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But suddenly there was nothing beneath her feet, and she was falling through blessedly cool air. With a fearful crash, she plunged into icy water.

***Blackness closed over her head,
and a swift current swept her
away.***

About the Author:

Homeschooled from first through twelfth grade, Ari Heinze holds astronomy degrees from Caltech (B.S. 2001) and the University of Arizona (Ph.D. 2007). He's passionately interested in astronomy, but equally so in storytelling. Even in early childhood he entertained his two younger brothers with stories, and now, besides writing with obsessive delight, he invents stories for his own children: Petra, Eleazar, and baby Brogal, born in January 2010. He and his beloved wife Jane live in Houston at present, but plan to move to a more starry and adventurous locale when they have opportunity.

The Author's Favorite Books:

Fiction: *Cry, the Beloved Country*, by Alan Paton

Green Dolphin Street, by Elizabeth Goudge

The Jacobite Trilogy, by Dorothy K. Broster

Jane Eyre, by Charlotte Bronte

The Lord of the Rings, by J. R. R. Tolkien

The Napoleon of Notting Hill, by G. K. Chesterton

Northanger Abbey, by Jane Austen

The Space Trilogy, by C. S. Lewis

Till We Have Faces, by C. S. Lewis

Nonfiction: *Confessions*, by St. Augustine

Desiring God, by John Piper

The Reason for God, by Tim Keller

Jeremiah, by the Prophet Jeremiah

Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians, by St. Paul

*Rain, Wind
and Fire*

*THE EPIC OF KAROLAN
THE THIRD BOOK AMONG FOUR*

Ari Heinze

SOLI DEO GLORIA

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and 2011 (edited text) by Ari Heinze
Cover art by Ari Heinze
Published by Hopewriter Publishing
ISBN: 978-0-9825543-3-3

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CONTEXT WITHIN THE EPIC OF KAROLAN

This is the third book in *The Epic of Karolan*. While Book Two followed only Jonathan for some months after the end of the Norkath War, this book returns to follow the other characters, until Jonathan re-enters the story at the appropriate time.

The first book, **Bright Against the Storm**, told of the adventures of Jonathan the blacksmith and Sir Ilohan during the time preceding the great war between Karolan and Norkath, and of the love that was between Jonathan and Naomi the shepherdess, whom he left behind in Glen Carrah.

The second book, **Ashes of Our Joy**, told how Ilohan and Jonathan acquitted themselves in the Norkath War and its aftermath.

The fourth and final book, **Darkness Gathers Round**, describes how a new threat, first revealed in Book Three, came upon Karolan and was resisted with great heroism. It concludes the story of Ilohan and Jonathan, and of others, no less significant, who were caught up in their adventures. For at the last, though darkness gathered round, their stories did not end in darkness.

To explore Karolan further, or to learn when Book Four will be available, visit <http://www.hopewriter.com>.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to my dear wife, Jane, for supporting me in writing and publishing this work, for believing it was possible even if I didn't, and for invaluable suggestions and insights at every step of the process. Thanks for reading it aloud to help with editing – until 2 AM the day before it went to the printers.

Thanks to my parents, Dan and Judith, and my brothers, Ky and Dar, for being my first readers, and for making me believe I could write something publishable.

Thanks to Daniel Song for detailed editing suggestions for the whole series.

Thanks to four-year-old Eleazar, who gave up three Tuesday afternoons' worth of fishing for this book. Apologies to the real Brogal (age ten months) whom I have sometimes sadly neglected to attend to the fictional one.

If I start naming those who shared with me the adventures I have drawn on to write my epic, this page will never be enough – but thanks to those who stood with me on icy mountains, hiked to hidden valleys, ventured into baked but splendid deserts, and dared enough heat and cold, hunger, thirst, and danger that my portrayals of these things have some taste of the reality.

Thanks to those whose love helped me dream of Ceramir, and whose courage and faithfulness helped me dream of heroes.

