps we should walk past their graves for a moment before returning these. You can learn much from those who passed before you."

Gonzales nodded.

"It wasn't until Sir Private Malidor died that the decision was made to bury him directly between those god sent and those knights from our Allied Kingdoms. It seemed a fitting tribute. Other than that, there is nothing to actually distinguish the graves apart. There were thirty-five original knights..."

"Aren't there only thirty suits?"

"We don't know if five of those who were buried were retired knights or had a different purpose. They might have been god's sailors delivering his knights."

"Sailors? They had a ship?"

"Sir Private Malidor related that Castle Staten Island was their ship. None of us know whether that is true or merely something to lead astray our enemies. You can see for yourself that Castle Staten Island has no oarlocks or mast for a sail. It certainly is strange for a ship to have two keels on opposite sides from each other."

Gonzales nodded. He had wondered why the structure was called a castle. Still, it resembled a castle better than it did a ship. Even if it was a ship, how could anyone see where they were going from within with no natural openings? Certainly, they couldn't be expected to stand upon its rounded surfaces without falling into the water.

"Then again, Malidor also said it was a ship of the air, though he never saw it fly. Maybe it needs two keels to fly."

"Fly? A flying castle?"

"We can fly in our suits. Maybe god's ship could also fly. Anyway, Malidor only states positively that he saw it moving very fast on the water before it rammed his ship. That's what makes it all so confusing and difficult to understand. Malidor called it a ship, yet it looks more like the tower of a castle lying upon its side. Its true nature has caused many arguments. At any rate, it's called a castle because it now rests on land. Certainly, with all that apparent damage, it will never fly or sail again."

Both men paused beside an old grave. "Blessings upon you, Sir Private Malidor," Wong said.

"Blessings upon you, Sir Private Malidor."

"You don't have to repeat everything. However, in this case, it certainly doesn't hurt."

"I'm really trying to do right."

"That's all that's asked of you. I've a good feeling about you."

"Thank you. What now?"

"We'll walk back to the castle and put away these shovels. Along the way, I'll tell about how some of the previous knights lived and died. If nothing else, it might give you some ideas on how to solve conflicts or protect yourself. After all, we do have some enemies; the Kron Empire for one."

Gonzales stretched out his arms for a moment, then reconsidered how tired he actually felt. The days of training at High Crag after the funeral had been full. After a moment of decision, he said, "*Deactivate Lieutenant Gonzales suit.*"

The armored suit opened with a click while lights flashed, and the helmet rose up off his head. For a moment it felt like he was still wearing it. Then he shrugged his arms out and caught the suit before

it fell. Though it was lighter than the shield some of his instructors carried to parry his thrusts, it was easily stronger. Several of their thrusts had easily slipped past his inexperienced defense to clank against his suit without scratching it or piercing through to his body. However, sword usage wasn't the primary thrust of his training. Instead, he was urged to seek other ways. If a fight couldn't be avoided, he was to use anything that might keep him from close combat, particularly against high odds. He still remembered retired Sir Private Washington urging him to use his flying ability more and rely less on blocking an enemy's thrusts.

"First, fly up out of reach! Then find a big rock and drop it on his head if you must fight! If not a rock, carry a bow and give him ample reason to fear what you can do to him from a distance. Most opponents are sly and devious or they wouldn't still be alive. They have no problem setting an ambush for their enemies. You have to be smarter than them if you're to beat them. If you can't be smarter, then be faster. Now be off with you to flying practice. With more flight practice, maybe you'll rely upon it and your wits more."

Gonzales had nodded. He then turned and left the back courtyard where he and Sir Sergeant Waleski practiced with the bronze sword. Like himself, she wasn't at all adept with the sword. However, she tended to do the right thing more often in refusing to give direct combat and fly out of range as quickly as possible.

"Good day, Sir Private Wong," Gonzales said.

"Good day, Knights of the Star. It must be time for your daily flying lesson. Follow me! *Five up*!"

"*Five up!*" both knights in training said.

"*Five left, forward, forward, forward!* You better keep up. I'm going to try to lose you both today."

Gonzales knew that Wong was mostly talking to Waleski. So far, she'd managed to keep up with him easily. Instead, Gonzales had experienced the frustration of losing sight on occasion and finding himself lost. In both cases, he'd landed. Consequently, he'd been scolded for failing to hover high where he'd be safe and use his god voice to communicate with the others and admit that he needed directions. Even if he didn't communicate, he'd have a better view and find it easier to spot the others. He didn't want to admit that alone he found himself scared more than ever about finding himself supported in the air by nothing more than the armor that sometimes cut into his underarms when those were already sore from sword practice. Even without the pain, he feared flying. Had there not been such an honor and responsibility to his neighbors back at the village to do his best by trying for knighthood, he'd have gladly deactivated the suit and placed it back on the rack in the Sacred Hall so he could walk back home.

"Ships on the horizon!"

For a moment, Gonzales forgot that he was hearing one of the other knights over the god voice. Then he remembered the proper spell word.

"*Up!*"

Gonzales felt the suit bite into his underarms ever more fiercely as he shot up, until his suit would ascend no more. Remembering to be more deliberate in his use of magic, he said, "*Five left,*" several times in slow succession so that his body turned a little at a time. Eventually, he caught sight of the ocean

and stared out in search of the ships before he finally remembered with embarrassment that the voice he heard was probably many leagues away from him. What they were seeing was completely out of his sight.

"Good move, Gonzales. You did the right thing in seeking the highest point possible and turning slowly for a good look," Wong said, as he came along to hover beside Gonzales.

"I did?"

"Yes, you did. It doesn't matter that you can't see any ships from here. What does matter is that you thought to check. Who knows? Maybe the other report's a diversion meant to lure our forces away from here. By checking, you made sure that we won't fall for any such tricks," Wong said.

Gonzales slowly realized that he'd, at least, performed one action properly during the day's training, even though he did it out of curiosity and concern for his neighbors rather than as a deliberate plan. He turned and placed the suit upon the floor before lying down to sleep in preparation for the next day's training.

"Gonzales?"

"I'm here, Sir Private Wong."

Wong stepped into the room, careful not to step on Gonzales. "I thought you might be here when your light went off in my helmet. I'm concerned about how well you're learning to fly. Today, I really didn't notice any improvement. Are you hearing the instructions well enough? I can shout them a bit louder if you can't hear me."

"I'm hearing you well. I can even hear you quite well over the god voice."

"That's good, but it doesn't explain why you're not keeping up with me. If we ever have to move together as a force, should another major invasion occur, I'd hate to lose you because you can't keep up with me. Basically, you're a good man to have around. You really seem to care about things."

"Thank you, but the truth is that I'm not comfortable when I'm flying. My suit cuts into the undersides of my arms."

"Then use the built-in seat to support your weight. Don't leave it totally to your arms." Wong hesitated for a moment as if remembering something. "Oh, I know. You're afraid that you'll fall. You're clenching the suit with your arms to hold yourself in place. Am I right?"

"Isn't everyone?"

"At first, I guess we all are. However, after awhile, you get used to the fact that the suit won't let go of you where it wraps up between your legs. Really, it's quite safe to relax enough to sit in your suit. Admittedly, though, there have been times when I wished the suit didn't wrap around the way it does. Then I wouldn't have to hold myself from going until I could land somewhere."

"I get that feeling, too. I think being that high scares the urge to go into me." Gonzales caught sight of Wong scratching his beard. "You don't know what to tell me now, do you?"

"It's not that. You're not the first to experience this problem. Probably about half of the knights

before you had this same problem. I just don't know which method is best for you to deal with it. Each knight is different, you see."

"Half of all the knights? Are you certain?"

"It could be more. I only know what's been passed along to me concerning half the knights. I'm just glad that you're not like the Sir Private Williams of thirty years ago. He hated hairy sneaks and disliked landing anywhere. He would have slept while hovering in his suit. In fact, I think he did sometimes. Still, he had to come down at least once every day in order to take off his suit so he could freshen up."

"Lots of people don't like hairy sneaks. Ugly little creatures, if you ask me. They always get into the grain and eat what we've gathered for our survival," Gonzales said. "So, how should I deal with my feelings about flying?"

"Well, from what I know about you, I think you'd be best just thinking of what you can accomplish for everyone when you fly. After all, we can spot enemies from a great distance and often without them seeing us. We can attack them from great distances and give them additional reasons not to bother our friends. We can carry ropes across gorges so that others can build bridges. We can even rescue people from floods and fires. Think about those things, or just don't think about flying at all. Sometimes it's just better not to think about it."

"What if these ideas don't work?" Gonzales asked.

"Then I'll suggest some of the other methods that worked for your fellow knights. Believe me, we're all on your side. The suit accepted you as a good, decent, caring person worthy of knighthood. That's good enough for all of us. If you need help, just ask."

Chapter 4

"Gonzales, Waleski, Wong. Proctor Washington is dead. Please gather in the courtyard," Lee said over the god voice.

Waleski and Gonzales paused in their flight training to stare back at the castle. Unlike their home villages where death came but once or twice a year, death seemed to be no stranger to the knights.

Standing but a few paces from Washington's body in the proctor's quarters, Wong said, "He was a good man and a capable knight. Still, he should have left the sword instruction to a younger man."

"He'll be buried on the island, won't he?" Waleski asked. She stood behind Wong and Lee.

"As soon as others are notified, and arrive here for the procession. Most of us will honor him with our presence," Wong answered.

"Not meaning any disrespect, but I'll volunteer to remain here on guard," Gonzales said. He'd

similarly halted behind the senior knights.

Wong turned to face Gonzales. "If anything, you'll travel with us because you still need flying practice. You know our policy on who stays and who goes. An older knight always remains behind where his experience can be put to use. There remains much for you to learn about our ways and those of our enemies, particularly the Kron Empire."

For several hours, Gonzales found himself training in close formation with the other knights who would travel to the island. Each time another knight arrived from some other region, practice for the flight procession began anew. Time after time, they rose together connected by brightly-colored sashes tied to a weight resembling that of retired Sir Private Washington's corpse. Taut ropes beneath the fluttering sashes bore the real weight.

When at last, Van Dyke deemed the group ready, they picked up the body and flew away from Castle High Crag to cross the ocean to their sacred island. Along the way, several of the knights related stories involving the deceased knight. Some were deadly serious in nature. Others showed a jovial side that few outside the Order would know. Those outside the Order were more likely to know the sharp point of Washington's sword rather than the sharp point of some of his jokes. The group was nearly to the island when ships were spotted once more.

Van Dyke said, "Continue on while I ascend to send back a warning."

"Can't he do that from here?" Waleski asked in a quiet voice.

Van Dyke glanced back at her for a moment, then smiled. "We don't know why, but we can talk farther if we're up higher. Keep going. I'll catch up as soon as I've finished."

"Should I get a shovel?" Gonzales asked, as the group settled down to the sand with the body of retired Sir Private Washington between their two neat columns.

Wong shook his head. "I believe that Van Dyke will want to dig this one personally. They were close friends while Washington was active. For now, it might be better if you stood aside with the rest of us." Catching sight of a hand signal, Wong followed another knight into the castle with Gonzales trailing behind him.

" *Deactivate Private Royal suit.*"

"Sir Lieutenant Gonzales, could we please have some privacy?" Wong paused for a moment. " *Deactivate Private Wong suit.*" He waited until the suit lights went off and the suit closed after he shrugged it off. "What do you...?"

Wong paused again upon seeing a certain look in Royal's eyes. He turned around quickly. Gonzales looked at the two men with questioning eyes, then nodded and walked away.

"What do you want?" Wong asked.

Gonzales stopped at the opening. He could still hear both men through his god voice. However, he walked outside to stand on the sand in the sunlight with their voices still as clear as if they stood beside him.

"I'm concerned about how Van Dyke will take this. After all, Washington appointed him with our approval to take over the Order when he retired. Despite that, Washington still influenced him until his death," Royal said. He lifted a small flask to his lips and drank.

"True, but there's really nothing we can do. We'll follow his decisions regardless of what we think. The Order has always followed just one leader when it comes to policy. Perhaps he'll seek out one of us or a retired knight for advice. That is his right, after all. Unfortunately, it's just one more thing we have to worry about besides Sir Lieutenant Gonzales' fear of flying."

"He doesn't appear to hold as great a fear as some before him. Even I got over my fear of flying."

"Perhaps, but he doesn't have the same strength of desire to succeed as others possessed. I fear he might harm himself. Maybe his feelings about not wanting to embarrass his neighbors will see him through. That's what seems to have led him here even though god chose him. I'm just not certain how much regard he holds for them."

For a moment, Gonzales wondered if he was meant to hear their words. Was this god's way of telling him something important? He opened his mouth to speak before remembering that they weren't wearing their armored suits. With that in mind, he realized that surely god was telling him something, as there didn't seem to be any other explanation possible.

"Where are Sir Private Wong and Sir Private Royal?" Sir Sergeant Waleski asked.

Gonzales turned with his face red over not noticing Waleski approach. "They're in the castle."

"Your face looks like you're thinking evil thoughts," she said with a grin.

"Certainly not."

"I'm just teasing. What's wrong? You seem tense and suspicious."

"I'm not certain. Maybe it's just that everything is still so new and different than before I became a knight. Don't you have that kind of feeling?"

"I don't think so. I'm now a knight as I was told to expect. My people live on the shore under constant threat from Kron's raiders. Regardless of where I'm assigned, I know that my people will be doubly watched after in hopes that they'll furnish another like myself."

Gonzales nodded. He knew she was correct. The Order and the kingdoms were known to take a special interest in whichever regions new knights hailed from, partly because their acceptances were interpreted as god's message that they should. For a moment, he considered what that meant for his people. Though they were not located on the outer border, they still played a critical role in the defense of the Allied Kingdoms. After all, the copper for making bronze was mined in his region. The neighboring region mined the equally critical tin. At one time, they'd been enemies until they learned that together they were stronger, just as the bronze they now made together.

"I'm keeping you from reaching Sir Private Wong and Sir Private Royal," he said.

"Sir Private Van Dyke is ready to conduct the ceremony. You should head over while I get the

others."

Gonzales nodded. He wondered why he hadn't heard anything. When he rounded one end of the castle he saw that Sir Private Van Dyke was just placing his armor back on. It became clear why he hadn't heard anything said about the ceremony. Glancing back, he noticed that the other knights were following behind Waleski with their armor back on once more. He briefly considered mentioning that he had overheard them before deciding that god meant for him to hear them, though he wasn't at all sure just why.

"Sir Private Van Dyke, can you hear me? This is Sir Corporal Smith calling." Smith's voice sounded urgent over the god voice. "We need more knights. Another raiding party has been spotted. Can you hear me?"

Gonzales looked around at the other knights. "Sirs, what are we going to do?"

Sir Private Van Dyke glanced up as Sir Private Washington's body descended into the shallow grave. The glare that Van Dyke gave was enough to chill Gonzales, and cause him to refrain from saying anything more. Slowly, the body went into the grave that Van Dyke dug earlier. Despite the temporary wooden retaining walls, enough sand had leaked into the grave that it wasn't quite full depth any longer. The body soon touched bottom. Both the retaining walls and the burial sashes were withdrawn. Only then did Van Dyke ask the others to silently send their thoughts to accompany Washington's spirit, that he might later guide another knight chosen by god.

"Thank you, fellow knights. I'll bury my friend, too," Van Dyke said. "In the meantime, Wong, Royal, proceed to Castle Bright Sand. Lee, Moto, proceed to Castle Black Water. It appears that the Krons are testing our defenses once more. Report on the conditions when you arrive. Advise the troops on dispersement if a landing occurs."

Four knights swooped up into the air. They quickly disappeared from normal sight. Only the knights wearing their visored helmets could still see them briefly. Soon, even they could no longer see the four who left.

When Van Dyke finished filling in the grave, Waleski reached out for the shovel.

"I'll put it away for you. You need to rest some."

Van Dyke nodded. As Waleski walked toward the castle, Gonzales fell in beside her. Using a technique he'd learned, he put his hand between his mouth and the small pike sticking out from the side of his helmet.

"I guess I should have kept my mouth shut."

"You only said what I was about to say. Chances are that you just barely beat the rest of us in asking," Waleski said, using the same technique to avoid the god voice.

"I'm not really doing much good, I fear."

"You're doing better than me when it comes to using a sword. At least, you don't lose your sword in practice."

"I have to be better. I get the shakes when we fly very high or fast."

Waleski entered the jagged opening and headed for the storage area. Gonzales followed directly behind her.

"This must have been a beautiful castle once. I don't know why, but I picture it standing on end instead of the way it is now."

"Well, except for the missing keels, that image on the wall there could be easily mistaken for this castle. Admittedly, it's standing on end. Maybe you're right."

Waleski placed the shovel in the open locker and turned to face the image without bothering to cover the small pike. She pointed at part of the image.

"Maybe one or both of the keels retracts when it's not needed? Those marks there could be where the keels are kept. It could be like a Bendovian wind-sailer raises its keel to pass over reefs. Maybe this castle has two keels because it can function as a ship on either side. Then again, that doesn't seem reasonable to me."

"Why not?" Gonzales asked, as he shrugged with his hands outstretched.

"The keel is used to keep a boat from capsizing. If the keel is in place, then why would one be needed on the top? For that matter, why does it have so many large rudders?"

"I don't know. Aside from some row boats and rafts, I have no experience on the water."

"That's all right. I'm not really asking you. I'm just posing the question to myself. It's just that our lessons relate how Sir Private Malidor told of seeing this on the water, yet he also taught the later knights that this castle could fly."

"Maybe that many keels are needed to fly? Certainly, falling from the sky could account for the damage to this castle. So could just falling over, if this is really a castle," Gonzales said.

Waleski looked around at the interior. "There are places in here that suggest that this could be stood on end and still permit people to move easily. See those ladders? Those make sense only if this stands like a tower. If this was a tower, those might not be keels. Maybe the keels, or whatever they called those, were added to prevent this tower from falling."

"If those are ladders. What if they're for something else? Maybe they're meant to trip up invaders, or intended for hanging supplies."

Waleski shook her head. Some of her curls jiggled about beneath the edge of her helmet. "Those have to be ladders. I'd like to know where those go. It doesn't make sense to have a ladder reaching a door without handles."

"Maybe there are doors inside the frames of those other open doorways?" Gonzales glanced down the length of the one open area, as he indicated two places where openings in the walls would have logically possessed doors.

"If there are, then how are they opened? Doors can't be opened without hinges or handles. Can

they?"

Van Dyke motioned, while grinning to some of the other knights to remove their armor. When the suits were off, he said, "Just like us when we became knights. They're discussing what might have been. They've already forgotten that everything they say is carried on the god voice. Perhaps they'll solve just one of the many mysteries."

"Because they're two new knights at the same time, and not as reluctant to discuss the mysteries with each other? Yes, I guess it could happen if they search around enough and ask many questions. Still, I doubt that they'll have any more luck than we experienced," Jones said.

"Then we'll give them some time to seek answers, you and I. The rest of you should return to your mainland posts in case you're needed. Kron might have sent more than the two raiding parties."

Jones and Van Dyke watched as the rest of the knights suited up and left. The two men found a shady location beneath one of the keels and sat down to reminisce some more about Sir Private Washington.

"Where's everyone going?" Waleski asked, upon hearing numerous spells for launching over the god voice.

"Sir Private Van Dyke is sending more of us to check on the raiders," Miles replied.

"We better hurry outside and find out if we're supposed to leave now," Waleski said.

Gonzales turned and tripped to the ground. As he did, some of the rubble was scattered about. As he returned to his feet, Waleski noticed a small black object.

"Looks like part of your suit. I didn't know that could come off."

Gonzales glanced down at his suit. He couldn't spot anything missing. "Did you see that fall off? I don't remember that being part of my suit."

"It must be part of your suit. It's shaped just like this part of my suit. It looks like it ought to fit on yours in the same place. Hold still. Let me see if this will fit back on. God might not like it if we break the suits he sent us."

Two audible clicks sounded as the piece snapped into position on Gonzales' suit.

" *Command code authorization restored. Recorder installed. Playback selected.*"

"It's god speaking, again," Waleski whispered in awe.

"I know I'm dying. That's why I'm recording this last report. If I wasn't impaled upon a stanchion that broke loose when we impacted, I probably wouldn't have committed an action that's totally against regulations. As it is, Malidor, a native similar in physiology to us, staggered onto the shore earlier today. I fear that the Staten Island may have collided with his surface

sailing ship before running aground upon this barren atoll. Because of that, I just spent my last few hours programming the interpreter unit by encouraging him to talk as much as possible. You might say that his presence gave me a reason to live a bit longer, rather than give up sooner. Though it was only a marginal understanding, we could then talk. As it turned out, I was right. He was shipwrecked and in peril of starving to death unless I did something. I felt even more strongly that it was our fault for putting him in his predicament..."

"That can't be god. It sounds like you, but you're not moving your lips," Waleski said.

Gonzales shrugged his shoulders inside his suit as he listened to the strange voice speaking in a tongue he couldn't understand that came from the new part on his suit.

"Of course, much of what we discussed was wrongly interpreted. I suspect that when I said the word for technology, he heard it interpreted as the word for magic. There's not much I could do about that. What I did do, however, was teach him just enough commands to use a basic flying suit, minus the offensive weapons. At first, he didn't believe that I was teaching him to fly. He seemed to change his mind somewhat when I had him bring a suit to me so that I could reprogram it with his name. His belief appeared to change when he found that the suit responded to his first command after my override so that he could put the flying suit on. I cautioned him about not using any of the other commands until he stepped outside. Fortunately for him, he listened attentively. At least, he's now off this barren atoll and returning to his home.

"I'm aware that placing advanced technology in the hands of a man who appeared to be armed with little more than a bronze knife is against regulations, but his life was at risk. As well, I don't think he'll use the suit wrongly because I had him swear an oath that I made up on the spot. He struck me as the kind of person who lives his life according to a system of honor. I based that even further upon the fact that he buried the other men and women of my command at my request before leaving. He said he'd bring back medical help for me, but I'll be dead sooner than he can probably return. That's assuming that he can even find this atoll, again. At any rate, the suit will be useless once he's dead, if no one finds us before then. As an added precaution against anyone being a voice-identical match for him, I made him learn the commands in English rather than instructing the suit to accept his language. That ought to put the suit out of commission eventually, no matter what. I feel bad about giving him a partial combat suit without civilian collision safety protocols, but it was the only kind of flight suit available. I can only hope that he doesn't collide with anything and harm himself or another person.

"I've also ordered the ship to seal all entrances. That should preserve the contents and equipment should a rescue team be dispatched and find our ship. If not, it should serve to keep out the natives. They don't strike me as sophisticated enough to force them open. Whatever results, these actions were taken exclusively by myself, First Lieutenant Jesus Gonzales, United Earth Reconnaissance Force. I, alone, bear full responsibility."

"Could that have been the voice of your patron knight spirit speaking from heaven?" Waleski asked.

"Perhaps. I just hope we didn't do anything wrong," Gonzales said.

"We fixed something. At least, I feel certain that we did. Surely, god wouldn't punish us for making something right. Maybe he was telling us that."

"Perhaps god and my patron knight spirit were telling me that I shouldn't be afraid of flying."

"Yes! That has to be what the message meant. He was telling you to follow in the spirit of Malidor and himself," Waleski exclaimed.

Chapter 5

Sir Private Jones motioned for Gonzales to swoop down at the men on the raider they'd spotted on a routine patrol parallel to the coast. With his sword at the ready, Gonzales positioned himself ahead of the ship before giving his spell consisting of three forward commands. He was scarcely aware that his hair flailed about outside the back of his helmet as he charged one side of the boat, while Jones flew abreast with his sword similarly ready to slash at the rowers on the other side.

" Missiles incoming."

Arrows flew at them. To his eternal relief, several glanced off the suit Gonzales wore. He turned his head upon hearing Jones swear loudly. An arrow stuck out of Jones' arm, but Jones hadn't veered off. He still charged with his sword now gripped by both hands. Then Gonzales realized that there hadn't been time to do more than that as he flashed by the raiders, some of whom struck out in their defense with their own swords. At least two were unprepared for his charge and lost their swords into the ocean. Three others missed blocking his flying slash and suffered wounds. One raider's sword broke when it struck the suit. Then Gonzales was beyond the boat and glanced over at Jones.

"You'll have to attack them on your own," Jones said.

"How bad are you hurt?"

"This could retire me, I fear."

"Can you make it back?"

"Yes, but you'll have to fight these raiders on your own. Otherwise, they'll attack our people."

"I won't let that happen."

"Be careful, Gonzales."

Gonzales watched briefly as Jones awkwardly sheathed his sword, turned about, and headed for the shore. Blood dripped down Jones' legs from several wounds he'd received. Then Gonzales lined up on the ship once more and gave his suit the commands to swoop in fast once more with his sword at the ready.

" Missiles incoming."

As he closed with the boat, several arrows clanged against his suit. Some even bounced off just in front of his face, to his surprise. One grazed him on one leg. He could feel the saltwater sting the slight

wound as he flew through misty spray thrown up by the waves. Then he almost dropped his sword when his suit spoke once more after a single, short, musical tone.

" *Sonic repaired and ready. Target in range. Activate sonic?*"

"What? *Sonic ? Activate ?*" Gonzales exclaimed, before issuing spells to veer off from the raiders and hover so he could puzzle out the latest enigma posed to him. The tone sounded again.

" *Sonic ready. Target still in range. Activate sonic?*"

A few arrows fell into the sea just before reaching him as he hovered out of range of even the best of the raider archers. Gonzales stared into the recess above his visor where a new light was blinking that he hadn't known to be there before.

"Sir Private Jones? Can you hear what I'm hearing?"

"No, Gonzales. What are you hearing?"

"I'm hearing god's voice again."

"Can you understand any of it?"

"Only one word. *Activate* . Then it speaks a new spell word. *Sonic* , I think."

Gonzales was only briefly aware of what took place, as his suit suddenly lit up before silence reigned over the ocean. A few last arrows fell into the water well short of where he hovered.

" *Target neutralized.*"

Gonzales stared out at the raiders who all appeared to be dead. "Blessings be! Sir Private Jones, the raiders are all dead, I think."

"Dead? Are you certain?"

"They look dead. My suit did something. It happened so fast, I don't know what it did."

"Make certain that they're not pretending to be dead. Raiders have tried that trick before. Fly to the nearest shore and pick up some rocks to drop on them."

"Yes, Sir Private Jones."

Gonzales returned to the boat. Everything appeared much the same as before. The men in the boat still appeared to be dead. Just as he flew up to position himself out of range above the boat, two of the men stirred.

"They're not dead. I don't think they were pretending, either. They're looking around at the others and shaking them awake. Whatever my suit did to them, they're truly scared. More of them are awake now. They're taking to their oars and turning their boat around."

"That's good. Keep watch on them until you're certain that they're leaving. I'll be back at Castle Verata. I'm almost to it now."

"How are your wounds?"

"Like I said, they're not good. When you get back, we'll need to discuss this new spell word you've discovered. It may be that god has found new favor with our Order and rewarded us through you."

Several of the nearest knights gathered within Jones' quarters upon hearing the news of the latest victory, and the strange events that took place. Sir Private Van Dyke walked over to stare even closer at Sir Lieutenant Gonzales' suit.

"Aside from the obvious differences we've noticed among the suits, I don't see where this light you described could come from. It's too bad that Jones was returning to the shore when this happened. His observation and verification would be invaluable."

"I'm telling the truth about what took place," Gonzales said.

"We're not doubting your word," Jones said from his bed. "Besides, you're not the first to experience something bouncing off your face for no reason. That's happened to me and just about everyone else here."

Moto and Wong both nodded.

"Have you ever noticed that the wind doesn't hit you strongly in the face once you reach a speed faster than most birds fly? Try touching your face then. You'll find, as most of us have discovered, that you can't touch your own face. It's god's protection. So, be thankful for it. It's only too bad that it doesn't extend to our arms and legs," Miles said.

"The second Sir Private Stravinsky once had god's hand catch an arrow just before it reached his face while he was still giving his suit the proper magic spells. He then flew against a ship with the arrow sticking out like he'd been hit. We're certain that threw the entire crew into a panic when they saw that he wasn't even hurt or bleeding," Moto said.

"Still, this new spell needs to be learned. What was the spell word?" Van Dyke asked.

"*Sonic*," Gonzales answered.

"It was *activate sonic*," Jones said. "From what I remember, Gonzales didn't even speak them directly together, because he was trying to tell me about it when he said it happened."

"Have you tried with your suit, Sir Private Jones?" Van Dyke asked.

"Yes, I have. I don't get any response," Jones answered.

"How about the rest of you? Have any of you tried?" Van Dyke asked.

"I tried with no better results," Moto said.

"*Activate sonic*," Wong said. "No, nothing."

" *Activate sonic*," Van Dyke said. "Nothing happens when I speak it. I'm beginning to believe that it was more likely a raider trick."

"If so, then why did they leave? They would have known that our land forces were still being gathered and that we could only delay their arrival," Jones asked.

"Then it must be a new twist on their trick that worked in our favor this time," Van Dyke said. "Aren't you going to try, Waleski?"

" *Activate sonic*," Waleski said.

" *Authorize sonics for Sergeant Waleski?*"

"What's the matter?" Van Dyke asked, seeing Gonzales' mouth open in surprise.

"God just spoke to me through the god voice about sonics and Sir Sergeant Waleski. What do I say? What should I do?" Gonzales replied.

"What did god say?" Van Dyke asked.

"Something *sonic*, something *Sergeant Waleski* ," Gonzales said.

"You'll have to remember every word better. Waleski, give the spell again. We'll see if the god voice will repeat itself to Gonzales once more," Van Dyke said.

" *Activate sonic*," Waleski said.

" *Authorize sonics for Sergeant Waleski?*"

" *Authorize sonics for Sergeant Waleski*," Gonzales repeated slowly.

" *Sonics authorized for Sergeant Waleski.*"

"God spoke again?" Van Dyke asked.

Gonzales nodded. " *Sonics authorized for Sergeant Waleski.*"

"There's a new red light inside my helmet," Waleski exclaimed.

" *Identify target.*"

"God just spoke to me!" Waleski shouted.

"What?" Van Dyke exclaimed. "What did god say?"

" *Identify target*," Waleski replied, in a calmer manner.

"More strange spell words. Why must god make us pass so many tests?" Van Dyke said, as he slumped to a seat beside Jones.

"Why is god speaking to these new knights?" Moto asked. "Haven't we been devoted enough? They're not even originally of the Order."

"I don't know, Moto. All I do know is that god chooses how he behaves, not us," Van Dyke said, slowly shaking his head.

" *Identify target.*"

"God's still speaking to me. What should I do?" Waleski asked.

Van Dyke shook his head. "I don't know. What's god saying now?"

"The same thing."

"Perhaps it's time to try one of the other spell words with this new spell word," Jones said. "Since *activate* worked with it, why not *deactivate* ?"

Van Dyke's head jerked up as his face blossomed into a smile. "Yes! Those are opposites! Very likely, one cancels out the other for this spell as well. Try the *deactivate* spell word."

" *Deactivate sonic*," Waleski said. "It must have worked! The new light went to yellow! No, now it's green!"

"Perhaps this is another of those powers that works only when god chooses to protect us, such as when we fly fast or into combat," Jones said.

"But why only these two?" Moto asked.

Van Dyke put one arm out around Moto as he stood up. "One might as well ask why are their names so different from ours?"

"Are you suggesting that they should be leading us instead of you?" Moto asked.

"I don't know anything about leading," Gonzales said.

Van Dyke frowned. "No, I'm not. Their time may come someday as it has for some of us, but not now. That hasn't changed."

"What if god assigns one of them our leadership?" Wong asked.

"Should god ever decide that I'm to be replaced, then I will step aside. I'll not dispute god's right to assign a new leader. Until then, I shall lead," Van Dyke said.

"Just as I shall follow," Moto said.

"I'm not questioning your right," Wong said.

"Nor am I," Gonzales said.

"I only ask the question that many of us might wonder about because of this," Wong said.

"Consider that this spell worked for Gonzales during a time of danger," Jones said. "It may be that god is questioning Waleski as to the danger."

"Impossible. God would know what danger is around. God can see everything," Moto exclaimed.

"God also lets us fly into walls on occasion instead of protecting us. Remember that god might be questioning us to ascertain our purity. Maybe it's to remind us of what is expected," Jones said.

"Sir Private Jones states something we all know has been debated before by our retired knights when they became proctors. Very likely, these are special tests for our newest knights. Perhaps god has something especially dangerous in store for each of them. He might be preparing them while giving them additional weapons to equalize the struggle they later have to endure," Van Dyke said.

Wong nodded. "Makes sense to me."

"In that case, I better brush up on my swordplay," Waleski said.

"Not if god is giving you a new weapon. It might be that swords are useless against the evil god intends for you to defeat at a later time. This could be his way of giving you practice," Jones said.

"Or it might be that they bring a new power to their suits...with god's blessings, of course," Wong said. "After all, keep in mind that both of their suits were believed empty of magic."

"*Deactivate sonic*," Gonzales said.

"What was that for?" Van Dyke asked.

"I wanted to see if my yellow light would also change."

"Did it?" Van Dyke asked.

Gonzales smiled and nodded. "It just went to green."

Van Dyke stood silent for a moment in deep thought. "I'm changing their assignments. Gonzales will proceed to Castle Bright Sand. Waleski will be at Castle Wind Spirit."

"You're assigning them to the most dangerous sectors?" Jones gasped.

"I must. If god is speaking to them, which I have no reason to doubt, then it follows that I should place them where god may use them to his best advantage," Van Dyke said. "That lies in protecting and leading his people down a righteous path."

Chapter 6

Gonzales woke as Wong shook him. "Ubu just spotted raiders coming our way. Get your suit on."

Gonzales rubbed his eyes. "Did you bring anything to eat?"

"No. We'll pick up something from below to take with us. Besides, aren't you eager to find out how well your new power works?"

"What if it doesn't work this time?"

"So, what if it doesn't? All that might mean is that the circumstances are different and god doesn't see a need for you to have that new power here."

Gonzales picked up his suit, and slipped it into place. Upon closing it, he walked out of his room to the tower battlement that surrounded it. Unlike some of the other towers, the top of his could be reached only by air. It provided him with special security in light of his importance to the castle's defense. There were no stairs leading to it. Instead, the floor was solid stone to prevent anyone, particularly a raider in disguise, from reaching his room. Just about every castle within the Allied Kingdoms possessed such a tower for the exclusive use of the Knights of the Star. The few that didn't were deep within the interior and safely away from direct attack by raiders from Kron.

"Have you become used to the directioner?" Wong asked, not long after they passed the last of the fleeing fishing boats warned of by Sir Private Ubu. As the boats encountered other boats and passed on the warning, the returning fishing fleet grew in number.

"I believe so. I wish I'd known about this during my first days of flight training," Gonzales said.

"That was a last precaution against you somehow faking inner worthiness."

"Can it be faked?"

"Enough to fool us, probably. Men are men, after all. As such, we all contain some part of us that can be fooled. We're not certain about the suits that god provided. For that reason, we take precautions in what we teach and how quickly."

"We must be close to Sir Private Ubu."

"You can see him already on your directioner?" Wong asked.

"Can't you?"

"Not yet, I can't."

"He's more to our left. *Five left*."

"*Five left*. Already, you talk more using spell words. That's good. Only a month, and you act more like a knight than a miner. Yes, I see Ubu on my directioner now. You might want to correct your course some more."

"Another five to the left?"

" *Five left.* Yes."

" *Five left,*" Gonzales said.

As Gonzales and Wong approached Ubu, Gonzales noticed there were two ships full of raiders a short distance away and more on the horizon. It was a full-scale invasion. It was up to the three knights to delay them while allied forces deployed, many of whom had to be rounded up from their normal jobs in the countryside. Only a few extra hours were needed to get the men and women formed into fighting units and into place.

The Allied Kingdoms couldn't afford to maintain standing armies even though the Kron Empire was their sworn enemy, and had tried several times to invade. Someone was needed to mine, plant or harvest, smelt, fish, or otherwise produce goods that could then be shared among the Allied Kingdoms, thus giving them even more reason to stand together. Clearly, though, the excellent fishing off Castle Bright Sand was reason enough to defend it despite its vulnerable position.

Arrows flew up to fall just short of the knights.

"Don't get too close. They've got better archers than what you've seen," Ubu said.

" *Activate sonic?*"

"Yes, god. *Activate sonic* ," Gonzales said. The green light changed to yellow immediately.

"God spoke to you?" Wong asked.

"Yes. Nothing is happening. I don't understand," Gonzales said.

"Maybe you did something before that god liked," Ubu said.

"I was charging the enemy the last time and then god spoke."

"Perhaps you should charge again," Ubu said.

" *Five down. Forward.*"

A flash filled the air as Gonzales moved clear of the other knights. That was followed by a second flash. In both instances, one of the boat-loads of raiders was struck by its force.

" *Hover,*" Gonzales said.

"I see it! I see it! They've all been struck down without even touching them! It's incredible!" Ubu exclaimed.

Wong drew his sword. "I'm moving in closer to see if they're dead."

"I'll cover you with my bow," Ubu said. "You should all carry one of these. It's better than dropping rocks."

"You know that I'm not any good with a bow," Wong said.

"I'm still learning how to use one," Gonzales said.

"You might not need to learn if god has graced you with a weapon as I believe he has," Ubu said.

Ubu flew directly over one boat as Wong approached it. Wong reached the nearer boat and settled down onto it. He carefully moved from one raider to another. When he finished and flew up off the boat, his sword dripped red. He headed for the second boat and was about to settle upon it when some of the raiders stirred. He lifted up quickly, while Ubu fired arrows down among the still helpless, waking raiders with devastating results.

"The others aren't going to believe that we slaughtered two boat-loads of raiders this easily," Wong said.

"I'm more concerned about what the other raiders believe when they reach these boats," Ubu said. "I hope they gain a quick understanding and turn back. I don't have enough arrows to deal with them all."

"Why not just take some of theirs?" Wong asked.

"Good. Pass the word to Waleski that Gonzales has used the *sonic* spell once more to great benefit in the witness of Wong and Ubu. Tell her that she must be charging the enemy," Van Dyke said, upon hearing the relayed report.

Castle Wind Spirit guarded the port connecting the island of Minius with the rest of the Allied Kingdoms. Small, but vital, it provided several strategic benefits. One was its value as an early warning of invasion, as its easily defended coast was in marked contrast to the poorly defended coast of the allies on the continent. As well, the people of Minius were willing to fight provided they were supplied with the arms they needed. Their island couldn't produce the weapons the other allies possessed. Consequently, the people of Minius had kept the Kron Empire away from the other allies' shore since joining the alliance.

"Did you hear that?" Sir Corporal Smith asked.

"I heard it all. I'll have to charge when I chant my new spell. Well, I knew I'd have to fight sooner or later," Waleski said.

"This will be a great victory for us if you can deliver our enemies to us so we can slaughter them before they kill tens or hundreds of our people," Smith said.

"It doesn't bother you killing them while they're helpless?"

"I've seen them do it to our people. I'm willing to return the same in kind."

"Yes, I've seen them kill innocents before. It's just that we're Knights of the Star. Should we be

killing those who are helpless? Sir Lieutenant Gonzales said that the raiders were fearful after he first used the new power."

"Then what do you suggest?"

"Why not just take away their weapons? We did, after all, take oaths not to kill unless absolutely necessary."

"Raiders! Raiders! I need the nearest knights."

"Already? Kron tempts fate so soon after our victory in the east?" Smith exclaimed.

"Maybe Kron doesn't know about the victory in the east yet. They don't have god voices," Waleski said.

"Of course, you're right. Regardless, we're being called by Royal."

Waleski stared in mute horror at the sight of two boat-loads of raiders whose bodies had fallen limp, when her suit flashed out twice in succession after she gave the proper spell. "Oh, god, what kind of power have you given us?"

"God knows that we're in need," Royal said.

"God knows that we won't abuse his power. In accordance with our oaths, we shouldn't kill them. Just take their weapons."

"Take them where? We can't carry that many weapons," Smith said.

"Then dump them into the sea. If you kill all of them, I won't call again on the power that god gave me. The seer told me I was called upon to do good for god, not kill every helpless person in sight," Waleski said.

Smith glanced from Waleski to Royal. "What do you think?"

"We'll have to act fast. Sir Private Van Dyke passed along that they won't be helpless for but a short time."

"If all three of us hurry, we can do it," Smith said.

After brief glances at each other, all three knights descended upon the same boat. Working fast, they moved from raider to raider tossing overboard every weapon larger than a knife. Some of the raiders were sluggishly stirring when they lifted off once more.

"What about the other boat?" Royal asked.

"They're already waking," Smith said, when another flash emanated from Waleski's suit.

"Not anymore," Royal said, as one arrow plunked into the water near Waleski.

"God is obviously watching out for us," Smith said.

"I'm glad we have Waleski with us. For once, we don't have to worry about having our arms or legs sliced open," Royal said. "This just occurred to me. What if she has this power because the name on her suit is different from ours?"

Smith descended upon the second boat and paused to stare first at Royal and then at Waleski as she landed. "It's possible. However, what you're suggesting is that I might also have that power because my suit responds to one of the strange spell words."

"Have you tried the new spell word?" Royal asked.

"No."

"Perhaps you should when those other boats get near," Royal said.

"What do you think, Sir Sergeant Waleski?"

"You owe it to god to try."

" *Authorize sonics for Corporal Smith?*"

" *Authorize sonics for Corporal Smith,*" Gonzales repeated slowly.

A flash instantly erupted from Sir Corporal Smith's suit.

"You can do it, too!" Royal exclaimed, as another boat full of raiders ceased to be a threat. "My idea about your names just might be right, you know?"

"I'm still thinking about that. What if your suit can also do this? Have you tried in combat like I just did?" Smith replied.

"What do you think, Waleski?" Royal asked.

"Me? I don't know what to think about all this," Waleski said. Her suit flashed at another boat rendering its occupants helpless.

"Is your suit doing the *sonic* spell?" Van Dyke's voice suddenly asked.

"Yes," Smith replied. "The raiders we haven't reached yet are rowing as fast as they can to escape. They've seen what we can do."

Chapter 7

Sir Private Van Dyke stared about at the knights. It was highly unusual for them to all gather at High Crag's church, except for the purpose of conducting a funeral. The other knights were in awe of the three among them who could command the sonic spell. Already, numerous theories had been put forth by

them, and by two still-living retired knights in residence at High Crag. Proctor Smith stepped forward amid a hush of voices. He was the oldest living knight among them.

"I recognize Proctor Smith. Your voice is free," Van Dyke said.

"Thank you, Sir Private Van Dyke. Sir Private Malidor's own words were to the effect that he was enlisted into god's service by the last living god-sent knight; the namesake of Sir Lieutenant Gonzales. It was he who gave Sir Private Malidor the instructions on casting magic. God spells, as some of you might insist, though I'd rather not start another argument on what we should call what we do. We do it for god regardless of what name we call it. That is enough. However, this came about because this young man who has taken the name of Sir Lieutenant Gonzales has somehow been given powers that strike me as very close to what the original Sir Lieutenant Gonzales controlled. We have striven to protect our people and to better their lives. Most of us have shed blood to do so. Now it appears that god is at last pleased with what we have gone through."

"Your point?" Van Dyke asked.

"My point is that perhaps god is trying to tell us in another of his mysterious ways that we should elect a new leader." Numerous voices cried out against the idea. "Hear me out, please, as I have more to say. You asked for my opinion. I give it freely," Proctor Smith said.

"He has our ears. Give him his voice," Van Dyke intoned, through a hint of a smile.

"My other idea is that this is a sign that we are to give Sir Lieutenant Gonzales the responsibility of guarding the hollow knights. That too, was one of the original tasks his namesake performed," Proctor Smith said.

Van Dyke nodded. "If I might speak for Proctor Smith, I believe that he has brought out a very worthwhile idea that we should entertain. He is correct that the first Sir Lieutenant Gonzales was responsible for the hollow knights. Sir Private Malidor mentioned that he remained at his post even though dying. While we do not know for certain if he was their leader, he was certainly a responsible knight. I'll even grant that he was their leader when Sir Private Malidor first met him if only because he was the last one left alive, a situation we nearly faced twice ourselves. If any would suggest that we place Sir Lieutenant Gonzales in charge of the hollow knights at High Crag, they will not find their idea opposed by me."

Proctor Smith caught the signal from Van Dyke that he could speak once more. "I do suggest that Sir Lieutenant Gonzales be stationed at High Crag. He has fought valiantly several times already. He has proven himself. He also possesses a power that will permit him to fully defend the hollow knights in a manner that no knight ever could before. At the same time, we have two other knights with the same power who can easily control our most dangerous sectors against the Kron Empire, whose presence appears to be lacking in our waters for the last two weeks since tasting this new power."

Van Dyke glanced around at the nods that most of the knights were giving. "I can see that we are vastly in favor of this. Does anyone require a vote?" Most of the knights shook their heads gently enough that only experienced eyes understood their meaning. "I am accepting Proctor Smith's suggestion of assigning Sir Lieutenant Gonzales to High Crag. Because of his special god power, he shall be in charge of its defense subject to the orders of Duke Sabbo. Are there any others who would speak?" Van Dyke said.

"I would speak," Waleski said.

Van Dyke nodded his permission.

"I understand that the raiders were cut down while they were helpless in violation of our oath. It's one thing to use a new power from god for the purpose of scaring off the raiders. It's quite another to violate his trust in us to do the right thing," Waleski said.

"We've spilled raider blood before," Wong said.

"But only because it was necessary. This wasn't necessary," Waleski said.

Van Dyke raised one hand. "Enough. I will speak. It is true that our oaths state that all life is sacred. It is equally true that we have striven at times to do no more than wound the raiders so that they couldn't fight, if for no other reason, than that it was easier than killing."

"God gave us our powers to protect, not kill," Proctor Smith exclaimed.

"Proctor Smith is correct. Kill only if it is necessary. Sir Private Wong, judging by what I know of your...battle, you must do penance," Van Dyke said.

"Then I must do likewise," Sir Private Ubu said.

Chapter 8

"Good morning, Sir Lieutenant Gonzales. I trust you slept well in your new quarters," Proctor Smith said. He remained seated in the eating area.

"I hadn't expected to be back here so soon. Now I've actually got to set up a schedule or something like that, I understand."

"Good morning, Sir Private Jones. Your wounds appear better."

"I feel better. Ready to help me bring the suits down when you finish eating, Sir Lieutenant Gonzales?"

"They're not in the Sacred Hall?" Gonzales asked.

"We don't leave them there after we turn in for the night. That would risk too much," Smith said.

"Probably you should take your place while I bring down the suits from my quarters," Jones said.

"The hollow suits are in your quarters?" Gonzales asked.

"You didn't notice the special niches in the walls of your quarters?" Smith asked.

"I saw those, but I didn't know what those were for, even though I used one for my own suit," Gonzales said.

"They're arranged in a special sequence so that we can keep the suit identities in order, whenever they're away from the Sacred Hall. We'll discuss this later, if you've no objection," Jones said. "To tell the truth, I'm glad that we're working together once more, even though you're in charge."

"That bothers you?" Gonzales asked.

"Not in the least. I think you'll eventually become one of the best knights ever within our order," Jones said.

"Good morning, fellow knights," said a female proctor missing her sword hand and three fingers from her other.

"Good morning, Proctor Coffin," Jones said.

Gonzales looked at the woman who wore a simple black robe like the other proctors. He had seen her at the meeting and learned from another knight that she'd retired because she could no longer handle a weapon. That had been her own decision, even though she could still easily perform most of the other duties.

"Good morning, Proctor Coffin," Gonzales said.

"The applicants will be waking soon and entering the castle," she said.

"Most are already awake. I noticed a long line stretching out from the gate when I came down from my tower," Gonzales said.

"Excuse me, but I better get the suits down," Jones said.

He walked to the door and stepped outside. Once there, he spoke his commands and quickly ascended to his tower to retrieve the suits two at a time.

"I'll explain to Sir Lieutenant Gonzales how we've handled this before," Coffin said.

Gonzales smiled at the applicants, who paused before filing past when their proctor prompted them so that others could catch a glimpse of the hollow suits he guarded. His short discussion with Proctor Coffin had been quite informative. He'd learned that most of the knights believed in smiling at the applicants because there was no way of knowing ahead of time who would qualify. It didn't make sense to antagonize someone you might later depend upon. As well, it served to ease the minds of those who wouldn't qualify that they were being defended by people who didn't hold themselves out as being above them in importance, even though they were.

He stepped out of the way of a proctor who entered the Sacred Hall to wipe off the hollow suits as part of the daily ritual. It was nearly noon before the first qualified applicant approached him with a properly knotted cord wrapped loosely around his hands. Within a short time, Gonzales had stepped aside several times so that the two men and a woman could enter. A short while later, Sir Private Jones

descended beside him to take over for his shift. When Gonzales returned for another shift, he wasn't at all surprised to see that two more applicants had succeeded and waited inside in repose of meditation. He settled into position blocking the only ground-level entrance, while Jones flew off to take a rest.

"Good afternoon, Sir Lieutenant Gonzales," Coffin said, as she led another small group of applicants past.

Gonzales nodded briefly before wincing at the sound of another applicant slamming into a wall after a brief scream.

"It happens," Coffin said, noticing Gonzales' reaction. She faced her group. "Hurry up. Take a quick look and move on past."

Her group silently filed past. Voices barked out orders in the background as the injured person was lowered to the ground. It took a few minutes to remove the injured man before the ropes overhead sang once more with another aspiring visitor. By then, her group had taken a peek at the hollow suits and left to learn more about the commands they needed to master.

Gonzales felt awkward as he followed the proctors for the first time into the Sacred Hall past Sir Private Jones who stood aside so they could enter. Only six applicants sat inside the hall. Late afternoon shadows made it appear that giants were descending upon them. The proctors separated into pairs before each pair took position beside an applicant, who was then roused from meditation.

"God is good to us this year! Two more knights! Four in all!" Coffin exclaimed. "Isn't that great, Proctor Smith?"

Smith shrugged. "It appears that you have some training to conduct tomorrow, Sir Lieutenant Gonzales."

Gonzales turned from staring at the two new knights whose smiling faces said everything about how they felt concerning their passage of the tests. "Oh, yes, you're right, of course. That's my responsibility now."

"Thinking about whether their suits bestow the same powers on them as Waleski and Smith?" Proctor Smith asked.

"No, my mind was elsewhere. Still, that is worth thinking about."

"Proctor Smith may have a valid point with his theory that the names of the suits have meaning as to the amount of power each possesses," Jones said.

"I don't know. It doesn't seem right that I should have more power than anyone else, if his theory is correct," Gonzales said.

"If I wasn't so big around the middle now I could have tried on my suit, while the new Sir Corporal Smith was here the other day just to find out if it matters who wears it," Proctor Smith said. "That might have cleared up the question once and for all. Of course, there's still Sir Corporal Coffin's

suit. If she's willing to try, we could gather more evidence to either prove or disprove my theory."

"No, I'm no longer fit to wear the suit of a knight," Coffin exclaimed.

"Just line up these two points on the castle before you pass over. That's how we find Castle Staten Island," Jones said.

"That's all there is to it?" Gonzales exclaimed.

"We try to keep it simple since most of us come from basic stock. Aside from Sir Private Van Dyke and Coffin, no other nobles have ever qualified. Van Dyke is probably the only active knight who can read and write. Coffin and Smith are the only retired knights who can do likewise."

"Thank god for that. I almost mixed up two of the suits yesterday. We might have lost a knight because of my error. Well, looks like they're awake. I just noticed their lights coming on."

"Yes, you're right. Our new Sir Sergeant Klaus and Sir Private Gwinn are both in their suits. I'll bring them to you while you prepare the rope," Jones said.

Though it was obvious from the suit shapes that Sir Private Gwinn's suit was meant for a female, it didn't always happen that way. Several times in the past, male and female applicants had discovered that they could qualify for one of the other suits despite the slight discomfort some encountered. However, the new Sir Private Gwinn was female and the new Sir Sergeant Klaus was a strong male who could barely fit within the suit he wore proudly.

Gonzales tied the rope around each after giving them the same explanation he'd once received. He then rechecked the distance between them and himself, so he wouldn't be yanked about. He'd been given a demonstration of that to satisfy his curiosity and didn't want a repeat. After rechecking his and their ground alignment, Gonzales said, "*Five up.*"

The two applicants repeated his spell words, though not with as much confidence. After a few hesitant moments in the air, they were flying over the walls and out over the ocean. As before, the suits leveled out to a lower altitude on their own as if following the major contours of the surface. Glancing from side to side, Gonzales noticed that the two new knights soon became more comfortable, though both appeared uneasy about flying over the ocean.

"Let's practice the oath now," Gonzales said, without realizing that doing so took all their minds off the matter of falling.

"It's about time you showed up," the voice called out from the shadows cast by the huge rocks at the base of the cliff near High Crag.

Several dark shapes dropped from a small fishing boat into the water to wade ashore as quietly as possible. One approached the voice as the others took up guard positions or held the boat.

"You're not the one who has to deal with this new weapon your knights have. They murdered whole boat-loads of our men without so much as being wounded. Now none of the men want to come near any of the kingdoms. They don't mind a battle where they can fight back, but this new way of fighting is too much for them. Why didn't you warn us of it?"

"I had no way of knowing about it until after it first appeared. Even I was caught by surprise. Besides, you know that I had no way of warning anyone until you arrived. However, I can tell you that only three of the knights have this new power. One is now stationed at High Crag, so he poses no danger. You need only avoid two of the knights in approaching the kingdoms."

"Which two? Describe them so we can recognize them."

"One is a woman."

"I thought we killed her."

"They have two other active women among their four new knights. This one with the new power is known as Sir Sergeant Waleski."

"Obviously the other is a man. Who is he?"

"The other is the man who took over my suit, Sir Corporal Smith."

"Your suit had this power? Why didn't you use it before?"

"It was only recently discovered. Somehow, the new Sir Lieutenant Gonzales discovered and used it first. Then he discovered that he could somehow activate the same power in those other two suits."

"Yes, right when King Xidon planned on his grand invasion. A lot of good your advance warnings did us about which knights were stationed in the different sectors. Now he's livid about what happened. All those boats and men he gathered, and most of them too afraid to venture out past our own waters. So, how many active knights are there now?"

"Twenty-one are active. Coffin could still fly. However, I've convinced her that she's useless to the Knights of the Star while she's unable to wield a sword. She refuses to don her suit, again."

"I will give your report to King Xidon. If you want my opinion, I doubt that he will be very pleased."

"Tell him that I intend to regain my suit. Once I have it and learn how to use this new power, I will turn it against the knights as only two others have the new power. I feel certain that I can deal with them. Both are new and largely inexperienced. The woman is poor with the sword. The man fears flying. Neither of them are problems for me. As well, I have planted seeds against the new Sir Lieutenant Gonzales that might yet reap enough discontent among the knights to split them apart as a unit."

"Oh?"

"Yes, I've posed him as the rightful leader so that Van Dyke will not completely trust him. That's partly why Gonzales is now at High Crag. The fool, Van Dyke, supported my suggestion and placed him in charge there. If any of the new knights try to follow Gonzales, which some will, they'll discover too late

that while he might have this new power, he has no leadership ability. There's even a chance that Van Dyke might settle with him in secret. If he does, then I need to deal with only the woman after regaining my suit. Present this new list of assignments for the knights to King Xidon so he can plan appropriately."

The raider accepted the small scrap of leached, pressed leaf. He placed it in a waterproof container, turned, and headed for his boat. As he did, his men followed.

"So, Sir Private Malidor could talk to the last knight from god even though he used a different language?" Sir Private Gwinn asked, as she glanced around at the strange new castle she'd just given her oath within.

Gonzales nodded. "Yes. He stated that he was handed a god voice that understood what he said and spoke the same thing in god's language."

"Seems strange that god would send his knights here unable to speak our language," Gwinn said.

"We believe that it is we who have deviated from god's language. Fortunately, god gave his knights a way to communicate with us," Gonzales said, repeating answers to the same questions he'd posed not too long ago.

Klaus glanced around as he picked up small chunks of debris from near the gash in the side of Castle Staten Island. "Do storms hit this island very often?"

"Several times a year. When we have a resident here, we've had reports of some that were quite severe. One storm even opened some of the graves," Gonzales said.

"I thought as much. These pieces are washing away from the Castle toward the sea over there. Are any of these important?" Klaus asked.

Gonzales thought back to when Waleski found a piece that fit on his suit. "Every piece might be important. Help me gather these together. We'll stack them inside."

The three knights moved alongside Castle Staten Island where the receding water from various storm surges had carried away small pieces. Most were half-buried in the sand. A few were found at the water's edge and some just within sight under the water. When they finished, they had stacked together a small pile of pieces.

"Some of these probably still fit together. If we had glue, we could put them back together and protect the castle," Gwinn said.

"If we do that, then how will we get inside for future oaths?" Gonzales asked.

"Well, I didn't mean that we'd glue them back onto the castle. We could glue them together, so that it could be placed against the opening to keep the weather out. If not that, then maybe if we brought some logs or stones out with us, we could fix up something to protect the exposed rooms," Gwinn said.

"That's been done before. The storms usually wash away the logs, because there's nothing to secure them against. Suitable stones are too heavy and require too many knights who could otherwise be protecting the coast against raiders from Kron. Besides, the knights don't know how to build shelters,"

Gonzales said.

"Then we should bring stones and workers who know how by boat rather than try to do the work ourselves," Gwinn said.

"The other knights oppose that because this is sacred ground meant only for us," Gonzales said.

"Do you think that? I don't feel like I'm more sacred than our people," Gwinn said.

Klaus put his hands before him as if shunning them off. "Don't ask me. I'm still getting used to the fact that I'm a knight. I'm still learning what to do."

"I was asking Sir Lieutenant Gonzales."

Gonzales stared at Gwinn. "No, I don't feel any more sacred than the people, either. What's sacred, though, is this island and Castle Staten Island. I was taught that god selected this island for his castle, because of its isolation."

"That doesn't make sense," Gwinn said. "If we're god's people, then why should he make his castle almost inaccessible?"

Gonzales put one hand to the side of his neck and rubbed, as if warding off a headache. "I don't have the answers you seek. Quite likely, you'd enjoy discussing this with Proctor Smith when we return to Castle High Crag. He's one of our better scholars. If you want an argument, seek out Sir Sergeant Waleski. I believe she feels that we are destined to be sacred, if we're not already. She also believes god is female."

"I'm also having difficulty understanding why Sir Private Malidor was permitted to keep his name while we must give ours up," Gwinn said.

"Then you will have to ask the other knights," Gonzales said, his face reflecting the same degree of puzzlement evident in Gwinn's.

As well, he hadn't yet brought up a question that nagged him since Sir Sergeant Waleski had gained the sonic power. He desperately wanted to know why god used only their names. After all, if they were god's knights, then it seemed more logical that god would address them by their titles even though the established knights used only the last portion of their names in addressing each other much of the time.

Chapter 9

"Leave the Sir Private Ashen suit," Jones said. He stepped toward the center of the Sacred Hall, so he could exit through the open top.

"What? You know we can't leave it unguarded," Gonzales said.

"It won't be unguarded. Duke Sabbo will be taking it under his protection."

"Duke Sabbo? I'm sorry, but I don't understand why he'd be guarding one of our suits. He's not a knight."

Jones moved closer, and whispered, "Private conversation, please. *Deactivate Private Jones suit* ." Gonzales hesitated for a moment, then issued his own deactivation command. "The Duke wishes to impress a visiting noblewoman. He gives us complete cooperation in our defense of the castle in exchange for the opportunity to achieve some friendly conquests."

"He uses one of our suits to further his own interests? No, that won't be permitted. Not while I'm in charge," Gonzales exclaimed.

"It does us no harm. Besides, he can't put the suit on and it's clearly damaged already."

"I don't care. Every suit is sacred. Mine was believed damaged, yet it works."

"Then you better speak with Sir Private Van Dyke. He permitted the Duke to borrow the suit while he was in charge here. It's part of getting along with the nobility. We are, after all, sworn to serve them."

"No, we're not."

"Actually, we are. The nobles are appointed over us by the Grand King. We serve at their leisure, as much as we do for the comfort of the king and his people," Jones said.

"We might act in their behalf, but our suits are strictly meant for those who qualify by possessing the inner virtues valued by god. Besides which, I was instructed to operate the defense of the suits as I saw fit. The suits will all go into our towers. Only the defense of High Crag is at the Duke's direction. Do you wish to argue that?"

Jones shrugged as he shook his head. "I'll inform Duke Sabbo that it's by your direction that I didn't leave the suit for him to borrow."

"You don't have to. I'll wait here and inform him myself. Take the suit to your tower."

"Looking for something, Duke Sabbo?" Gonzales asked, from the back of the Sacred Hall.

"Yes, Sir Lieutenant Gonzales, a suit. I was going to protect one of the suits in my quarters tonight."

Gonzales stared briefly at Duke Sabbo's physique. It was evident that the man could fit into any of the suits. In all likelihood, the nobleman had tried to qualify just as had nearly everyone else who could slip into one of the leather testers.

"I understand how you intended to protect the suit. Our Order is bound to god. As such, I cannot allow one of our suits to be used by you to such purpose."

"A fine one you are to talk about such matters. Bound to god, indeed. Bring me one of the suits, and be quick about it."

"You'll not be given possession of a suit. Furthermore, I don't understand what you mean with your other comments."

With his hands upon his hips, Sabbo scowled at Gonzales. "You mean to tell me you've never carried a woman aloft to your quarters?"

"Why should I?"

Sabbo stood in contemplation for another moment. "From what kingdom do you hail?"

"Copra."

"It figures. The people in Copra simply don't have the same respect for their nobility as those in the other Allied Kingdoms. Regardless, I am your superior. As such, you will furnish me with one of the suits. Your own will do if you refuse to hand over one of the others."

"My answer is still no on this matter. I will follow your orders, and those of other nobility in other matters, but not in handing over one of god's suits."

"In that case, I shall report you to Queen Neessha. Doubtless, she will take up the matter with your knightly superior."

"That remains your choice. In the meantime, our discussion is ended. *Five up* !"

Duke Sabbo staggered back at the impudence exhibited by Sir Lieutenant Gonzales. He'd never had a knight leave on his own before without permission.

"You've not heard the last of this!"

Jones silently crossed to the tower where Gonzales lived. Through the open door, Jones could see Gonzales placing his suit in one of the storage niches in the lushly padded stone. The entire room, like his own, featured elaborately embroidered tapestries whose features could barely be appreciated by candlelight and rivaled those found in the courts of their kings and queens. A large bed occupied the center of the room and several cushioned chairs completed the furnishings. Jones mouthed his commands softly enough that Gonzales noticed him only when he spoke upon landing on the encircling balcony.

" *Deactivate Private Jones suit.* I overheard what you said to Duke Sabbo. He'll make trouble for you."

"That may be, but this I feel strongly about. God gave us these suits to accomplish good, not personal gain. Am I right?"

"Well..."

"You don't agree?" Gonzales asked.

"It's not that. It's just that some of us have been approached by women eager to sleep with us. Our oaths and the proctors don't forbid us from accepting such offers. Surely, you've noticed that some of the women look at you much differently than before you became a knight."

"I attributed that to differences between the women around here and those where I lived. Are you telling me it's not?"

Jones walked closer to Gonzales. "You haven't been back home yet. Otherwise, you'd know that you're considered special by many of the people. A few might be jealous that you can fly. A few more than that, however, will be jealous of the eyes cast upon you by the women. Those feelings are tempered only by the fact that many of us do not live long lives and accomplish much for them in the brief time we do have as knights. What I'm getting at is that you will be offered much by the people. The Order does not prohibit you from accepting, especially in light of the fact that god doesn't pay us for our services. Most of us would starve if it weren't for the merchants, farmers, and fishers who see us as beneficial and willingly give us enough to fill our plates."

"Beneficial? In what manner?"

"Ah yes, I forgot you're from Copra where raiders aren't such a problem and few knights ever visit. We reduce losses for the merchants, farmers, and fishers by warning them of raider attacks. That gives them plenty of time to hide their families and goods before the able-bodied among them report for duty with one of the local dukes. They're quite appreciative in light of how much many of them stand to lose without any warning, as often occurs during the stormy season. What we consume in a year comes nowhere close to what they might lose in a single raid. That is why most of them see us as beneficial. Similar reasoning applies to our relationships with the women who favor us."

"I understand what you said about the merchants, but I don't see how similar reasons can apply for the women," Gonzales said.

"A lot of the men didn't realize it at first, either, until the wiser among them pointed out that we knights accept far fewer women in a year than the raiders would steal or otherwise despoil in the same time. Those same wise tongues pointed out that we never took an unwilling woman or intentionally interfered with a marriage."

"Why wasn't this covered in my training?"

"Because none of it is official policy. We haven't asked for this to be covered or ruled upon because the Grand King or any of the Council of Kings might view us as becoming too powerful. Our Order has officially asked for very little. We wouldn't have these well-protected rooms had it not been for the attempted assassination of the knighthood by raider spies."

Gonzales said, "That much I know. The attempted assassination was covered in my training. Otherwise, I would have wondered about living this well in comparison to what I had before."

"There's probably lots more that you haven't learned yet. My only advice is that you try not to upset the nobles."

Chapter 10

Gonzales halted before the guard at the palace entrance. "Sir Lieutenant Gonzales to see the Queen by her order."

"Pass. She's expecting you, sir."

Gonzales strode past the guard into an entrance bordered with tapestries showing notable events in the history of the kingdom. Several featured Castle High Crag withstanding attacks by raiders from different lands. On the latest could be seen flying figures whose dark armor and robes contrasted with the bright metallic armor that ground defenders wore. Though there were fewer battles depicted for the past century, it was clear that the battles were no less important. Though Gonzales wished to pause and take a closer look, he didn't. He was under orders to report promptly, even though he was in trouble and probably couldn't get into anymore by feeding his curiosity.

The entranceway opened up to a much larger room than any he'd seen before. Though he could fly about and might have speculated upon the size of the rooms inside the castle keep, he hadn't given much thought to how large the throne room might be. Now he felt awed at the size of the room. It was large enough that he could even fly safely within it, had he wished, though he resisted the urge. He continued to advance, even as an escort took position beside him.

"Halt when I stop," the escort whispered.

Gonzales nodded.

"Business before the Queen?" a minister shouted.

"Say 'I report at the Queen's order'," the escort whispered.

"I report at the Queen's order," Gonzales said.

"You may approach," the minister shouted, even though Gonzales and his escort hadn't stopped their advance across the room.

Larger tapestries covered the high walls. Empty cushioned chairs to the sides faced the throne where the queen in her raiment sat. Aside from her, what few people occupied the room remained standing.

Gonzales noticed a well-worn mark on the floor. Upon reaching it, he wasn't surprised that his escort halted. Gonzales stopped close enough to the mark without alarming any of the guards stationed throughout the room. Just to the side of the Queen and behind some guards, Gonzales caught sight of Duke Sabbo whose face seemed to be occupied by a sneer.

"It has come to my understanding that you have refused an order given you by Duke Sabbo."

"Address Queen Neessha as 'My Queen', and answer her," the escort whispered.

"My Queen, sadly, it is true. I am most guilty of not turning over to Duke Sabbo one of the hollow suits when he so ordered. His command conflicted with my orders to protect the suits from all

who are not knights of the Order," Gonzales said.

Duke Sabbo's sneer changed to a look of alarm, as he caught sight of the Queen glancing in his direction. "My Queen, Sir Lieutenant Gonzales must have misunderstood my intentions. I wished only to study one of the hollow suits."

"Duke Sabbo, it is not your position to study their suits. God sent the Knights of the Star those suits. He has made that quite clear by who he permits to wear the suits. No amount of study has ever changed the mind of god as to who is worthy. In the future, I suggest that you concentrate your studies upon the defense of Castle High Crag which is your responsibility." Queen Neessha's stare relaxed, as she turned her gaze back toward Gonzales. "Sir Lieutenant Gonzales, return to your duties with your Queen's permission."

"My Queen, thank you," the escort whispered.

"That's it?" Gonzales whispered, as he glanced at his escort.

"Just say that, turn about, and leave," the escort whispered.

"My Queen, thank you," Gonzales said.

He turned about awkwardly and walked back to the entrance with the escort beside him. When he reached the entryway, the escort halted. Gonzales paused for a moment.

"Is it all right if I look at some of these before I leave?" he whispered.

The escort glanced back at Gonzales. "Are you crazy? Get out of here before you do find yourself in trouble."

Gonzales walked toward the entrance, while attempting to admire as much of the stories shown in the tapestries as possible. When he reached the entrance, the guard smiled.

"Duke Sabbo got his? Good for you," the guard whispered.

"I guess so. I'm not really certain what went on in there."

"Stop by our quarters tonight. I'll explain whatever you want to know."

"Um, thank you. I just might."

Klaus said, "I never thought I'd be guarding the Sacred Hall. How did it go?"

"Apparently, I'm not really in any trouble. The Queen told the Duke that he didn't have a right to study our suits. Then she said I could return to my duties," Gonzales said, upon reaching the entrance to the Sacred Hall to take over.

"You didn't tell her why he really wanted the suit?"

"I wasn't sure that it mattered, not after what Jones told me last night." Klaus looked at Gonzales

with puzzlement. "I learned that quite a few of the women find us desirable. I couldn't very well accuse the Duke of something that some of us engage in as well, especially as there's no law against it," Gonzales whispered.

"Yes, I had a couple of lovelies pass by here who gave me more of a look than they did the suits behind me." Klaus stepped aside so Gonzales could take over as the guard. "I remember some of the women giving such looks to the knights stationed on Minius. I used to think it was because they thought those knights were handsome. I never thought an ugly fish like me would ever get such a reaction. Now I know differently."

"Maybe the women around here prefer ugly fish," Gonzales whispered, with a smile.

"In that case, you and I will have more than a few to choose from," Klaus said.

"Report to your training with Jones!" Gonzales said with mock anger.

Duke Sabbo paused before Gonzales at the Sacred Hall. "We're not finished. You caused me great embarrassment today. I'll not forget that."

Gonzales entered the guardhouse and paused as the voices within quieted to a hush. Heads turned toward him as he surveyed the austere furnishings of rough wooden tables and chairs with little in the way of tapestries. Certainly, the few inside the guardhouse were old and remarkably dull without the benefit of historical art upon them. The food on the tables, however, gave off an aroma as good as what he'd received since becoming a knight.

"Sir Lieutenant Gonzales! You accepted my offer?"

Gonzales accepted the chair the guard pulled out from the table. "Thank you, yes. You offered to explain things to me. One thing I've already learned is that I need to learn more. There's a lot more to being a knight than I first believed."

"I'm Osongh, Imperial Guardsman, though you could probably tell as much from my uniform."

Gonzales nodded. The alternating black and white chevrons that covered the front of Osongh's tunic could be seen from a distance. Friend and foe, alike, could easily recognize an Imperial Guardsman among other troops. As well, Gonzales knew that Osongh was a skilled veteran as the Imperial Guard drew from experienced units only. That Osongh was in the twenty-man-strong Imperial Guard indicated he was in the top ten percent of the standing military in the Kingdom of Cragland.

"Sometimes I wish I was back in the Red and Black, instead of the White and Black," Osongh said, as he offered a bottle by holding it over a wooden cup. "At least, you knew then that your leaders were capable. Otherwise, they never lived long enough to be much of a bother."

Gonzales nodded once at the offer. He didn't need an explanation of what Osongh meant by the Red and Black. Those were the colors of the uniforms worn by the military's professional combat units that closed in to kill the enemy. When not in battle, they trained the civilians how to defend themselves.

"That's plenty for me to drink. Thanks."

"Sounds like you've been warned about flying and drinking," Osongh said, as he set down the bottle.

"I was told that they had to sweep up what was left of Sir Private Ashen. Having seen his suit, I have no reason not to believe how he died."

"Before my time, but I've heard the story. However, the Duke isn't before my time. I can tell you one thing, I'm glad that we have you here. He's incompetent enough to get us killed."

"I don't see how, so long as you remain inside the castle."

Osongh laughed. "Tell him what we practice, Eusis!"

"When we drill, the Duke has us practicing charges. We're supposed to practice defense to protect the Queen. Instead, he has us practicing charging the enemy," Eusis said.

"If raiders ever breach this castle, we're done for. That's why we're glad that you have this new power, and were assigned here," Osongh said. "We feel certain that it doesn't matter what we practice, since they'll never get past you."

"I should think that raiders would never get this far. Certainly not past the cliffs on two sides, and past the Red and Blacks on the other," Gonzales said.

"I heard you ask to look at the tapestries more closely. I can arrange for you to see some that are no longer displayed, if you're truly interested," Osongh said.

"The Mothers' Tears, we call them," Eusis said.

"Before the Knights of the Star came into being, High Crag was defended by five times our number," Osongh said. "The raiders cut through the only unit outside the walls in less than an hour. Then they set siege to High Crag. It didn't fall, but the people outside suffered greatly until the raiders left with the coming of the stormy season."

"They're not pleasant to view. Too many mothers and daughters suffered while their men were murdered or enslaved. This area didn't even bother rebuilding any towns until the Knights proved their worth," Eusis said.

Osongh drew his knife and threw it near a barrel of grain, catching a hairy sneak full in the back. The small pest squeaked out loud once before kicking about as it died on the floor.

"The people back then ate hairy sneaks just to survive. They couldn't hunt, fish, or farm while the raiders besieged the castle. We just kill them for practice." He stood and walked over to retrieve his weapon.

"Actually, I was more interested in viewing the panels showing some of the battles involving the Knights of the Star, so I'd know a bit more about what to expect," Gonzales said.

"A lot of boredom, just like us," Eusis said.

"Can't dispute that. This has to be one of the worst jobs in the kingdom. There might be a lot of marching and drilling in the Red and Blacks, but at least it was usually for the purpose of going somewhere to fight. That is, if the raiders possessed enough backbone to land on our shores," Osongh said, as he returned to his seat.

"Tell him some more about the Duke," Eusis said.

"Such a wonderful soul, he is. If the Queen wasn't so thoroughly insulated from the people, she'd learn just how wonderful he truly is. Be careful around him. He doesn't like the Knights because the people do. He'll use you anyway he can get away with."

"I'll keep that in mind," Gonzales said.

"You should get out and meet some of the people, too. They'd appreciate getting to know you and find out they can depend upon you should the raiders attack High Crag, again," Eusis said.

"I agree with that," Osongh said.

Chapter 11

The guard at the gate stared for a moment at Sir Lieutenant Gonzales as he walked out of the castle. Usually a knight flew over the high walls. However, he was used to seeing Gonzales walk about within the castle grounds more than any other knight. As well, he'd seen Gonzales at the guardhouse on several occasions, though he hadn't yet met him. At least, the guard knew that Gonzales was a friendly sort, who didn't mind conversing with some of his friends and comrades.

Gonzales considered flying down the same winding path that he'd traveled up before becoming a knight. Along its length outside the castle stood numerous applicants, all similar in size, who hoped to qualify. A hush befell them upon his exit through the gate as they stared at him in his black armor suit.

"It's all right. The tests are still going on within. I just felt like going for a stroll."

Smiles greeted his message, along with, "Blessings be upon you, brave knight!"

Gonzales returned their smiles. He couldn't help noticing that a number of hands sought to touch him as he passed by. Rather than admonish them for touching the suit, he let them get away with it. He knew that it would be the closest that many of them could manage. Besides, as the other knights had stated before, there was no telling which of them might be a fighting companion later on. It was best not to antagonize anyone without a strong reason.

"Thank you for your blessings. Thank you," Gonzales repeated several times, until he finally reached the end of the line.

"Fly for us! Please show us you can fly."

" *Five up*," Gonzales said.

The crowd grew silent as they gained confirmation that a knight designated by god had actually walked beside them. A few clenched hands to their chests as if those were now possessed of magic for having touched a true knight.

" *Land*," Gonzales commanded. Then he walked once more down the path.

Townfolk stopped in their tracks upon spotting Gonzales entering the town. With no particular goal in mind, he'd just followed the main road, even though that would eventually lead to the docks where some of the people earned their living fishing. As well, a small contingent of Red and Blacks remained stationed near the docks to defend those against invasion. Larger units stood positioned outside the town where they could maneuver. Gonzales gave little thought to the military as he entered the town. Instead, he nodded in a friendly manner to the people who gawked at the sight of him mostly because he was walking.

"Are you hurt?" one man asked, while hurrying to Gonzales.

"Not at all. It just seemed like a nice day to walk," Gonzales said.

"But you can fly?"

" *Five up. Land.*"

"Then you just want to walk?" the man asked.

"I just decided to walk. It seemed like the right thing to do today."

"You're not in Cragless for anything in particular?"

"It was suggested to me that I take time to meet some of the friendliest people in the Allied Kingdoms, as well as let them meet me."

"Except for some occasional raiders, we are a friendly town of people. I'm Aboc, Fish Salter and Exporter by trade."

"Sir Lieutenant Gonzales..."

"You're our new knight in charge of coordinating defense? We've heard of you. People! Gather round! This is Sir Lieutenant Gonzales," Aboc called out.

More than a few men stepped forward to meet Gonzales. A few women moved closer to get a better view of him. After a few minutes of introductions, Gonzales found himself escorted down the street by the group. Older men pointed out key locations where raiders had been stopped or trapped in past skirmishes. Younger men wanted to know if he could really knock out an entire boat of raiders on his own. When, at last, lunchtime approached, Gonzales found himself asked to eat at more than one establishment.

"I'm not looking for anything fancy to eat. Frankly, I'm still a simple man from Copra..."

"A knight in our service is entitled to better than merely adequate rations," Aboc said.

"He should eat and rest at the Storm Watch!"

"No, he should visit the Black Kettle!"

"Where do the sailors eat when they come into port?" Gonzales asked. "If there are any to be found, I might learn more from them."

Aboc exclaimed, "The Thieving Seabird! He'll meet sailors there. Come along with us, Sir Gonzales."

Gonzales walked among the men as they led the way to the restaurant. The group rounded a corner and headed for the docks. As they set foot upon the wooden boardwalk, a commotion broke out somewhat ahead. A woman screamed, causing everyone to halt and stare ahead.

" *Five up, forward...hover, four down, land,*" Gonzales said, as he flew the short distance to investigate.

"God's knight! Sir, what can we do for you?" a man gasped, even as the woman who had screamed struggled against him.

"Tell me what's going on, please," Gonzales said.

"He's a raider!" the woman said.

"I'm not a raider. I operate the Thieving Seabird. This woman ordered food without any money to pay when I brought the service. I'm just tossing her out," the man said.

"You have no money?" Gonzales asked.

"No, sir."

"What about letting her earn a meal? Perhaps she could work for you? Wouldn't that benefit both of you?" Gonzales asked.

"Are you willing to work?"

"Will you let me eat first?"

"How do I know you'll work if I feed you?"

"Even I was trusted before I earned the right to be a Knight of the Star. If she fails, then call the Squire and lodge a complaint," Gonzales said.

"Yes, she'd make a nice addition to the Squire's women."

"I won't fail you," the woman said, knowing fully what fate would befall her if she fell legally into the Squire's hands.

The proprietor released his grip on the woman. "Very well, go eat your meal. When you finish, seek me out and I'll provide work for you. Does this meet with your approval, Sir?"

"It's not my approval you should seek. God is the only one who can judge our actions in light of our inner feelings," Gonzales said.

"Paysha! Sir Lieutenant Gonzales chose your restaurant to eat at today!" Aboc gasped, as he and the rest of the escorting group caught up. "Is everything all right?"

"This is the knight with the new power we've heard about?" Paysha exclaimed.

"Yes, he's the one!" Aboc gasped, as he caught his breath.

"Welcome! Welcome! Welcome! Please, come into my establishment!"

"Thank you, I will. I asked where the sailors eat. Your restaurant was recommended."

"Yes, we do have lots of sailors. In fact, one of them gave me the name for my restaurant. He said he knew the food had to be good if the seabirds were swooping down to steal from the plates. That was before we had any walls in place. I'll empty a table just for you."

"No thanks, I don't mind having company to talk with. That's partly why I'm here. Just seat me with anyone who doesn't mind sharing a table," Gonzales said.

The proprietor glanced around. "Any preferences as to who?"

"None at all."

"This way, please." Paysha led the way to a table with one empty chair. "Gentlemen, do you mind sharing your table with Sir Gonzales?"

The three men stood immediately. "He's welcome," one answered.

"Thank you, gentlemen. Please return to your meals," Gonzales said, as he pulled out the one unused chair that turned out to have a wobbly leg.

"Take mine, Sir Gonzales."

Gonzales shook his head. "This chair is fine. It reminds me of home."

"I see. So you've never actually seen a sea monster?" Gonzales asked.

"Would you be wanting anything else?" a familiar female voice asked.

"Well, I thought I saw a sea monster one time."

Gonzales turned to see that the woman he'd assisted earlier was wearing an old worn apron over her clothes. "I could use a bit more water in my cup."

"Yes, sir. I'll fetch it immediately."

"Describe it, please. I'd really like to know what you saw," Gonzales said.

"Well, it was big; bigger than our ship. However, it didn't have any tentacles like I'd heard. If it did, it kept those hidden under the water. Anyway, it slid past us in the water and didn't seem to care about us in the least. Then it was gone just as fast as it appeared. I thought others saw it, but no one admitted to seeing it at all. Of course, I couldn't just go around hollering about something that wasn't in sight anymore. Still, I feel certain that I saw a sea monster."

"Your water, Sir." The woman reached over and took his mug before dipping it into the bucket of water she carried. "Will there be anything else, Sir?"

Gonzales turned to her. "No, thank you. This is fine." He turned back to his conversation.

"How was your visit to Cragless?" the guard at the gate, asked.

Gonzales stopped. "Quite informative, Eusis. I could have learned a lot more, but I knew that it was nearly time for the tests. Maybe we'll receive more knights today."

"We can only hope so. You're welcome to stop by tonight."

"Thank you. I probably will after the final tests."

Gonzales entered through the gate without paying any more attention to the dozens of people setting up camp outside the walls in anticipation of trying out for knighthood the following day. Even as he disappeared from sight, more applicants were arriving and approaching the guard. Eusis turned to one of the proctors and accepted a pressed leaf, which he then handed to the next applicant.

"Return along the line of shelters until you see one bearing this symbol. Sleep in it for tonight. When you wake in the morning, get into line behind the person whose shelter is ahead of yours. Keep this with you to return to the guard when you reach the gate."

"Was that a real knight who walked past just now?"

Eusis nodded. "He's a good fellow, too. Doesn't lord it over anyone that he can fly. Doesn't mind walking among us or eating his meals with us, either."

Chapter 12

"See me when Jones relieves you," Proctor Smith whispered to Gonzales, as he stood guard over the Sacred Hall.

"Certainly. Is there a problem?"

"Not a serious one, but one that you can resolve, I believe."

"I will certainly seek you out when I'm relieved."

Gonzales hovered over the castle for a few moments before he caught sight of Smith in the courtyard. He then moved into position and landed a few paces away.

"Ah, I'm glad you remembered."

"Yes, sir. What's the problem?" Gonzales asked.

"There's a woman in town asking for a knight's mercy. Yours in particular."

"Mine?"

"By name. Proctor Gly of Cragless hustled up here to inform me of that. The Squire of Cragless is waiting upon word from you as to whether you intend to administer mercy or leave her to him. I can tell Proctor Gly to return and deliver her to the Squire if you've no desire to become involved."

"That won't be necessary. I'll visit Cragless and find out what's going on before I say anything more on this."

Upon reaching the town church, Gonzales wasn't surprised to discover the woman to be the same one he'd assisted the day before. "If you expect me to rescue you from whatever new trouble you've managed to fall within..."

"No, only to rescue me from the hands of Paysha! I beg a knight's mercy. He wants me to work all of today, as well, for just the one meal he gave!"

Gonzales glanced at the proctor. "Is this true?"

"Paysha is known to be somewhat miserly, even though he serves a good meal," the proctor said.

Gonzales thought for a moment. "More than a day's work for a single meal? She'd never pay her debt off at that rate. Yes, I'll grant her a knight's mercy."

"Blessings be upon you!" the woman cried.

"You'd best fly off with her now. People will understand if they see proof of your mercy. I'll explain to Paysha that you've granted Deliah your mercy," the proctor said.

Gonzales would have to do just that. He'd learned that in his initial lessons, something that Jones and some proctors were teaching the new knights. At the time it seemed noble and unlikely to ever happen to him, even though he'd imagined how it might feel. Now he realized it was more serious than he'd ever imagined.

"Yes, of course. Follow me outside." Deliah followed Gonzales outside the town church to where he stopped. "Come around to my front and reach around me." He reached around Deliah as her

arms grasped together around his neck. " *Five up, five up, forward, five left.*"

Her head pressed against his helmet as Deliah struggled to hold on tight. "Please don't drop me!"

"I won't. *Five left.*"

"Where are we going?"

"I'm taking you to High Crag for now."

"What will happen there?"

"Nothing. When we reach the castle, I'll release you to go on your way. It would be best if you avoid Cragless when you do."

"Actually, I was on my way to Castle High Crag to apply for knighthood."

"In that case, you won't have any farther to walk. *Hover, four down, four down, land.*"

Gonzales felt his feet touch the ground and released his hold on Deliah. She continued to hold on tightly.

"We're here. You can let go now."

Deliah glanced down. Upon seeing the ground beneath her toes, she finally released her hold around his neck. "Thank you for your mercy."

"See the guard for instructions."

"I know what to expect from here. I learned that much already from applicants who tried and failed."

Gonzales watched as she approached the guard to accept a waiting list leaf. He was soon satisfied that she no longer needed any assistance.

" *Five up, five up, forward, down, five up! Land.*" Blessings, he thought, that was a close one.

Chapter 13

"Blessings upon you, brave knight. May I pass?" Deliah asked.

Jones glanced at the knotted cord the woman carried clenched in her fist. Nodding slightly, he stepped aside so she could enter the Sacred Hall. She entered and took a seat upon the stone floor where she stared at the hollow suits for a moment before closing her eyes. Jones was already back into

position blocking the entrance so that no one could enter without his permission. A proctor's bell rang announcing the hour. Moments afterward, Klaus alit on the ground before him.

"I'm here to relieve you."

"Very well. How's Gonzales doing?"

"He's still feeling awful. He finally got out of his suit, though. Gwinn is taking him his lunch soon. Maybe he'll hold his food down."

"That's good. It's bad enough getting a cold. Even worse when you find yourself giving spells that you don't understand."

"I still don't know what he said. Whatever it was, I'm fairly certain that he caused my god lights to flicker all about."

"Same here. Sir Private Van Dyke sent word that we're to keep him in bed until he's better and not to let him get near the other knights. He's already moving the two knights at the next castle to keep them from experiencing whatever spells we're under. They're the only other knights affected, it seems. He's hoping that distance will have the same effect on these strange manifestations as it does on the god voice."

"Just one applicant so far?" Klaus asked.

"Just her. Still, the day is young. More will probably qualify before time for the final test."

"We can only hope that god is still working through Sir Lieutenant Gonzales to give us the tools we need for helping our people."

"I'm sure he must be. So much was lost when his namesake died before passing on all the knowledge god meant to send us through Sir Private Malidor." Jones glanced at the hollow suits. "Some of them are still flashing. Whatever he said is still in effect."

Klaus turned to glance inside. "Even the Sir Private Ashen suit is blinking, though it appears feeble beside the others. There must still be magic within it."

"Gonzales was right to refuse that suit to Duke Sabbo."

Gwinn and Jones landed at almost the same instant as bells announced the end of the day for the proctors and laborers who ushered out their charges. They stepped toward Klaus who stood aside.

"Still only one?" Jones asked.

"She's the only one to be tested," Klaus said, as several senior proctors approached.

The proctors showed no surprise at seeing only one person within the Sacred Hall. They had even experienced days when no one qualified for the final test. Still, those days were few and there were nearly as few with only one applicant. As with any other test, two proctors bracketed the applicant and led her from suit to suit. The remainder stood and observed. When Deliah finished with the last suit

without succeeding, she turned to the knights.

"I'm sorry. I really tried. Isn't Sir Gonzales here? I wanted to thank him for believing in me, even though I failed."

"He's sick in bed," Jones said. "Besides, it's been our experience that god often sends people here to fail so they can accomplish something elsewhere... Blessings be!"

Jones facial expression caused Deliah and the others to turn and stare in wonder at a suit that opened on its own. Lights flickered across the open chest plates.

"It's the Sir Private Cardin suit!" a proctor said.

"Can it be beckoning her?" Gwinn asked.

"She must have passed, after all," Klaus said in a soft voice.

"Five knights this year. Never before have so many been accepted in a single year," the eldest proctor said. He gently pulled the woman back to the suit and assisted her in placing it on.

Jones grasped the two sides of the open front and shoved those back together until they clicked closed. Then he stood in obvious puzzlement.

"Is something wrong?" the eldest proctor asked.

"Her light didn't come on," Jones said. "I expected to see a god light come on. Do either of you see another god light?"

Klaus shook his head.

"Nothing happened," Gwinn said.

"What now, Proctor Raash?" Klaus asked.

"She must seek guidance from god. Escort her to the church where she can meditate further," Proctor Raash said.

Jones turned to Klaus. "I'll take care of the hollow suits. You and Gwinn take her to the church."

"This way, please," Klaus said.

The woman followed Klaus out of the Sacred Hall. Gwinn followed her.

"*Five up*," Klaus said, upon halting just outside.

"Shouldn't we just walk?" Gwinn asked.

"*Land*," Klaus said. "Can you fly?"

"Do you want me to try?" Deliah asked.

"Maybe you're right. We should all walk," Klaus said.

" *Master override activated.*"

"Blessings, I think I just heard god speak," Deliah said, as each of their suits opened on their own.

"Does god want us to pray with her?" Gwinn asked. She snapped her suit closed once more.

"I'm not certain. It seems that god wants us to walk with her. As to prayer, it sure won't hurt," Klaus said, closing his suit.

"For now, I think we should leave mine open until god says otherwise," Deliah said.

Jones entered the church a while later. He quietly made his way to where the three suited figures sat. Upon reaching them, he wagged one finger indicating that they should get up and follow. Moments later, they stood outside the church.

"Klaus, see to Gonzales. You might have to stay with him tonight. Call on me, if you need any assistance. For now, Gwinn will stay with our future Sir Private Cardin," Jones said.

"Should she fly up to my room?" Gwinn asked.

"Can she fly? I still haven't seen her god light come on," Jones said, as he reached out to Deliah's open suit and pressed it closed.

"There's still no light," Gwinn said.

"She'll have to try. Give the *five up* command. *Land* ," Jones said, as he hastily corrected his own suit.

" *Five up*," Deliah said.

"Keep trying," Klaus said. "God requires that it be said perfectly or he won't let you fly."

" *Five up*," Deliah said.

"That's true," Gwinn said. "It took him ten tries to fly for the first time. When he got the command right, he went so high, I thought he'd never stop."

" *Five up*," Deliah said.

"Fortunately, Jones caught up with me and advised me that *land* was the best command under the circumstances so I wouldn't dig a hole for myself in the ground," Klaus said.

" *Five up, five up, five up*," Deliah said.

"Take it easy. There's no need to rush, Sir Private Cardin," Jones said.

"I'm not Sir Private Cardin yet. Wouldn't it be better to call me Deliah?"

" *Deliah*."

"God said her name?" Jones exclaimed.

"That's what I thought I heard," Gwinn said.

"What does this mean?" Deliah asked.

"I'm not certain." Jones glanced up at the sky. "It's still clear. I'm going to fly out far enough to contact Sir Private Van Dyke and ask him about this. Perhaps he'll know. Wait here. I'll be back soon. If I'm not, have the Red and Blacks search along the coast."

"What's he mean by that?" Deliah asked.

"He's concerned that he might have to land in the dark if the weather is bad farther away," Klaus said.

" *Five up, five up, five up*," Jones said.

Though the others couldn't see him, they could still hear his commands as he flew off.

"Jones to any knight not at High Crag."

"Jones? This is Moto. What's the problem?"

"Get hold of Van Dyke. Tell him that god is calling an applicant by her name through one of the suits. We need guidance on how to handle this. I'm returning to High Crag now. Did you understand me?"

"God is talking to an applicant?"

"The Cardin suit opened, but god addressed the woman by her name. Tell that to Van Dyke. I need to return now. There's a storm coming up. I don't want to be caught in it."

"You don't need to tell me about the storm. It's all around me. Still, I'll try to get in touch with Van Dyke for you."

Jones corrected one more time for the town ahead as he sailed through the dark with only occasional lightning flashes to guide himself. He felt glad that his instructors had spent time teaching him how to fly at night, should it ever be necessary. It had turned out to be extremely necessary. Raiders sometimes tried to slip by the knights in the dark so they'd reach the shore at dawn. Of course, that required having a spy already on shore to guide them to safe beaches. The downside was that the torches also guided the knights to where the spies could be found.

There were also times when a knight needed assistance. The fastest way to reach one under such circumstances was to fly. Had Gonzales not been sick, the mission would have been a good one for him, though he seemed to be more involved in what happened. Jones actually suspected that Gonzales was somehow one of god's direct conduits.

Still, he wished that it hadn't happened when a storm was moving in. Night travel was dangerous enough, particularly at low levels. Storm travel was even more dangerous. It was too easy for the winds

to flip a knight over several times before his flight could re-stabilize. Some of those same winds also caused huge dips and swells in the sky as if one was riding across the waves on the ocean into the shore. Jones didn't mind the swells so much as the dips that carried one close to the ground at speeds fast enough to kill or shear off limbs.

" *Hover!*" Jones shouted through his chattering jaws, as he struggled to hear himself over the wind that whipped his arms and legs. He felt equally glad that he didn't need to hold his sword, because his hands were too numb to grip his blade. Were he to see a raider, he'd have to watch helplessly since he couldn't attack while unable to fight. " *Five left! Five left ! Forward !*"

"Did you reach Van Dyke?" Klaus asked.

"Still awake? How's Gonzales?"

"Yes, I'm still awake," Gwinn answered.

"Gonzales seems to be sleeping better. I gave him a potion that the elder proctor provided. Right now, I'm just sitting up with him. I was outside, but there's a storm coming in," Klaus said.

"Sorry, I didn't realize, Sir Sergeant Klaus," Gwinn said.

"Yes, I know. I'm in it. I thought I could fly faster than it, but it caught up with me. At the first good break I see, I'm going to land. I'll walk the rest of the way if I have to, though I'll probably seek some shelter first for the rest of the night. How's Deliah doing?"

"She's sleeping, but the suit is still on her," Gwinn said. "She can't fly yet, so I had to carry her up to my quarters."

Chapter 14

Van Dyke landed near Jones in the courtyard only hours after the last of the storm had passed over Castle High Crag. "I may have to remain here a few days. There's another storm coming. I just barely kept ahead of it."

"Gonzales is feeling better this morning. He's still sneezing and throwing up, but he's not talking in strange spell words any longer," Jones said.

"What about the new woman god addresses personally?"

"Gwinn stays by Deliah's side constantly. If you see her, don't close the suit. She can't get it off unless Gonzales speaks one of the strange spell words."

"Did you hear his spell words? Do you remember what he said?"

"After the first incident caught us by surprise we listened to whatever he said and noted what

appeared to happen, and informed a proctor to record it. Still, we're not certain which words he spoke caused the resultant actions. Klaus has been listening very carefully to everything Gonzales says, even when he's not in his suit."

"Probably a wise decision on your part. We were fortunate to have two new knights still in training who could assist you. I will visit Gonzales. Find the senior proctor and have him gather all the proctors together at the Sacred Hall. Klaus and I will bring Gonzales there."

"Why? The proctors are sure to ask that," Jones said.

"Tell them that we need their knowledge on what Sir Malidor passed along to the first proctors devoted solely to assisting our Order. They should bring their old words."

Gonzales sat on a bench that was still wet from the recent storm. Normally, it was used by the proctors during applicant testing. In his weakened condition, he needed to rest some more so that he could be in attendance. Proctors sat beside him and on other benches with their ancient texts. The other knights stood monitoring their god lights in case anything noteworthy took place.

"Proctor Raash, what is your opinion?" Van Dyke asked.

Raash stared at Van Dyke with ancient eyes. His time of service dated back through half the existence of the Knights of the Star, long enough that he briefly knew some of the very first proctors assigned to guide the knights by the church.

"I have researched this matter since shortly after the suit opened for Deliah. In my opinion, you made an excellent choice in assigning Sir Lieutenant Gonzales to guard the hollow suits as his namesake once did. Somehow, god has seen fit to guide him into opening a suit to a new knight who should be permitted to keep her name, as did Sir Private Malidor. There is a strong possibility that god deliberately limited Gonzales by giving him an illness so that he couldn't give names to all the other suits."

"God gave me this illness?" Gonzales asked.

"Ridiculous," the retired Smith snorted. "We all came down with an illness at least once. Many experienced several bouts of sickness each year. God had nothing to do with those."

"God taught us all significant lessons by giving us an illness soon after knighthood," Van Dyke said.

Raash held out one unsteady hand to request silence. "Even if god did not give Gonzales this illness, he may have taken advantage of the situation to have one of his knightly positions filled with a worthy soul. We can test this for ourselves. She may have performed an act that god feels should be specially rewarded."

"How can we test this?" Van Dyke asked.

Raash turned his head toward Deliah. "Have her ask the suit to activate in her name. If it does, then that may very well be a sign from god that she is to become a knight."

Van Dyke nodded to Jones. Jones turned to Deliah and pressed her suit closed.

"I hope you know what you're doing," Deliah said.

"Repeat after me, *activate Sir Deliah suit*," Jones said.

" *Activate Sir Deliah suit.*"

" *Sir is not recognized as a legal rank. Repeat command,*" the suit voiced.

Deliah's eyes widened. "God spoke to me."

"Leave out the sir and try it again," Van Dyke said.

" *Activate Deliah suit.*"

"She must need a first name," Raash said, upon seeing nothing happen.

"Try it as *activate Private Deliah suit*," Van Dyke said.

" *Activate Private Deliah suit.*"

Upon hearing several knights gasp, Raash asked, "What's happening that I can't see?"

"Our god lights are blinking all over," Van Dyke whispered. "Some of them are moving. The symbols that marked Sir Private Cardin have changed and moved down in position."

"There's definitely a new light on," Jones said.

"I can see lights, too," Deliah said.

"God just spoke to me," Gonzales said, in a wheezy voice.

"What did God say?" Raash asked.

" *Private Deliah reporting for duty,*" Gonzales said.

Raash flipped through some of the ancient leaves while Van Dyke observed over his shoulder. He stopped at one of the earliest and read silently, while his withered finger traced the text so he wouldn't lose his place.

" *Duty* is mentioned by Sir Malidor, but none of the rest. Taken as Sir Malidor understood it to mean, she is now a knight."

"Find out if you have control now, Sir Private Deliah," Van Dyke said. "Follow my hand signals."

Deliah watched as Van Dyke gave the same hand commands she'd learned as an applicant. "*Five up! Yike!*"

"You obviously have control," Van Dyke said, before giving her more hand commands and finally bringing her back to a landing beside him.

"Sick or not, that means I must escort her to Castle Staten Island for her oath," Gonzales said.

"Yes, you should," Proctor Smith said.

Van Dyke glanced up at the dark clouds rolling in, as another storm approached. "It will be better if you wait until the storm passes. Am I correct that others before us have waited rather than taking an unnecessary risk, Proctor Raash?"

"An oath can indeed wait for a storm to pass," Raash said. "Nor has the oath been necessary when danger threatened the people. God accepts the oath afterward. Actions are always more important."

"Some delay might be good in light of Gonzales' illness. In a few more days, he should be over whatever ails him, I hope," Jones said.

"He has had the brief illness?" Van Dyke asked.

"It appeared to be that. If it wasn't, I doubt that he'd be out of bed right now," Jones said.

Raash nodded. "I agree. I've seen enough of the knights come down with this before. He should be well again in another day or two."

"Then it's decided. He'll escort Sir Private Deliah after the storm passes when he is fully well. Jones will have Klaus and Gwinn assist in guarding the hollow suits until his return, so there's no need to send them elsewhere, yet. Besides, they're still in training. Am I correct?" Van Dyke said.

Jones nodded. "I'll give Deliah some elementary instruction beforehand. If god wills it, she'll be ready to fly on her own when Gonzales is well."

"As will I," Van Dyke said, as a hail of cold rain broke from the sky. "Jones, get Proctor Raash back inside. Klaus, get Gonzales back to his room. Gwinn, take Deliah to your room. I'll be with Proctor Smith."

Van Dyke glanced around the church before he turned back to Proctor Smith. "I need to know your true feelings. Do you believe that Gonzales should take over the Order? Was this knighthood that god conferred upon Deliah a sign that I should turn over the leadership?"

Proctor Smith shook his head. "I don't know what god wants. You know that I feel the suits are machines."

"I can't believe that. Machines would react the same way every time. Sword grinders do not ever vary. Nor do pottery trundles. Those are machines, so..."

"Those are simple mechanical machines. You know as well as I that our suits have something to do with the very lightning we see in our storms."

"Lightning is a power belonging to god." Van Dyke lightly ran one hand over the burnished wood back of a prayer seat.

"It's useless trying to explain what I believe if you insist on attributing everything to god," Smith said.

"Our Order has no meaning if our work isn't devoted to the glory of god in caring for his people. That is the reason for this church. That is the reason for our Order, which the church has backed."

"Then I have to state that I do not believe that god wants Gonzales to take over. However, you would do well in having him watched. He might believe eventually that he's meant to lead simply because he appears to wield more power than the other knights. He might want to do good just as do you and the other knights. Still, he could succumb to evil in order to remove you from the leadership, so that he can lead in name as well."

"You really believe that?" Van Dyke asked.

"I've been with him long enough to make my own observations. I can only warn you. What you do about him is completely up to you."

"When you next see Proctor Coffin, advise her that I need to speak with her unless she mentions that we've already spoken." Smith cocked his head for a moment as if questioning why. "She may have to be my eyes and ears among the new women. They might wish to follow Gonzales."

"Yes, she'd be a good choice. I will keep her advised as to what I might overhear or see. That way, you need ask only one of us to learn the latest. Gonzales might become suspicious if both of us are constantly reporting to you after being with him."

"In that case, I'll have her advise you as well."

"Thank you for your trust."

Chapter 15

"Are you certain that you feel up to this?" Jones asked, as Gonzales rechecked the rope linking him to Deliah. "Before he left, Van Dyke said her oath could wait until the end of the stormy season."

"It's my responsibility to give her the oath. I'm not sick any longer. Besides, we appear to have a good break in the weather for travel. If it changes, we'll hold up in Castle Staten Island until the weather becomes more favorable. Anyway, you know that I need to fly more."

Jones looked through the bag of provisions that Deliah carried, before turning to Gonzales to check his. "What about water?"

"Gwinn offered to fill our water pouches for us. We'll leave once we have those in hand," Gonzales said. He rechecked his alignment just as Gwinn flew over with the pouches. "Thank you, Gwinn."

"You're welcome, Gonzales. Be careful and travel with his blessings," Gwinn said, as she looped water pouches over both Deliah and Gonzales.

"Are those raiders?" Deliah asked.

Gonzales glanced over to see where Deliah was pointing. Far off on the horizon, a single ship powered by oars plowed through the waves. Its one mast stood broken at mid-point, incapable of holding a sail.

"Yes, those are raiders."

"Should we go back and warn the others?"

"It's only one boat. They're not intent on invading our lands. If they were, there'd be lots of boats with them. They're probably fishing or lost. They're not even heading for our shores."

"Then should we go down and fight them?"

"We don't need to. Remember, our oath instructs us to fight only when necessary. It's really not necessary right now. Let's go over the oath once more. It's something we try to live and not just say because it sounds noble."

After almost landing in the surf, Gonzales led the way on foot to Castle Staten Island. In the gloomy light, the god lights from inside shone better than he'd ever noticed before.

"What is that?" Deliah asked, about one large screen in a bulkhead.

"No one knows. It just circles about endlessly going from one color to another. Some of the proctors have speculated that it's trapped lightning. Look around for a few moments, if you want. Then we'll conduct your oath."

"I think I'm ready. If we delay any longer, I might forget it."

"You won't. Step over to that wall and place your hand upon the star. Then repeat after me."

Deliah set down her supplies and walked over to the wall. She placed her hand against the star.

" *Welcome, Private Deliah.*"

Deliah jerked her hand away for a moment before placing it against the wall once more.

"Has anyone tried to close this door?"

"What good would that do?" Gonzales asked.

"You say that god doesn't speak like this to everyone?" Deliah asked.

"Proctor Raash told me that I was the first to hear god inside Castle Staten Island since Sir Private Malidor. You're the second. He and the others will be even more interested in you upon our return. Somehow, we're special, though I don't know why. Proctor Smith spent a month out here trying to shed some light upon the mysteries that god sent us, without any success."

"What mysteries?"

"Well, one mystery is the matter of opening the doors. We believe that over there and opposite that on the other side are doors. You can see that they're identical in shape to this opening within the wall. Do you see any way of opening those?"

"I don't know. I just wondered if anyone had tried. Maybe this isn't a door. Maybe those just happen to be the same shape."

"Those have to be doors. Sir Private Malidor went through them." Gonzales sneezed several times in quick succession.

"Blessings be. You're still not completely well."

"I've been well for over a week. I just hope I'm not becoming ill once more. Jones told me that most of the knights have suffered frequent bouts of the brief illness."

"You'd think that god would grant us some relief," Deliah said.

"It's believed that this is one of the ways god reminds us to be humble and not assume greatness simply because we can fly. Sh! I hear voices."

"God?"

"No, from outside. Now keep quiet." Gonzales walked to the jagged opening in the Staten Island and peered out cautiously. He hastily ducked back inside. "Raiders. They must have landed. Draw your sword and be ready to fight."

Deliah drew her sword and stood ready behind Gonzales, as he drew his. "They must be the ones we saw earlier."

"Keep quiet. They might not come in if they don't hear us."

"Sorry."

Gonzales glared ever so briefly at Deliah before turning back to watch the entrance.

"There it is! Just like Basoc described."

"Yes! With this in our control, there will be no more knights. The Order will crumble."

"Quiet, you fool! There might be someone here. Basoc warned that the knights sometimes leave one of their retired brethren here for weeks to study and meditate. Old they might be, but they can still fight!"

"They mean to take god's castle. We'll have to fight," Deliah whispered.

"I'll have to fight. You'll fly back to High Crag and call out until someone hears you," Gonzales said.

"I'm not leaving you. God chose me to become a knight," Deliah said.

"You took an oath. Live up to it. My order is for you to fly back and alert the other knights, so they can fly out here before it's too late. Once you reach them with a warning, you can return. Now get ready to leave as soon as I gain their attention."

"How?"

"As soon as I have them looking at me, move up to the entrance and give the commands to fly right from there."

"I don't think there's enough room. What if I hit the ceiling?" Deliah asked.

"I'll charge the raiders so you can step outside before you fly. This is probably why god chose to give me extra power. Now get ready to follow me and don't stop for anything."

Gonzales carefully wiped away the perspiration that coated his forehead inside his helmet. He clenched his sword tighter in his other hand, and carefully stepped around the pile of debris to stand visible in the opening.

"This is sacred ground! Leave if you value your lives!" Gonzales shouted, as he stepped forward.

"A knight!"

"Leave!" Gonzales shouted, as he held his sword up over his head.

The raiders stopped at the sudden appearance of a second knight.

"Another knight! Is this a trap?"

" *Up!*"

"Keep going, Deliah!" Gonzales said.

A moment later, Gonzales backed up to the entrance so that he could be attacked only from the front. His action encouraged the raiders to resume their advance.

"Get him!"

" *Activate sonic,*" Gonzales said, as two arrows flew at him.

" *Identify...target identified.*"

Gonzales stared out at the group of men who had been knocked out. Those farther away remained on their feet. They halted and stared in horror at their comrades who had fallen simultaneously before a single knight.

"To the boat!"

"He has the new power!"

"Back to the boat!"

In a panic, the remaining raiders ran across the sand toward their boat. Gonzales lowered his sword to his side as there was no longer a need to fight. It wasn't until the fleeing raiders shoved off from the beach that he realized he still faced a serious problem. The raiders before him on the sand would eventually revive. He needed to disarm them. At least, without weapons, they'd pose less of a threat. With his sword at the ready, Gonzales walked among the recumbent bodies to pick up their weapons and carry those into the castle.

"Sir Lieutenant Gonzales, can you hear me?" Deliah asked.

"Yes, I can hear you. Did you get the message out?"

"Blessings be, you're still alive. Jones is relaying your message. How badly are you hurt? I'll be there as soon as I can spot the island."

"I'm not hurt at all. Use a spell to turn slightly to your sword side."

"You know where I am?"

"My god view shows that you're almost here, but you'll pass away from the island unless you turn some."

" *Five right!* How's that?"

"You're almost perfectly aligned. You should see the island in a few moments."

"That's good. I'm freezing."

"You shouldn't fly so fast then."

"I was worried about you."

"Thank you, I appreciate that."

" *Hover!* Okay, how do I get back now?"

Gonzales chuckled at how Deliah had overshot the island and now hovered over the surf. If she landed, she'd get a dunking. "You'll just have to give more spells to turn yourself. Then give a forward once you have the ground beneath you."

"You think this is funny?"

"We all do that eventually. Even when you think you're experienced enough not to do that, it still happens on occasion."

"Just remember you said that in case you over-fly and I laugh at you. By the way, I didn't see the

raider boat."

"Most of them fled shortly after you left."

"You killed the others all by yourself?"

"Not exactly. The ones who didn't run are tied up and sitting under a keel."

"You captured them?"

"I couldn't kill them while they were helpless. As soon as you land, you can assist me in guarding them."

"First I want to get warmed up. I'm freezing!"

Van Dyke landed upon the sandy beach with five other knights he'd pulled from their assignments across the Allied Kingdoms. He knew well before reaching the island that Gonzales and Deliah were both alive and in control of fifteen prisoners.

"You should have just killed them. They've violated our sacred ground."

"They know of a spy in our midst. I overheard one mention the name Basoc before they knew we were here," Gonzales said.

Van Dyke halted with a stunned look on his face. "I've not heard that name for a long time. However, I'm not a spy."

"You're Basoc?" Deliah asked.

"I used to be Duke Basoc before I swore my oath. However, it's not an uncommon name. Quite likely, someone else by that name is the spy. When we return, we'll notify the Council of Kings, so they can send out their agents to investigate everyone by that name and find the spy. Now we had best kill these raiders for violating god's castle."

"I can't kill these men while they're helpless. You said that we have to obey our oaths not to kill unless absolutely necessary," Gonzales said.

"It might be wiser to question them. We should find out what more they know than where this island is located and who might be here," Deliah said.

"We can't keep these men on our sacred ground," Moto said. "Besides, there's no food or water for them."

"What if we carry them back to the mainland for questioning? Their presence might force the spy to flee," Lee said.

Van Dyke turned to Lee. "You've a good suggestion there. When the spy flees to avoid capture, we'll know who he is for certain. Return with Moto, and bring back enough ropes for us to suspend these prisoners between two knights."

"We've already got a rope that can be used," Gonzales said. He retrieved the rope he'd used to guide Deliah to the island.

"In that case, they can carry the first prisoner with them and turn him over to the Duke of High Crag. Fifteen prisoners? That means we'll have to make several trips apiece. Moto, Lee, bring back more food and water with you, as well. There won't be enough daylight to make another flight. This may take several days to accomplish."

"I'm supposed to hold your prisoners?" Duke Sabbo exclaimed from behind a large, ornate desk in his office.

He'd just listened to Sir Private Lee explain about the prisoner in the courtyard and the others to be flown in later. Proctor Smith had accompanied Lee to the Duke, so that Lee encountered no delays in being heard. Moto remained in the courtyard with the prisoner. The two knights had used their god voice to contact Jones before they reached Castle High Crag so that the supplies could be waiting for their arrival. Jones had, of course, consulted with the proctors to obtain what was needed. At the same time, Moto and Lee needed a brief rest to warm up before returning to Castle Staten Island.

"Think of how it would impress the Queen. You need only break these prisoners and gain information concerning the spy they know about. Surely, any spy who threatens the Order also threatens you and the Queen," Proctor Smith said in a soft voice.

"Yes, it would impress Queen Neesha. It might even elevate her status in the council," Sabbo said. He knew well enough that any increase in her status would apply to his own.

"If you would break these men, have them thrown in cells. Have your guards withhold water from them until time for questioning. Then they'll tell all they know for one drink. There won't be any need to beat them," Smith said.

Sabbo nodded. "Very well, Sir Private Lee. I'll accept your prisoner and the rest when they're delivered. Give me a moment to arrange for my guards to take the one outside into custody." Sabbo rang a bell to summon a servant.

"Come along, Lee. We're finished here. We'll get your supplies loaded up so you and Moto can return before darkness gets any closer," Smith said.

Lee followed along without speaking until they were outside in the courtyard. "This should have been settled before we arrived."

"My apologies, but I was busy gathering the supplies you needed so you could return sooner. Those had to be selected and bundled together. As far as I was concerned, the welfare of the knights at Castle Staten Island was more important than a prisoner who I could have seen to on my own after you left."

"My own apologies, Proctor Smith. You must ignore the provocation I inadvertently spoke. You clearly had more to accomplish than we did in just flying this prisoner here."

"Accepted. It looks like the Duke has already contacted some of his men to take charge of the

prisoner."

"They're welcome to him. Right, Moto?"

Moto nodded as he handed over the rope he held onto so that the prisoner couldn't run, even though it wasn't really necessary. The prisoner appeared to be scared over his ordeal of flying at high speed over the ocean while dangling from a rope between the two knights.

Chapter 16

"My Queen, I do not know who poisoned the prisoners. They weren't supposed to be given any water until questioning. I will not rest until I find out who killed them before they could reveal the identity of the spy who must obviously be among us," Duke Sabbo said.

Queen Neesha opened her mouth to speak, but paused in thought for a moment. "Yes, you must be right about the spy being among us. Find him, Duke Sabbo. If you accomplish nothing else, find the traitor so that we might deal with him."

"I will, my Queen."

Van Dyke waited for the last of the knights to enter the church and take a seat. He had to recall some who'd already been sent back to their assignments.

"It seems strange that all the prisoners were killed just after we delivered the last of them to the Duke. Without pointing a finger that does appear to reduce the number of people among whom we should be searching for our spy. Yes, Proctor Smith?"

Proctor Smith had found a seat at the front. However, he paused and signaled that he wanted to speak. "I just overheard the last of what you said. Actually, quite a large number of people knew of their presence: other prisoners, the guards, the Duke, the Queen, and all of the proctors. I even dare say that most of the people in Cragless know by now that there were raiders brought here as prisoners. Tongues are certain to wag about such events. Surely, someone saw the knights carrying them all tied up. It doesn't take an educated man to figure out that they were prisoners."

"We were seen bringing in the first prisoner by some fishermen on the water," Moto said.

"How did they know how many prisoners would be brought in and when the last arrived?" Van Dyke asked.

"Perhaps they figured out that there weren't any more prisoners when they saw the last of the knights return," Smith said.

"How would a spy know that there weren't more knights yet to arrive?" Moto asked.

"The spy obviously monitored your comings and goings. I would expect a spy to do such things. Perhaps one of the prisoners already held by the Duke passed on information to the spy from the prisoners you turned over to the Duke. They might have indicated to one of them just how many they numbered. Even ignorant raiders can count that high," Smith said.

"Duke Sabbo assures me that the prisoners were held apart from each other so they couldn't converse. Besides, that still doesn't account for how any prisoners could have contacted a spy to give him any information or why they were all killed," Van Dyke said.

"Then it had to be one of the guards," Miles said. "They had access to the prisoners. Only they could come and go freely. Besides, it had to be someone who could reach the prisoners in order to poison them. They killed the others already there to keep them from identifying anyone."

Smith nodded. "Miles makes sense. He's right that we should look for someone with access to the prisoners."

"And access to poison," Lee said.

"I dare say that anyone could find poison outside the castle and easily bring it inside," Van Dyke said.

"But how many know how to find poison around here? I'm not familiar with the poisons in this area, though I could easily point out several in Minius," Lee said.

"A good point, which may assist us in eliminating some suspects," Van Dyke said.

"Surely, you don't suspect any of the knights," Deliah said. "All of us were too busy carrying those prisoners and keeping them alive for the past four days. Certainly, if Gonzales or I was a spy, we could have killed them at Castle Staten Island or let them escape."

"If anything, I don't believe that either you or Gonzales is a spy. It would be the height of stupidity for either of you to jeopardize yourselves as spies by capturing fifteen of your own warriors and turning them over."

"Unless they didn't think we'd ever question them," Smith said.

Van Dyke shook his head. "No, that doesn't fit. Those men would have talked to save their lives. I saw it in their eyes. Gonzales and Deliah spared their lives in accordance with our oaths. Besides which, they remained at Castle Staten Island until we brought back the last of the prisoners. They had no opportunity to contact anyone. If anyone is beyond reproach, they are."

"So it must seem," Smith muttered.

"Are we considering the Duke to be a suspect? He was, after all, reluctant to even accept the first prisoner. Proctor Smith had to convince him," Lee said.

"Actually, I did little to convince him. It might be possible that he was merely putting on a false face at first to disguise his real feelings. He has, after all, held ill will toward Sir Lieutenant Gonzales," Smith said.

"Are you suggesting that the Duke is a spy?" Lee asked.

"No, I'm suggesting that he might have wished to strike back at Gonzales. He could have ordered the prisoners killed to prevent Gonzales from receiving any credit in uncovering a spy who the Duke is now responsible for finding," Smith said.

"But Gonzales is bound to receive some credit for discovering that there happens to be a spy in the first place," Gwinn said.

"Or there might not even be a spy," Smith said.

"Then why were the prisoners killed?" Van Dyke asked.

"Did anyone else hear the name that Gonzales claims is the name of the spy?" Smith asked.

"Whether Gonzales heard a name or not doesn't change the fact that all the prisoners were murdered. They were killed to keep them from talking," Van Dyke said.

"Or to keep them from revealing that there was nothing to be revealed," Smith said.

"If that was the case, then only Gonzales would have a motive," Lee said. "He has no motive. We've already proven that."

"That's what we're supposed to believe," Smith said. "However, it still leaves the Duke with a perfect excuse in order to embarrass both Gonzales and the Order. With those men dead, we can't prove whether Gonzales actually heard them say the name of a spy."

"In any event, the Duke needs to be watched," Lee muttered.

"As do some other people. These deaths could be manipulated by others to advance themselves," Smith said.

"The Duke said that himself," Lee exclaimed. "He mentioned that Queen Neesha could gain the leadership of the Allied Kingdoms because of this."

"Seriously, I can't believe that Queen Neesha would permit her political desires to override the security of our lands to whom we're sworn to defend," Smith said.

"But I heard him. You were there with me. You can't say that you didn't hear him," Lee said.

"You're correct that I can't deny hearing that. However, I don't think..."

"See? Proctor Smith admits that I heard the Duke correctly," Lee exclaimed.

"Enough!" Van Dyke exclaimed. "We're reaching the point of bickering. Our Order learned long ago that we do not bicker among us. What you have brought to our attention is that we must consider everything we do in light of all possible motives. Our small Order cannot follow everyone just to uncover the one we believe has perpetrated these murders. In the meantime, we're accomplishing nothing sitting here. Before long, we'll find ourselves pointing fingers at those we know god selected."

"Some already have," Lee said.

"Only motives have been suggested and disproved. No one was accused," Van Dyke said. "This meeting is ended. Rest up, and return to your assignments. If any of you discovers any evidence, notify me through the god voice."

Smith entered the archive room without any noise. Even so, Van Dyke heard and turned to him.

"I thought I'd do some research into the names we recorded of all the knights, in case another had the same name as myself," Van Dyke said.

"I wondered why you hadn't left yet. Any luck?" Smith asked.

"Besides myself, there's Sir Private Johnson."

"Then he must be the spy."

"No, I think not. He's not been back to High Crag since Washington was buried. Before that, he'd been here only twice before. Besides, he had no way of knowing the name that Gonzales said was the spy. On top of that, he's been sick the last few days. Waleski has to carry his food and drink to his tower each day."

"You don't think that could be a clever subterfuge on his part?" Smith asked.

"Were he located closer to High Crag, it might be possible for him to slip away. However, he's not close enough to reach here without his absence being noticed. It's not a clever subterfuge on his part, as you put it."

"You trust Waleski? She supports Gonzales for leading the Order, you know."

"So you've mentioned before. Or should I say as Coffin has reported you told her. According to you, I should worry about Gonzales taking over the Order because he has Waleski, Klaus, Gwinn, Deliah, and Jones on his side, not to mention the power that three of them wield, while I appear to have only Sir Corporal Smith with that same power."

"You didn't notice how Lee supported Gonzales at the meeting? He's already eroding your authority."

"I might be led into believing that had I not already checked more of the records. I also decided to check the names of all the proctors at High Crag."

"Only at High Crag?" Smith asked.

"This is the crux of the crisis, I believe. Whoever acted on this matter had to be near enough to react. I've already eliminated Sir Private Johnson as a suspect. I can safely eliminate myself as well, especially since I'm already in charge and have nothing to gain."

"Unless it's as some have observed that you might want the prisoners dead to implicate Gonzales. However, I don't believe that's at all possible. You're too dedicated, especially in light of the nobility you surrendered to become a knight."

"It's good of you to agree that I'm not a suspect. However, I can't say the same for you. You're the only proctor whose name was originally Basoc. I would have known otherwise, immediately, had you gained your knighthood after me."

"You checked the women, as well?"

"Basoc isn't a woman's name, but I checked. You're the only other person in this castle with that name. However, that isn't what made me suspicious of you."

"Oh? You're suspicious of me? Why?"

"The coastal village you're listed as coming from is no longer in existence. It was wiped out by raiders. Because of that, there's no one we can ask about your past. That, combined with your passage into knighthood, confirmed you even more as selected by god in everyone's eyes."

"You're doubting now that I was selected by god? That I somehow fooled god? If so, then I must be very great and powerful, indeed."

"Or god let you pass in order to test us, which I believe is the case before me. Ten years serving as a knight and ten more as a proctor must have been truly bizarre for you since you're really a raider."

"You accuse me of being a raider?" Smith asked.

"If you act on their behalf, then you're one of them regardless of where you came from. Besides, as I recall, many of the worst raids occurred in the sectors bordering yours. You'd call for help from other knights. Whole villages were sometimes wiped out before their knights could return to direct the troops."

"Every sector lost a village sooner or later."

"Yours never did while you were active," Van Dyke said.

"You're just jealous of how well I fought to protect the people I swore to defend. I was determined not to let them share the same fate as my own village."

"You're trying to evade the facts. Those are what matter. I realize now that you've been trying to drive a wedge between the newer knights and the rest of us who accepted them. I won't let that happen."

"You accuse me of trying to destroy the Order?"

"I've come to realize that Gonzales and the other new knights were sent by god to help uncover you before worse could happen. Had it not been for Gonzales and Waleski, the major invasions we turned back two months ago might have seriously damaged our forces. I'm not just accusing you of attempting to destroy the Order. I'm accusing you of attempting to destroy the Allied Kingdoms, as well."

"It's strange that you should accuse me of that when I fought with every ounce of my strength against the raiders, until I could no longer fight well because of my accumulated wounds. On the other hand, you suddenly became quite pious when Waleski refused to kill. I'm surprised that you haven't accused her of being a spy or an agent of the raiders."

"She didn't refuse to fight against the raiders. Her only objection was to killing helpless men. I could, and do, respect that. She showed how we were veering away from our avowed goals. As well, I've had the opportunity to see for myself that there was no need to kill the raiders. The prisoners we held briefly were truly afraid of Gonzales, even though he hadn't harmed them. They would have swam home, despite the distance to their land, had we permitted them any choice in the matter."

"Even so, your accusation means nothing."

"You think that I haven't any proof?" Van Dyke asked.

"So far, all I've heard is an empty accusation based upon what my name once was, even though you once had the same name. Bring out your proof that I poisoned those prisoners. Bring out your proof that I destroyed any villages. Bring out your proof that I've tried to break up the Order. You've become paranoid and delusional." Smith abruptly turned and strode away. "I fully intend to speak with Proctor Raash about this. Maybe Gonzales should lead the Order after all. Maybe god did send him to take over the leadership."

Chapter 17

Duke Sabbo approached Gonzales at the entrance to the Sacred Hall. For once, the smile that Gonzales normally displayed disappeared.

"I'm not here to demand a suit. Proctor Raash has been found murdered. Proctor Smith claims that Sir Private Van Dyke murdered him. I need assistance from you and the other knights in arresting Sir Private Van Dyke so he can be tried. Please call your comrades and request they report here."

"All knights who can hear my voice, report to the Sacred Hall. This is an official request from Duke Sabbo."

"Despite our differences, thank you. I never imagined that a knight could do evil. You're selected by god. I just know this has to be a mistake of some sort," Sabbo said.

"Did Proctor Smith witness the murder?" Gonzales asked.

Sabbo shook his head.

"Murder? Who was murdered?" Gwinn asked. "*Land.*"

"Proctor Raash was found murdered, according to Duke Sabbo," Gonzales said, as Deliah landed a few paces away.

Jones landed beside the hall and stepped forward. "Do you suspect anyone, or was it the same spy who murdered the prisoners?"

"Proctor Smith stated that he and Sir Private Van Dyke argued yesterday after his meeting.

Evidently, Sir Private Van Dyke accused Proctor Smith of something. Proctor Smith then stated he would formally complain about the false accusation to Proctor Raash. When Proctor Smith got around to that this morning he learned that Proctor Raash was dead, his throat slashed. He, of course, brought all this to my attention. I am bringing this to your attention, because I can't fly after Sir Private Van Dyke to apprehend him. That requires your cooperation and willingness to follow my orders."

"As I stated before, I will follow your orders when those are not in conflict. I will seek out Sir Private Van Dyke as you have ordered," Gonzales said.

"Not so fast. Someone has to remain here to guard the suits," Jones said.

"You're still recuperating. I can take Gwinn and Deliah with me to apprehend Van Dyke, though I seriously believe he'll return voluntarily," Gonzales said. "Klaus will remain with you to guard the hollow suits."

"Why not try calling the nearer stations first? Van Dyke might return without anyone chasing after him," Jones said.

"I've no objection to what you try first, providing you're willing to chase him should he refuse," Sabbo said.

"Thank you, Duke Sabbo. I am willing, but Jones is right. We should give Van Dyke a chance to turn himself in. I'll fly up and call the nearest stations," Gonzales said.

Sir Private Van Dyke landed just as the last rays of the day left the sky. He turned and faced the Duke.

"Please remove your suit. Queen Neesha has ordered that you not wear the suit as it might unduly influence the court," Duke Sabbo said.

" *Deactivate Private Van Dyke suit.*"

Sabbo stepped forward to accept the suit. Gonzales stepped in with one hand outstretched.

"Sir Lieutenant Gonzales, I will trust you with the suit god permitted me to use," Van Dyke said, as he handed the suit to Gonzales.

Sabbo nodded and stepped back. "I'm sorry, but you also have to reside in a cell for now. I will guarantee that the men who guard you will see to it that you're not poisoned."

"I believe you, Duke Sabbo. Would you please see to it that Proctor Smith not be permitted to visit me for any reason?"

"You don't want him visiting you?" Sabbo asked.

"I'm guessing that he's my accuser. If he is, then that ought to be more than enough reason to keep us separated," Van Dyke replied.

Gonzales entered Proctor Smith's quarters. "You asked to see me?"

"I wanted to warn you that Van Dyke was becoming mentally unfit. He had Proctor Coffin and myself keeping an eye on you. You can ask her if you'd like verification."

"I was suspected of something?"

"He was becoming unbalanced. Consequently, I threatened to report him to Proctor Raash. Only he could remove Van Dyke from his position."

"Yes, my training covered that."

"Excellent. I wasn't certain whether you remembered that or not. Except for Jones, the rest of you here at High Crag are all new."

"So you think Van Dyke killed Proctor Raash to prevent that?"

"I don't know. I only reported what facts I knew first hand to Duke Sabbo. He formulated the accusation based upon the evidence he gathered together. I fear that he found enough to substantiate Van Dyke as the murderer. If so, then Van Dyke will be removed from membership within the Order of the Star."

"We'll have to elect a new leader."

"That's true. Also, Van Dyke won't be permitted to recommend anyone. Part of what I wanted to warn you about was that his instability is not constant. One moment, he'll act like your friend. The next might find him attempting to knife you in the back. Sadly enough, he even called me a raider to my face. I'm certain that you noticed he believed me to be his accuser. After all, he said so in our presence."

"Is this all that you wanted to warn me about?" Gonzales asked.

"Sadly, no. I've learned that besides Van Dyke, Sir Private Johnson once bore the name of Basoc. I felt you should be warned about that. You may have to oppose him."

"That must be why Van Dyke was inquiring over the god voice to Waleski concerning his recent movements. Do you think he's our spy?"

"It's possible that Van Dyke managed to uncover that in one of his more lucid moments. It might even be the one thing that pushed him over the edge. To tell the truth, I wouldn't be surprised if he exonerates Johnson as completely innocent. Regardless of what happens, you might have to oppose Johnson for the good of the Order."

"If it comes to it, I will."

"Please don't hold it against Van Dyke. After all, insanity occurs frequently among the nobles."

"It is sad that so many of them succumb to that. No, I'll not hold it against him. He has tried to uphold the principles of the Order."

"Yes, yes, remember the good he once performed. Let us hope that perhaps the Duke has the

wrong person in custody. Thank you for seeing me. Should you decide that you want consideration as leader of the Order, I'm willing to speak on your behalf with others. Just send them to see me. I'll make time for them."

"Then you believe that Van Dyke will be found guilty?" Gonzales asked.

"It's not very often that an accused is found otherwise by the court."

Chapter 18

Gonzales was amazed at the number of knights brought to High Crag for the election. Fully ten were retired, but still entitled to vote. Several of those were picked up by other knights, who then flew them to High Crag so they could avoid weeks of road travel. It was the only way possible to get everyone assembled for a meeting that would last but a single day. At the end, they would have a new leader. That leader would continue to lead after Van Dyke's trial unless Van Dyke was found innocent. In the meantime, a power vacuum would be filled. Someone had to give out assignments and maintain discipline within the Order. As well, most did not know all the facts of the case facing Van Dyke. Because it might bear upon the election, what was known was openly discussed for the first hour. Then they briefly retired to contemplate what their consciences as men and women of god might dictate.

"It feels strange not wearing our suits," Deliah said.

"Perhaps, but it makes sense," Gwinn said. "Besides, I don't want everyone listening to every word I say. With this many of us around, it's almost impossible to keep your own thoughts straight, let alone talk without wondering what you just heard or who said it."

"I just hope we're not attacked," Deliah said.

"Our suits are near enough if we need them. Anyway, the hollow suits are safely in a tower out of reach," Jones said.

"By the way, I've heard your name mentioned," Gwinn said.

"I'm being considered for the leadership?" Jones asked.

"I'm sorry, I meant Deliah. I've heard her name suggested," Gwinn said.

"She and Gonzales are both high on the list," Waleski said. "I felt so alone when I learned that Cardin was killed just after I became a knight and I was the only active woman. I'm glad to finally meet both of you. Have you met Proctor Coffin yet?"

Deliah and Gwinn both nodded.

"I thought you might also be in contention for this honor. After all, you have the same *sonic* power that Gonzales possesses," Deliah said. "You've been mentioned frequently as responsible for

righting our course when it comes to showing mercy."

"I didn't do anything more than pay attention to our oath and follow it. That was as much the results of what the other knights taught me as what god might have willed through me. Anyway, I don't want the leadership. I still don't understand strategy or tactics. Added to that, I'm terrible with a sword and bow. I'm just fortunate that god gave me the *sonic* power. For that reason, it's best for me to remain an ordinary knight who can be sent to where she's needed," Waleski said.

"I don't know those, either. I'm still learning to use a sword. Proctor Meson has just about given up trying to teach me archery," Gwinn said.

"Proctor Meson thinks I'm in need of more muscle first," Deliah said, as she held up her arms. "I think he's right. In practice, I lose my sword on almost every other swing I block. It would be just as well that I'm not elected, since I still don't understand strategy yet. Proctor Smith is very patient. He keeps showing me, but I just don't understand it at all."

"But your name was accepted by god. You have to accept the leadership if you're elected," Gwinn exclaimed. "Surely, that has to be a sign of greatness."

Jones walked away. He could see that his viewpoint wasn't desired, as the women were ignoring him. He stopped beside Gonzales for a moment as Gonzales explained what he knew about his sonic power to one of the visiting proctors.

"This sounds to me like god has already appointed you as a leader whether you have the title or not," Proctor Stravinsky said, while energetically waving his stump of a right arm. "If you're nominated, I intend to support you. You have good intentions, not that the others don't, and you're fresh. You're not set in our ways, which might need reviving. This sonic power you unexpectedly found is proof of that. God wanted you to return us to our less barbaric ways. Look what constant fighting did for me, not that I regret losing an arm for my people. I'd gladly give them the limbs I have remaining if it would protect them. Regardless, we should have sought more merciful ways of fighting off the raiders from our shores. Some of us paid the price for not succeeding. In fact, I might even nominate you myself."

"He's a good man," Jones said.

"Ah, Jones! I heard you managed to get yourself hurt. You don't look too bad," Stravinsky said.

"I'm almost healed, though I initially believed the wounds were worse. To tell you the truth, I'm planning on supporting Gonzales, as well, if he's nominated. Did you hear how he faced down Duke Sabbo?"

"That's already been passed around to every knight and proctor in the Allied Kingdoms. It's not often that a former commoner can face off a nobleman and win. Knight of the Star or not, he's still from common stock like most of us," Stravinsky said.

"True, but..." Jones said.

"There's no 'but' to it. You know, as well as I, that we fall under the church for our direct orders. The church reports to the Grand King only in regards to us. Otherwise, god is our boss. Even so, we're still a separate branch-bastards if you must-that the governments begrudgingly acknowledge only because we can fly. They don't want us on any other side, and you know why. Our suits protect our vital organs better than any armor their soldiers ever wore. They don't want to see us trounce their soldiers

like we do the raiders," Stravinsky said.

"But what about Deliah? God permitted her to retain her name. Isn't that a sign?" Jones asked.

"Did he, or did god act through Gonzales? I've heard about what was going on when she gained her knighthood. If you ask me, god wanted us to see that Gonzales was the man he wanted in charge. To do that, he gave us a third miracle. He gave Gonzales the suit that wouldn't respond. That was a miracle. Then he gave him the additional power. That was another miracle. We just couldn't see those while Van Dyke was in charge. Now we can," Stravinsky said.

"I hadn't thought of it in that way, but I suppose you could be right," Jones said.

Gonzales turned at feeling a tap on his shoulder. "Proctor Smith?"

"We need to talk in private. I've some distressing news for you."

Gonzales followed Smith outside the church and stopped as Smith turned around. "What's wrong that I should know about?"

"Duke Sabbo will be coming here soon to arrest you. Whoever the spy is, he's taken your sword and killed Van Dyke. The Duke asked me if I recognized the sword they found. I told him I couldn't remember whose it was. I know you have to be innocent. You haven't left the room recently for anything, have you?"

Gonzales nodded. "I had to use the facility for a few moments, but that was the only place I went."

"You better get your suit and flee. The Duke will probably use this as an excuse to get even with you for embarrassing him before Queen Neesha."

"I can't do that. I'm innocent."

"If you're accused and arrested, your chances amount to nothing. You'll be found guilty. You and I both know how the courts work, particularly for anyone who was a commoner."

"But I'm innocent."

"Your sword in Van Dyke's body says otherwise. I believe in your innocence. The Duke won't. You should fly to Castle Staten Island where he can't arrest you. Claim sanctuary. The rest of the knights will respect that. While you're there, pray to god to reveal the true killer. Now, hurry. You don't have much time. Go back inside. Try to remain natural and get your suit before the Duke gets here. Then leave. I'll attempt to delay the Duke's men."

Gonzales entered the church once more. He glanced toward where the suits rested and spotted his suit minus his sword. Gonzales scanned the room only to see that everyone was still discussing the merits of the people believed worth nominating. Without much thought, Gonzales walked over to his suit. He shook his head slowly as he stared down at it.

"What's wrong?" Deliah asked.

"I just heard from Proctor Smith that someone murdered Sir Private Van Dyke with my sword.

See? It's missing," Gonzales said.

"Van Dyke is dead?" Lee suddenly turned, and asked.

"Yes, according to Proctor Smith. He said that I should fly away. I know that I can't. Even if I'm wrongly found guilty, I can't violate my oath. I swore that I'd suffer in order to further the cause of justice," Gonzales said.

"But Smith is right. It's not justice to allow yourself to be found guilty if you're not," Deliah exclaimed.

Several knights and proctors turned their heads on hearing Deliah's raised voice.

"Who's not guilty? If you're talking about Van Dyke, I know he's innocent," Moto said.

"Van Dyke is dead," Lee said. "Gonzales informed us that Van Dyke was murdered in his cell."

Moto staggered back. "No! This can't be! He didn't even receive a trial yet. If it is, then Duke Sabbo must pay for his incompetence."

"I'd rather we found the real killer. I don't think it could be the Duke despite his apparent flaws," Gonzales said. "Besides, what motive could he have for harming Van Dyke?"

"Then who?" Moto shouted.

"I don't know, but it has to be one of us, because we're the only people who've had access to the murder weapon. Whoever killed Van Dyke used my sword. The killer had to take it from this church after we removed our suits and arms," Gonzales said.

"Your sword? How do we know that you didn't kill Van Dyke?" Moto shouted.

"I don't know. Regardless of what happens, I'm not flying off as Proctor Smith suggested," Gonzales said.

"That's got to count for something," Deliah said. "Would the real killer be so willing to take his chances with a trial?"

"All of us would do so. I don't think that counts at all. The real killer would try his best not to appear guilty," Moto said.

Proctor Stravinsky strode between Deliah and Moto. He pointed his stubby right arm at Moto. "More to the point, we should find out more concerning the circumstances and verify that Van Dyke is actually dead. If he is truly dead, then we should consider who among us is capable. After all, some of our members are notoriously awful with a sword. Ubu, for one, is very poor with a blade. I understand that some of our newest knights are similarly poor. If a sword was the weapon as I've heard shouted, then that would eliminate some knights among us. Van Dyke could easily disarm a poor swordsman, even without a sword of his own."

"Without his suit?" Royal asked.

"Why didn't the jailers hear him being murdered?" Ubu asked.

"Now you're asking the right questions. Let's find out the known facts before we accuse anyone." Stravinsky strode toward the door. "If you want to learn the truth, then follow me!" he exclaimed, without looking back.

Stravinsky walked out of the Duke's office.

"What did you learn?" Lee asked.

"It's not good news at all. They believe that Van Dyke was murdered in his sleep. Anyone, even the worst swordsman, could have committed the foul deed," Stravinsky said.

"I had my sword with me this morning. How could it have been used during the night?" Gonzales asked.

"Duke Sabbo doesn't even know how anyone could bypass his guards. He's questioning them. I can tell you that he fears this was a conspiracy involving some of his guards and at least one knight," Stravinsky said.

"I do know some of the guards, but we haven't conspired against anyone," Gonzales said.

Stravinsky stared at Gonzales. "They could say that I know some of the guards, as well, though I believe those guards no longer work here because of age and infirmity. I dare say that I'm equally a suspect since I can still, at least, stab a man in his sleep with my shield hand. Like others, I've had to become proficient with what I have left. There are probably others who also know some guards. For now, I suggest that you not go around pointing more suspicion at yourself. As well, we should all return to the church to continue our meeting. Like it or not, the Order remains in need of a leader."

Duke Sabbo entered the church and strode down the center aisle without comment. He stopped before Proctor Smith and leaned close. "I'm here to arrest Sir Lieutenant Gonzales for murder."

"I understand, Duke Sabbo. Will you permit us to finish our meeting? I swear that he'll be turned over to you."

"I've no wish to disturb the sanctity of the church. Conclude your meeting. Then turn him over."

"Thank you, Duke Sabbo. We will conclude our meeting by sunset. Had it not been for the murder of Sir Private Van Dyke, we would have concluded already. Will you permit Sir Lieutenant Gonzales to participate in Sir Private Van Dyke's funeral?"

"I will give it strong consideration. I'm already of the opinion that my cells are not safe for prisoners any longer."

"Meaning that Queen Neesha is upset over Van Dyke's murder?" Smith asked.

"Most upset. As it is, I shall have to apprise her of the delay in arresting Sir Lieutenant Gonzales. She does believe strongly in the church, so she might not take this badly."

"I'm willing to speak with her on your behalf. And for Gonzales, too."

"That won't be necessary. I'll see myself out."

Smith nodded. "Are there any further nominations?"

Gonzales stood. "If Duke Sabbo just visited to announce my arrest, then I withdraw my name. I do not want the Order arguing over whether I should be part of this election."

"Are you certain that you want your name removed from consideration?" Smith asked.

"Was that an arrest notification?" Gonzales asked. Smith nodded. "Then I'm not going to accept a nomination. I'll not be considered for the leadership with charges against me." He then sat back down and allowed his chin to sag against his chest.

"You're innocent, aren't you?" Deliah whispered.

Gonzales nodded.

Sir Private Moto stood with a smile, as he accepted the warm congratulations from his comrades. His smile disappeared when Gonzales approached.

"Strangely enough, I believe that you didn't kill Van Dyke. I still don't see how you could possibly gain anything by murdering him. After all, the odds of him securing an innocent verdict were already stacked against him. Even you knew that. All you had to do was wait. The court would have removed him for you. I intend to mention that to the court."

"Thank you, Sir Private Moto. I swear by god's blessings that I did not kill Sir Private Van Dyke. I would have died for him," Gonzales said.

"I believe that, too. If you wish, I'll walk with you to meet Duke Sabbo."

"Thank you. That won't be necessary. I'm sure you have much to arrange that needs your attention first," Gonzales said.

"I'll walk him out," Proctor Smith said.

"I'm ready. Let's get this over with," Gonzales said.

"Blessings be upon you," Moto said, as Gonzales walked toward the exit.

Osongh and Eusis both stood up when the guards escorted Gonzales into the cell area. "We told the Duke that we hadn't conspired, but no one believes us," Osongh said.

"I've always been assigned to the gate. Osongh was always assigned to the Court entrance. We couldn't have had anything to do with killing any prisoners," Eusis said.

"Save it for the trials," the guard beside Gonzales said.

Gonzales entered the cell and sat down without comment.

"Aren't you going to even plead your innocence?" the guard asked, as he clanged the door shut.

"God will reveal my innocence," Gonzales replied.

"In that case, I guess that means you can fly without your suit, and everything else," the guard said, referring to the usual verdict outcome in trials at Castle High Crag.

Guilty parties were stripped of all possessions and shoved off the parapet overhanging the cliffs. It was effective and disposed of the body all in one action. A vital lesson had been learned once when a prisoner's clothing snagged on the cliffs making it possible for him to not only cheat death, but also to escape, since it was assumed that he'd died. No one had glanced down for his corpse. His later appearance and capture, along with only a modest amount of torture, had revealed the flaw. When he was finally executed, he became the only person to ever be sent over the wall twice, and the first to go without anything on. Since then, it had also become traditional for the dead in Cragland to be buried with as much of their personal clothing upon their persons as was possible. Full dress provided a clear sign that they'd succeeded in accomplishing something during their lifetime. To die totally naked meant that nothing since birth had been achieved.

"I fly only when god wills it, and I obey the orders of the officers appointed over me. If I must die, then so be it," Gonzales said.

"You might be willing to die, but I'm not. I didn't do anything," Eusis said.

Deliah paused at the gate to the Duke's cells. "Are you certain that I can't visit?"

"Duke Sabbo's orders. No one visits any prisoners. We'll not have any more murdered. He specifically stated there would be no exceptions for anyone ranking below the Council of Kings," the guard said.

Chapter 19

Duke Sabbo's face remained grim as Gonzales removed his black robe at the foot of the steps leading to the parapet. "You're taking this better than most."

"It's god's will. He gave me knighthood to accomplish certain tasks. My death is proof that I must have completed those. I will leave this life knowing that I did not murder Sir Private Van Dyke. God will accept me into his arms regardless of where my body lies," Gonzales said, as the last of his clothing fell to the ground.

"If you become too frightened to jump, don't worry about it. The guards know how to stick you just enough to dislodge you for the fall. They won't act cruelly in how they use their spears."

"Thank you, Duke Sabbo, but I'll not disappoint the court. I'm glad that the court found your guards innocent of their charges."

Gonzales slowly ascended toward the parapet that would end his life. He nodded wearily at the guards who stood ready to prevent him from attempting to escape. Duke Sabbo kept pace behind him out of formality. Were Gonzales to attempt an escape, he'd step aside to let the guards deal with him. His responsibility was solely to officiate the proceeding. He reached the top just a moment behind Gonzales. When Gonzales reached the opening in the battlement and halted, Sabbo drew out a black cloth.

"Queen Neesha granted permission for you to use a blindfold in light of your performance as a Knight of the Star."

"I appreciate that. Did you know that I've always been afraid of flying? Even when I fought the raiders, I was always more afraid of falling than of them killing me. I guess I'm still afraid of that, so yes, I accept your offer. Please thank our queen for me."

Sabbo stepped forward and adjusted the blindfold around Gonzales' head. "If you have anything to say, please feel free to speak, so long as you keep it brief. If you'd rather, you can stand there for a minute before you jump."

"I've already stated that I'm innocent. All I can add is that I wish god's blessings upon the Allied Kingdoms. Goodbye, everyone."

Sabbo watched as Gonzales stepped backward, fumbled for a step that wasn't there, and fell back flailing his arms and legs wildly. He glanced over the edge for a moment and then turned to his guards.

"The execution has been carried out. Return to your posts."

"Oh, god, thank you."

"Quiet! We don't want anyone to hear you."

"Proctor Coffin? What's going on?" Gonzales asked, stunned to find something to grab in the darkness that enveloped him.

" *Forward, forward, forward, forward, forward.*"

"Not so fast! I don't have any clothes on and I'm freezing!" Gonzales chattered.

Coffin reached up with the remaining fingers of her left hand to pry away the blindfold. "Can you see the cliffs at all? I can't see behind me. Your hands are in the way."

"Not any more. Those are far behind us."

"Good, then it's safe to talk. You're innocent. Enough of us know that for a fact. Duke Sabbo knows, as well. He couldn't help but notice how much Van Dyke trusted you. Whoever killed Van Dyke probably figured to get rid of you, as well, with false evidence. Fortunately for you, Duke Sabbo isn't an idiot when it comes to investigation. His stupidity approaches the level of concern only when it comes to defensive tactics."

"But I was found guilty."

" *Hover!* A deception engineered by the Duke with the Queen's permission, when he realized what was happening. You don't need to know all the facts. Just be glad that the Duke had access to all of the secret testimony and evidence before it was presented to the court. He pointed out the inconsistencies when the Queen heard your case. The court then decided that you could be instrumental in finding the real murderer."

"Why did Duke Sabbo trust you? We know that the murderer has to be one of the knights."

"Maybe because I have nothing to gain. Maybe because I can't even stab someone with a sword. Maybe because I was once Lady Taashira. Maybe because I'm Duke Sabbo's sister. Take your choice. What matters is that we know you're not guilty. Now quietly accept our assistance in clearing your name and finding the real murderer."

"What if we can't find the murderer? The moment I put my suit back on, the other knights will know I'm still alive."

"Do you think they don't know that I'm back in my suit? I'm not worried about the other knights finding out. Duke Sabbo is hoping that the one responsible for the murder will reveal himself when you emerge unscathed to announce that you know who the murderer is."

"And then what?" Gonzales asked.

"Duke Sabbo expects the real murderer will try to kill you. All you have to do is stop him from doing that. Then capture or kill him, as you deem necessary."

"You don't want much."

"No more than god in this instance. Now keep quiet. *Up !*"

"Please don't drop me," Gonzales cried, as they ascended fast.

Coffin glared at Gonzales to make her point about not talking. Then she gave a series of turning commands, followed by more commands to move forward at a slower speed so that Gonzales wouldn't become too numb from the cold to hold on. Past experiences among the knights dating back to Sir Private Malidor had provided them with valuable information they'd passed on concerning the effects of speed and wind. When she finally descended she was centered on the battlement of the tower where Gonzales had lived. She released her meager grip around Gonzales as he released his hold on her.

" *Deactivate Corporal Coffin suit.*" She waited until her suit was off. "Go dress, and get warmed up first. I'll bring your suit."

"You should be careful. They might still hear you. I once heard some of the knights talking even after they took off their suits and I had walked away."

"Seriously?"

Gonzales nodded as he reached his bed, and found some clothing already laid out for him. "I didn't mention it before, because I didn't want to embarrass them. Because they were talking about me, it occurred to me that maybe god wanted me to overhear them."

"You're positive their suits were off?" Coffin asked.

"I'd learned enough by then to know which god lights were theirs. They had their suits off when I overheard them."

"Stravinsky might be more than a bit right if that's truly so. That would be a fourth miracle. Maybe you are meant to lead us."

"I'm satisfied just to serve."

"Finish dressing while I get your suit. Once we put it on, we're flying out to Castle Staten Island."

"What about my announcement?"

"You'll make that as we leave. Quiet now. *Activate Corporal Coffin suit. Five up. Five forward. Land.*"

"That's not my sword," Gonzales said, as Coffin landed with his suit and a weapon.

"*Deactivate Corporal Coffin suit.*" She stepped out of her suit and entered his room. "Would you mind remaining quiet when I'm in my suit? Here's your suit. This was Van Dyke's sword. Duke Sabbo felt it would be fitting justice if it was used on Van Dyke's murderer."

"If this plan works. It occurred to me that this plan doesn't have a chance of working if the murderer is one of the proctors."

"You suspect Smith as I do now?" she asked.

"Proctor Smith? No, I haven't suspected him. What makes you suspect him?"

"The information he's provided to everyone has varied according to who he spoke with. He told me after your arrest that he suspected Sir Corporal Smith, his replacement, as the killer and feared for his own life. At least, that was his excuse for carrying a sword once more."

"That's interesting. He told me that he suspected Sir Private Johnson, because his name also used to be Basoc."

"My brother told me that Smith suspected you, though he seemed hesitant about naming you as Van Dyke's killer. Then he found the one critical piece of evidence that clinched everything for him."

"Which was what?" Gonzales asked.

"Duke Sabbo found a secret passage into the cell that Van Dyke occupied. He followed up on his discovery and learned that it was a precaution against an enemy taking possession of Castle High

Crag and imprisoning its nobility. Whoever killed Van Dyke knew of the passage. Quite likely, it was how the murderer gained access to poison the other prisoners. That cell wasn't in use then and stood open."

"But how did the murderer get my sword? If it was Proctor Smith, he couldn't fly up here without a suit because Sir Corporal Smith has it."

"He didn't have to fly. King Teeno didn't completely trust the knights at first, because of Malidor's origin. Even though attempts were made on the lives of the knights, he didn't trust them enough to furnish them complete security, as most of the neighboring kingdoms did. When the stones were fitted into place to seal off the tops of the towers given to the knights staying in Castle High Crag, he had the workers create secret entrances. If any of the knights tried to turn against him, he had a way of sending soldiers after them while they slept. The killer must have discovered the passageway into your tower."

"But I had my sword when I flew down for the meeting."

"Or one similar enough to it that you wouldn't notice the difference, until you drew it for use. Then it merely required removing the replacement sword to mark you as the murderer," Coffin said. "That would explain Proctor Smith's sudden decision to arm himself. Wouldn't it?"

"I felt he was justified because of Proctor Raash's death."

"I would believe that had he taken to carrying a weapon right after that death, instead of days later with his claim of suspecting his replacement. Instead, he did his level best to plant seeds of distrust among us by pointing an incriminating finger at others. I believe he wants to fragment the Order and cause us to fight each other. With most of us out of the way, it would be possible for the Kron Empire to invade our lands successfully."

"You still haven't explained how he'll learn I'm still alive. Won't he suspect a trap if someone just tells him outright?"

"Whether he suspects a trap or not, I truly believe he'll have to face you. I suspect that he fears the power god gave you, and wants you out of the way along with Waleski, Klaus, Smith, and myself."

"You? Why you?"

"Though I still believe that god granted us these suits and their powers, I must confess that I believe that Proctor Smith's theory about some of the suits may be correct."

"His theory?" Gonzales asked.

"Some of the suits are pre-destined to hold greater power, only he also believes that the suits aren't from god." Coffin glanced around. "It's a good thing that you don't clean up after yourself too well. Come over here so I can draw in this dust for you."

Gonzales followed Coffin to one portion of the floor where no one had walked for a long time. She stooped down and drew with her shield hand as he watched.

"First, let's use something familiar to you. This mark is the Queen. These marks below her are the Duke and the squires, who control the castle and the towns. These marks below the Duke are his officers. Then below them are the soldiers. Just imagine that there are similar groups under each of the

squires representing theirs, so I don't have to draw everything. Got that?"

"I think so, but why?" Gonzales replied.

"Okay, there's only one queen, right?"

"Yes."

"There's only one knight with the first name of Lieutenant. If Smith is right, then it's not supposed to be a name, but a title."

"I'm not a queen."

"Don't argue, just listen. There are two suits named Sergeant, and three named Corporal. Now, we have only one castle in Cragland, but Cragland isn't typical among the Allied Kingdoms. Most of the kingdoms have two or three castles with a duke commanding each. What this means is that sergeants are the equivalent of dukes, and corporals are just like squires. If this logic is followed through, then it means that Private is the same thing as Imperial Guardsman. Whoever wears your suit would be the leader." Coffin finished making new marks in the dust.

"But I can't be the leader."

"There's already enough proof that Smith's theory about the ranking among the suits is correct. You supplied some of that proof when you discovered that you could issue god spells to activate powers in the other suits. Whether this is actually the case or not, it's what Smith believes. It's also why he wants you dead."

"Quite right, and a bit too late to do anyone any good," Proctor Smith said, as he opened the secret door and entered with his sword at the ready. Where he walked was well used and unlikely to be spotted amid the dusty portions of the floor. "I suspected I'd find you here after discovering that your body wasn't at the bottom of the cliff with creatures nibbling at your decaying flesh. It was too soon for your corpse to be washed away. I thought at first that someone had slipped your suit to you as you fell until I realized that Coffin's suit was no longer under guard, though yours was still there. Then she returned and retrieved your suit, leading me to you."

Gonzales leaped for his sword and reached it in time to snatch up the scabbard and block Smith's swing. Gonzales drew his sword and blocked another swing. He then faced Smith, watching for the man's next move.

"Why did you turn against god?"

"What makes you think I ever followed your god? The fact that I succeeded in becoming a knight ought to be proof enough for your simpleton mind to comprehend that god doesn't select any knights. These suits were made by someone like us, but with more knowledge. God doesn't care whether you win or lose." Smith backed off slightly to prevent Coffin from reaching her suit. "Once I kill both of you, I'll leave you up here to be found later. It won't take much effort to steer the rest of the knights into believing that you were lovers who quarreled over where to hide to avoid detection."

"Us? Lovers?" Gonzales exclaimed.

"The others would accept that as possible. I'll mention that I noticed Proctor Coffin would often

spend the night elsewhere than in her quarters. They'll believe that I refrained from saying anything then, as it was within her right to do so."

"You're vile," Coffin said.

"No, I'm a realist who will win out. Had you not discovered this new power the suits hold, the war would be ending anyway. Once we possess it, we won't have to kill every soldier in order to win. It will be amusing to see your former kings and queens in the roles of shackled servants."

Gonzales blocked two slashes and jabbed back only to have his thrust parried.

"You're one of the better students Washington ever taught, but you're not as good or experienced as me."

"That doesn't matter. I know now why god selected me to become a knight." Gonzales slashed out with a blow that rang against Smith's sword and pressed it back. He moved in and grappled Smith with his free hand to prevent the man from moving. "Get to your suit now, Coffin!"

"Fools! You can't..."

"*Activate Corporal Coffin suit!* Klaus, Jones, Gwinn, fly up to the tower Gonzales lived in! Proctor Smith is the real murderer!"

Smith's rage showed in his face as he shoved Gonzales aside to the floor. He broke free long enough to run for the secret entrance. He disappeared through it, closing it behind him. Gonzales regained his feet and ran to the entrance, trying to feel for any purchase with which to open it.

"I can't get it open."

"It doesn't matter. Smith can't escape now."

Jones and Gwinn settled onto the battlement outside the room and stared inside at the sight of Coffin in her suit and Gonzales prying at the floor with his sword.

"You said Smith is the murderer?" Jones asked.

"Gonzales! You're alive!" Gwinn exclaimed.

"Yes, Duke Sabbo and I suspected Proctor Smith. We set a trap that worked. Smith just tried to kill both of us. He even admitted to having been on the other side since before he became a knight," Coffin said.

"That's a serious charge," Jones said.

"Regardless, you better have your sword at the ready if you encounter him," Coffin said.

Chapter 20

Sir Lieutenant Gonzales knelt before the Queen, as she received his sword from Duke Sabbo. "Arise, Sir Lieutenant Gonzales. Accept back your sword and your honor."

The escort beside Gonzales whispered, "My Queen, my blade serves you always."

Gonzales stood and received his sword, which he then sheathed. "My Queen, my blade serves you always."

"Return to your duty. By the way, Sir Lieutenant Gonzales, I understand that you hold an interest in our history. If you'd like, please view the kingdom's historical tapestries at your leisure. There won't be anything new for several months, but I think you know already what will be pictured. I understand that you and Sir Corporal Coffin have agreed to pose for the artisans."

Gonzales' face reddened. "We have, my Queen?"

The escort whispered, "We will, my Queen, if that is your wish."

"I mean, we will, my Queen, if that is your wish."

"Excellent. I will look forward to seeing the results. Thank you. You may go now."

Gonzales walked to the exit, pausing when he reached the tapestries. He noticed that the scene showing the first nude execution was quite small, and didn't really reveal much of anything. Confident that a reproduction of his near-execution would likely be just as small, he felt more comfortable about the pose he would have to perform.

"Still no sighting of Basoc?" Coffin asked, as she landed in the courtyard.

"One of us would have stated so had the guards found him. They're still searching the tunnels hidden beneath this castle. There must be additional entrances that they haven't discovered yet," Klaus said.

"I'll not rest until he's found."

Deliah landed beside her. "None of us will. By the way, you and I need to talk about something in private."

"Me?" Coffin asked.

"*Deactivate Private Deliah suit.* Yes, you and I. We can talk in the church."

"*Deactivate Corporal Coffin suit.* Lead the way."

Both women remained silent until they were inside the church. Each set her suit down beside the doorway, though Deliah retained her sword in case Basoc showed up.

"What do we talk about?" Coffin asked.

"Gonzales."

"What about him?"

"Waleski told me that he had eyes for you ever since he became a knight. Are you serious about him?"

"I'm at least fifteen years his senior. No, I'm not interested in him. If he's interested in me, I'm flattered. However, I think he'd find a younger woman more suitable."

"Then you haven't returned to active knighthood because of him?" Deliah asked.

"I returned only because it was necessary to uncover Basoc. I'm remaining on duty because I believe I have the new power. It no longer matters that I can't handle a sword. Lastly, I want to see Basoc cornered and brought back for one last flight over the parapet. God forgive me for that. Should I take your question to mean that you are interested in Gonzales?" Deliah smile, and nodded. "In that case, I wish god's blessings and a long life upon you and Gonzales."

"Thank you."

"Your highness, Sir Lieutenant Gonzales has been restored to his position. Shouldn't you intervene?"

King Vimma scowled at Duke Plesso. News had been conveyed to the court of the Grand King by means of the god voice belonging to the knight assigned to protect the crown. "It is my understanding that he was proven innocent and convicted only to smoke out a hairy sneak. Why should I intervene?"

"Sire, because it's turned out to be one of the church's knights anyway. If we can't trust them all, then they shouldn't be permitted to fly about in suits that make them invulnerable."

"I am more convinced by how Sir Lieutenant Gonzales was willing to go to his death rather than attempt escape. Has that point flown past you?"

"He did escape, Sire."

"He did no more than I would expect of any man who has just fallen from a cliff and found life rather than death waiting. I'm convinced that he felt god had saved him at that point, even though it was through our hands that god acted, or more exactly, Queen Neessha's. I see no need to intervene. The Knights of the Star are righteously outraged at how an enemy infiltrated their ranks to test their resolve and valor. They will eventually capture the cause of their unrest and deal with it appropriately. Besides, it was they who suffered, not we. We still have reason to trust in their actions, and we shall."

"But, Sire, this proves that they're truly not selected by god. They shouldn't hold greater status or influence than the Royal Knights."

"Can the Royal Knights, whose birth-lines ascribe them a direct relationship to god, even fly?"

"No, Sire, but the Knights of the Star claim they're selected by god."

King Vimma fixed Duke Plesso with his gaze. "If you even think I should tell the people that they're not, then you're certainly not in my camp. You know, as well as I, that their church will claim that Smith was tempted away from the true path after god's selection. That has happened before. The people accept it as part of the rigors to be endured in living a righteous life. Whether Smith was actually against them to begin with won't matter. That will be drowned out by voices crying out that evil forced him to lie about that in an apparent effort to discredit the church and god. We've more to gain by using the church's knights than by opposing them."

The first tapestry Gonzales studied showed how the Knights of the Star fell under the church's wing. He wasn't aware, nor did the tapestry show, that the church had seen Malidor's appearance as a way of improving their status, while enabling them to repel the efforts of other encroaching religions within Cragland. At the same time, they promised King Teeno that the Knights of the Star wouldn't be used to depose him. Instead, the Order of the Star would swear allegiance to him in accordance with the same oath that Malidor admitted he'd given to a knight sent directly from god. That the Order considered the suits as godly was a belief that the Order permitted to grow, because it was advantageous at the time. It didn't matter to them that Malidor had chosen to ally with the Order of the Star simply because their religion's name coincided with the image on his new armored suit. Certainly, the Order believed that god would have communicated with them directly rather than through a former enemy. Still, the Order knew how to make use of something that no other religion possessed, especially when one of their own proctors succeeded in opening a suit with Malidor's guidance.

The tapestry displayed Malidor's arrival, his conversion as directed by god, and the subsequent knighting of two proctors and three villagers, one of whom soon died in an accident. Unreported was the fact that other proctors added their own embellishments to the fast-forming common lore. Flying knights weren't anything that could be easily hidden. They did, however, give the church greater legitimacy and power, which was evident in the tapestry.

Gonzales paused before the second tapestry illustrating the near-simultaneous creation of the Allied Kingdoms. By then, Cragland had something to offer that the other kingdoms didn't. The other rulers recognized it as vital to their overall defense and integrity. Save for the innermost kingdoms, those bordering the seas were raided regularly by the Kron Empire. What Cragland possessed were experienced flying knights who could swoop into battle faster than any mounted knights could manage. Even though there were only five Knights of the Star by then, they were enough to scare off the raiders from the shores of Cragland, and cause them to seek easier targets. Consequently, the rulers gathered to propose a union that would benefit everyone. King Teeno soon found himself convinced not only to join a union, but permitted the expansion of the Knights of the Star to fill as many of the thirty suits as possible. In doing so, he became the first Grand King of the Allied Kingdoms and reigned during the first major Allied victory over the Kron Empire.

Gonzales had to step over to view the third tapestry to learn more about how the war had been won so decisively over the Kron Empire. Fortunately, Duke Quexxo of Copra was given the task of managing the forces. His stewardship wasn't limited in scope to the previous ideas of dispatching the flying knights as a single force to charge into the enemy's midst. Instead, he researched their capabilities. He'd conceived of having the knights use their god voices to communicate with each other and his forces. He'd stationed Sir Private Malidor with him to relay his instructions to the other flying knights and his units. Another flying knight moved from unit to unit relaying his instructions based upon the reconnaissance given him by the other three knights. Consequently, two small units managed to

simultaneously ambush and massacre a larger force of Kron raiders shortly after they landed, and formed up for their attack on an inland town. That victory incited the Kron Empire into staging a full-scale invasion.

Gonzales side-stepped to the next tapestry to view the history of the first invasion. Again, Duke Quexxo was placed in charge shortly after two patrolling Knights of the Star alerted the newly formed Allied Kingdoms that the Kron Empire was invading in force against two shores after having learned of the alliance and the defeat of its raid. That, in itself, posed new problems because there were still only five Knights of the Star. No one else had succeeded in opening a suit. Even so, Duke Quexxo managed to surmount the problems of communication by stationing himself on an icy mountaintop near the middle of the Allied Kingdoms. He ignored how it appeared to the troops, along with the discomfort to himself.

Again, Duke Quexxo pulled off stunning major victories on each coast. His forces reached the Kron landing beaches in plenty of time to prepare their defenses and prevent Kron forces from moving inland against the villages. On the western coast, the defeat was so thorough that not one Kron boat left after the battle. Instead, those were all captured and converted into replacements for some of the many ships the Kron raiders had stolen before. Nearly as many boats were taken on the eastern coast, though a few Kron boats managed to escape with partial crews on board.

After the invasion, very few Kron raiders appeared near their combined shores. One reason was the lack of forces available to the Kron Empire. Another was the lack of boats. Those that did appear tended to veer off immediately if a flying knight was spotted. Several decades passed before a second massive attack was launched by the Kron Empire only to scatter in retreat when faced with the prospect of dealing with fifteen rather than only five flying knights.

Faced with a new weapon that was somehow renewable, even though Duke Quexxo had died by then, the Kron Empire worked to establish a network of spies in hopes of countering the Knights of the Star. At the same time, they limited their raids to attacks only on seaside villages and towns that were more numerous and prospering by then. Occasionally, they succeeded in reaching a town or village before land forces could be marshaled against them. Other times they found themselves facing forces holding complete strategic and tactical command of the situation as the Allied Kingdoms learned how to counter the new Kron tactic.

However, one thing had changed since Duke Quexxo's death. The Knights of the Star were used more and more in an offensive role. Only a few nobles knew why. Though the change in tactics was meant to put the knights in a position where they could be wiped out in combat, that hadn't happened. Instead, the knights had adapted and steadily replaced their ranks from growing numbers of converts to the Order's following.

Chapter 21

"You better bundle up," Jones said, as he watched Klaus, Deliah, and Gwinn prepare for sea patrol. "We're not entirely through the stormy season."

Klaus nodded as he added a second set of leggings beneath his bunched up robe. "I just hope

we don't have to deal with any fog."

"What's to worry about? Just hover and listen. If there are any raiders, they're bound to talk some," Gwinn said.

"I'm not worried about them. I just don't want to hit either of you."

"If it's any consolation, Gonzales wanted to go out in your place, Klaus. He's actually tired of being tied down to the Sacred Hall," Jones said.

"Maybe he'll see some action anyway, if Basoc turns up. I've heard that they've found more tunnels beneath High Crag," Klaus said.

"Sure you don't want me to take the first shift?" Coffin asked, as she stood waiting by a niche in the Sacred Hall.

"Even if you do, I'm staying right here so you can teach me more about reading and writing," Gonzales said, as he put the last suit brought down from the tower in its place within the Sacred Hall.

"What sparked that interest in you?"

"Whether or not god gave us these suits, there is writing of some sort in the god visions. It's my responsibility to at least try to learn. God gave us these suits for more than stopping the Kron Empire."

"You see the Bendovians as a real threat?"

Gonzales shook his head. "No. From what sailors have told me, no man does. They steal only a few men from fishing boats for use as mates. Likely as not, they look forward to the Bendovian women attacking every five years. It's just that I feel god wants us to accomplish more than merely patrol the border. Already, I'm matching these strange symbols with all of our names. I can, at least, learn my language first before attempting to learn more of god's."

"The fog must be thicker than usual. I can't hear any of the others out on patrol," Coffin said.

"*Five up!*" Gonzales glanced out to sea. "You're correct. The fog is heavy today. I can't even see them on my directioner. *Land*."

"Okay, I'll teach you. You'll need a few things first. Fetch a bucket of sand and two sticks."

"You're not worried about our friends?"

"They have Jones along to teach them. He's probably making the most of training them how to handle fog."

"Is something wrong, Sir Lieutenant Gonzales?" Proctor Meson asked.

Gonzales looked up and noticed that Proctor Meson leading a small group of applicants past.

"No, nothing's wrong. I was studying how to make my letters so I can learn to read." Gonzales flashed a smile at the applicants who then visibly relaxed.

Even on the stormiest of days a few applicants struggled through wind and rain to reach High Crag for the opportunity to try out for knighthood. Some camped out for days in the shelters outside the castle until the weather behaved enough that they could test. In the last few days, only foggy weather had stood in their way. Once the weather became better, the groups would become larger. Until then, only small groups would go through, because the applicants couldn't be tested on wet equipment.

Meson nodded in a thoughtful manner. "If you need another tutor, I'll be available as well. We can include some reading lessons with your archery practice."

"Thank you, Proctor. That sounds good to me. How are these applicants doing?"

"They're good learners. Knights usually are, I've noticed. Anyway, I've my hopes up that one of these will become a knight. I always keep my hopes up about that. I was rewarded five times so far this year with my hopes. I'd best get them moving. Very well, now, everyone. You've seen the hollow suits. Move on past. You've still more to learn. The ropes will soon be dry enough."

Gonzales continued to smile even when one hand flashed out to touch his suit as the applicants filed by. He'd become used to that kind of attention. After they were gone, he returned part of his attention back to the letters drawn in the sand near his feet.

Sir Private Moto landed just as Gonzales returned to the Sacred Hall to carry off more of the hollow suits. "Coffin, Gonzales."

"Moto!" Coffin exclaimed. "What brings you here? You should have spoken before you arrived."

"I felt it best not to announce my presence. I trust my fellow knights, but our security needs tightening. However, I'm not here about our security. I'm here to make assignments. Klaus and Gwinn should be trained by now."

"They are," Jones suddenly said. "We're just now coming in sight of land."

"Good. In that case, I'm sending Klaus and Gwinn to Castle Bright Sand. They can leave in the morning."

"What about me? I'm experienced. I can handle that sector now with the sonic power in my suit," Coffin said.

"Someone is needed here to train Sir Private Deliah. Your background might be more useful here. On advice from other proctors, it's better for us if you remain here so you can read any records left by Basoc," Moto said.

"Useless junk, if you ask me. His few writings we've found are nothing more than images of what we see when we're wearing our suits," Coffin said. "A few are fairly good drawings of Castle Staten Island."

"All the more reason to keep you here for now. You're our most educated knight. Believe me, that's the only reason I want you here with Gonzales," Moto said.

"I'm interested in the security problem," Gonzales said.

"I'll talk about that later when we have privacy," Moto said. "In the meantime, I'll give you a hand in storing away the hollow suits."

Moto waited for the other knights to remove their suits before saying another word after learning that the secret passage had been thoroughly blocked. No one could get close enough to hear, let alone enter any longer. Even so, Gonzales had carried up a heavy stone with the help of other knights to place on top of the secret door as an added precaution.

"Basoc isn't our only threat. Someone threw a knife at me at Black Water. Fortunately, they didn't know that I still had my suit on under the hooded cloak I added to keep myself warm. Otherwise, I might be dead."

"In the Grand King's own court?" Coffin exclaimed.

"My suspicion is that Basoc wasn't the only infiltrator sent by Kron," Moto said.

"Another knight?" Gonzales asked.

"No, I'm certain that it has to be someone outside the Order. Whoever it was is allowed access into the castle," Moto said.

"Then you don't suspect any of the proctors?" Coffin asked.

Moto shook his head. "At the same time, I don't want us talking to each other about any of this while in public. It's too easy to be overheard without even thinking about who might be around. We've become too used to being overheard by everyone in range. That's why I'm not announcing where I'm going. I don't want to take any chances."

"We do have a tendency to talk loud at times," Coffin said.

"The point is that we know we can be infiltrated. We can no longer operate as we did. I'm just sorry that it cost us a dear friend to learn that," Moto said.

"How will things change?" Gonzales asked.

"Well, you'll have two other knights assigned here with you. Eventually, I'll assign Coffin to one of the other sectors. Very likely, I'll leave Jones and Deliah here. King Vimma would rather that we continue pairing our knights instead of tripling them. That means that this will be the only castle with three knights. King Vimma found that reasonable because you have to conduct patrols as well as guard the Sacred Hall. He's willing to let me keep four knights here until Deliah is thoroughly trained. That gives you about two months before you lose Coffin," Moto said.

"So I've got two months to read anything Basoc left behind and help train Deliah?" Coffin asked.

"When you're not running patrols or taking a shift at the Sacred Hall," Moto said.

Coffin bit her lower lip while nodding. "Where am I going later?"

"Depends on how things develop. King Vimma made me aware of a few things that I hadn't considered before, such as dispersing our force to give more sectors the advantage of our new sonic power. If necessary, which someday it will be, we won't have a knight with *sonic* power guarding the Sacred Hall. Castle High Crag is easily defended. Anyway, we've protected the suits before without that power," Moto said.

"What about if Gonzales can activate the other suits? Has anyone given that any thought?" Coffin asked. "If he can, we could have thirty knights and cover every border kingdom for once."

"Very privately, King Vimma told me that he's not interested in seeing the people lose their faith or in further antagonizing the nobles, some of whom distinctly don't care for us. However, he stated that he wouldn't oppose the church's efforts to determine whether it's possible. Grand Proctor Folon suggested that we shouldn't. He's concerned that if Gonzales succeeds, it would give the crown the authority to transfer the Order directly and completely under their control. We'd no longer have the church's support and that might affect the people," Moto said.

Gonzales scowled. "Let me get this straight. You think I can activate those other suits?"

"It's like I was explaining before Basoc tried to kill us. If the suits have a hierarchy, then you might very well be at the top. That doesn't have to necessarily mean that god didn't give us these suits as Basoc insisted, but it could mean that god chose to give us more latitude than we ever suspected. Even if you have that power from god, unless someone replaces you when you retire, that power will be lost, again. I think the Grand Proctor has little to worry about," Coffin answered.

"God couldn't have meant to trust me with so much power," Gonzales said facing Coffin.

"I don't see why not. You're one of the most devout knights I've ever known," Moto said. "You don't carry anyone up into your tower, even though you're free to do so. You attend church regularly to pray."

"He doesn't have a drinking problem, either," Jones said. "How is Royal?"

Moto sighed. "Not any better, I'm afraid. However, we're getting away from Gonzales. I'm similarly concerned about this problem. The potential for damage to the Order is high. There are plenty who would condemn us if we discover that we can predetermine who is to become a knight. We also face the problem of who to select if Gonzales does have this power to create knights."

"Is that why I'm remaining here?" Deliah asked.

Moto turned to Deliah. "You're remaining here to learn. Most of our knights trained here first. However, you're also here so that we can see whether your knighthood is further influenced by Gonzales. Regardless of where I assign you, proctors will study you in ways they wish they could have studied Sir Private Malidor. You'll cooperate with the proctors when it doesn't interfere with your duties."

"Then am I supposed to try activating one of the other suits?" Gonzales asked.

Moto turned to Gonzales. "I really don't know. I'm supposed to be your leader, but this is something no one ever faced before. I don't have anything to guide me."

"Except god," Gonzales said.

"God doesn't talk to me as often as he does with you. I strongly suspect that you'd be our leader now if Basoc hadn't engineered a false murder charge against you."

"I don't know how to lead."

"That's not true. You already lead the knights here at High Crag. Have more faith in yourself, as god obviously does," Moto said. "Possibly that's the answer we're both seeking. God wants you to accomplish great matters. He's given you special powers. I believe that you'd only disappoint god by failing to use those powers."

"You'll need assistance from the proctors. Several of them observed you while you suffered the brief illness," Coffin said.

"I remember they did. I wasn't asleep or delirious all the time," Gonzales said.

"True, but it was only when you slept that you gave magic commands," Coffin said.

"Consult the proctors. Let them guide you in what you said. When you're ready to try, warn the other knights so they can take precautions. I recall that some of their suits reacted. They'll want to be on the ground or farther away before you try," Moto said.

Gonzales nodded. "I take it you want me to try."

"Contrary to the Grand Proctor's guidance, yes."

"What if I fail?"

"There's no dishonor in failing. If you should, then we'll know that god meant for you to only make Deliah's admission possible under her name. Then we'll know that you're part of an important chain and look to her for the next instruction from god."

"Me?" Deliah exclaimed.

"You're a knight now. No one cares that you happened to be a thief before this," Moto said.

"You know?" Deliah exclaimed.

Gonzales turned his puzzled face toward Deliah.

"The people in your kingdom are still baffled at the news that god chose you to become one of his knights," Moto said.

"Shouldn't we have been told?" Gwinn asked.

"I didn't steal anything in Cragless!" Deliah exclaimed.

"It's not our job to pass on such matters, particularly as we're expected to accept each other. Eventually, that information will reach here on its own. Do you really need to know that one of us was a murderer before becoming a knight?" Moto said.

"Here in this room?" Gwinn asked.

"I only said one of the knights. Anyway, we're not here to discuss what each of us did before becoming a knight, though it would certainly be interesting," Moto said.

Coffin nodded. "Past knights were no better or worse than those alive in the Order now. The last Cardin worked as a prostitute before she became a knight. Washington studied to become a proctor before finding out that he was to first become a knight after someone noticed that he could easily fit within a suit and convinced him to try. The last Yakamata preferred men in his bed. Not that it matters, as it's on record now, I'm the one who murdered a man before I became a knight. I knew instantly upon seeing my suit open that god would forgive me provided I channeled my efforts into accomplishing what was needed for his people. Like some initiates before me, I freely confessed my prior sins to a proctor before flying to Castle Staten Island to give my oath to god."

"It must have been your destiny to save an innocent life in exchange for the one you took," Gwinn said.

"Not hardly. I'd kill that hairy sneak, again, if need be. Believe me, I don't kill any man without sufficient reason," Coffin said. "Still, there might be something in what you say about it being my destiny to save an innocent life. We all seem to be individual links in a chain leading somewhere."

"So my own destiny may have already been fulfilled?" Gonzales said.

Moto sighed and shrugged his shoulders. "As knights, we all stand equal before god. Only time will tell if he has special purposes in store for some of us."

Chapter 22

Waleski waved at the sailors as their small convoy passed below her. She could tell by the ship designs and their signal flags that they were friendly and merely on their way to Minius for the purpose of trade.

"*Land*," Royal said, descending onto the deck of one boat. "Would you have some wine for a knight in need on such a dreary day?"

Waleski didn't hear any reply, but she saw a sailor scurry off with Royal's flask despite the dim light caused by the heavy cloud cover. He returned less than a minute later with it filled.

"My thanks to you, brave sailors! Journey in safety! We'll keep an eye out for raiders and turn any away from you! *Up* !" Royal shot up past her. "Well, well, what have we here? Waleski, I do believe that we'll have to kick some raiders back from the coast today. So far, I see at least ten ships."

"*Up*!" Waleski found herself beside Royal and stared out at the burgeoning numbers of Kron raiders on the horizon. "It's more than a raid. That's an invasion force. Waleski to any knight who can

hear me. We've twenty Kron ships in sight and more arriving."

"Go after them with your power," Royal said. "We don't need any of the other knights. You don't even need me, except to help keep watch."

Waleski nodded. "Yes, I guess you're right."

She gave her magic commands to alter her course and descend toward the raiders. Just as arrows rose up toward her, her suit flashed in rapid succession at the boats.

" *Warning. Available power reduced fifty percent.*"

"God just spoke to me and changed some of the god lights. The long green light is now shorter and yellow," Waleski said.

"He did? It is?" Royal exclaimed, as he pulled his flask away from his face.

" *Warning. Available power reduced by sixty percent.*"

"God's still speaking to me. The yellow god light is getting shorter."

"Try to remember what he says. The proctors will want to know that."

" *Warning. Available power reduced by seventy percent. Flight capability may be...*"

"Help!"

Royal watched incredulously as Waleski fell into the water. He'd barely heard her over the god voice. He hesitated for a moment before he noticed that the raiders had observed her distress and were no longer attempting to retreat. Then he reacted. As he moved in, the raiders changed their minds once more and resumed their frantic retreat. Waleski reached up to grab Royal by his ankles.

She shouted, "I can barely hear you over my god voice. I don't know what went wrong. Is god mad at me for attacking those raiders?"

"I don't know anymore than you. We better get you back to Minius. *Five up* . You sound cold."

"I am cold. I'm completely soaked and I'm freezing."

"Take a drink of this. It will help warm you." Royal passed down his flask. "I won't fly too fast, either. *Five up* ."

Royal maintained a low altitude and moderate speed until they reached the island. Only then did he ascend to a higher level as it was necessary to clear many of the rocks. When, at last, solid ground became available, Royal descended so that Waleski could release her hold upon his legs and rest her arms. She tumbled to the ground and rolled to a stop.

" *Commencing solar recharge.*"

"Are you all right?"

" Available power at twenty-five percent."

"I'm fine, thanks. God's still talking to me and showing me an angry red bar. I wish I knew his language. I didn't mean to offend him."

"I don't see how you could. You didn't do anything different from before. Wait here. I'll get you a blanket. *Five up !*"

"Thanks," Waleski chattered.

" Available power at twenty-six percent."

Waleski barely lifted up before dropping back to the ground.

" Available power at twenty-three percent. Available power at twenty-four percent."

"God, I'm sorry for anything I've done to offend you."

" Available power at twenty-five percent."

"Try giving penance," Royal's voice said.

Waleski mumbled, "That's what I'm trying to do," as she positioned herself upon her knees.

"Sir Sergeant Waleski fell from the sky? Are you certain?" Duke Plesso asked. He'd been surprised to learn that Sir Tacchon had run from the official court with the news.

"That's what was just reported," Tacchon gasped. "I scarcely believed it myself, but she fell into the sea while fighting off raiders from Kron."

"We can use this somehow." Plesso stood and paced about for a moment. "There must be a way for this to benefit us."

"She's afraid that she offended god in some manner."

"That's it! Of course, she did! That means it's up to us to see that she's tried for her sins."

"But that falls within the church's responsibilities."

"Then they'll have to try her or face displeasing the crown. King Vimma won't tolerate them doing that. It would take very little to engineer a shift in his support to one of the other religions. His own kingdom's religion would very much like to be recognized as the official state religion."

"But they don't have control of the Knights of the Star."

"They won't need any control. If the proctors fail to try Waleski, then they'll be forced to dissolve their knighthood, perhaps even their Order. At the very least, we can force them to rid themselves of one knight. Even an embarrassment is a victory for us."

Waleski felt warmer after Royal placed a blanket around her. When the sun broke through the clouds, she momentarily halted her prayers to remove the blanket so she could dry out faster.

"Is god still angry at you?" Royal asked.

"I don't know. He's still talking to me, though not as often."

" *Warning, available power at thirty percent.*"

"Oh, my!

"What's wrong?"

"He must have heard my prayers. The red bar changed back to yellow, again."

" *Warning, available power at thirty-five percent.*"

"I better pray some more."

"Very well, I'll try not to disturb you. Maybe I should check on the raiders just to make sure they've actually retreated."

Waleski ignored Royal as she returned to her prayers.

Chapter 23

Moto changed his course slightly to intercept Coffin, even though they were both in god voice range of each other. He noticed as he came into eyesight of her that she was looking in his direction, evidently expecting him.

"You've made good time."

"So far. If it was warmer, I'd try going faster."

Moto nodded. He understood that it was asking too much of any of the knights to travel too fast when the weather was still cool. "You brought the writings?"

"I brought what there was."

"Good. We'll discuss those in private when we reach Minius."

"That won't be long now. There's the ocean."

Moto glanced around at the landmarks. " *Five left.*"

Coffin gave the same command. "Will there be a trial?"

"That remains to be seen."

"How does Grand King Vimma feel about this?"

"That can't be discussed now. Too much is reported over our god voices," Moto said.

Moto and Coffin both descended toward a large rock standing tall out of the water a short distance from Minius. The privacy it offered was obvious because it was too dangerous to approach by boat. Climbing it from the sea was just as hazardous. In addition, numerous smaller rocks between the open sea and the shore were partly why Minius was so impregnable. Both knights doffed their armor suits and sat down to talk.

"There are severe undercurrents in Vimma's court," Moto said.

"Precisely as Van Dyke and I both warned long ago?"

"Yes, if it wasn't for your warnings, we'd be down to ten knights by now and in serious danger of extermination. The nobles pressed Vimma to demand that the Grand Proctor order a church trial of Waleski."

"I thought as much. Are we to sacrifice Waleski for the good of the Order?" Coffin asked.

"Vimma doesn't want to lose her. He's aware that we broke up the last invasion on our own. He knows that Waleski broke up another attempt probably aimed at Minius. He doesn't dare insult Queen Elannia."

"I should hope not. Of all the kingdoms, hers is key to the defense of the western shores. If she withdraws her kingdom, there's no way for the others to force her back into the alliance."

"Exactly what he said to me, though in different words. That's why he chose to have the trial held on Minius, just as he left Gonzales in Queen Neessha's hands. Vimma feels certain that Queen Elannia will influence the outcome toward a favorable conclusion."

"That makes sense. Then if Waleski is found guilty, Queen Elannia can't cry foul," Coffin said.

"Vimma said as much. Basoc's actions made it only too clear to him that Kron fears us more than anything else. Vimma doesn't want us ended for all the obvious reasons. At the same time, he has to balance the demands of the nobles because he still requires their support. They wouldn't be such a problem if Van Dyke was still alive."

"Yes, the nobles tolerated us better with him in charge."

"You should have taken over instead of me," Moto said.

"I wasn't active at the time. Choosing me under that circumstance wouldn't have settled well with our fellow knights. Besides, Basoc probably would have caused more harm had I not been retired and in a position to see what he was pulling."

"Vimma suggested that we consider some alternatives."

"Such as?" Coffin asked.

"That we realign ourselves politically. By that, he suggested that we break away completely from the Order of the Star. We would become the Imperial Knights. As such, he could then shield us better against the nobles."

"I seriously doubt that. If anything, we'd become more vulnerable to their actions. Sooner or later, they'd insist that we not have any sacred towers as quarters. We'd have to give in to that demand. Then they'd assassinate us as soon as we let our collective guard down. Right now, the Order of the Star is our only real protection against the nobles and their jealousy. Is that why you wanted me to bring the writings?"

"Vimma did suggest that we could find justification in the writings to prove that we don't have to remain connected to only one religion. That would ease some of the religious jealousies he has to deal with continually."

Coffin shook her head. "Even though I know that's true, I'm not going to support it. This has nothing to do with the fact that I grew up as a follower of the Order of the Star."

"It's true?" Moto exclaimed.

"Basoc wasn't fabricating evidence to split up the Alliance. He was uncovering what was best left alone for the good of all, except the Kron Empire, that is. After all, it's more difficult to refute the truth. If anything, I'll admit that he wasn't a fool."

"Then he was right about Gonzales' suit?"

"I strongly suspect that he was. Our problem isn't just that, however. If we announce that, we risk exposing other truths that are best left alone. Vimma might not realize this, but others do. Our entire Alliance is in jeopardy if the Knights of the Star leave the Order. Queen Neessha confided in me about this."

"I don't see how," Moto said.

"It's simple and quite scary. If we're not selected by god, then there's no reason to believe in any particular religion. That puts them all out of power as far as controlling us. At the same time, if we have more power than the nobility of all the kingdoms, then that points out that they're not related to god as most claim. Similarly, they don't have any valid reasons for controlling us. Unfortunately, many of the nobles realize this. However, some are unwilling to leave things as they are. In doing so, they might cause the people to realize that we've a more legitimate claim in leading them than anyone else, especially since most of us came from among the people. If that ever happens, we'll be forced to choose sides in a war that will involve every single kingdom within the Alliance. That's if they don't murder us first after we break free of the church."

"The kingdoms will fight each other?"

"A few might. However, it's more likely that the people will fight against the nobility. Should the Kron Empire find out about that, they'll move in and take over. Can you see that now?"

Moto nodded. "What you're telling me is that we're doomed if we become Imperial Knights."

"I'd much rather fight Kron than my friends."

"In which case, we need some suggestions to offer Queen Elannia."

"Hopefully, she'll ask for some."

Gonzales felt surprised for a moment before he realized that he was hearing sounds from underground as he stood guard before the Sacred Hall. The sound of moving stone came to his ears before he saw the slab moving behind him in his god visions. He drew his sword as he turned and faced two applicants whose meditations were abruptly interrupted by the vibrations.

"Stand aside," Gonzales ordered, as he faced the opening.

Three Kron raiders rushed up steps that few knew existed as the two applicants crawled out of the way. The raiders clearly hadn't expected to meet a Knight of the Star with his weapon at the ready. Gonzales advanced upon them swinging his sword.

"Knights of the Star! The Sacred Hall is under attack!"

Unable to spread out, the raiders found themselves forced to fight one-on-one as Gonzales blocked them from exiting the underground labyrinth. One fell moments later to his sword and dropped back down the steps. Forced off balance, the second raider was wounded by Gonzales, even as more appeared below and pressed against each other to advance up the steps. A dark shape descended behind Gonzales. A quick glance in his god vision was sufficient to impart that his own reinforcements had arrived.

"I was about to take my suit off when you called," Deliah said.

"Just watch my back and let these applicants get out safely. I can hold off the rest of these raiders."

"Shouldn't we call upon the guards? Never mind, they're coming already."

"Tell them to circle behind these raiders underground."

"Proctors, arm yourselves!" someone shouted.

"Guardsmen to the tunnels! Sir Lieutenant Gonzales and I can hold this entrance!" Deliah shouted at two who came running with their weapons at the ready.

"No doubt Basoc is behind this," Gonzales said.

He took advantage of a raider's missed swing and kicked the man in the face to tumble him backward into the arms of his comrades. More guards ran into the courtyard with their weapons as the alarm spread through the castle.

"Can we hold them all off? It looks like there are tens of raiders below us," Deliah exclaimed.

"Carry off the hollow suits while I keep them out!"

"What if I mix them up?"

"Just carry them off! We'll figure out later which suit is which! Now do it!"

"Yes, sir," Deliah said. She quickly grabbed four of the suits. She leaped out of the hall and ascended to her tower quarters where she hurried to place the suits in storage niches before flying down to retrieve more. "The suit beside you is the last one left to move!"

Gonzales kicked another raider while slashing with his sword. He then turned, grabbed the last suit, and ran the few feet out of the hall before giving the commands to ascend. As he reached his tower, he noticed that the guards were falling back from other secret entrances now open. There were just too many enemy soldiers below to hold back.

"Deliah, get to the Queen's side and carry her to safety. I'll find the Duke and help his men."

"Where should I take her?"

"Bring her up here. As soon as you get her to safety, carry up some of the archers." Gonzales then commanded, " *Up!*" He watched his god visor until he saw that the bar indicating his altitude was at its top limit. "Sir Lieutenant Gonzales to all knights. Castle High Crag is under attack from the underground tunnels. We need help urgently. *Land !*"

Already, several enemy soldiers were in the courtyard engaging the proctors and Imperial Guards. Even some of the applicants had picked up weapons and joined in against the men from Kron.

"My Queen, you must come with me to safety. Most of your personal guards are already dead. You must trust me," Gonzales heard Deliah say over the god voice, while swords clanked about in the background.

It was clear to him that some of the enemy had invaded her royal court. He caught sight of a Kron raider behind him and turned to slash out at the man, catching him by surprise. It was enough to put the man out of action so that Gonzales could then run for the Duke's office. He was almost to the office when he heard the Duke's voice coming from elsewhere in the courtyard as he ordered his men about to defend the castle. Gonzales turned and ran for the Duke's location. He used the one suit he still held as an temporary shield and slashed out with his sword at another Kron agent.

"Duke Sabbo!"

"Gonzales! Are the suits safe?"

"All but this one. Grab hold of me so I can fly you up to guard Queen Neessha."

"I have to lead the attack!"

"In that case, you'll need armor. I hope this works."

"What are you talking about?" Sabbo asked.

" *Activate Private Ashen suit.*"

" *Nano-tech repairs forty-seven percent complete, Lieutenant Gonzales.*"

"Deliah, what was that word I'm supposed to remember?"

" *Override.*"

"Thanks. *Activate Private Ashen suit .*"

" *Nano-tech repairs forty-seven percent complete, Lieutenant Gonzales.*"

" *Override nano-tech repairs forty-seven percent complete!*"

Lights flickered briefly on the suit as it creaked open.

"You opened another suit? You surely must have god's blessings!" Sabbo exclaimed.

"Put it on, Duke Sabbo! There's no time now for talk!"

Duke Sabbo hurried to slip his arms into the suit, excitement removing any fear he felt out of his mind. The next thing he knew, Gonzales was pushing the suit closed about him. "I'm a Knight of the Star now?"

"You will be, I think. There's no time to explain everything. Just stay with your men while I check on the queen!"

"Of course I will! Stand and fight, men! They can't beat us now!" Sabbo exclaimed, as he stood with his sword at the ready and brushed a tear away from one eye with his other hand.

"Deliah, is the Queen safe yet?" Gonzales turned in time to see Deliah fly off from the entrance to the royal court with the queen holding on tight.

"We're just now getting up to the tower."

"Good. I see you now. When you get up there, bring down one of the suits to me. I'm going to make more reinforcements for us." Gonzales turned in time to slash out at another Kron warrior.

"How do I fly?" Sabbo asked.

"Just stay on the ground, Duke Sabbo. You don't know enough to fly yet," Gonzales said. He thrust his sword into an enemy soldier just as the man's sword clanked against his own armor.

" *Land!*" Deliah's feet kicked out at the same Kron soldier as Gonzales withdrew his sword. The enemy soldier toppled that much faster to the ground as she held out another suit and touched down on the surface. "I just grabbed one. I don't which one it is."

"Duke Sabbo! Read this for me. My reading isn't good enough yet."

Sabbo turned, and read, "That's the Private Williams suit."

" *Activate Private Williams suit!*" Gonzales ordered. Immediately, the suit opened. "I need the Imperial Guard over here who doesn't have his armor on!"

"You must mean me! I need armor!" Eusis' familiar voice shouted out. "I wasn't near mine when the alarm sounded!"

"I'll fill in for him!" Deliah shouted, as she leaped forward with her sword at the ready.

"Fall back to my voice and stick your free arm out to me! I've armor for you!" Gonzales shouted.

Eusis dropped back as instructed. He soon felt the hardness of a suit against his knuckles. Groping, he found the armhole and slid one bare arm inside. It wasn't until he pulled his arm around that he noticed that the suit was black.

"By his blessings! This is..."

"Put it on! Move your sword out of the way and get your other arm in!" Gonzales shouted.

"Just do what he said," Sabbo yelled, as he moved deeper into the fray.

As soon as Eusis placed his other arm inside the suit, Gonzales clicked it closed. "Trust your suit to protect your head and body. Just worry about your arms and legs. Deliah, fly to Cragless and alert the Squire!"

"Must I?"

"Do it!"

"Very well. Be careful! *Five up!*" Deliah flew off over the wall towards the town.

Gonzales raced off toward a group of raiders. He halted upon reaching them when a thought occurred to him. "*Hover! Left!*" he shouted, while picking up his legs and sticking his sword out so that the edge sliced about in a wicked circle. Immediately, two of the raiders collapsed from his assault. Unwilling to face him, the others dispersed. "*Hover! Land!*" Gonzales shouted, grateful to feel his feet beneath him once more, as well as halt his dizzying spinning. He leaped after the fleeing raiders.

"High Crag is under siege?" Moto asked, putting his suit back on and hearing Royal call his name.

"They're not just outside. They're inside fighting in the very courtyard around the Sacred Hall," Royal replied.

"Who else is under attack?" Moto asked.

"Yes, it could be a diversion meant to throw us off guard," Coffin said, as she picked up on the conversation. "We can't send everyone there."

"What a fight this is!" Sabbo exclaimed.

He fended off another blow from a raider while standing with three of his Imperial Guards. Two of them were already severely wounded. They remained alive only because he and Eusis had steadfastly defended them. Not far off, several proctors had fallen. Another was assisted toward the Duke by a proctor whose eyes exhibited his surprise at seeing two new Knights of the Star.

"Where's Sir Lieutenant Gonzales?"

"Over there somewhere." Sabbo motioned before fending off another thrust.

"I'm above you," Gonzales said.

"What about Sir Private Deliah?"

"She's with the townspeople. They're fighting their way up here to help us. Just don't lose faith!" Sabbo shouted.

"I see him now! He's carrying a wounded soldier up into the tower!"

Sabbo glanced around for a moment. "Okay, that's another one he's saved. Even wounded, those men will stand by their Queen!"

"When is Gonzales using his special power?" Eusis asked.

"I don't know," Sabbo said.

"It usually works on its own when god wills it," Gonzales said. "I think god is holding off because many of his followers are in the way."

"Of course! That must be why!" Sabbo exclaimed. "We must consolidate our forces in one place. Help these wounded men to the base of that tower. Gonzales, signal everyone to meet over there!"

Gonzales glanced down from the tower where he was depositing a wounded man. He spotted Duke Sabbo and Eusis as they retreated to the next tower beside his. "I see where you mean. It's certainly worth trying."

"Can anyone hear me yet?"

"Wong? Is that you?" Gonzales asked.

"Yes, I'm just now clearing the pass into Cragland. Moto relayed to me that I should assist you. Am I too late?"

"We're still fighting them off. You're not too late," Gonzales said.

"Thank you, god," Deliah said.

"Deliah, is god speaking to you?" Gonzales asked.

"Only through his actions in sending Wong to your rescue. I've been so worried about you. We still haven't cleared the way into the castle yet," Deliah said.

"Wong, are you the only relief sent our way?" Sabbo asked.

"Who's speaking?" Wong asked.

"This is Duke Sabbo speaking over the god voice. This is truly amazing. I can't see you or Deliah at all, yet I can hear you both as if you each stood next to me."

"Duke Sabbo? How can you hear and speak with me?" Wong asked.

"I'm now a knight. So is Imperial Guardsman Eusis," Sabbo replied.

"Duke Sabbo speaks the truth. He and I each have on a black suit now," Eusis said.

"We have two new knights? Gonzales, what in god's blessings is going on?"

"I followed Moto's suggestion when I realized that High Crag stood in danger of being overrun unless Deliah and I had more knights available. I succeeded in activating the Private Ashen suit for Duke Sabbo, and the Private Williams suit for Eusis when I saw that they needed armor."

"I'll be there soon," Wong said.

"I can already see you," Deliah said.

"Yes, I see the problem. They've got the narrowest part of the path blocked. I'll come in behind them. Then your men can break through," Wong said.

"*Activate sonic*," Gonzales ordered.

"*Sonic activated. Target acquired.*"

"I'll guarantee that these prisoners won't be murdered this time. They'll talk before I'm done with them, too," Sabbo said.

Queen Neessha settled to the ground as Deliah flew down with her from the tower where she'd been protected during the battle. She strode over to look at Duke Sabbo.

"I think not. If you're now a Knight of the Star, then your eldest will rise to champion Castle High Crag. That duty will fall to him."

"My Queen, I meant only until he arrives. Certainly, the proctors and Sir Private Moto would be agreeable in permitting me to discharge those duties until my eldest son arrives," Sabbo said.

"My Queen, I'm not entirely certain that Duke Sabbo or Imperial Guard Eusis are Knights of the Star yet," Gonzales said.

"They have on the suits. They must be knights," Neessha exclaimed.

"My Queen, I activated the suits for them. We still need to see if I have god's permission to grant them knighthood as happened with Sir Private Deliah," Gonzales said.

"Ah, now the situation is becoming clear to me. How long will that be?" Queen Neessha asked.

"My Queen, until Sir Corporal Coffin returns with some of the official writings detailing the procedure. For now, I'm inclined to leave the suits in their care, except that they can't see to personal needs unless I release them. I remember how Deliah felt so uncertain until then. I'd rather not put them through the same uncertainty," Gonzales said.

"My Queen, if I may continue to discharge my duties as Defender of the Castle, I will see to restoring our defenses," Sabbo said.

"Yes, do that, Duke Sabbo. You and your men fought bravely today despite suffering grave losses. Your efforts will not be forgotten," Neessha said.

Sir Private Moto felt uneasy at entering Queen Elannia's elegant chamber, resplendent with colorful tapestries hanging from the walls and shown off in their magnificence by strong sunlight coming through her windows. She sat behind a polished, wooden desk with moderate piles of writings upon its surface, a fact that caught him off guard even though he knew that nearly all nobles could read and write. He hadn't given much thought to someone as high as a queen spending time reading, particularly as much as she had before her.

"What is the latest concerning High Crag?"

"It still stands in Alliance hands. Queen Neessha remains alive and well," Moto answered.

"How many were lost?"

"They're still sorting that out. What I've heard so far is that half the castle's Imperial Guards were killed. Most of the rest were wounded, some quite severely. The proctors fared no better."

"And the Knights of the Star? Did we lose any of them?" Elannia asked.

"Strangely enough, we might have gained two as a result of the fighting."

"That is indeed strange. Do you have the details concerning this development?" Elannia asked.

"Yes, my Queen. I'm listening to more as we speak. Sir Corporal Coffin is high above us relaying reports."

"In that case, just repeat what she passes on."

"Sir Lieutenant Gonzales opened two of the suits and placed those on two men who needed armor. Right now, Duke Sabbo and Imperial Guardsman Eusis are in black armor."

"Did you say Duke Sabbo?" Elannia laughed.

"Coffin, are you certain you heard Duke Sabbo's name?" Moto asked.

"It was repeated to me. I'm certain," Coffin replied over the god voice.

"Yes, my Queen. Duke Sabbo now wears the black armor."

Elannia laughed some more. "Well, it appears that he'll finally have a suit with which to impress the visiting ladies. I suspect he'll fly around in hopes of trying out more beds than his own."

Moto tried not to act surprised that Elannia knew of Sabbo's behavior. He concluded that one of the other knights had shared too much information. "Gonzales is waiting for Coffin's return so that the writings she carried here can be consulted."

"I see. Are you trying to remind me that we have Sir Sergeant Waleski to consider?"

"No, my Queen."

"It doesn't matter. If you hear anything that seems important, just speak up. In the meantime, what are your opinions concerning Waleski?"

"It's my understanding that she can fly now, though she's been restricted to her quarters."

"That's true."

"Since she can fly again, it seems to me that god has accepted her penance. Otherwise, why restore flight to her?"

"Yes, I suppose that's the explanation we'll have to use officially. You're not concerned that her suit might be wearing out?" Elannia asked.

"My Queen? I don't understand."

"You really believe that the black suits are from god?"

"I've heard recent information regarding that. My Queen, our conversation should remain private."

"We're here alone. Our conversation is already private."

"No, my Queen. My own voice is heard by any knights close by. I feel I should make our conversation more private. However, if I do, I won't hear any of the latest reports concerning High Crag."

"Very well, do what you must. You can catch up on the reports when we finish our discussion."

" *Deactivate Private Moto suit.*"

Queen Elannia watched as Moto set his suit down upon the floor. "Are we private now?"

"We are, my Queen. You asked if I believe that our suits are from god. What I've learned

recently indicates that they're not. However, I don't think many of my comrades are ready to learn that."

"You're far more intelligent than I expected."

"Actually, I'm quite ignorant. Sir Corporal Coffin educated me about this just before we arrived. I'm still reconciling this with my beliefs."

"Then you understand that we need your Order regardless of how it gained its power. I can't ask my people to increase the size of our military just so we can keep our kingdom free of the Kron Empire's rule. They've become comfortable with our prosperity gained from increased fishing and trade over the past century. That's why I'm asking whether the suit is wearing out as might happen to farming tools used too much in the dirt. Don't look at me in shock. I'm aware that tools and weapons wear out and break."

"I honestly don't know the answer. I believed that our suits came from god because they're not like any armor we can make. Now I have some doubts, but not enough to renounce god's intentions."

"I'm not asking anyone to renounce their belief in god. Like I stated, my court will accept your god's restoration of flight to Waleski as proof that she performed sufficient penance. All I truly want now is your opinion on whether your suits are finally wearing out," Elannia said.

Moto shook his head. "I really don't know."

"In that case, I want three of your knights stationed on Minius. Do what you must to arrange this. After all, you do have two new knights and you won't be losing Waleski. Oh, one more thing. I don't want Duke Sabbo or whatever name you give him stationed here."

Chapter 24

Duke Sabbo listened attentively as a proctor went over the commands. " *Activate Private Ashen suit.*"

The assembled knights and proctors watched for the suit to open. Most weren't disappointed when it failed to do so for the Duke. Then again, they'd witnessed many failures in the past.

"What now, Sir Lieutenant Gonzales?" Sabbo asked.

"I'll try what the knights overheard and passed on to the proctors when I was sick," Gonzales said.

"Yes, I think you should," Moto said.

Coffin flipped through the writings. She selected a new leaf with fresh writing upon it. "I think I've found what you said. Try saying *reprogram Private Ashen suit*."

" *Reprogram Private Ashen suit,*" Gonzales said.

Instantly, the suit worn by Duke Sabbo flashed weakly across the chest.

"Now tell it a new name," she said.

"What name?" Gonzales whispered, while covering his pike as he faced toward Coffin, again.

She hesitated, then said, "Tell it Duke Sabbo. That ought to work."

" *Reprogram Private Ashen suit. Duke Sabbo*," Gonzales said.

" *Duke is not recognized as a legal rank. Repeat command*," the suit voiced.

"Does that mean it doesn't like the name like happened with Deliah?" Gonzales asked.

"You're probably right. Maybe the first word has to be *Private* , *Corporal* , *Sergeant* , or *Lieutenant* . You better try again," Coffin replied.

" *Reprogram Private Ashen suit. Lieutenant Sabbo*."

" *Promotion authority exceeded. Promotion denied*."

"Try *Private* ," Moto said.

"Might as well," Coffin said.

" *Reprogram Private Ashen suit. Private Sabbo*," Gonzales said.

" *Accepted*."

"Mine said that word when I became a knight!" Deliah exclaimed.

"My god vision is changing just like it did before," Moto whispered.

Gonzales nodded as he observed within his own visor how one light suddenly switched off before another switched on in a lower location with a strange new set of symbols beside it.

"Duke Sabbo, try saying *activate Private Sabbo suit* ," Coffin said.

" *Activate Private Sabbo suit*." Instantly, Duke Sabbo's suit opened. He pressed it closed.

"That's it! The new light is reacting to his instructions. Duke Sabbo, you're now a real knight," Coffin said. "Now we can try this on Eusis."

"Except I'm no longer a duke, am I?" Sabbo asked.

Proctor Meson shook his head. "No, you're not. Welcome to god's service, Private Sabbo."

" *Reprogram Private Williams suit. Private Eusis*," Gonzales said.

"It appears that you'll be escorting our new knights to Castle Staten Island tomorrow," Moto

said.

Gonzales nodded. "After they receive some flight training."

" *Warning. Available power reduced fifty percent.*"

"I think your god just spoke to me," Sabbo said. "Also, one of the long green bars just changed to yellow."

Gonzales stared at Sabbo in stunned silence as he considered the problem. "Don't repeat anything more after me, either of you. I need to call Moto and ask for his advice concerning this. *Up !*" Eusis and Sabbo continued to hover, following Gonzales with their eyes as he flew up until he was a mere dot. "Gonzales calling Moto. I have an unusual problem. I need your advice."

"What kind of problem?" Moto asked.

"Private Sabbo gave the proper magic command, but his suit is barely flying above the ground."

"I'm heading your way now. I heard him mention that god spoke to him. What did god say?" Coffin asked.

" *Warning. Available power reduced fifty percent.* I'm fairly certain I remembered that correctly," Sabbo said.

"I'm turning back for High Crag," Moto said.

Gonzales descended gradually until he hovered at the same altitude as Eusis. Coffin soon hovered beside them.

"He's at bush-hopping height," Coffin said. "I doubt that he'd like to fly about like that for very long."

"I'm more concerned about him being within reach of waves," Gonzales said.

Moto appeared overhead and descended. "Is his situation anything like what happened to Waleski?"

"You heard what he said. That sounds to me almost exactly what happened," Coffin replied.

Moto's face presented obvious concern. "It's already apparent to me that Sir Private Sabbo might need some assistance in reaching our island. I'll remain here another day and travel with you. I can always leave from the island to reach my next destination. Go ahead and teach them what you can, Gonzales. Coffin and I are going to the church for a discussion."

"Confidential conversation?" Coffin asked.

Moto nodded. Within moments, he and Coffin each had their suits off.

"I'd appreciate it if you'd keep your sword ready. The workers are still finding entrances to seal," Coffin said.

"Yes, I know. As well, Basoc remains on the loose. What I want to discuss is partly related to what you stated to me before, as well as what Queen Elannia mentioned," Moto said.

"Which is?"

"Our suits might be wearing out. At least, that's what she was concerned over. I didn't want to believe that might be the case. However, too much has transpired lately that goes against everything I believed before. You'd practically convinced me of that already. I had to admit that to Queen Elannia, but I didn't want to shake the beliefs of our comrades. Waleski and Gonzales, in particular, seem quite devout."

"Many of the others are equally sincere in their beliefs."

"Which is why I'm concerned. I can't ask the Duke to constantly do penance when you and I know that the truth might be that his suit is almost worn out. I doubt if he'd understand in light of how strongly he fought against the Kron invaders. At the same time, I can't ignore this problem. There's no telling what might happen if the other knights aren't ready to accept this new knowledge."

"I'll support you in whatever decision you make."

"I guessed that you would. I'm going to order Wong to return here to assist Deliah in guarding the hollow suits."

"Why? I'll be here."

"No, you'll be with us at Castle Staten Island. If Sabbo's suit drops him into the water, it might require the rest of us to rescue him."

"You sound like you're concerned that more of our suits might fail," Coffin said.

Moto nodded. "I can't deny that. Our metal workers can remake our swords, but they can't remake our black armor."

Moto returned to the practice area.

"I'm glad you came back," Gonzales said, as he pointed at Sabbo. "That's the fastest he can fly."

"In that case, we better take supplies with us. It will take him most of the day to reach Castle Staten Island," Moto said. "I also decided that Sir Corporal Coffin will accompany us. Continue your lessons while I call Wong. He'll alternate with Deliah in guarding the hollow suits."

As it turned out, the trip took more time than expected. The sun was setting behind them when Castle Staten Island came into sight at last. Their faces showed their relief at reaching their destination. Had the truth been known, several were relieved that Sabbo hadn't been knocked into the water despite waves that often reached up as high as his knees. Fortunately, everyone had maintained a careful watch

for large waves. They'd worked together to lift him even as he bent his legs just to gain a bit more distance between himself and the water.

"I'd heard this was distant from the land, but no one said you flew this far without stopping," Sabbo said. "I hope I won't be desecrating our island if I find a place to freshen up."

Moto was untying himself from the matrix of ropes they'd used and turned to face Sabbo. However, Gonzales was already untying Sabbo, and pointing.

"Over there is where we take care of freshening up," Gonzales said.

"Thank you, Gonzales. I promise I won't delay the oath for too long," Sabbo replied.

"Don't worry, I'll be doing the same. I'll hold your armor for you. Then you can return the favor after you've finished," Gonzales said.

"We all will," Coffin said.

Moto followed along after picking up the ropes to hand to Gonzales. "We probably should have had him travel more lightly as Coffin suggested."

"Naked except for his armor?" Gonzales asked.

"It wouldn't have harmed him. Besides, he's shivering from the cold. I'll bet you that his robe is soaked from being so close to the water."

"It's too bad that we don't have much firewood with us," Coffin said. "I'm not entirely dry, myself, but it's going to take more than the little we brought to get all our clothes dry and us warm."

"We could search the shore for driftwood," Eusis said.

"That's a good idea. However, it's getting too dark to see anything well. I doubt if we'd find much, if any," Moto said.

"There's another way to get him dry! He could give his robe to one of you to carry around fast. Don't you remember that wet clothes dry quickly when we fly fast?" Coffin exclaimed.

"Of course, Coffin! You're absolutely right. Sabbo, take your robe off and give it to me. I'll have it dry soon enough for you," Moto said. "You'll still have your armor to wear."

"Are you certain about this?" Sabbo asked, as he looked at Gonzales as if questioning whether they were serious or just trying to embarrass him for a joke.

"They're right. I've gotten my own robe drenched only to have it dry in minutes just by flying fast. Of course, it feels like ice while it's still wet," Gonzales said.

Sabbo removed his black robe as he stood up. There was a look of apprehension in his eyes until he felt his armor in his hands again and slipped it into place.

"Be careful about closing that," Moto warned. "It can pinch dreadfully bad in the worst of places."

"I was wondering about that," Sabbo said as he used great care in closing the suit and feeling it against his bare flesh. By then, Moto was in the air with Sabbo's robe fluttering about.

"Thank you for letting me go next," Coffin said, as she handed her armor to Gonzales.

"I can hold her armor for you, Sir Lieutenant Gonzales," Eusis said.

"Thank you, but just see to your own needs for now. You can hold mine should you finish first," Gonzales said.

"Will we give our oaths in the morning?" Eusis asked.

Gonzales handed Coffin back her armor. "*Deactivate Lieutenant Gonzales suit.* Unless Sir Private Moto is in a hurry, we'll probably do that then."

"What did Gonzales say? Did he give Eusis an answer? Someone tell me," Moto said, as he flew overhead.

"He said the morning was fine unless you're in a hurry," Coffin said.

"Yes, tell him that I am. It's going to take us all day tomorrow just to get Sabbo back. We'll conduct the oaths as soon as possible," Moto said.

Coffin glanced over at Gonzales. "Moto wants the oaths given tonight."

Gonzales nodded. He then held out his hand to Eusis for his armor. Within moments, his suit covered his torso and head once more.

Eusis and Sabbo followed Gonzales into Castle Staten Island. Both men displayed awe at the sight of an interior that held enough light for them to see and move about without tripping. In deference to Sabbo's former standing, Gonzales motioned him toward the wall first.

"*Welcome, Private Sabbo.*"

"I heard my name! God said my name!" Sabbo exclaimed.

"Approach the wall and place your hand upon our symbol," Gonzales said. "Then repeat the oath after me."

Sabbo walked over to the wall and placed his hand against it. He ignored the vibration. "You don't have to remind me of the oath. I have it memorized. On my honor, I will uphold the law and obey the orders of those appointed over me. Whenever possible, I will do my utmost to assist my fellow beings and improve conditions for all, be they friend or foe. I will remember that all life is sacred and should not be taken except when only absolutely necessary. I will always champion the cause of justice, no matter what personal consequences I might suffer. All this, I do swear before all I hold dear."

"From this day forward, you will be known as Sir Private Sabbo. Perform your duties faithfully and know now that you will receive burial with honor and one day serve at the hand of god in heaven."

You are no longer known to us as Duke Sabbo. Any sins belonging to Duke Sabbo are absolved with his oath to god. Eusis, please approach the wall when Sir Private Sabbo is out of the way."

Sabbo stepped to the side closest to the storage racks. Suddenly, light flared around him as his suit suddenly opened.

" Primary care required. Deposit your suit for scheduled primary care in accordance with United Earth Forces Maintenance Manual 2.1.3, Private Sabbo."

"What's wrong? Is god upset with me?" Sabbo exclaimed.

" Primary care required. Deposit your suit for scheduled primary care in accordance with United Earth Forces Maintenance Manual 2.1.3, Private Sabbo."

The rest of the knights stared about in awe. After a moment, Coffin said, "I think you should take it off."

"Then I'm not a knight?" Sabbo asked, as he slipped his sword bearing sash and his arms from the suit and stood in only his black robe.

"I don't...Oh, my! Look! I've never seen that happen before!" Coffin exclaimed.

Sabbo wheeled about to see that his suit had closed and flown on its own into one of the storage racks. As soon as it reached its niche, an opening appeared in the wall behind it. Metal arms protruded from the opening to encircle the suit.

"What's happening?" Eusis asked.

"I don't think any of us know," Moto whispered.

"God is repairing the damage! See? The big crack on the front is closing!" Gonzales exclaimed. "God wants you to have a better suit!"

"I surely hope so," Sabbo whispered.

"Yes, you're right! It surely is closing the crack!" Moto exclaimed.

Coffin edged closer to the suspended suit to gain a better view of the extended arms and the mechanisms behind them. If nothing else, it was the first time that anyone since Sir Private Malidor had seen anything beyond the interior of the one room they could enter. Each of the arms was tracing a path along one of the cracks that had been on Sabbo's suit since the first Sir Private Ashen slammed into a castle wall while drunk. She soon realized that some hadn't even been truly visible, yet the metal arms were finding them all.

"If I'm right, we should have Waleski report here to have her suit checked out. Hers was believed beyond use." The rest of the knights turned their heads toward Coffin. "We can find out if Gonzales moves close enough to the racks and the same thing happens," Coffin said.

"Do we dare? What if god doesn't give the suits back?" Moto asked.

"Those arms aren't god. I don't know what those are, but they're not god. I don't think they'll

keep the suits. Besides, Malidor was once an enemy, yet he was permitted to carry off all the suits when more of this castle was open," Coffin said.

"Actually, when he carried them off, the suits were all he could reach except for the shovels," Moto said. "I think we should remain cautious. We'll ask Gonzales to test your idea only if Sabbo's suit is returned."

"Your suggestion of caution sounds worthy to me," Coffin said.

"It's my decision, not my suggestion," Moto said.

"Should I give my oath now?" Eusis asked.

"I don't see why not. Gonzales, finish your duties as Guardian of the Suits," Moto said.

Coffin nudged Sabbo awake. "Your suit must be ready. It's not glowing any longer and there aren't any metal arms surrounding it anymore."

"Then I'm to be a knight?" Sabbo asked, as he slowly stood from the hard floor.

"I guess we'll find out in a moment. See if you can pick up your suit."

"What if god smites me? I wasn't exactly one of his more faithful followers."

"I don't think he will. Besides, you know as well as I that this has to be a machine of some sort."

"It's harder to believe that a machine would know someone's name than to believe that god would."

"Let's not argue over that. We've already been over this in our own education."

Sabbo walked over to the storage rack. "It doesn't appear dangerous. It certainly does look repaired. I don't see any cracks at all."

"Pick it up. See if it still responds to your name."

"What's going on?" Moto asked, as he sat up.

"Sabbo's suit appears mended now. I was urging him to take his suit and try it on," Coffin said.

"Yes, you should. We need to know whether it still responds to you," Moto said.

Around him, the other knights stirred from their sleep. Sabbo reached out hesitantly toward his suit. When lightning failed to strike, he went ahead and touched his suit again, without drawing any ire. He leaned forward.

" *Activate Private Sabbo suit.*"

Instantly, the suit opened as small god lights flashed brilliantly across the chest plates.

"I will be a knight!" Sabbo cried.

He lovingly lifted the open suit from its niche. Moments later, he carefully placed his arms into it. Gonzales sat up and stared at Sabbo. The man dabbed at tears running down his face with one hand and snapped the chest plates closed with his other.

"You better get outside first before you try any commands," Moto said.

"Yes, you're right. We don't want Sabbo injuring himself in here," Coffin said.

"Oh, then it's all right if I injure myself outside?" Sabbo asked, even as he wiped away more tears.

Moto answered, "Absolutely! Now just go out there!"

"You picked up some of Washington's wit," Coffin said.

Sabbo strode past the knights, careful not to step on Gonzales and Eusis who stared up at him from the floor. By the time he exited through the broken opening, the other knights were all standing behind him. He stepped out well into the open.

" *Up!*" he commanded.

"By his blessings, did you see how fast he rose?" Eusis exclaimed.

"Gonzales, I think we should try Waleski's next before we risk yours. I want to be certain that this is what will result. Since you won't need me for your return, I'll fly on ahead and send back Waleski. Coffin can also return to relieve Wong since you won't need her assistance, either," Moto said.

"I'd rather remain here to document what happens," Coffin said.

"You have a good suggestion there. In that case, it might be better if you all return and wait for Waleski to arrive. Then the three of you can journey back here together," Moto said.

"We could bring the other damaged suit with us to see if it can be mended," Coffin said.

Moto rubbed his chin for a moment. "That's another good idea. Do it. By his blessings, I don't think I've ever seen a new knight so eager to fly as Sabbo."

"He's certainly not afraid as I first was," Gonzales said.

"I think this is great fun! *Left !*" Sabbo exclaimed.

Chapter 25

"You appear worried," Waleski said, as she, Gonzales, and Coffin left the coast.

"You're not at all bothered by what might happen?" Gonzales asked, while he avoided looking down.

"I'm meant to be a knight. Why should I worry?"

"God might have meant for you to become a knight, but what we do now might disturb his intentions," Coffin said.

Waleski glanced over at Coffin. "I don't believe that. You said that Sabbo's suit was mended in god's own tower. To me, that means god wanted it mended. If he wishes to mend my suit, he's welcome to do so, as he only permits me to use it in his behalf."

"Well, I'm concerned. I believe in god, but he doesn't actually speak to me. At least, not in a manner that I can truly understand," Gonzales said.

"Yes, we've lost so much since god placed us upon Caerna," Waleski said. "Sometimes, I wish I could kick our ancestors' backsides for losing god's language."

Coffin shook her head slightly. Her own upbringing as a loose follower of the Order of the Star hadn't kept her from viewing other religions with an open mind, despite some of their obvious differences. She'd viewed the nocturnal services of Moon Believers as different only because of when they worshipped. Unlike the Order of the Star, the Moon Believers spent an entire night in worship once every week. Believers in the Order of the Star, on the other hand, slept in the knowledge that god's star was watching over them. Otherwise, both contained elements of forgiveness in return for confession. Even the Sun Watchers shared many beliefs, though they attended services twice each day, once to welcome the sun and again to bid it a well deserved rest. Deliah held that last belief, though she appeared to have converted to the Order as had other knights whose roots sprang from different religions.

"You wouldn't get that sort of an argument from any Naturers. They'd call it an expression of free will given by god."

"People in Pahsoh can afford to throw their clothes off and cry free will, but that doesn't make them right," Waleski said.

"I don't know. I think sometimes that they have the right idea, except when it comes to claiming that everyone is equal. Their radical elements might yet topple the Allied Kingdoms with their ideas," Coffin said.

"Don't we use some of the same ideas, though? I've heard about those. We do elect our own leader within the knighthood. Even our rulers elect the Grand King every five years," Gonzales said.

"You must be reading more," Coffin said.

"Not much. I don't have access to very much to read, and I still don't know many words. The proctors have to assist me often," Gonzales said.

"Then, by now, you've probably noticed that the symbols we see in our helmets are also words," Coffin said.

"I've wondered if that's what those really are," Gonzales said.

"We've got words in our helmets?" Waleski exclaimed.

"Even if you believe that our suits came from god, that doesn't preclude god from communicating in writing as well as voice," Coffin said.

"That's a valid argument," Gonzales said.

"God communicates with us in writing, too?" Waleski asked.

"If you learn how to read, you might figure out what god wrote in our helmets. Right now, I'm the only person working on that problem," Coffin said.

"But how could we do that?" Waleski asked.

"Similar to how our language is translated into Bendovian or any other language," Coffin replied. "We learned it word by word until we knew enough meanings to reach into their writing. Well, almost similar since we won't have anyone to teach us god's language. Maybe, one of these days, we'll find god's interpreter."

"Maybe I should spend some time learning how to read," Waleski said.

"Check with the proctors when you return to Minius. Because of your status as a knight, they'll teach you. Just be aware that it's not as easy as Pahsoh trader language," Coffin said.

"If ever there was a mystery, that's one I'll never figure out," Waleski said.

"What do you find strange about Pahsoh trader language?" Gonzales asked.

"Not their language. I mean their traders, in particular, do their best to amass wealth, but the people in Pahsoh are totally opposite in their religion. Stripping naked to worship god just doesn't sound right," Waleski said.

"Not when you consider that they're reminding themselves that wealth means nothing to god. Before god, they consider themselves equal and express their humility," Coffin said.

"It's just as well that I'm assigned to defend Minius rather than Pahsoh," Waleski said.

"We're almost there. My visor blinked like it usually does," Gonzales said.

"Do you think that's meant to help guide us to god's castle?" Waleski asked.

"Should I go in first?" Waleski asked.

Coffin shook her head. "I'll carry in the hollow suit first. Let's see what happens to it before we risk either of you."

"Thanks, I appreciate that. I don't accept what you suggested, but that doesn't mean I'm not concerned that it could happen that way. I've already taken one swim that I'm still unsure about. I still don't know what I did wrong or how I offended god," Waleski said.

"Maybe god wanted you to defend Pahsoh, instead," Gonzales said.

Coffin laughed as she entered the gash. She disappeared from sight leaving Gonzales and Waleski standing beneath one of the side keels out of the sun. "You want her dodging seateeth, too, if she falls in again?"

"No, I was thinking of how she'd deal with their holidays when everyone is required to be naked regardless of their religion. Of course, she might prefer seateeth," Gonzales said.

"I've been to Pahsoh during their three-day holiday, as a matter of fact," Waleski exclaimed.

"You went naked the entire three days and it didn't bother you?" Coffin asked.

"Not at all, though I was only four at the time," Waleski said.

Gonzales laughed.

"All right, you pulled that one on me good. Since then, you've obviously changed," Coffin said.

"That's true enough. I know more about what's going on around me. It might be all right to have a three-day long festival where everyone walks around naked, but I can't go for some of their other traditions," Waleski said.

"You might when you get older and a bit less desirable. Then you'll look forward to a trip to Reeftown where you'll have the right to make demands upon the men during certain holidays. Many a widow has found a new husband that way," Coffin said.

"If I ever become a widow, I might agree with you."

"Well, the good news is that the Private Malidor suit was just taken from my hands and flew to the same storage niche. The wall is opening. The arms came out, again. I don't see any need for me to stand here and watch. I'll be back outside in a moment," Coffin said.

"After you take your sword off, walk over to there, Waleski. That's where god, I guess, examines your suit. It doesn't seem to happen anywhere else in here," Coffin said.

Waleski looked up from the mended Malidor suit that Coffin held to where Coffin pointed with the stub of her right wrist. After removing her sword and its sash, Waleski walked over, and halted in surprise when a light formed around her suit and it popped open.

"Primary care required. Deposit your suit for scheduled primary care in accordance with United Earth Forces Maintenance Manual 2.1.3, Sergeant Waleski."

"That's how it happened to Sabbo. Just slip it off, and let it go," Coffin said.

Waleski stepped forward pulling her arms out to discover that her suit was already hovering on its own.

"If you don't get that one back, I'll try to make this suit work for you," Gonzales said.

"Thanks, but I've gotten used to being called Waleski. Maybe we should eat now?"

"Sounds good to me. I know we have the new power, but I'd just as soon not have a fire after dark in case there are any Kron ships nearby," Coffin said.

"Why didn't this ever happen to anyone before?" Gonzales asked.

"I don't understand your question," Coffin said.

"Why didn't god mend the suits before now? I feel certain that Waleski and I walked all over this room before," Gonzales said.

"Yes, I'm wondering about that, too. I'm sure that we walked all around trying to find one of those other rooms," Waleski said.

"I don't know. You might as well ask why we weren't given this power before now. None of us knows, even though several suggestions have been offered," Coffin said, as she stepped through the gash onto the sand and glanced around. "We still have enough time for a fire."

"I guess it's your turn now," Waleski said, as she woke Gonzales.

"It gave back your suit?"

"As soon as the metal arms drew back into the wall. Don't worry about taking over on guard. I'm still fresh and awake. Besides, I like watching sunrises."

"Becoming a Sun Watcher?" Gonzales asked, as he stood without picking up his sword or weapon's sash.

"No. It's just that I like sunrises. It's a sure sign that god's star actually watched over us during the night. I like being rewarded with another day to live."

Coffin turned over in her sleep.

"I better see if god wants my suit before we wake her."

"I'll be outside on watch. If you want to talk some..."

"Thanks, I'll keep that in mind."

Gonzales walked over to the niche. Upon reaching it, he found himself bathed in light as his suit opened.

"Primary care required. Deposit your suit for scheduled primary care in accordance with

United Earth Forces Maintenance Manual 2.1.3, Lieutenant Gonzales."

Gonzales shifted his shoulders so he could withdraw his arms and step aside. Once clear, the suit flew to the maintenance niche as the others had.

"I will trust in you, god. Please find me worthy of your continued support."

As a set of mechanical arms went to work, Gonzales walked to the opening to make his way outside onto the sand where he could sit and meditate.

Chapter 26

King Vimma studied Duke Plesso's approach to the throne. There was something about the Duke of Verata that had never settled well with King Vimma, even when he ruled only Verata.

"I report at the King's order," Plesso announced.

"You are here because you requested I order you for consultation. Speak your voice," Vimma said. His serious intonation left no room for doubt in the Duke's mind that the conversation was other than social.

"Sire, I have heard the Order of the Star selects knights in place of god. If this is so, then those who are selected should be from the Royal Knights only. They should not have the right to pick commoners who may carry no respect for your position or our god."

Vimma sat passively for several moments before reaching for a goblet. He studied the contents briefly before taking a sip. "Duke Plesso, I believe you flinch at shadows. The Knights of the Star take an oath..."

"I'm aware that they do. However, the people may see royalty in a new light because of this."

Vimma glared at Duke Plesso. "Do not interrupt me. As I was saying, they take an oath. To this day, no active knight in their Order has refused any orders from myself or any other legitimate leader." Plesso opened his mouth to object. "I'm aware that Basoc of Kron succeeded in gaining knighthood as Sir Corporal Smith. That does not diminish the loyalty of the others. Should I condemn all the dukes because one sided with the Krons several generations ago?" Vimma looked at Plesso in a manner that indicated he was to be answered.

"No, Sire."

"To be fair to you, I must apply the same rule to them. We have held this discussion before."

Plesso glared at King Vimma for only a moment before he dropped his gaze. "Going by our earlier discussion, I mean only to protect your position. If nothing else, this Sir Lieutenant Gonzales should be ordered not to tamper with the traditional method of selecting new knights. At least, that will

assure us that only devout peasants..."

"I explained my position to you before. That is the considered opinion of the Council of Kings. The people recognize that we have forged a powerful alliance that benefits them. Our merchants prosper more than ever thanks to the Knights of the Star. The Royal Knights never succeeded in securing our coasts and waters. I will, however, give some thought to the manner of selection for the Knights of the Star. There is a chance that the Council might choose to opt for tradition, though I can see little reason in light of the greater danger posed currently by the forces of the Kron Empire. Certainly, Gonzales showed no hesitation in selecting those most capable of fighting for the right side when he selected. Nor did he forsake his Queen. He saw to her safety first. Had you paid more attention to the news given us by the Star Knight assigned to this court, you would know the prisoners at Castle High Crag have admitted that King Xidon has marshaled forces large enough to establish a foothold against what we can muster. We need the Knights of the Star more than ever, and men like Gonzales who uphold our rule without question. We are especially fortunate that they have discovered this new weapon that strikes down the enemy despite their numbers. I believe our conversation is ended."

"Yes, Sire."

Plesso turned and left at a casual pace. He paid no attention to the murals, particularly those whose colors were still bright because the effects of age hadn't dulled them yet. He cared little for the flying exploits those displayed within the member kingdoms, particularly because those showed absolutely no participation by the Royal Knights. Upon exiting the building, only then did he permit anyone to see the fire in his eyes as he returned to his own office.

He headed for his desk to pick up a marking stick and an unused leaf. He glanced about the room. Only then did he write on the leaf. Upon finishing, he rolled the leaf into a tight tube. As he did so, he glanced about once more as if concerned that someone might see him. With the tube clenched tightly, he made his way up a stairway to the roof. Minutes later, a solitary homer flew from the castle.

Chapter 27

"Gonzales, your suit is ready!" Coffin announced from the entrance to Castle Staten Island.

Gonzales stood up from the sand where he'd sat gazing upon the rows of former knights while mediating. He trudged back to the castle as if tired.

"Worried that you won't regain your suit?" Coffin asked.

"The suit matters not. I'm more concerned that I remain worthy. I took power from god when I gave knighthood to Eusis and Sabbo."

"I think god chose you because you'd chose wisely when necessary. They'll both make fine knights."

"What about Sabbo's bedding habits?" Gonzales asked.

"God didn't tell us not to share our seed. If he could forgive me for killing, I'm sure he's capable of forgiving the sins of others. We can't all be as devout as yourself."

"I'm not very devout."

"You're more so than any of us," Coffin said, as Gonzales entered the castle.

"It looks new. There aren't any cracks left in it."

"Well, there aren't any arms around it, so I guess you can take it now."

Gonzales gingerly lifted the suit from the niche. Upon stepping back, he ordered, "*Activate Lieutenant Gonzales suit.*"

Immediately, the suit opened so he could shift it about to place his arms within the openings and fit the suit into place.

"It still fits you well. I think that should settle the matter of whether god approves of who you selected," Coffin said.

"Do you really believe that?" Gonzales asked.

"What other explanation is possible?" she replied.

"Before we leave, you should step over there to see if it wants to repair your suit."

"That's a good idea," Waleski said through the god voice.

"You think mine needs repair?" Coffin asked.

"I don't know. You'll have to trust god to know whether your suit needs repair," Gonzales answered.

"Yes, I guess that's the only way to find out. We do have enough food and water to stay another day. Very well, I'll find out if god wants my suit," Coffin said.

She stepped over to the spot where each of the suits had been accepted by god for repair.

"*Primary care required. Deposit your suit for scheduled primary care in accordance with United Earth Forces Maintenance Manual 2.1.3, Corporal Coffin... Medical status alert. Corporal Coffin is injured. Ready medical chamber.*"

"What's happening?" Coffin exclaimed, as her suit fell from her to hover just before reaching the floor.

It whisked upward and around her to the niche using a roundabout route different from any the knights had seen before. At the same time, red lights bathed the room around Corporal Coffin, even as a panel opened at one end of the room.

"Look!" Gonzales exclaimed.

A strange bed-like device floated into the room through the open panel. As it approached Corporal Coffin, a mechanical arm swung up and out to jab at Coffin before she could dodge out of the way. She stared briefly at the mechanical arm as it contacted with her flesh before her arm flinched away.

"It stabbed..."

The device stood on end and wrapped itself around Coffin before she could fall. Before Gonzales could reach her side, something halted him. He felt with his hands to find an impenetrable shield much like that which formed before his face when he flew at high speed. As much as he wanted to reach her, he couldn't. Instead, he helplessly watched as she was tilted to a horizontal position and carried away into the open panel to disappear from sight when the panel closed automatically.

"Waleski! She's gone!"

"What are you talking about?" Waleski asked.

"Come down here from patrol. God just took Corporal Coffin!"

"You don't have to yell. I can hear you. I'll be right there."

Moments later Waleski settled to the ground outside the castle. She entered to see that Coffin's suit rested in the niche with the mechanical arms working upon it. At the same time, she couldn't help but notice that Coffin wasn't in sight. She knew that she hadn't seen Coffin anywhere about on the atoll. Aside from hiding under the two keels, there was no place to hide without burying oneself.

"She's gone. God took her through there," Gonzales cried.

"You saw god?" Waleski asked.

"I don't know what I saw."

"Draw me a picture in the sand outside."

"Shouldn't we wait here?"

"We'll watch from the doorway. If she returns, we'll run back in to rescue her."

"I don't think so. I couldn't reach her when god came. The air formed a wall in front of me just like in front of our faces when we fly."

"It shielded all of her without a suit?" Waleski asked. Gonzales nodded. "We'll do whatever we can if she's returned to us. Draw a picture of what you saw," Waleski said.

At the entrance, Gonzales smoothed the sand before drawing with one finger as best he could. Waleski looked on as he drew something she'd never seen before. Hearing him explain that it touched her but once on the arm to disable her, she couldn't help but shudder from a chill running down her spine.

"Could it have killed her?" Waleski asked.

"By stabbing her in the arm? I don't know. I didn't see any blood spurt out. She couldn't have

bled to death."

"Not a drop?" she asked. Gonzales shook his head. "This is strange. We need Sir Private Moto to guide us."

Gonzales continued to shake his head before he realized that Waleski was right. They did need leadership because he had no idea of what they should do next. He nodded his head instead.

"Yes, you better fly back to tell Moto what's happened. I'll wait here in case god returns her before Moto can reach us."

Waleski nodded. "You're right. You're not in any shape to fly at the moment. I'll go. You stay inside out of the sun." Gonzales stepped into the castle doorway and watched as Waleski flew up and circled briefly. "There's no one in sight, so you don't have to worry about any Krons. Moto and I will be back as soon as we can."

He watched her fly off until she was out of sight. Only then did he walk back into the room to stand looking at the empty suit under repair. After awhile, he sat down and slumped back against the wall.

"Standard United Earth Reconnaissance Force structure dictates that the unit, formed of thirty personnel and officers, operate with two active teams and one smaller team headed by the force leader in standby reserve. Each active team can work as a single unit or as two units when circumstances dictate by dividing along section lines under the sergeant and corporal who lead the unit."

"God? Have I wronged you?" Gonzales asked, as he turned toward the voice.

He stared at the wall where colorful lights normally flittered in a random pattern. Instead of those, he observed small boxes arranged in a pyramid pattern. Curiosity drove him to reach out to touch one of the shapes.

"A Team is led by Sergeant Waleski and Corporal Nigel." He ran his finger over to another box. "B Team is led by Sergeant Klaus and Corporal Coffin." Gonzales moved his finger to the top box. "Headquarters Team is led by First Lieutenant Gonzales and Corporal Smith."

"What about Smith? What do you want me to do, god?" Gonzales asked.

Moto settled onto the sand as Gonzales staggered to the doorway with his hands rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "Any sign of her?"

"Nothing. Her suit is ready, but she's not returned. I think god intends to keep her," Gonzales said. "You didn't bring Waleski back?"

"We need her for defense. Like it or not, we'll need everyone, including you, if the Krons attack in force."

"But what about Coffin?"

"Leave food and water for her. We'll check for her every other day until we're certain that she's gone."

"But she's one of us!"

"I know that. We can't leave the kingdoms in peril just for her."

"We can't leave our island unprotected, either."

"Why not?" Moto asked.

"Because this is the only place where we can have our suits repaired."

Moto stared at Gonzales as understanding came to him with an immediacy that couldn't be rejected. "You're right. We do have to defend this island now. We don't dare let the Krons prevent us from reaching this castle. If it falls, then sooner or later, we'll fall. When that happens, the Krons will win."

Gonzales nodded. "That's what I concluded. God talked to me, again. I don't know what he's saying, but I can show you."

"I'd like to see what you found."

Moto followed Gonzales inside the castle. He watched as Gonzales touched one wall where colored lights created a pattern. With one touch the lights changed to portray a white rectangle. As god spoke, images formed and moved on the rectangle to form a pattern.

" Standard United Earth Reconnaissance Force structure dictates that the unit, formed of thirty personnel and officers, operate with two active teams and one headquarters team headed by the force leader in standby reserve. Each active team can work as a single unit or as two units when circumstances dictate by dividing along section lines under the sergeant and corporal who lead the unit."

"Touch that pattern," Gonzales said.

Moto reached out to touch one image on the rectangle.

" B Team is led by Sergeant Klaus and Corporal Coffin."

"Touch another," Gonzales said.

" A Team is led by Sergeant Waleski and Corporal Nigel."

"I recognize the names, but nothing more," Moto said.

"This is similar to something that Coffin once showed me," Gonzales said.

Moto traced his finger to the third box.

" Headquarters Team is led by First Lieutenant Gonzales and Corporal Smith. Private Moto is a member of this team."

"It didn't say that before," Gonzales exclaimed.

"It didn't?" Moto asked.

"No. This time, it said more than I heard before."

"For now, you'll have to remain here. I will send Sir Private Sabbo to record what you hear, if you can maintain god's confidence in you."

"You think this shows I have his confidence?"

"What else could it be?" Moto asked.

"Couldn't god be punishing me?"

"I don't see why. I'll have Sabbo bring out more food and water for you both. That should give me a day or two to replan our defenses. I better take back Coffin's suit."

"No! If she's alive, she'll need it for her return." Gonzales stepped in front of Moto to block him from reaching the suit.

"It goes back. We can't take the chance that a Kron might sneak up while you're asleep and steal it. We know that one of them once made a suit work. God might let them succeed again just to punish us for not protecting the suit properly."

Gonzales' face drooped knowing that Moto was right. He nodded at last and stood aside. Moto moved on.

"If she returns while Sabbo is with you, then you can send him back for her suit while you remain here to defend her. If not, then it won't matter to her."

Chapter 28

A hand reached into the homer nest to retrieve the newest arrival. After a moment, the homer was released back to the nest while the hand opened the rolled leaf to read. Basoc turned to one of his men.

"He's finally agreed to our terms. Travel to the coast to meet with the next boat. Tell King Xidon that he should instruct our forces to hold off their attacks until they see our signal."

The man turned and left the room. Moments later, the sound of his mount could be heard as he galloped away.

Basoc glanced about at the men he still commanded. Though few, they were steadfast and would fight on order. However, he had better use than to send them against a foe that currently

outnumbered them. There were other ways to deal with the Knights of the Star. Basoc knew that, because he understood their operations.

"Gather round. I have a mission for each of you. The fool of Verata might not fully succeed. If not, then it will remain up to us to sow the seeds of their destruction."

Chapter 29

"I hope you can hear me, Gonzales. I don't see the island anywhere." Sabbo's voice carried some concern within its tones.

"Du...uh, Sir Private Sabbo! I can hear you," Gonzales replied. He stepped out of the castle onto the sand to gaze about.

"Can you see me at all?"

"Not by sight, but I see your dot on my directioner." Gonzales glanced about for a moment before he remembered that there was an arrow in his god vision that always pointed north. He studied the display. "You're south of the island. Turn to your shield side and resume travel. You're not too far from the island."

"Thank you, Sir Lieutenant Gonzales."

"Just call me Gonzales. It's a whole lot easier."

"You should call me Sabbo. *Left...hover...forward* . Am I heading in the correct direction?"

Gonzales studied the god vision for a moment. "You're almost at the correct angle. You'll approach close enough to see the island soon and make your own adjustments. I'll be watching for you. Can you see any Krons on the water?"

"Not around here. Their ships ply our waters only so long as a knight isn't present. They retreat upon spotting one of us. I do believe they're more afraid of us than ever. I see the island now. *Five left* ."

"You're in sight now. How much supplies did you bring?"

"As much as I could carry. I do appear a bit like a pack animal, do I not?"

"Can you land with all those?"

"I'll have to. These were all lashed to me so I wouldn't have to worry about losing any. I'll be down shortly. Has anything more happened?"

"Not yet. I've touched every wall I can reach inside to see if there are any more hidden messages from god. Only the one has appeared. There won't be much for you to record," Gonzales

answered.

"What of Sir Corporal Coffin?"

"Not even a glimpse of her. I wish I held better news than that."

"*Land*," Sabbo ordered. Gonzales walked over to greet Sabbo personally. "Moto decided that more must be done to protect our island. He spoke with the other knights before deciding that he would approach the Grand King and ask for stone workers and stone to build a protective wall for us," Sabbo said. "Reach around back and untie the netting. I can't seem to reach it myself."

Gonzales nodded. "Good to see you again. I'll get the netting loose."

"We make a good team. I hope we work together often."

"All right, I'm about to slip the knot free. Ready?"

"Ready as I'll ever be. Do it," Sabbo replied.

Gonzales slipped the knot loose and barely caught some of the load from falling. He eased what came loose down to the sand in case anything was breakable.

"I'm glad you didn't let that fall. Our fresh water and spirits are in that pack."

"Spirits?"

"Just enough to stave off any chill out here. Nothing like the amount that Royal consumes daily. It's not the drink that's evil. It's the lack of moderation," Sabbo said.

"So, we'll have a wall to protect the doorway?"

"More than that. If Grand King Vimma and the Council of Kings agrees, we'll have a wall built around the entire island so that enemy boats cannot land."

Sabbo removed the rest of his telling load. His knees were about to buckle when he sighed with relief at placing the burden down upon the sand.

"We best get this inside. We might have a storm tonight. There are signs in the sky," Gonzales said.

"Oh, magnificent. I arrive just in time for a storm. How high does the water rise?" Sabbo asked.

"During a storm? I don't know. If conditions get bad, we'll fly back to the coast," Gonzales answered.

"It would have to be bad for you to prefer flying," Gonzales smiled. "I need to write down your discovery before any storm arrives. If it's bad enough, the castle might not be here when we return," Sabbo said.

"If it's not, then why bother?"

Sabbo cocked his head at Gonzales. "You could be right. However, we need to know everything that might help us later. Even if we lose Castle Staten Island, we'll still have the suits."

Gonzales lifted one pack and carried it into the castle. Sabbo followed him with another. "You should have seen me when I loaded everything."

"You loaded?" Gonzales asked.

"Well, when the proctors placed everything on me. I just hovered a step above the ground. I couldn't even tell that I was carrying everything until I landed."

Gonzales preceded Sabbo back outside to retrieve the last packs. He was careful to salvage the ropes and netting used to secure the packs to Sabbo.

"I hope you don't plan on us tying all those packs to ourselves if we have to leave because of the storm," Sabbo said.

"I was thinking of securing the packs inside the castle before we leave. While we're gone, they won't float away should the water come in."

"Ah, good idea. We might not have to carry back more supplies when we return. Unless you're hungry or thirsty, we should get to the discovery."

Gonzales walked over to one wall. "It was here that I chose to sit down. I touched the wall and that caused it to display this tapestry of light."

"An interesting name you've given it. I shall use that in the description I record."

Gonzales smiled weakly as he touched it. The colorful lights that moved about randomly ceased. In their place was a rectangle. The voice Gonzales heard before began its lecture. Sabbo hurried to write down everything phonetically that he could.

"Make it start again. Can you do that?"

"I don't know how to make it start over until the colored lights return. I can make it stop by touching one of the patterns."

"No, don't. We'll do this bit by bit in the proper order. I'd rather not miss anything."

"Hungry?" Gonzales asked.

Sabbo nodded. He'd written on ten leaves, though it took four restarts in order to get that far along the lecture. He glanced up inside his helmet for a moment. At the same time, he tapped his marker on a leaf.

"Those numbers have..."

"Numbers?" Gonzales asked.

"Oh, my god, those are numbers! That's why they repeat in that manner," Sabbo exclaimed.

"What are you talking about?" Gonzales asked.

"I just discovered that some of the god vision writings are numbers. They correspond to our own numbers. We number things based upon our fingers. God must have given the original knights the same numbering system."

"Then you mean that our numbers are like what god uses?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying. Some of their numbers make sense to me now. One looks like a stick or a single finger held up. That means the next number that follows it has to be a two."

If those are numbers, what are they for?" Gonzales asked.

Sabbo stared inside his helmet. He mouthed the numbers in his own language through several repetitions, before he exclaimed, "It's for telling time!"

"Why would god need to know the..."

"Not for god, but for his knights. They might need to know the time when they're not near a town or castle. That's why those numbers are identical in all of our god visions."

"You're certain?" Gonzales asked.

"No, but I think I can prove it if need be. I'll bring this up with Sir Private Moto when we return. We have cause to celebrate. I've written down most of what god says when you touch the wall..."

" *Storm warning. Activating defensive shield.*"

"God?" Gonzales exclaimed.

Sabbo wrote furiously upon another leaf to catch the latest words of god. He then glanced around. "I don't see anything different. Any idea what that was about?"

"Maybe god was telling us something about the time."

"Possibly. Would you mind bringing out the food and drink while I put these in the correct order?"

Gonzales nodded. A moment later he rummaged through the packs to find what the proctors had provided for them. Rolled hard meat was one favorite among the knights. For one thing, it could be handled easily while hovering. For another, it cooked up well when sliced and placed in stews and soups. He selected two and withdrew two small water flasks. With those in hand he walked back only to pause before reaching Sabbo's side. He gazed outside in amazement.

"You best come over here and look outside."

"Do we have Krons to fight?"

"Worse. The storm is here already."

Sabbo stood up slowly, favoring his legs to stretch out any kinks. He walked over to stand beside Gonzales and stare at the storm. "You didn't say that it was already this bad."

"That's why I wanted you to come over here. Do you feel any wind?"

Sabbo licked the back of his hand and held it out toward the jagged doorway. He shook his head as lightning flashed out at sea. The momentary light was enough to illuminate high waves hitting the opposite side of the island. Stepping through the doorway, he managed only a few steps before he contacted an invisible wall.

" Outside activity is not appropriate unless emergency conditions exist. Consult Lieutenant Gonzales for permission to pass."

"God spoke your name," Sabbo muttered, as he stepped back a pace.

"I hope I haven't offended god," Gonzales replied.

"I don't believe you have."

"I better meditate. Here, you go ahead and eat. I should fast while I meditate."

Sabbo fumbled to avoid dropping the food and drink that Gonzales thrust upon him. "Can you remember what god said? I need to write it down."

Gonzales shook his head as he returned to the one room inside the castle. Sabbo stared out at the storm for a moment before deciding that maybe god would repeat the message if he stepped forward once more.

" Outside activity is not appropriate unless emergency conditions exist. Consult Lieutenant Gonzales for permission to pass."

Sabbo mouthed the syllables that he didn't understand, as he made his way back inside to write those down. He had stepped back one pace in time to view a bolt of lightning strike and briefly illuminate the shield. Despite the nearness, he didn't have to shield his eyes. When he reached his writing equipment, he discovered that he still had their meals in his hands. He glanced around before deciding that it wouldn't matter if he placed those on the shelf where one of the suits used to be stored.

"Would you mind starting the tapestry of light once more? God isn't mad at you. He spoke your name even after you came in to meditate," Sabbo said.

"Are you certain?" Gonzales asked, as he glanced up at Sabbo.

"I'm certain. Isn't god protecting us from the storm? Would it make sense to do a favor while angry?"

Gonzales' eyebrows hunched down as he gave thought to the conflict that Sabbo described. When he lifted his eyebrows, his face was less somber. "I hadn't thought of that."

"For all you know, god was telling me to step beside you so I wouldn't be hurt."

"You're right. We don't know what he said, and you were the one who found the wall. Maybe you should be meditating."

"I'll meditate later. For now, eat something and assist me with what I need."

Gonzales lifted one hand to reach the wall. As he contacted it and approached the tapestry of light, new images appeared along the bottom. Upon seeing those, Gonzales halted.

"Oh, my god, he shows us something new."

"Please, no. I haven't finished the other yet. Why did you have to find something new?"

"I don't know why something new appeared."

Sabbo studied the images, before drawing likenesses upon yet another leaf. "At this rate, I'll need another pack of these and more markers. My tongue will be black from all this writing."

Gonzales touched one of the images. A new image unfolded from the one he touched. As one finger traced down the image, a color bar moved with it. He turned toward Sabbo only to say nothing despite his open mouth.

"I see it. I'm not sure what it means. Maybe you shouldn't touch it for now," Sabbo said.

Gonzales lifted his finger.

" *Ride of the Valkyries selected*," the god voice announced .

The image disappeared as a symphony of sound filled the room. The two men looked around for the source only to discover that it came from the same locations where the god voice emanated.

"Whatever it is, it goes well with the storm outside," Sabbo said moments later.

Chapter 30

Coffin opened her eyes. Strange clear ropes led to blocks that covered her wrists. Though she tried, she was unable to withdraw her hand or the stump of her other arm. As she studied the ropes, she realized that something liquid moved within them. She tried to lean forward for a better look only to feel herself move down and backwards. It wasn't much, but it was enough to frighten her that she was about to fall. She lifted her head once more to stare at another clear rope that led to one arm. Something held the rope against her. She could see dried blood on the fabric that covered the end of the rope.

"Where's Sir Lieutenant Gonzales or Sir Sergeant Waleski?" She waited a minute, before demanding, "I want to know what's happening!"

In response, music filled the room with soft sounds meant to soothe someone in recovery.

Despite her unfamiliarity with the symphonic sounds, she found herself interested in what was taking place as she glanced about the room. She soon drifted back to sleep, though the real cause was an increase in the drugs meant to incapacitate her. She wasn't awake to hear the next computer message.

" Medical procedure complete on left hand. Missing fingers restored through adult stem cell stimulation. Transferring unused solar power back to reserve."

" Digit regeneration successful. Physical therapy required."

"I don't understand, god. What did you say?" Coffin glanced around for the source of the voice.

" Patient using new language. Assuming dual meaning for god. Adding doctor. Switching to new language for patient practice. Corporal Coffin, you are in the medical wardroom."

Coffin's mouth dropped open upon hearing the same voice she believed to be god speaking in her own language. Regardless of the surprise, she recovered quickly.

"Why am I here? What is a *medical wardroom* ?"

"You are undergoing *biometric regeneration* of your missing *components* ."

" *Biometric regeneration? Components* ? I don't understand," Coffin replied.

" Insufficient data to carry on language practice with patient."

The block on Coffin's left hand opened. The motion caught her attention and she stared with incredulity at the reappearance of three missing fingers. One of the clear ropes disengaged from the back of her hand before she could do anything. The gleaming needle gave her more reason to stare in awe as a small mechanical arm reached in to dab a fast-clotting surface agent on the wound where the needle exited. Several moments passed before Coffin dared to move her replaced fingers.

Chapter 31

" Storm danger passed. Deactivating defensive shield."

Sabbo looked around even as he reached for another leaf to write down what he heard. He knew it held meaning, but without more he had no way of knowing what. He reached over to shake Gonzales awake.

"Something wrong?" Gonzales mumbled.

"God just spoke. I don't see anything different."

"Maybe he's reminding us to pray," Gonzales said, as he sat up.

"God used the deactivating spell word."

"Oh?"

Gonzales reached out to the wall. His touch activated the tapestry of light to reveal the same images arranged in a pyramid formation that they'd viewed before.

"Whatever it is, I just hope god will let us out so we can take care of some personal matters. I don't know about you, but I need to relieve myself," Sabbo said.

"You shouldn't have drunk so much."

"No more than you. My water flask is still half full."

Sabbo stood with his suit in hand. He walked toward the jagged opening they called a doorway, though they knew that it was really a rip in the wall. He stepped through and walked a few paces before he whooped with glee.

"What's wrong?" Gonzales shouted, as he grabbed his suit and leaped to his feet. He ran for the opening. He saw Sabbo off to one side away from the castle taking care of personal matters. "The wall is gone?"

"I'm out here, aren't I?" Sabbo muttered.

Gonzales walked out and selected a spot where he could take care of personal matters. "Did you stay up all night?"

"I slept some when I tired of listening. The music responds well even to me."

"I don't believe I slept well at all. I dreamed that someone was talking in a strange voice."

"Some of the music had singing. You probably heard that in your sleep. I couldn't understand anything except for a few spell words."

"Did you get those written down?" Gonzales asked.

Sabbo laughed. "I would need ten hands and sets of ears to document everything I heard, though one frequently used word was *baby*. On top of that, I'd need so many leaves, there wouldn't be any left to write down the Grand King's commands, even though he doesn't issue many. Anyway, you missed a lot of interesting music. Our own minstrels would kill to possess that much ability."

"Then I must have heard what you said. I remember hearing that word. I hope god lets Coffin enjoy music."

"I'm sure he must. If this is his castle provided for his knights, then it shows that he approves of music. More and more, it appears that he approves of much. Then again, it follows that he would since he chose to use those things in creating our world. After all, it's not the use, but the manner in which something is used that determines whether something is right or evil. Moderation is the key."

"You really believe that?" Gonzales asked.

"It's one of the few arguments that makes sense of everything. It might not explain to us how or why something works, but it does give us guidance."

Gonzales stared at Sabbo. "Why do you bed so many women if moderation is important?"

"I am moderate, even in that. I accept only one each night. As it is, I have to turn some down who would rather that I accept more than one in my bed at a time. You should give some thought to your own piousness. God might feel that you're trying to fool him into accepting you later."

"My prayers are sincere."

"I didn't say they weren't. I'm only observing that you try too much to be correct in god's eyes when it's obvious that god already favors you."

"I'd rather you didn't question my prayers," Gonzales said, with agitation in his voice.

Sabbo paused to study Gonzales. "I'm not questioning your prayers. Admittedly, your sincerity is partly what convinced me to speak on your behalf in your trial before the Queen."

"Partly?" Gonzales asked in a softer tone.

"That, and you didn't attempt to flee. Those convinced me that you had to be as innocent as Van Dyke. You would have been impressed had you heard me speak on your behalf at the closed trial."

"If you can remember what you said, I'd like to hear it."

"Actually, I wrote it down beforehand. It's back at Castle High Crag. I'll read it to you someday. That, or you can read it yourself when you finish your lessons. Maybe I should give you some while we're here."

Gonzales nodded. "I'm sorry for bringing up your, uh, sleeping friends."

"You should give some thought to doing the same. You could conceive a son capable of continuing as the next Sir Lieutenant Gonzales. Think of how important that could be to your people."

Gonzales tilted his head, as if giving the matter some thought. "Do you really think that could happen?"

"How many sons have you seen who resembled their fathers?"

Gonzales nodded slowly. "Many, I would say. Very few don't."

"Then wouldn't it be reasonable for a son of yours to have a better chance than someone else to fill your suit?"

"He might have a better chance."

"Might? I should think that he definitely would. You'd be wise to father several sons so that one will be certain to reach maturity," Sabbo replied.

"You really think I should do like you?"

"The Order encourages children so long as you don't take another man's wife. You might want to give Waleski and Deliah some encouragement on your own. I understand that both have some interest in you."

"They do?"

Sabbo chuckled. "They'd welcome the opportunity to have daughters who can follow in their footsteps."

"Daughters?"

"Why not daughters, as well as sons? I can see we have other lessons to cover. It just occurred to me. The deactivation spell I heard before waking you must have been for removing the invisible wall."

Gonzales stood. Lacking any other way of dealing with the results, he kicked some sand as cover before stepping away. "*Activate Lieutenant Gonzales suit.*"

Sabbo stood a moment later. "*Activate Private Sabbo suit.* Should I check for Krons?"

"I better do that. I have the *sonic* weapon should there be any present."

"Then I should return to recording the words," Sabbo said.

Chapter 32

Sergeant Klaus stood on duty at the Sacred Hall. Because it was a pleasant day for testing, inside rested the hollow suits. Sometimes Klaus thought that hallowed might be a better description. An applicant approached with a knotted cord in hand. He studied the cord briefly to assure that it was correct. He'd overheard others on the road back home tell some of those in his group that they could still have a chance of knighthood if they approached the sacred hall with a knotted cord in hand similar to what they had to sell. He suspected that person was either willing to part with the real thing or had made a copy. He knew now that it wouldn't do anyone any good to have a copy or even the real thing from a former applicant. The knots were changed daily according to some scheme that the proctors had devised. Like any other Knight of the Star on duty at the Sacred Hall, he learned upon reporting for duty what the day's cord would look like. So far, he hadn't faced a counterfeit cord. He ascribed that to the morals of those seeking knighthood.

As he stood alone in thought, it occurred to him that maybe the person who tried to sell a cord had never tried for knighthood. It could have been someone who merely knew that a cord was required to enter the Sacred Hall. Stepping aside, Klaus motioned for the applicant to enter. He smiled while wondering whether the man entering would soon join the Order. Both he and the applicant cringed when a scream sounded from above among the singing ropes.

"I hope that wasn't my brother," the applicant said.

"We are all brothers. I feel sorrow for him to have tried so hard only to fail now," Klaus said.

"I will pray for him in my meditation," the applicant said, as he entered to sit on the stone floor.

He glanced at the eight empty suits with god lights shining brightly in the shadows of the Sacred Hall. From that moment on, his head remained bowed as if he was afraid that god might not find him worthy and demand that the spirits ignore him.

Klaus stepped aside as Sir Private Royal arrived to take over. Royal glanced inside to see that there was only one applicant thus far. Having satisfied himself as to who was inside, he took his place guarding the hall. Klaus left to rest his feet from standing for nearly two hours.

Royal stepped aside as a rugged man approached with a knotted cord in hand. He glanced inside to see that there would barely be enough room for the man to sit down. Unlike most days, more than the usual number of applicants had succeeded in passing the flying test. Royal briefly noted that some of the applicants weren't meditating as most did. Though he knew that some were bound to be less pious, he'd never seen quite so many who didn't bother meditating. Instead, their eyes were mostly upon the suits, not that he could blame them for wanting to improve their lot. When he turned back to the front, Klaus was standing there once more to take over for another shift.

"Looks like we might gain a knight from this group," Klaus said in a soft voice.

Royal shook his head. He stepped forward so Klaus could stand blocking the doorway.

"You think we won't?" Klaus asked as he took his position.

"I don't know. Suddenly, I've just got this weird feeling in me about tonight."

"Sure it's not from drinking?"

Royal shook his head. "It's one thing to drink for warmth when you're out flying a lot. I don't drink here. That would desecrate our Sacred Hall."

"I'll see you later tonight. We'll hope and pray for good to occur."

More proctors than usual reported to the Sacred Hall. They and the applicants spilled out into the courtyard, as there wasn't enough room for everyone to remain in the hall at one time. Only Royal and Klaus remained in place as protectors of the suits. They watched as the applicants came forward to stand before the suits and speak the spell words as they invoked the spirits of former knights.

As had happened often, several applicants failed. They were escorted out by their proctors, to stand in the courtyard and wait. It was a procedure used time and time again so that the group could leave together. With the underground tunnels secured, only the gate served as an entrance to those not Knights of the Star.

" *Activate Private Malidor suit.*"

"He's done it!" someone shouted, as the suit opened.

Klaus attempted to give the applicant a friendly shove into the suit, but it wasn't needed. The applicant reached for the open suit and slipped into it as if he expected to become a knight. He even closed the suit for himself as if he knew what to do.

"I imagine that Sir Lieutenant Gonzales and Sir Private Sabbo will be glad to receive some company tomorrow," Klaus said.

"I just hope it's not cold," Royal stated.

" *Activate Private Yakamata suit*," another applicant intoned.

The remaining applicants seemed energized, though stunned, to see a second suit open within a minute of the first. They were stunned even more when the applicant snapped shut the suit and intoned, "*Up!*"

Royal and Klaus stood similarly stunned as the Yakamata suit and its occupant streaked up through the roofless Sacred Hall into the dark night. Within moments, nothing could be seen.

"What's going on?" a proctor exclaimed.

"We don't know," Klaus replied.

"Get after him!" another proctor shouted.

"I'll go. You remain with the suits," Royal said. "*Up!*"

" *Hover! Left! Forward, forward, forward, forward, forward!*"

"You can't escape. Return to Castle High Crag. *Hover* ," Royal ordered.

His experience paid off as he observed inside his directioner where the Yakamata suit was heading. With little difficulty, he oriented himself to the same direction and gave the necessary spell words in order to pursue.

Klaus sighed with relief when the last of the applicants completed their attempts with no more succeeding. The proctors escorted the last out of the Sacred Hall leaving him alone with the successful applicant in the Malidor suit. He turned to the man standing at the end of the line of empty suits.

"As soon as I put these suits away, we can arrange quarters for you to spend the night."

"What if the other knights don't return?"

"I'm sure that he will. Sir Private Royal is very experienced."

"Then you haven't been a knight for long?"

"I became a knight only this year."

"Then you're just the one," the suited applicant mumbled.

"What was that you said?" Klaus asked.

He moved nearer the applicant in order to hear better. The applicant moved faster than Klaus had reason to expect. Before he could react, he felt a longer knotted cord reach around his neck. Moments later Klaus fell lifelessly onto the stone floor of the Sacred Hall.

"What kind of treachery is this?" Royal exclaimed upon seeing the red light come on beside Klaus's position. "Any knight who can hear me, head for Castle High Crag to secure the empty suits."

The man in the Malidor suit thought for a moment before deactivating his own suit with the proper spell word. With the suit open, he removed a rope from inside his robe. Only then did he snap the suit closed once more. When he ordered his suit into the air moments later, the rope carried along the empty suits beneath him.

Sabbo shook Gonzales awake. "Put your suit on. We have bad news."

"What's wrong?" Gonzales asked, as he reached for his open suit.

"Klaus is dead."

"Oh, god, no. How?" Gonzales struggled to wake up as he sluggishly slipped into his suit.

"Sir Private Royal is calling for help. He's chasing an applicant who flew off with a suit."

"Anyone in hearing, I need help capturing an applicant who opened the Sir Private Yakamata suit," Royal said.

Sabbo covered his mouth pike and motioned for Gonzales to do the same. "You activated my suit. Can you deactivate the Yakamata suit?"

"I could try, but if he's up high, the fall will kill him," Gonzales said.

"If he won't take the oath, he's not a knight. Ask him to halt first. Then warn him what you can do. Otherwise, we'll have to corner him somehow. I don't know if that's possible. We haven't any nets," Sabbo said, as he led the way out to the sand.

"But we promised not to kill unless necessary," Gonzales said.

"What if he's a Kron like Smith trying to take one of our suits? Is there really any choice? Klaus is dead. This man may be his killer. God hasn't instructed us to be merciful to murderers." Sabbo paused for a moment. "Maybe you could deactivate and then quickly activate his suit to scare him?"

"That might work." Gonzales removed his hand from the pike. "This is Sir Lieutenant Gonzales to the man in the Sir Private Yakamata suit. You are approaching Castle Staten Island. You are to *land* here. If you do not, I will disable your suit."

A laugh carried across the god voice. "Then you'll have to disable a lot of suits if you can. We have them now."

" *Up!*" Gonzales ordered. He watched in his helmet as the dots representing Yakamata and Royal approached closer to the island. " *Deactivate Private Yakamata suit.*"

" *Yakamata's suit is in use. Deactivation is not permitted.*"

" *Override.*"

" *Override unauthorized during flight.*"

" *Deactivate Private Yakamata suit.*"

" *Yakamata's suit is in use. Deactivation is not permitted.*"

"It's not working!" Royal shouted.

" *Up,*" Sabbo ordered. "We'll have to corner him!"

Gonzales maneuvered into position. He easily tackled the man by the legs in the air because he had more experience flying. He held on and commanded, " *Left.*"

Sabbo took advantage of the slowed speed to grab the man by one arm as the duo flailed about. He held on tightly as the three spun wildly through the air as one suit tried to propel the group in one direction while the other suits acted on other commands. With two men holding on, Royal caught up and slammed into the man's head. He managed to grab hold and drew his sword.

" *Land*, you heathen Kron. If you don't, I'll sever your arms and throw up on the stubs," Royal shouted.

" *Override. Deactivate Private Yakamata suit,*" Gonzales ordered.

" *Override unauthorized during flight.*"

Aware that he was facing armed knights, the man in the Yakamata suit surrendered. "I yield! I yield!"

"Then *land* , heathen!" Royal shouted, while lightly drawing his blade across one of the man's arms.

One by one, the captive and knights gave the spell words to maneuver and land. With swords at his arms, the man deactivated his suit and surrendered completely. Sabbo walked away with the suit leaving Gonzales facing the man. Royal held his sword at the man's throat as an added incentive to ensure that the man didn't attempt any further escape.

"Please, don't kill me. I'll tell you what I know," the applicant sobbed.

"Start talking," Royal ordered, while jabbing his sword to make his point.

"It was Basoc's plan. He said that some of us might succeed in activating a suit," the man cried.

"That figures. I want to know what you meant about the other suits," Sabbo demanded.

"The man with me took the suits that we couldn't activate. Basoc has those now," the man cried.

"He deserves to die," Royal said.

"Not on this island. Not while he's helpless," Gonzales said.

The man cried and threw himself at Gonzales' feet.

"Royal's right. We can't hold him and go after the stolen suits at the same time," Sabbo said.

"Then the two of you should go after the suits," Gonzales said.

Sabbo shook his head. "No, you two should go. I can guard this man while I record the god voices. Take his suit with you. Without that, he's not going anywhere."

Basoc quickly covered the mouth pike with his hand before he spoke to the man he sent among a group of applicants to Castle High Crag. "Leave these here. Return to Kron now." He turned to one of the men. "Hand him his sword. If they find you, defend yourself however you can."

"I'll look forward to killing more of them. I think it's fitting that their Order was begun by Malidor in this suit. In King Xidon's name, I shall end it wearing the same suit."

Basoc studied the suit for a moment. "You're right. This could even be a sign that we will succeed. Go now. Cause as much harm to them as possible. Just remember to fight on Kron soil where they will be at their weakest."

The new Private Malidor flew off toward the sea to cross to Kron. Basoc looked over the suits briefly while making notes for himself. After a few minutes, he clapped his hands to signal others of his command to his side.

"Ready the supplies and mounts. We must move in case he was followed. They're sure to search the ground along his path."

Some of the men seemed in awe that anyone could follow a path in the air. Regardless, they moved quickly to gather what would be needed. Basoc used the time to place each suit inside a separate cloth bag. With the suits thus hidden, casual observers couldn't spot the suits and tell the Knights of the Star. Instead, his small group of men would be mistaken for travelers returning home after failure at Castle High Crag.

Chapter 33

Moto entered the chapel at the head of the knights, most of whom had reported to Castle High Crag on his orders. Only three knights remained away. Sabbo was on duty at Castle Staten Island because its importance had become evident with the repair of the suits. Smith and Waleski stood watch under new orders on the two sectors most likely to face attack. As the knights entered, not one removed his suit or weapon. They entered silently and waited for a special guard to take up posts at the entrance. Only then did they remove their suits so they could speak without concern that someone might overhear them on the god voice.

Moto tacked a large pressed leaf on the wall. Such leafs were rarely used by anyone other than a noble or a proctor with one of the recognized religions. In this case, the leaf displayed a map of the Allied Kingdoms. With his sword for a pointer Moto called out names and pointed to areas as he outlined a grid that they would search.

"If you find any of the stolen suits, call the others and wait for them to arrive."

"We're to attack as a group?" Ubu asked.

"I can't think of a better way than finding them one at a time and using your numbers to overwhelm them until Gonzales can reach you. Besides, if you find one, you'll probably find all of them. They may know enough from Basoc on how to activate the other suits. Calling upon the others nearest you appears to be our wisest choice," Moto answered.

"Will we have to fight to the death? I understand that they've sworn to destroy us," Deliah said.

"That's what we learned from the prisoner. We can't take any chances. We know what they intend to do to us," Moto said. "After we bury Sir Sergeant Klaus, we will search from one shore to the other. We will recover those suits and avenge our comrade."

"Will Gonzales fill the remaining suits?" Ubu asked.

Moto shook his head. "We have to rid ourselves of these spies first." He motioned for Gonzales to step forward. "Gonzales and Sabbo discovered something new at Castle Staten Island."

Gonzales walked forward to stand beside Moto. "We were there when a storm came in. The castle protected itself and us from the storm by erecting a shield like the one our suits make for our faces. We experimented. I can activate that shield so no one can enter Castle Staten Island."

"Then why does Sabbo need to stay there?" Jones asked. "He's not a duke any longer. He could help us search."

Moto stepped forward. "Someone has to tell us if anyone attempts to land there. Sabbo will return here and call for us if that happens. In fact, it was he who recognized that Castle Staten Island is the most important key in our battle to regain the suits. Sooner or later, Basoc will learn of its importance. Then he will have to seek out Castle Staten Island to support his attacks. Also, we still don't know for certain that Coffin is dead."

Coffin stared at her restored sword hand. She flexed the muscles with difficulty, not

understanding that she'd have to relearn how. Though still immobilized, she realized that the bed, as she called the device in which she rested, possessed more features than any bed she'd ever lain upon. Nowhere had she encountered a bed that could rotate so that she sometimes rested on her back and other times hung against a taut covering that covered her body. Nor had she ever experienced a bed that could raise her to standing and sitting positions. Beyond that, the bed had forced her to walk at times, though she went nowhere. When asked, god had only replied that it was *physical therapy*. She'd finally given up on asking much. Instead, she'd accepted that god was keeping her alive without food and restoring her body. However, water seemed to be furnished whenever she asked for it, though she still wasn't sure why she had to sip through a clear, hollow reed. Handing her a mug would have given her practice.

The knights left the chapel with their suits on once more. Their faces remained grim as they lifted off one by one to fly to their prearranged starting points. As they flew off, each watched the directioner for signs of an active suit other than their own. The first to leave High Crag reached their destinations by that evening without incident.

The following morning, the knights rose with the sun to fly at a moderate pace in what passed for a rough line. Their directioners provided their one real tool as they had no illusions of spotting anything with the naked eye from the air. Instead, they knew that they'd encounter a new dot on their directioner once they came within the calling range of any active missing suit. When that occurred, they would give chase from the air like a pack of predatory chasers.

For the tenth time since returning to Castle Staten Island, Sabbo walked over to the invisible wall. He reached out to touch it as reassurance that it was still there. As before, it resisted his attempt to reach beyond it. Unlike the first time when he jammed one finger hard enough to hurt, he was more careful. Then again, he also had a carefully drawn line in the sand to guide him in judging where the wall stood.

Turning away from the wall he studied the sky, and muttered, "I hope that's not a storm coming in."

"Basoc, I mean, Cosab!" one man hollered. Basoc glared at the man for using his real name. "Sir, this bag is expanding," the man said in a more normal tone.

Basoc examined the bag containing one of the stolen suits. Upon opening the bag, he discovered that the suit was open. "How did you do this? What did you say?"

"I said nothing."

"Then it had to be something you did. How did you open this suit?"

The man stared inside the bag at the suit. "I only shifted it from one arm to my other because my arm was tired. Nothing more than that, I swear."

Basoc rubbed his bearded face while he considered his options. He knew that the suit could be

placed upon anyone including himself. What he didn't know was whether the suit would obey or even come off again, short of killing the wearer and butchering the body to remove it. Even then, it would be difficult. He knew that for a fact.

He'd recovered suits before from knights killed in action after their bodies had decomposed in the burial sand of Castle Staten Island. The skull was the most difficult part to remove because it had to be broken into pieces. Doubtless, not many knights would want to know that their remains might be violated, but it was the only way the Order knew of.

"Is something wrong, Cosab?" the man asked.

"No, nothing's wrong," Basoc said, as he realized that he could have stolen a suit or two long before by claiming those were washed from the graves by a storm.

An isolated death here and there over the years could have given him a few more suits had he claimed that those couldn't be found. He could have significantly lessened the odds currently against him. Instead, in trying to fool them, he had behaved too much like the other knights when it came to recovering the suits.

"I'm thinking about the suits. There must have been a way for the suits to be taken off of a dead knight that we don't know." The man stared at Basoc. "Think about it, soldier. Don't be a dumb peasant. Wouldn't it make sense for others to know how to remove someone from one of these suits while the wearer was unconscious or dead? These have to have more in common with our own armor than giving protection. Any fool can take armor off an ordinary knight." He ordered, "Show me where you gripped the bag before it opened. Then switch your hold."

The man placed the bag under the one arm as he'd been holding it. Self-consciously, he switched the bag to his other arm. When he finished, Basoc took the bag from him to inspect the locations where the man appeared to touch the suit. Reaching inside, Basoc snapped the suit closed so he could withdraw it, only to not see anything that he hadn't seen thousands of times before. Basoc soon thrust the suit back into the bag. He wondered at the same time whether Coffin was dead because the suit he examined was hers.

"If it happens again, don't move anything other than your lips to call to me." Basoc glared at the other men carrying suits. "That goes for all of you. If something causes the suit you carry to open, call for me and stop all else that you're doing. Remember, the Knights of the Star are human like ourselves. They perpetrate the myth that they're selected by god, because it covers their own inadequacies and failures. They can be beaten."

Sabbo left the island when he became certain that a large storm was sweeping toward it. Without shelter, he had no choice in the matter. As matters stood, he felt himself buffeted more than usual as he ordered his suit toward Castle High Crag at his best speed. His teeth chattered unavoidably by the time he reached the shore. Despite his face shield, each breath he took contained a coldness that struck deep into his chest before dissipating.

"There he is! Follow me!" Eusis shouted excitedly over the god voice.

Sabbo glanced at his directioner for a moment, before he realized by the movement of the dots that they were heading his way. "I'm Sir Private Sabbo. You're heading for me."

"You're supposed to be at Castle Staten Island," Moto said over the god voice.

"Storm came in. I had to leave. How many of the suits did you recover?" Sabbo replied.

"None. We're finishing our second sweep of the kingdoms. We hoped we'd finally succeeded when we spotted you," Moto said.

"You searched everywhere?" Sabbo asked.

"They must have taken the suits to Kron," Ubu said.

"We'll meet at Castle High Crag, except for Waleski and Smith," Moto said.

Chapter 34

Freed at last from the bed, Coffin stood on shaky legs. She was unaware of how many days and nights she'd spent in a special bed meant to prevent bedsores and muscle atrophy. Instead, she attributed her weakness to a lack of solid food. Though she was unaware of it, several parasites had been removed, both internally and externally.

"God, I know you created me, but it's not very warm here. May I have my robe?"

Bright lights briefly illuminated Coffin. Among them, small lasers fed her measurements into a complex formula meant to create clothing with room for maximum comfort and agility. Equipment that hadn't been used in a century produced a set of clothing because the technology built into it was conceived with self-maintenance features. The ship's designers knew that they couldn't send technicians along for everything that might break down. Instead, they'd designed the equipment to maintain itself using nano-technology for as long as the ship possessed power. That was guaranteed so long as the ship's solar panels lining its hull could deliver what was needed. The same feature figured into the design of the combat suits. So long as those could obtain power they'd repair themselves in the field. It wasn't the designers' fault that the new people using the suits kept the empties in a shaded hall most of the time. That had unavoidably slowed down the recharge rate and with it the repair capability.

A sliding sound to one side of Coffin caused her to step back and look about the room. She spotted the open drawer that caused the sound. Inside it, she found black clothing produced in exactly her size. Though amazed at the speedy response to her request, she hesitated as she viewed the unusual material. Most nobles didn't own clothing woven as fine as what she touched. She glanced around first before deciding that the clothes were truly meant for her. Coffin reached in to take the clothing into her hand. She felt of the fine weave before deciding moments later that somehow that wasn't how the clothing was made. The two pieces were both as black as the suit she wore as a knight. She knew without question that she was to wear what god gave her with her armor.

After a quick examination, she pulled the top on over her head. Snug without binding in the least, the fit amazed her for a moment before she remembered to slip the bottom into place. It was only then

that she spotted the footwear. She withdrew it to place those upon her feet to discover with amazement that even those were custom fitted. She could distinguish that each was meant for one foot and only that foot. When she walked a few paces, she felt like she was flying because of the overall comfort. Her sandals had never been that comfortable, nor fit quite that well.

"God, I should rejoin the other knights so that I might serve you. I thank you for returning my hand and missing fingers. It must be my fault that I can't control them quite as well as before, because I know you would never create imperfection. I will try to overcome my limitations in serving you. Please show me the way out."

A door opened in response. Certain that god was granting her request, Coffin walked out of the medical wardroom at a slow pace so she could see as much of god's world as he might permit. Instead, she viewed only pastel-colored walls for the most part. She didn't know that most of the ship's internal workings were behind panels so those could be protected from contamination on those occasions when the ship performed a surface landing. Even the blood from the dead crew members was long ago erased by the self-cleaning features the ship possessed. She had no way of knowing that one of the crew died just short of reaching a medical station where he might have received life-saving care.

She would have understood, though, why the ship could recognize medical emergencies only at special stations. Her own people knew that only so much could be bought or placed in one location at a time. It was solely a matter of compromise. In order to have one desire, another had to give way. Her father, Duke Ulla wanted once to forge a mighty mounted force capable of reaching throughout the kingdom so that he might impress his king and benefit the people. However, he didn't have enough mounts or armor to do so.

He would have died sad had his daughter not succeeded in becoming a Knight of the Star. Her accomplishment, despite the man she murdered, did much to earn his respect and their king's respect for him. As well, the fact that god accepted her as a knight went a long way in the king's eyes. He stated that there was no way that Sir Corporal Coffin could murder and be accepted by god, such was his belief in the Order's teachings. Therefore, it couldn't have been murder after all. Because such verdicts resulted from closed hearings, there was no appeal allowed by anyone not in favor of the rendering. Coffin learned upon leaving the chapel that she'd been found innocent of murder, despite her true guilt. Of course, the king had also reasoned that it would be good to have a royal among the Knights of the Star as he had no doubt about her real guilt. The innocent verdict was merely a political expediency.

Upon reaching an intersecting hallway, Coffin glanced down each direction in hopes of seeing someone, perhaps even god. "Which way, god?"

" *Left.*"

So ingrained was the spell word, she turned instinctively in the correct direction. She moved along slowly so she could view whatever might be visible, and also because she was still regaining full use of her body. However, there was little to see that she could understand.

"Does it matter whether we remove our suits this time?" Wong asked.

"We should act as though it does," Moto replied. "Take off your suits. Then we'll discuss our choices."

A murmur of voices carried through the chapel as the knights deactivated their suits. Some held onto their suits so they could place them back on quickly should an emergency occur. Others, more at ease with their circumstances, set their suits beside them within reach. Only Moto set his down and stepped away from it so that he could face the other knights. He glanced around until he was certain that all of the suits had been deactivated.

"Some of you have already confided in me several ideas. Even though I believe that they've sent the suits to Kron, it's also possible that only some have been sent there. It is because of this that I insist we not speak under circumstances where they might pick up our words over the god voice," Moto said.

"Wouldn't it hold true for us hearing them?" Wong asked.

"A good point. Using the logic that Sir Private Sabbo, among others, taught me, there are two possibilities. Either they're out of our hearing range or they're being cautious like we ought to be when discussing plans. Following that logic, I must assume that they can hear us and plan accordingly."

Gonzales stood to gain attention.

"You have something to say?" Moto asked.

"You won't like hearing this, but deactivating suits doesn't always turn the god voice off. When Proctor Washington was buried, Royal and Wong went into Castle Staten Island to speak privately. I left their presence as they asked me to do, yet I could still hear their conversation over the god voice," Gonzales said.

"You heard us anyway?" Wong asked.

"You spoke about my fear of flying. I decided that god wanted me to hear you so that I'd know you all wanted me to succeed," Gonzales said.

"He's right about that. We did speak about his fear of flying," Royal said. "I feel certain that we both had our suits deactivated."

"Did this ever happen again? Could you overhear other knights when their suits were deactivated?" Moto asked.

"It never happened again," Gonzales said.

Moto rubbed his hands over his face. He was about to dismiss the idea entirely when something else occurred to him. "Remember how you activated Sabbo's suit?"

Gonzales nodded. "Do you want me to activate his suit?"

"No, but if you activate one of the suits that Basoc's man took, it might help us find it."

"How would that help?" Royal asked.

"Our suits show up on the directioner when active and in range. They might be moving about on foot without activating any of the suits. If Gonzales activates just one of the empty suits, and it's anywhere in range, we'll know where to search for it," Moto said.

Numerous comments circled the room as many of the knights caught onto the idea's simplicity and general likelihood of working. Many soon murmured their agreement that the idea was sound.

"What if they're waiting for us to do that, so they can use the suit?" Ubu asked.

"Gonzales need activate the suit only long enough for us to gain an idea of its location. He can deactivate it as soon as one or more of us know where to search," Moto said. "If one of Basoc's men or Basoc attempts to fly in it, that's their misfortune when Gonzales deactivates it."

"That's no worse than what we planned before," Deliah said.

"I can't deactivate a suit when it's being worn. I tried when we recovered the Yakamata suit," Gonzales said.

"This plan can work, but it will take longer," Sabbo said. He spoke up without waiting for recognition because he noticed that Moto didn't use the formality that Van Dyke imposed on meetings. That, of course, came from their different upbringings. "Before, you could fly about in a huge line across all of the kingdoms looking for the live suit. This time you must have a group centered on Gonzales. They must fly back and forth as if the kingdoms were all covered by a checker pattern."

Several of the knights shook their heads as if unsure what Sabbo meant. Sabbo stood and walked to the front of the room. He drew his sword and faced the wall. Carefully, he etched a crude map of Cragland before crossing it with a checkered pattern.

"This is what I mean. Gonzales will have to start here, fly to this next checker to try again, and keep on moving from one zone to another until he finishes one row. Then he has to work his way back," Sabbo explained. as he jabbed at the checkered map with his sword to punctuate his statements.

Several of the knights recognized what he meant and showed their agreement by nodding. A few still held back.

"I recall that Van Dyke ordered many of us to move farther away from Gonzales when he muttered numerous spell words while suffering a fever at the time that Deliah became one of us. If he hadn't, some of us might have fallen to our deaths when Gonzales opened some suits. How it happened, I'm unsure, but it might be that some of our suits can relay his instructions. I know that was one of Van Dyke's concerns. I believe it's worth trying before we commit ourselves to one course that might take too long to use," Moto said.

Sabbo nodded. "It will take little effort to experiment with this idea. Have four knights fly off. Two can fly to the limit of our directioner and the other two can fly to the limits of the first two knights' directioners. When they reach those points, one of the farthest out can land with an empty suit. Gonzales can then attempt to deactivate and activate that suit. If this works, then my checker pattern will not be needed."

Agreement was quick among the knights. Moto glanced around before selecting four knights for the test.

"I'll be the one on the ground. Gonzales can try to activate my suit. We'll not risk bringing back the empty suits to try this. The others with me will witness whether this works."

"And watch for Krons, should they discover our plan," Ubu said.

"What if you don't fly far enough to avoid hearing Gonzales over the god voice? The directioners don't show as far as we can hear," Wong remarked.

"Then we'll try from even farther out. We'll all move until the first pair can barely hear Gonzales and those of us beyond can barely hear them," Moto said.

Coffin hadn't realized that the rooms were resealing behind her as she made her way back to the suit chamber. When she did notice, it was too late. "You didn't give me back my robe. That is proper church dress for those in your service."

"Your garment was infested. It needed *neutralizing*."

Coffin glanced down at her outfit. "I don't know if we can make anything like this, but I guess we'll try since this is your design, god."

Gonzales tried several times to deactivate and activate a suit beyond the sending range of his god voice. Each time, he failed. Had he known how to properly operate a relay link, he would have succeeded.

Moto and the knights who attempted the experiment returned with glum features. They knew that Sabbo's suggestion was the only plan that would work. There was little choice, but to prepare for a long search. Because of that, some of the knights would travel with Gonzales as searchers. The rest would have to patrol and protect the coasts against invasion.

Upon re-entering the church Moto walked to the front to stand before the etching that Sabbo created. Moto drew his sword and etched beside it a rough drawing of the continent hosting the Allied Kingdoms. He drew numerous lines until the crude map was checkered in a rough approximation of what the knights knew to be the god voice limits under normal conditions.

"I have to do this in the middle of all of these squares?" Gonzales asked.

"Possibly even more," Moto answered. "Start tomorrow morning with your team. Sabbo, you should return to Castle Staten Island soon. Take Royal with you."

"To stand guard on the sand? If I can't get into the castle, I don't see how the Krons will," Sabbo remarked.

"They have one suit active. We'll not travel alone anymore than necessary, particularly to our sanctuary where we're strictly on our own," Moto said.

Sabbo nodded. He recognized instantly that Moto was right. Even two might not be enough if the Krons managed to activate more of the missing suits.

Chapter 35

"Hello! Can you hear me?" Coffin shouted, and waved her hands.

"Coffin?" Sabbo exclaimed, as he landed on the sand away from the shield he knew was in place.

"She's alive?" Royal exclaimed, doubting his own eyesight.

"I'm inside Castle Staten Island. I can't get out," Coffin said.

"It looks like her," Sabbo said.

They approached the shield cautiously to halt several paces away in amazement. They reached close enough to speak with Coffin.

"I can see both of you. Royal, go back and tell the others that I'm trapped here," Coffin said.

"It is you! We'll both have to return to do that," Sabbo said.

"She doesn't know. The Krons stole some of the suits, including yours. Moto ordered that we travel in pairs," Royal said.

"There are two suits in here, but neither responds to me," Coffin said. She motioned toward the ship behind her.

"Your hands! You have both hands and all your fingers!" Sabbo exclaimed. He approached the shield to inspect Coffin more closely. "Where did you get those clothes?"

"God gave me back what I lost and these clothes. Can you hurry back and get Gonzales to let me out? At least, bring me some food and water if I have to stay here. Every time I approach this wall, this happens," Coffin answered. She stepped forward two paces.

"Consult Lieutenant Gonzales for permission to pass."

"That's why I know you need him," she said.

"I've heard that before." Sabbo explained what had transpired on the island and the mainland.

"We better leave now," Royal said. "She can learn the rest when we return."

"Yes, he's right. We'll be back," Sabbo said.

"And bring me a sword!" she shouted.

"I have a dot on my directioner!"

"I have two dots coming at us! They must want to fight at last!"

"It's us," Moto exclaimed, as he and Ubu approached the group. "Gonzales, can you hear me?"

"I hear you. Did we recover the suits?" Gonzales asked.

"No, but something just as good. Coffin is alive. God gave her back her hands," Moto said.

"Amazing! That's good news. When is she joining us or are you sending her on defense?" Gonzales exclaimed.

"She can't get out of Castle Staten Island," Ubu said.

"I'd rather have you searching for those suits, but god's will seems to be that we should receive her back. I can't go against the church on this," Moto said.

"Then how will the others search without me?" Gonzales asked.

"Take your entire group with you to Castle Staten Island. You'll need their assistance to fly her back," Moto said.

"If that's what you want, but I could give her another suit. Then she could fly herself," Gonzales said.

"He's right. She's a trusted knight. We won't gain anymore until the proctors devise a way of excluding the Krons from sneaking in more of their spies," Ubu said. "Just tell the king that it was the only way to retrieve her safely, seeing as she's not a prisoner. He'll have to believe you."

"I can't lie to the king," Moto said.

Ubu shook his head. "Then don't tell him if you can't speak a lie meant to protect his throne. *Hover*," Ubu stared at Gonzales before him in the air.

"*Hover*. The Royal Knights are pressing the king to order you to give them the empty suits," Moto said.

"Is that what you want me to do?" Gonzales asked.

"If they get those, they'll want ours before we're dead. You can't give them those suits," Ubu said.

"What is god's will?" Gonzales asked.

"*Land*. We'll talk on the ground in private," Moto said, as he disappeared toward the surface.

Gonzales and Ubu joined Moto. With other knights flying above to give them early warning should any Krons be about, they resumed their conversation without their suits activated.

"The proctors want us to keep the suits," Moto said.

"But what about god?" Gonzales asked.

Moto glanced at Ubu, as if seeking support before he shifted his eyes back to Gonzales. "God wants us to reclaim Coffin as one of us. Give her a suit."

"I agree. That's what god wants," Ubu said.

"What about the other suit?" Gonzales asked.

"Secure it in Castle Staten Island like before," Moto ordered. "You better put your suit back on and leave. She doesn't have much left to eat and drink. God will surely be upset with us if we let her die after he gave her back to us with her hands restored."

Gonzales lifted his suit into place and permitted it to slip onto his shoulders and back. He pressed the front panels together while making sure that the seat didn't pinch him. Moto and Ubu both watched for a moment as Gonzales left and called out to his force to follow him.

"Thank you for helping me lie," Moto said.

"I didn't hear a lie. Maybe you couldn't hear it, but the voice I heard was god's coming from your lips," Ubu said.

Moto crinkled his eyebrows at Ubu. "It sounded like my voice?"

Ubu shook his head, as he lifted his suit to place it in wearing position. "God is known to use many voices so that all will hear."

Sabbo and Royal flew up to greet Gonzales and the four-member search team as they approached the island.

"Is she still alive?" Gonzales asked.

"She is," Sabbo replied.

"Hungry, too. She ran out of decent food this morning after stretching what little there was. Can't blame her for not eating what's left. I'd have to be a lot hungrier than she is to bother with that slop. I'd also need much to drink it down with," Royal said.

"It's even worse, because she can see what we brought out for her. It's in sight, but not in reach," Sabbo said.

"I hope I'm close enough for it to hear me. *Deactivate defensive shield*," Gonzales said.

"*Deactivating defensive shield.*"

Several knights shouted with glee upon hearing the god voice reply. At the same time, Coffin ran out with one hand outstretched so she wouldn't collide with the shield. When she passed beyond the line in the sand she knew marked the shield, she scrambled eagerly for the food that Sabbo and Royal had stacked on the beach.

" *Hover. Land,*" Gonzales said, as he reached the island.

Around him, the rest of the knights gave the same orders. They followed Gonzales as he walked toward Coffin. Like him, they stared in awe at the sight of Coffin's restored hands and her new apparel. He paused before her, while the knights circled her to gain a better perspective of the miracle she presented.

"Not one of the royals can argue with this miracle when we return," Deliah said.

"Sir Private Moto assured me that god wants you to have a suit. I'll give you one of the two from inside," Gonzales said.

"Thank you," Coffin mumbled through the food she chewed. She gulped down some water and turned away from the food.

"You don't want to finish first?" Gonzales asked.

"I can take some with me when we leave," she answered.

Gonzales led the way inside. He halted when he reached the Sergeant Klaus suit. "I think it might be better if you have this suit. It might still have the *sonic* when you wear it."

"That will be fine with me. We'll need all the power we can muster," Coffin said.

" *Reprogram Sergeant Klaus suit. Corporal Coffin,*" Gonzales ordered.

" *Reassignment cannot be carried out without removing rank software.*"

Sabbo reached into a pouch to withdraw a marker and leaf. He hadn't expected the suit to reply with something new.

Gonzales looked at Sabbo and Coffin. "I'm glad I have you both here. What do I say now?"

"Try another combination," Sabbo said.

"It might be that the suits are hierarchial, as I once suggested," Coffin said. "Try the same command without changing the first name."

"You mean *sergeant* ?" he asked. Coffin nodded. " *Reprogram Sergeant Klaus suit. Sergeant Coffin,*" Gonzales ordered.

" *Are you authorizing a battlefield promotion?*"

"That sounded like a question," Coffin said.

"How do you know that?" Sabbo asked.

"I had the opportunity to speak a little with god when he gave me back my hands," she answered. "I didn't understand some of what he said."

"God is male?" Royal asked.

"I never saw god, so I really don't know," she replied.

"So, what do I answer?" Gonzales asked.

" *Authorize* worked for the *sonic* . Try using that word," Coffin said.

" *Authorize*," Gonzales said.

The suit's god lights flickered madly. The group turned when noise came from behind them. They looked at the tapestry of lights where an unusual display took place. The lights flew in upward trajectories to burst into flower-shaped arrangements of numerous smaller lights that dropped and faded away as others shot upward in the same arcs. At the same time, the god voice spoke.

" *Congratulations Sergeant Coffin. Corporal Coffin suit out of range for deactivation. Signal will be relayed automatically if suit remains serviceable. Suits are to be returned promptly to supply when not in use.*"

"I don't know what god said, but I don't think it's bad," Royal said.

"Chada! Your, uh, bag! It's glowing, um, strangely."

Basoc turned and ran to Chada's side. He skidded to a halt on the grass and grasped Chada to avoid falling. Steadying himself, he stared at the lights and drew his sword.

"No, Basoc, I didn't do anything wrong!" Chada begged.

"Shut up," Basoc said, as he cut through the bag to release the suit to fall to the ground. He studied the suit for a moment more before shouting, "Run! They've activated this one as a trap to find us! Disperse and meet up at tomorrow's camp."

The men needed no further encouragement. Basoc had warned them that the knights might try to trap them in such a way. They took off in several directions in ones and twos.

Basoc concluded that they must have cornered Saigor who succeeded in taking the Malidor suit, and learned that he didn't take the suits to Kron. Now they had guessed that the suits had remained within the Allied Kingdoms and that Saigor's escape was merely a diversion. As Basoc ran, he realized that matters would have progressed better had he picked off the smarter knights instead of trying for Gonzales. He knew too late that he had feared the wrong man for the wrong reason. Basoc concluded that Gonzales was no more than the simple peasant he appeared to be when he first arrived. Only his clothing had changed.

"Better than the swamp water they brew in your land?" Royal asked.

Gonzales gasped at the strength of the small drink he took. "I don't know. I never bothered to drink any. This is certainly enough to take away your breath."

"Perhaps, but it does warm you up, doesn't it?"

Gonzales nodded. He could feel the warmth of the drink in his stomach. It burned his throat all the way down in reaching it.

Nearby, Coffin stood silently looking at the tapestry of light. She listened to the voice explaining about the patterns that Gonzales and Sabbo had found and activated once more for her, even though she didn't understand more than a very few words. She finally turned toward them.

"Much as I hate to say this, Moto isn't going to like what this means." Her words caught the attention of the other knights.

Sabbo nodded. "I was afraid that you'd reach that conclusion."

"I can't help reaching it now that god is furnishing the same evidence as some of us guessed before. Even Basoc, curse his existence, figured it out correctly. Gonzales is supposed to be in charge. He's wearing the leader suit. That's why he can do so many things," Coffin said.

"I don't know how to lead," Gonzales said.

"You're already leading a patrol. There's not much more than that to leading all of us. Just do what you do now for all the knights, instead of just the few assigned to you," Coffin said.

"It's not quite that easy, but there's not much you'll need to learn," Sabbo said.

"Like when to charge?" Royal asked.

"Partly, though, I know to look for alternate entrances. I thought before that I'd only have to charge our gate to clear it of anyone forcing their way in among the applicants. I never expected them to know of hidden entrances. I certainly underestimated the Krons then," Sabbo said.

"He doesn't have to justify anything. He fought beside us and protected our wounded," Eusis said.

"Let's not argue among ourselves," Gonzales said, while stepping into the middle.

"I believe he is a leader. He certainly acts like one now," Coffin said.

"Just as you are," Sabbo said. "Like it or not, you and Waleski are his next-in-commands. He could probably switch your suits to give others the power. Unfortunately, there's no way for him to give Moto his suit. Therein lies the problem."

"Leader or not, I don't know what to do," Gonzales said.

"Believe it or not, leaders often don't know until they reach the point where they have to give a command. If you want to avoid leading for now, then let Moto continue to lead. However, if not, then he may have to accept the fact that you would have been elected leader had you not been falsely accused. Your friends haven't told you, but enough of them voted for you anyway after you withdrew your name," Sabbo said.

"They voted for me?" Gonzales asked.

"I know because enough stepped forward to thank me for standing up for you in your trial. That's when I learned that they voted for you. Moto won by only one vote. He wouldn't have won had you remained in contention," Sabbo said.

"Regardless, he was elected. He is our leader," Gonzales said.

"Then we will all honor that. That is what we swore," Eusis said.

"Only a leader would honor another leader as you did." Coffin placed an arm around Gonzales's shoulder to show her support in his decision. In doing so, her hand brushed against the recorder.

"I know I'm dying. That's why I'm recording this last report..."

"It's god speaking? No, it's Gonzales. How are you doing that?" Eusis asked.

"...similar in physiology to us, staggered onto the shore earlier today. I fear that the Staten Island may have collided with his surface sailing ship before running aground upon this barren atoll. Because of that, I spent my last few hours programming the interpreter unit by encouraging him to talk as much as possible. You might say that his presence gave me a reason to live a bit longer rather than give up sooner. Though it was only a marginal understanding, we could then talk. As it turned out, I was right. He was shipwrecked and in peril of starving to death unless I did something. I felt even more strongly that it was our fault for putting him in his predicament.

"Too much of the ship's power is inoperative. The Navy guys did their best when the emergency hit us, but they didn't have enough warning before we hit an island. It was probably that ship we smashed through during hydro refueling that sent us at it. All that wood must not have shown on radar. The only things left that work appear to be the master computer and most of our suits. Ship diagnostics indicates that the medical protocol took a major hit. It might self-repair itself in fifty years to where it can handle a paper cut, but it's not doing me any good now."

The voice ceased when Coffin moved her hand. Sabbo continued scribbling for several more seconds as he strained to record what he could remember.

Chapter 36

"It's good to see you back and whole," Moto said, as he embraced Coffin moments after she landed at Castle High Crag. He stepped back a moment later to study the strange clothing that Coffin wore.

"I'm grateful for everything. I know you sent Gonzales to free me from Castle Staten Island. We learned more about it," Coffin replied.

"Excellent. Gonzales, welcome back. I hate to do this, but you have to resume your search for the suits. The proctors will gather supplies so your group can leave in the morning, when you've had a chance to refresh yourselves," Moto said.

"Thank you," Gonzales said. He turned to his search force to give them instructions.

"It's nearly supper time, Coffin. We can talk more while we eat. I understand you saw more of the insides of Castle Staten Island. What was it like?" Moto said. He walked beside Coffin in the direction of the knights' dining hall.

"God kept me asleep most of the time. I didn't even know that I'd been gone over two weeks. Two days, I figured until I found the food in the suit room. Then I guessed maybe a week," Coffin said.

"You lived without food and water for two weeks?"

"It would seem so. God placed me in a strange bed that could spin around." Coffin described with her hands how the bed had shifted. "There were blocks that covered my wrists so I couldn't move my arms until god finished restoring my hands. Then the blocks came off."

"So, what did god look like?"

"I never saw him. I think god is male. The voice sounded like a man. He even talked briefly in our language."

Moto nodded. "God would be capable of doing that. Did he say why he was giving you back your hands?"

"It never came up. I didn't even think to ask. All I thought about was thanking him for being generous to me."

"Clearly, god was generous to you."

"Most of what I saw is beyond description. I intend to draw what I can remember of the rooms I saw."

"You saw more than one?" Moto asked.

"I was carried in unconscious, but I was permitted to walk out. I saw portions of five rooms through shields that felt like glass. That's the good news. Sir Private Malidor told the truth about the castle possessing many rooms. There were other doorways to more rooms that I couldn't see at all."

Moto hesitated. "The way you spoke, there must also be bad news."

"For you, perhaps. I'm convinced that Gonzales wears the knight leader suit," Coffin said, while covering her helmet's voice pike.

Moto stared in Gonzales's direction. He covered the pike sticking out in front of his mouth. "Many of us suspected that. Is that the only bad news?"

Coffin halted, so she wouldn't have to raise her voice. "There's good news to go with that. Gonzales believes firmly that you deserve to remain leader because the Order elected you. It's not his

fault that the leader suit fit him. Regardless of that, he's loyal to you."

"He doesn't want to replace me?"

"Not in the least."

Moto turned back to the dining hall. He moved without haste and faced Coffin as he walked. She resumed walking when he came alongside once more.

"This creates a problem for me and Wong."

"I know. Even though Gonzales supports you fully, enough of our membership will want him as your replacement when you retire," Coffin said.

"I promised Wong my support as my replacement. Now god is making me pay the price for selling what wasn't mine."

"God didn't strike me as vindictive. He gave me back my hands despite the murder I committed years ago. Some would call my crime one of the worst possible short of turning on god."

Coffin paused to permit Moto to enter the hall first. She followed behind him. The smell of roasted meat on an open fire made her mouth water. Breads added other aromas to the mix. As was usual, she and Moto went to a table where someone would bring food to them.

"I take it that Gonzales left the other suit inside Castle Staten Island and sealed it?" Moto asked.

"He did. Sabbo and Royal remained behind."

"How are the lessons for Gonzales going? Can he read yet?"

"He's made progress since I last taught him. He might not read everything yet, but he can read. I overheard him reading some of what Sabbo wrote down."

"That will only make him even more logical to follow me as our next leader. Would you consider teaching Wong when he has the time?"

"Much as I want to say no, I can't do that to you after you sent Gonzales to free me. When we both have time, I'll teach him."

"Why would you want to say no?" Moto asked.

He glanced up at the woman who carried over two bowls as a warning that Coffin might not want to answer immediately. Coffin held off in answering until the bowls were placed and the serving woman left.

"Any hesitancy on my part is solely because I would rather see Gonzales elected. Knowing how to read might make a difference."

"Wong is a better leader," Moto said softly.

"At present, yes. However, at present, even I'm a better leader than Wong."

Moto nodded. There was no denying that she was right. She possessed more knowledge, could read and write, and had been a knight longer. She knew more about how decisions were made and operations performed.

"We should eat. Whatever the outcome, you have both my blessings and thanks for agreeing to teach Wong."

"Will you continue to give Gonzales the opportunity to become a leader?"

"Do you mean will I permit him to lead some of the knights?" Coffin nodded. After a moment, Moto nodded back. "We better eat while this is hot." He moved his hand away from the pike so he could eat.

"Yes, flying does give you an appreciation for hot meals. It's interesting, though, that this new clothing seems to keep me warmer when I'm flying."

"All the more reason to believe that we have to prove ourselves to god to earn greater good for ourselves. Very likely the reason that someone as prideful as Waleski came along to teach us, and herself, how we were straying. God picked her so we could see where we were going."

Her hand away from the voice pike, Coffin took a bite while nodding once more in agreement.

"Kaither! It's true! You are a knight now!" a voice shouted.

Gonzales turned toward the voice. Though he recognized it, he didn't care much for the person it belonged to. He spotted the man breaking out of a small group to walk over to him. Immediately, two proctors converged upon the man.

"Remain with your group or leave."

"I just want to speak with an old friend," the man said.

For a moment, Gonzales considered leaving the man to the proctors. He'd really nothing to discuss with someone he knew to be a bully and a braggart. Then he remembered that, as a knight, he was supposed to represent the best within the Allied Kingdoms, short of being born into nobility. Common folk might only dream in futility of becoming nobility. However, becoming a Knight of the Star was within reach if one's inner being was true and just. Gonzales opened his mouth to voice a spell command, only to realize that he wouldn't accomplish anything by showing off. Instead, he walked toward Yalon.

"It's all right. I know him."

The two proctors halted a few paces away from Yalon. "He shouldn't leave his group," one said.

"He'll return to his group. I'll see to it," Gonzales said.

The proctors faded back to their positions. One stood with the group the man left and observed. The other returned to other duties.

"They throw out people who cannot follow the rules," Gonzales said.

"I heard you can make knights on your own. It would please many back home if others from Copra became knights," Yalon muttered.

Gonzales shook his head. "God permitted me to be his instrument briefly. I cannot give you knighthood."

"You can't make more knights?"

"Only when god permits me under his rules."

Yalon glared briefly at Gonzales. "What do you mean by smiling? Are you happy that you can't knight me?"

"It means I'm trying to be friendly, even to someone I didn't care about before. Now I believe you should return to your group."

Gonzales said nothing about the fact that the only empty suit retained by the Order remained at Castle Staten Island. Many of the people trying out would fail and soon leave. The few who succeeded would receive a chance to activate that suit. Hopefully, they'd have the opportunity to try and activate the other empty suits, if those could be recovered. Eusis stared at the man as he stomped slowly back to his group. He then stepped forward to stand beside Gonzales.

"You don't care much for him, I take it?"

"You can't tell that he's a bully?" Deliah asked, as she reached the other side of Gonzales.

"There's some of that in everyone. I noticed more that he has a sense of self-importance despite his station," Eusis said.

"He hasn't changed much since I last saw him," Gonzales said.

"Well, he doesn't have much of a chance, judging by his attitude. I'm surprised that he could even wear the leather suit. Maybe it was caught in the rain and stretched some," Eusis said.

The knights nodded at that being possible, though they knew that the proctors generally avoided travel whenever it rained. Under such circumstances, they sent out the call to the nearest villages so that those who wanted to try wearing the suit could travel to them.

" *Corporal Coffin suit deactivated*," the god voice said.

"God?" Gonzales asked.

"I don't think you did anything wrong. God mentioned Coffin's old name," Eusis said.

"He must have shut off the old suit. Those were the proper spell words," Gonzales said.

"Do you think it's possible that god can't always see everywhere and everything?" Deliah asked.

"That would explain why he permits so much evil to take place," Eusis said.

Chapter 37

Basoc led the group from the woods onto the trail used by throngs of applicants traveling to and from Castle High Crag. At first, they planned to tell anyone who observed them returning to the trail each day that they'd buried one of their own who failed only to die from his injuries. There'd be no reason to doubt their word. There were plenty of such graves along the trails. Of course, there were more closer to High Crag than away, but it wasn't unknown for someone to die just short of reaching home. Because of that, it was said that the road from High Crag was blessed with the blood of those considered the best by their villages. Basoc nodded at the remark when passing travelers mentioned it. He knew enough not to argue otherwise and reveal his identity.

Hiding the suits, on the other hand, had proven to be more of a problem. The first time others noticed the full packs, they asked for food only to be rebuffed. Some of their comments noted the fact that their selfishness was why they'd failed. Careful thought since then had rendered a solution.

"Blessings, travelers," a small group announced, upon seeing Basoc and his men.

"Blessings upon you. You travel to apply?" Basoc asked.

"Our loads become lighter with every step."

"As they should. We carry out new copies to test for size," Basoc said.

"Then you've no food?"

"Only if you wish to eat leather," Basoc said with a chuckle.

One quick-witted applicant exclaimed, "If we eat those, we might not have to worry about someone else becoming a knight in our place."

"Ah, but if you fail, then who will defend you later?" Basoc asked.

Several of the applicants nodded. Though many traveled to apply, far more had succeeded in wearing one of the leather suits. Even among those who traveled, there would be some who would later change their minds about fighting. They knew it wasn't just a matter of the suit fitting. Had that been all, the kingdoms would be filled with knights. Basoc had already convinced two such men to abandon his group after they lost heart and turned around to travel back in his group's company. One woman turned around to walk behind his group as the other group continued on toward Cragland. Basoc glanced over his shoulder just as one of his men brought it to his attention.

"She's a good looker. She could probably give all of us part of a night."

"Quiet, fool. Act more like a proctor," Basoc ordered. He slowed down so that he dropped

back to the end of his own group.

The ropes of High Crag sang out as the applicants gave the orders they learned and flew across the courtyard. Yalon stepped forward when his turn came. The height of the battlements didn't bother him at all. As well, he knew that there were secrets that most applicants didn't know about. He'd succeeded in bullying some of the returning failures into revealing that there were spikes in key places. Then again, their wounds had made it difficult for anyone not to wonder what had happened. What he hadn't planned on was the fact that each applicant's test was unique depending upon how they gave their instructions. The least amount of hesitation in giving a spell word would cause them to travel at a different height and, sometimes, even a different direction when that was possible. Too late, Yalon saw the tree branches that he rushed toward instead of passing over.

"Stop! Stop!" he shouted only to be ignored. He slashed through the branches while trying to shield his face with his arms. It was only as he emerged on the other side that he remembered the spell word. "*Hover! Hover! Hover!*Get me down from here! I'm hurt!"

A minute later Yalon felt the ground beneath his feet. Proctors stood waiting for him and unstrapped the suit so it could be returned to the battlement.

"You sent me into a tree!" Yalon shouted.

"You sent yourself there. Had you observed your proctor attentively and used the spell words immediately, you would have cleared that tree like other applicants," a proctor admonished.

"He's not hurt bad. The cuts aren't deep at all," another proctor said.

Yalon glared at the proctors. "If my proctor had given me the instructions sooner, I wouldn't have hit that tree. I'll retake the flying test, but I want another proctor. That one-armed dolt doesn't know what he's doing. He almost killed me."

One proctor stepped in front of Yalon. "Your proctor is a retired Knight of the Star who lost an arm in battle. If anyone knows the importance of giving spell words at the right time, Proctor Stravinsky does."

"You owe him an apology," another proctor said.

"That doesn't excuse him from almost killing me. He doesn't know much about teaching," Yalon spat.

One proctor shook his head. Another took Yalon by the arm.

"Leave now. You're not worthy of wearing the armor of a Knight of the Star."

"What? You can't make me...Ow!"

The proctor who grabbed hold of Yalon escorted the man to the gate. Reaching it, the guard stepped aside long enough for the proctor to shove Yalon out. By the time Yalon recovered his balance and attempted to re-enter the castle, the guard stood in his way with his hand upon the hilt of his sword.

"Don't even try. I used to be in the Red and Black. My skills aren't rusty, either. Just leave like you was told," the guard said.

Yalon sized up the guard who was clearly larger. The armor the guard wore made it likely that Yalon could do anything with his fists. More likely, the guard would toss him out even harder than the proctor. After a moment of useless glaring, Yalon turned to walk alone down the path.

"Proctor Casob, I can't go on. I realized this morning that god has other plans for me. Please let me travel with you for now," the woman said.

"God spoke to you?" Basoc asked.

"He speaks to most women sooner or later." She glanced around even as her cheeks blushed. "I'm expecting."

"I see. Then you do god's work, after all."

"Thank you, Proctor. I knew you'd understand."

Basoc did understand. He knew without any explanation on her part that she wanted to return home. It was safer to travel with a group, particularly if one was a woman. Lawless bands in some regions would take advantage of someone traveling alone and even rob some small groups if anyone among them appeared to have money. After all, sometimes a merchant traveled to try out for knighthood.

"Do your best to keep up. We have our own duty to fulfill."

Chapter 38

" *Override. Activate Private Porter suit.*" Gonzales studied his directional for several seconds before issuing more spell commands. " *Deactivate Private Porter suit. Override. Activate Corporal Nigel suit.*" He viewed the directional once more for signs of a newly activated suit.

Slowly, he went through the spells for the missing suits while he and his patrol watched for any telltale signs. Each of the men and women assigned to him flew in a circular formation with him at the center. That maximized their coverage of the directional. Experience had taught that they could extend their search in that manner. When he finished, Gonzales flew on in the direction of the next sector. The knights to his side and behind him flew on as well. Only those ahead remained in place to mark the beginning limit of the next sector to search.

By flip-flopping in that manner, they would be less likely to miss any territory. However, it meant that they would stop and search many more times than was first planned when Moto etched sectors on the wall of the chapel. In fact, they'd already exceeded the number Moto thought necessary.

Basoc turned to Loson. "Try again with more inflection in your voice. The Nigel I knew had a strange accent."

" *Activate Corporal Nigel suit.*"

Lights flashed across the suit chest. A moment later, it popped open.

"Hurry. Get it on and fly home to Kron. Everyone else, disperse!" Basoc ordered.

The rest of the group took off in different directions despite the darkness. One soon fell in the brush. Moments later, another ran into a tree. Regardless, no one turned back to check on them. It was up to each of them to escape and meet at the next location. Loson slipped into the armor. As he pressed the suit closed, Basoc slipped a sword-bearing sash over him. Basoc turned Loson to face in one direction. Immediately, Loson gave his first excited spell words to zoom up into the night air in real flight.

Basoc walked out to the trail at a more careful pace once everyone was gone. As he approached the trail, his feet crunched through some twigs.

"Proctors, is that you?" a woman's nervous voice asked.

"Just me," Basoc answered.

"Worried about me?"

"Not really. We just spoke with a knight. He's overhead now," Basoc said.

"Then it's bound to be safe here," she said. "How soon will the others be back from their prayers?"

"I won't see them for a day or two. They've been given instructions to visit some villages near here. For now, I'll travel with you."

"You're a brave man, Proctor Casob."

"Of course, you'll have to stand watch part of the night. I can't remain awake the whole time and still be of use tomorrow."

"Do you wish to rest first?"

"Get your suit on!" Smith shouted.

Two knights rose into the darkness with nets in their hands. They spread out moments later to open one net between them while readying smaller nets.

"He must be past us," Wong said.

"Not yet. Gwinn said she wouldn't lose him."

"I'm still behind him," Gwinn said over the god voice.

"Someone's on our directional now," Smith said.

"That's him!" Wong exclaimed, as a second dot appeared.

" *Left!* No, not *left!* " an unfamiliar voice commanded.

"He's in a spin!" Wong exclaimed.

A scream of pain came over the god voice.

"We're chasing a one-legged Kron now," Gwinn said.

"My leg! You cut off my leg!"

"Well done!" Wong said. "We're moving in with the nets."

"If he doesn't land soon, I'll take off his other leg," Gwinn remarked. "I know you can hear me, you Kron garbage. Give the spell word for landing or I'll take off your other leg."

" *Hover,*" the Kron managed to order. Retching sounds carried over the god voice a moment later.

"Land or die!" Gwinn's voice demanded.

"There he is," Wong said. "Stay out of the way. We'll net him."

"He's all yours," Gwinn replied.

" *Land!*" Loson commanded.

"Filthy Kron!" Smith exclaimed, as he and Wong missed netting the wounded Kron who disappeared below their net's reach.

"I'll follow him down. *Land!*" Gwinn said.

Gwinn landed near enough the Kron that she could see he would give little resistance. He was busy trying to stem the bleeding from his leg where she'd severed it at the knee. The added momentum of her suit gave her enough strength where she normally couldn't manage such a telling blow.

"Toss your sword away and I'll let you live," she ordered.

Loson awkwardly drew his sword with one hand while holding his wounded leg with the other. Seeing two more knights land to surround him, he tossed his weapon aside. "I want to live."

"Not my favorite choice for you, but one I'll uphold," Wong said.

Smith bent down to tie a short cord around the wound to stem the bleeding. He didn't need to be told that the man would likely die anyway.

"You wouldn't have seen me if it hadn't been for the bright moonlight," Loson said.

"That's right," Gwinn lied. "Take the suit off."

Wong threw one of the smaller nets over the Kron.

"I can't take it off with that in the way!"

"You'll do it anyway," Wong ordered.

"Where are the other suits?" Smith demanded.

"I don't know. When I opened mine, Basoc ordered everyone to leave. They've moved by now," Loson replied.

"Think he's telling the truth?" Smith asked.

"Maybe. He's not going anywhere now," Wong said.

"I think I know where Gonzales should search," Gwinn said. "He was flying in a straight line until he spotted Castle Nictou and I gave chase."

"I'm glad you forced him to turn toward Castle Bright Sand," Wong said.

Chapter 39

Gonzales considered the suggestion that Gwinn offered. The valuable pressed leaf map he carried provided his force a way of visualizing what she meant.

"It does make sense," Eusis said.

Other knights nodded in agreement. Gonzales looked from face to face.

"If we're wrong, we'll have to start over."

Deliah grinned. "After hearing about how that dumb Kron turned toward Castle Bright Sand to escape, I doubt that the others will be any smarter. I'm willing to take the chance."

Again, the other knights nodded. Some smiled at how Deliah accurately characterized the Kron who was captured. Had he turned in some other direction, there wouldn't have been any knights between him and the ocean. He might even have escaped. Instead, he'd died. It was shock, not blood loss, that dealt the fatal result. Otherwise, Wong, Smith, and Gwinn might have gained some additional useful information from him.

"You'll have to start over anyway if you stop your search to secure the suit we recovered," Gwinn said.

"She's right. We've just enough time to do a search along the line of his flight," Gonzales said. "We'll try it."

Basoc observed the knights fly overhead. Like the woman beside him, he waved at the knights as if he was an ordinary traveler. He knew that they couldn't recognize him anymore than he could identify any of them. They were simply too high for that. However, he didn't need any hints to know that one of them was Gonzales or Moto. One or both of them would be in the search party.

"Do you believe they travel to Castle Bright Sand?" she asked.

"It's possible, though I thought Castle Nictou stood off in that direction," Basoc offered.

"It's working! There's a new suit on the directioner!"

"*Deactivate Private Porter suit*," Gonzales ordered with excitement in his voice.

He held his position as more of the team flew past to reach the suit location. Coming in from several directions, there was little chance that they'd miss it. However, it was important that he remain where he was in case they needed it activated once more to provide better directions.

"I see someone with a bag," Deliah said.

"I see him, too. He's running!" Eusis said.

"He must have it!"

Sounds of fighting carried over the god voice. Finally, Deliah exclaimed, "We've got one more back!"

"Leave the Kron to rot," Eusis said.

"Carry the suit to Gonzales."

"Let me know when you're ready and I'll try another," Gonzales said.

Basoc could tell by the way knights criss-crossed the sky that they were on the trail of the suits. He wondered if Loson had somehow managed to describe where he'd been. After all, he hadn't mentioned to any of his men where they were destined. He'd only given vague directions for the area he was in that might fit many other distant locales as well.

Hagat spotted the knights flying over. As soon as they passed out of sight, he ran for a cave not far ahead. He reasoned that they could approach him from only one direction. There'd be no landing elsewhere to where he couldn't defend himself. Upon reaching the cave, he went in until the darkness threatened to overwhelm him. Even then, he didn't stop. Using the wall to guide him, he groped his way inside even deeper.

Gonzales smiled as his force returned to their positions. One dropped off a fourth suit in passing.

"Just two more," Deliah said, from her position.

" *Override. Activate Private Van Dyke suit,*" Gonzales ordered.

"Nothing on my directioner," Deliah said.

"Nothing here, either," Eusis said.

The other knights reported similar results.

Gonzales's voice was dejected when he gave the deactivation order. " *Override. Activate Corporal Coffin suit.*"

Moments later, he gave the deactivation spell words for that suit when the others reported no signs.

"What now?" Deliah asked.

"We circle this area in case they're just out of our range," Gonzales said.

"At least, we can send Proctor Stravinsky to Castle Staten Island now," Eusis said.

"If he'll go," Deliah said.

Chapter 40

Hagat opened the bag containing the suit he carried, the suit he knew now might mean his death. He stared at the god lights in the dark as he summoned up the courage to try once more with the spell words that Basoc taught him.

Moto arrived at Castle Nictou to view the results. Gonzales and his force weren't entirely happy over what they'd accomplished. He could understand their reluctance to show any satisfaction over what they'd recovered because three suits remained missing. Even so, he remembered what the proctors had

recommended he say upon reaching them.

"Good work."

"We didn't recover all the suits," Gonzales said.

"You still did good work in getting these back. Now we have to try something else," Moto said.

"What else is there to try?" Eusis asked.

Moto smiled. "They want the suits. They don't have enough to face us down. We'll make them come after the suits once more. For now, fly those back to Castle Staten Island and secure them there."

"You don't want us to search anymore?" Gonzales asked.

"No. We have to prepare for an invasion. When it appears, they'll be with it if they haven't shown up before then to steal back the suits. Either way, we'll be ready. We'll also outnumber them," Moto said.

Sabbo and Royal waved at their friends as they arrived. Both knights had been apprehensive about the appearance of dots on their directioners, until they heard the voices of their friends. After that, they were somewhat relaxed. Gonzales landed first. He approached the defensive shield at the front of the others to disable it. They followed him inside when the shield deactivated.

"Only five?" Royal asked.

"We'll recover the other three. Moto has some plans for that," Eusis said.

"I should hope so," Sabbo said.

"Moto wants everyone back, once these are secured," Gonzales said.

"It's about time. We can't do anything standing around out here on the sand. My ability to write is of little use if I can't go inside," Sabbo said.

"Moto reached that conclusion, too," Deliah said.

Smith grimaced at the taste of the wine. As he tried to drink more, he realized too late that it was poisoned. By then, he couldn't speak. Basoc entered the tower using one of the oldest methods known, a rope. He shook his head at how poorly the knights had observed their own quarters when returning after their patrol. They hadn't noticed the rope at all. Had they done so, they might have been suspicious of the leftover wine. Instead, Basoc entered to find Smith dead and Wong sleeping.

For a moment, Basoc considered killing Wong. Then it occurred to him that it might be better to make it look like god had abandoned him by merely taking the suit. Quietly, Basoc picked up Wong's suit before walking over to stand by Smith's body.

" Activate Corporal Smith suit."

The suit opened. Basoc grabbed hold of the corpse and pulled it free to fall upon the floor. He barely had time to slip into the suit when Wong, still groggy with sleep, stumbled over to draw his sword. Basoc snapped the suit closed, whirled about, and slashed out at Wong before he could defend himself.

Wong grasped the stub of his arm where his hand was severed. "I hope Gonzales finds you. When he does, I hope he kills you slowly."

"When I die, it won't be as slow as I intend to kill you. Tell your friends that I'll gladly kill them just as slowly."

Wong stood waiting for the final blow. Instead, Basoc hurried out of the tower quarters to launch himself into the sky.

Basoc noticed almost immediately the dot indicating that another knight was in the vicinity. Wary of a trap, he carefully gave commands and readied himself to attack rather than escape.

Realizing that he was being left alone to bleed to death, Wong found a cord to tie around his wrist. Upon stemming the loss of blood, he staggered to the battlement of his tower quarters to summon help.

Hagat hovered as he studied the presence of a new dot inside the helmet. He wasn't certain what it meant as it traveled toward a center point. There were far too many pinpoint lights inside the helmet's brim for him to understand while he hovered in the darkness and waited for the dawn so he could see his way. Otherwise, he was too afraid of flying into something. He had been warned by Basoc that the commands should never be given inside any buildings or beneath trees. Fortunately for him, he'd remembered that as soon as he'd succeeded in opening the suit inside the cave. He'd walked out and given the spell words only when he could see the stars. Only then had he recognized the danger of flying at night after realizing that he had no idea how high he might be.

Basoc slowed as he approached the hovering figure. He held his sword at the ready with the intention of swooping in fast and low enough to strike at the other knight's legs once he was into position. He knew from experience that such wounds were crippling, if not fatal. For a moment, he wondered who he might be attacking. It made a difference because he knew that every knight had individual quirks in style. As he scanned the names, he gazed in shock at the sight of a lit name that shouldn't have been present.

"Hagat?"

"Basoc? I mean, Cosab?"

"That no longer matters. You can call me Basoc, again. You succeeded in activating your suit."

"Yes, but I don't know where I am."

"All right. Can you see a dot moving inside your helmet?"

"Yes?"

"That dot is me. If you see any other dots, it means that the Knights of the Star..."

Gonzales woke to the shouts. He rolled out of the bed and slipped into his suit in time to hear part of a conversation. He recognized one voice immediately. He also spotted the lighted Van Dyke name. As he listened, more lights flipped on within his helmet.

"There are other lights in my helmet," the Van Dyke sound-alike voice said.

"We have to hurry. The Knights of the Star are putting on their suits. Have you a sword?" Basoc replied.

Gonzales ran for the ledge of the tower. "*Five up. Five up. Five up.*"

"Gonzales is awake. That's him giving spell words. Follow me," Basoc said.

"*Up!*"

"That was Deliah," Basoc said.

Gonzales scanned the dots to see that only friends were moving about on his directioner. Basoc and his companion were farther away. The question remained as to what direction. There was only one way to find out.

"Spread out," Gonzales ordered.

Hours later, Eusis hovered while the other knights caught up. "I lost them. I just couldn't keep them both in sight at the same time when they split up."

"I heard them. It was a clever tactic. It would have lost me, too," Gonzales said.

Chapter 41

The applicants filed past Sir Lieutenant Gonzales who stood on guard before the Sacred Hall. Inside, a row of suits waited applicants. Thus far, not one had succeeded in passing the flying test. Though Gonzales smiled at the applicants, his attention was mostly upon the god lights inside his helmet. He watched often for the approach of anyone in flying armor.

Private discussions with the other knights and numerous proctors had concluded that Basoc and his men would try again to steal more suits. Some of the Krons killed while recovering the suits had sounded much like the former knights whose suits they carried. It stood to reason that Basoc had men

and women hidden about who might sound like some of the other knights. One might even sound like Gonzales. That possibility had concerned everyone the most.

"Sabbo and Royal approaching."

"I see you," Gonzales replied. He observed the two dots appearing on his directioner just as Sabbo announced themselves. It was the only way they knew to avoid false alarms. "Did you learn anything?"

"We didn't hear anyone trying to activate the Corporal Coffin suit. They're still trying to find someone who can activate the Wong suit. We heard some of his men in the background over the god voice. It's not an easy accent for the Krons to imitate," Royal said.

"They do all their practicing low so their archers can cover them. Basoc spotted us flying over and dared us to come down. We did, but so fast that he didn't have time to order his archers to release their arrows at us. That was the only time we did that," Sabbo said.

"It was worth it watching his men cower. They haven't our flying skills yet. However, we'll have to wait for them to attack before we try to fight them," Royal said.

"He's teaching them swordplay specifically with us in mind. Our dear friend Royal was absolutely right in recommending that we relearn how to fight with the sword. It won't be the same now that some of the enemy can fly," Sabbo said.

"I see the coast now. Time for us to adjust our course," Royal said. "Is Moto still at Castle Klato with Wong?"

"I don't know. He said he might after visiting Castle Nictou and Castle Verata," Gonzales replied.

Despite the offer, Wong had refused to travel to Castle Staten Island to see if god would replace his hand. He felt he'd disgraced himself and his comrades by failing to stop Basoc. Moments later the two knights veered their courses away from Castle High Crag. Gonzales watched the directioner as before after they disappeared from sight.

Hours later, Gonzales returned to take over the watch on the Sacred Hall. As he expected, there was no one waiting inside. It was part of the plan that no one be sent who satisfied the flying lessons. Instead, those men and women were taken aside to wait elsewhere. That way, none of them could see any empty suits up close enough to notice that the suits in the Sacred Hall were fakes. As had occurred on the days before nothing happened.

When darkness arrived Gonzales lifted up into the air with the fakes to store those in a tower where he and another Knight of the Star would sleep, while several Imperial Guardsmen stood guard over them. If anyone entered their quarters at night, they'd have to fight their way through those guards and several ingenious traps. Likewise, if any of the successful applicants attempted to leave their waiting area, they'd be imprisoned as possible spies. Those who displayed patience would have that much more in their favor.

Deliah looked upon Gonzales with a warmth that was unmistakable to some of the guards. Because of their presence she made no other move toward Gonzales. Instead, she sat quietly in her black robe with her armor on one side, and her sword free of its sheath on her other.

"Do you think they'll attack tonight?" she asked, when she knew it was safe to talk.

Gonzales set down his suit and unsheathed his sword. "Not according to what Royal and Sabbo observed. Maybe in a week."

Chapter 42

"Not yet. Wait for our spies to report that Saigor has been spotted," Basoc cautioned.

Beside him, Hagat held onto his suit with one hand. He held his bared sword in the other at the ready. If anyone spotted them, he'd have just enough time to put his suit on. Then he'd decide whether to fight or escape. A voice startled him.

"Only two in High Crag. The others fly their patrols."

Several Kron warriors spread out to secure the landing. As Basoc had planned, no one expected him and Hagat to arrive by boat instead of flying in just hours to reach the Allied Kingdoms.

"Which two?" Basoc asked.

"Gonzales and Deliah."

"Perfect. I can defeat both with the sword," Basoc exclaimed.

"Krons attacking Minius!" Gonzales shouted, upon hearing a relayed god voice that a force headed by at least one flying knight had appeared off its shores.

"They could attack here," Deliah shouted, as she flew down from a tower.

Below her, additional guards ran to their posts. If anyone attempted to breach Castle High Crag, it wouldn't be through the hidden tunnels. Those were now sealed from the inside. Only the gates provided access to ordinary invaders. Around Gonzales, guards escorted the last of the applicants out of the castle so the gates could be closed.

"They could be close enough to each other that they appear to be but one," Gonzales reminded. "It wouldn't make sense for them to attack with only one knight."

"Then we won't have to fight?" Deliah asked.

"We'll just continue with our routine. We'll drive them away from Minius, and they'll try elsewhere."

"Give the men more time to reach the castle. This is rugged ground to cover," Basoc said.

"I'm tired of waiting," Hagat said.

A voice called out of the darkness, "They're halfway there."

"Now we can leave," Basoc said. " *Activate Corporal Smith suit.*"

"Do you see the lights?" Gonzales asked.

"Yes. Basoc and Hagat are somewhere in range. Do you think maybe they're also attacking Castle Bright Sand?" Deliah asked. She walked to the edge of the tower's parapet to stare out into the night.

"No, one of them's coming here. That's not one of our knights on the directioner, I'll bet," Gonzales said. He turned toward the direction his directioner indicated.

"Congratulations, Copran peasant. You've actually managed to learn something since you became a knight."

"So it's you come to fight us, huh, Basoc?" Deliah asked.

"I can handle the two of you. Come up and fight," Basoc replied.

"Movement outside the walls!" a voice shouted.

Sounds of fighting followed as the twangs of bows sent arrows over the parapets. Misses could be heard clacking against the rocks. A few incoming arrows sounded louder when those missed soldiers manning the walls and struck the stone courtyard. Most, however, hit against the outer stonewalls where some guards released their arrows through narrow openings.

"Come down and fight, Kron coward," Gonzales dared. He put one hand out to Deliah to prevent her from giving a spell word to lift off into the air.

"I surely will. When you're dead, I'll reclaim the suits you took from my men," Basoc said.

Gonzales motioned Deliah back into the quarters. He backed up, as well, while watching both the approaching dot and the night sky. Upon entering, he and Deliah eased through the traps and the guards meant to protect them while they slept.

"Now," Basoc ordered.

Hagat released his hold on Basoc. Both men maneuvered to land in the tower where a torch outlined two knights standing with their swords at the ready. They landed together and approached cautiously.

"I know you're no coward, so this has to be a trap," Basoc said.

"Come in and find out," Gonzales replied.

Basoc deflected the first sword to swing out from the darkness. Even as he did so, his eyes caught sight of the empty suits. One single characteristic caught his attention as he fought instinctively: a lack of god lights.

"Those aren't the real suits! Back out, Hagat!"

Hagat backed off, even as another guard sprang forth to engage him. Basoc managed to block that guard, as well, as he moved to the parapet. He glanced up a moment after Hagat lifted off to see that he wasn't blocked, either.

" *Up!*" Basoc said.

"They're getting away! We have to chase them," Deliah said, as she ran past the traps and guards.

"No, Deliah! That's what they want!"

Gonzales followed to restrain her only to see her lift off just two steps ahead of him.

" *Up! Forward!*"

Basoc swooped back at Deliah. His sword caught her on her shield arm. Had she been on the ground, a shield such as the Royal Knights used, would have protected her. In the air, a shield of that kind could catch the wind and rip her arm off. Ordinary metal armor sleeves had been tried without success, as well. Those failed because they often shattered while cold. Their swords didn't fail as often only because those were sheathed most of the time. Only the thick robe she wore beneath her armor gave her any protection. It wasn't enough as she dropped her weapon to seize her wound and stem the bleeding.

Gonzales swooped upward on hearing Deliah cry out in pain. He managed to drive off Basoc, because he possessed the better position for aerial fighting. It was difficult to attack someone coming from below because the suits didn't permit the wearer to bend over while in flight. It was a stand or sit upright position that couldn't be compromised only because none of the knights knew how to fly in any other position.

"How bad is your wound?"

"My arm is almost cut through," she cried.

"Head for Castle Staten Island. I'll follow," Gonzales said. "Can any other knights hear us?"

"Calling for help? Bring them on. We can fight here or at Castle Staten Island," Basoc said.

Gonzales maneuvered down in time to avoid a collision with Hagat.

"Why didn't he send her to one of the other castles?" Hagat asked.

"Good question," Basoc said. "Of course! The suits are at Castle Staten Island with another

knight. I should have thought of that and checked there first. Forget him. Chase after her. She'll lead you to Castle Staten Island."

Gonzales wasted no time in orienting himself and flying after Deliah before Basoc and Hagat could change directions. With them behind him, he flew off in the direction of the rising sun while hoping that someone had overheard and would fly out to even up the odds.

The glaring rays of the morning sun didn't prevent Gonzales from observing the pursuit far behind him as Basoc and Hagat trailed him. It did prevent him from easily seeing Deliah whose strength was fading. Her voice grew weak on the god voice. Gonzales could only hope that she'd reach the castle conscious so she could land.

" Wounded approaching. Readyng defensive shield deactivation."

"Who is that?" Hagat exclaimed nervously.

"No one. It's a voice that lives in the castle. It's never hurt anyone. No need to worry about it now," Basoc said. "It certainly won't help them now."

" Soldier unresponsive. Taking control of combat suit."

Gonzales marveled at the fact that Deliah's suit turned automatically toward the castle when she would have missed the island by several arrow ranges. He gave instructions to his own suit to follow her as closely as possible.

" Deactivating defensive shield. Activating defensive shield."

An idea suddenly occurred to Gonzales. As he reached the island, he landed. He bent down and scooped up a handful of sand before running toward the castle entrance. Upon almost reaching it, he stopped and tossed some sand at it.

"Yes!" he exclaimed, when the sand halted in midair to slide back down. *" Five up. Five up. Five up. Forward. Hover."*

"You think you can defend by yourself? Where are your comrades?" Basoc said.

"Aren't there more knights?" Hagat asked.

"Do you see any other lights on besides ours? He's alone now. We've got him," Basoc answered.

"Two of us against just him?" Hagat exclaimed.

"Soon to be two of us against a wounded knight hiding inside the castle. He's a dead peasant as I see it. He was poor in swordsmanship," Basoc replied.

"Let me take him," Hagat said excitedly.

Basoc didn't answer immediately. "Very well, I'll let you fight him. It will be a more fair fight that way, though not by much. I trained all my warriors to fight well."

Gonzales listened as Hagat gave spell commands to descend and skim the waves. He knew that the man was planning on rushing in to strike at his legs from below in order to cripple him. The blood loss would make it easy for Hagat to strike higher and disarm him. Then it would end quickly with but one foreseeable result.

"You're braver than I thought, standing there in the air daring us to attack," Basoc said.

" *Up!*" Gonzales ordered, at the last possible moment.

Hagat plowed into the shield at high speed. There wasn't enough time for him to react to the god voice even had he understood what was said.

" *Consult Lieutenant Gonzales for permission to pass.*"

Hagat's body left a bloody spot in midair that seeped back toward the sand. Through sheer momentum, Hagat and the suit he wore bounced up and over to splash into the water beyond.

"What magic is this?" Basoc swore.

"God wills that we not lose," Gonzales replied. "Had you truly been one of us, you would have learned the newest secrets god revealed to us. Deliah will soon be whole again, just as Coffin is now."

"You're lying...No, you don't lie, do you?"

"You ought to know by now. Only I can go past that shield. Kill me and you'll never get any of the empty suits or harm Deliah. When she comes out, she'll have other knights waiting for her and none of them will be you. You won't stand a chance."

"So, you can open the shield?"

"Did I say that?"

"You said as much. It appears, then, that I can't kill you. I will have to capture you. Let's find out if you're man enough to face me sword in hand on the sand. No flying for either of us. You'll have the chance to kill me while I can only capture you. That should make it just about even for you."

Gonzales pondered Basoc's words. Without waiting for a reply, Basoc landed on the sand a few paces away from where Hagat's blood seeped down the curvature of the shield into the sand. He stepped forward, and picked up Hagat's sword to poke at the shield.

"Interesting. I should have guessed that our face shields weren't the only thing that could be protected in this manner," Basoc said.

"I don't have to fight you. In fact, all I have to do is wait for others to arrive. Then we can take you for certain."

"Yes, you could do that. However, if anyone else shows on my directioner, I'll know then to escape and try some other time and place. If you want to stop me now, then you'll have to do it alone. However, you're more of a coward than I first suspected. You're not only afraid of flying. Nor will you ever be a leader like your suit demands."

Gonzales landed on the sand some distance away from the ship. He watched as Basoc advanced toward him with a sword in both hands. Basoc raised one hand as if to charge. Too late, he saw Basoc's intention wasn't to charge, but to throw.

" *Forward! Hover!*" Gonzales ordered, as he sped past Basoc while blood spewed from one leg. The hover command halted him just as he reached the defensive shield. Even so, his momentum slammed his limbs against it causing him to drop his sword. " *Land. Deactivate defensive shield.*"

Gonzales fell to the ground, unaware at first that the shield wall had been supporting him momentarily. He glanced back to see that Basoc running toward him with his remaining sword raised to deal another blow. There'd be no need to throw that sword, Gonzales knew, because he was unarmed. His only option was to escape. For a moment, he considered launching into the air. A quick look at his wound convinced him otherwise. He wouldn't last long enough to reach the mainland. Furthermore, he was Deliah's only way out. With no other choice, Gonzales tried to crawl on his back toward the doorway.

Basoc laughed. "Oh, how the mighty have fallen. I shall enjoy hacking off your limbs, unless you confess the secrets you know. That will be the only way for you to obtain a swift, almost painless, death."

Gonzales struggled to move in before Basoc reached him. Too late, he felt the tip of Basoc's blade against his arm. The blade pointed down such that any command given by Gonzales would only serve to skewer him.

"What shall it be? Fast or painful?"

Gonzales glared at Basoc. There seemed to be nothing he could do until he spotted something that gave him some hope with a very high risk. "Fast."

"Very good thinking, Gonzales. Start talking."

"For you, that is. *Activate defensive shield*."

Basoc didn't have the opportunity to scream out as the shield sliced him in two. Gonzales screamed as both his feet were severed in the same instant despite his effort to pull them out of the way. He could barely crawl when his suit suddenly levitated.

" *Officer unresponsive. Taking control of combat suit.*"

Chapter 43

"I wish I knew," Moto said. "I hope this isn't all that's left of Gonzales."

The other knights continued to stare at the two fallen halves of Basoc, and the two feet they felt certain belonged to Gonzales. With only the sandals to go by, the identification wasn't certain because many people wore similar footwear. Still, there seemed to be no other choice when the distance and

remoteness was considered.

"Some of us have to remain here, in case he's alive," Coffin said. Moto nodded, even as every knight stepped forward to volunteer. "We'll rotate the duty. Two of you will remain here each day until the next two arrive. The rest of us will return to our duties and pray. Beyond that lies in god's hands."

the end

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