CEMBAR

KAROLAN

NORKATH

The far North is forested and unpeopled

Forest

Farmland

Britheldore

Aaronkal

Guldorak

Niida

Idranak

Metherka

Dilgare

Tremilin

Valley of Petrag

Felim

Kiuhern

Byrinkal

Glen Carrah

Vykadrak

The Great Mountains

Cliffs of Doom

Kyrta

Drantar

Church of Joyful Prayer

Luciyr

Drantar's Gap

Desert Gap

Ceramir

Harevan

Desert Church

The great Desert extends beyond the edge of knowledge to the extreme South, from whence, it is said, the Jarnith once came.

The Desert

Many other castles, churches, rivers, and other features exist which are not shown.

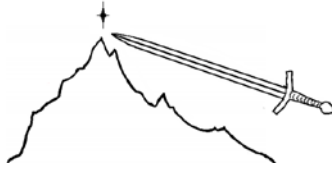
The borders cannot be traced with certainty where they meet the Desert and the Mountains.

*To my beloved wife, Jane:
No words I could write would truly express
how great a blessing you are to me.
I thank God for you with all my heart.*

“Many waters cannot quench love;
rivers cannot sweep it away.
If one were to give
all the wealth of one’s house for love,
it would be utterly scorned.”

Song of Solomon 8:7, NIV

Chapter 1



The Shepherdess' Life

WARM NOW FROM RUNNING TO AND FRO, NAOMI OF Glen Carrah flung herself down on the grass in the midst of her flock. It was the day after Karolan's heroic victory at the Battle of Petrag, but few who had not been there had heard the news. Naomi knew nothing more of it than of her own future – and yet there was peace in her heart, as she lay in the golden grass. The sun was warm despite the strong, steady wind from the north. She watched the heads of grass toss wildly in the wind above her, with the immeasurable blue sky beyond them. The calm footsteps of her sheep told her they were grazing contentedly around her.

She was thinking of Jonathan, her beloved. She had heard that his journey with Prince Ilohan had taken him far away, beyond the ravages of war. Yet she did not believe he was safe. Jonathan had wanted passionately to fight for Karolan, and for her. A weary journey over wild lands would not have stopped him. He had returned, she believed: he had returned somehow to fight in the war. He was in great peril, not only his mortal life but also his soul, for he had not given himself to God as she had.

“Father,” she prayed, “You have heard my prayers for Jonathan, over and over, scores of times in the days he has been gone. I know you love me. I love you, and I pray that one day he will love you as well. Today I give him to you, and commit him wholly to your care, for I know that you have heard me and have done what was best.”

She lay still among the grass stems, her peace deeper than before. She did not need to pray for Jonathan any more, she felt: that task was done. God had heard and acted. He had done the very best, by his own, ultimate, definition, and she trusted him. She was held in peace as in a loving embrace, and she knew it came from beyond the world, not from her own heart or mind. She wondered why it had come to her now, and what its purpose was. Then she noticed that the sheep had stopped eating, and were hurrying about uneasily. She rose swiftly to her feet to see what troubled them. Below her, spanning the full width of the glen, was a wall of fire.

It rushed up toward her, blown by the swift north wind, with a speed she could never hope to outrun. Already the crackling roar of it was loud in her ears. She stood still, her hair blowing in the wind, and looked at it. So the war was lost, and the land conquered. Her village was sacked and burnt. Jonathan was dead. Her father was dead. Barnabas was dead. Even Hannah was almost certainly dead. The children whose blankets she had folded that morning were dead, or captives. Her own death rushed on with the speed of the galloping fire.

She knew now the reason for the peace that she had felt. God had heard all her prayers. She was sure, beyond doubt, that Jonathan on his travels had come to love him, and that when in a moment the flames took her life, she would find him waiting to welcome her at the gates of Heaven. The flames roared closer, devouring the glen at a fearful speed. She smiled

at them, and knelt down on the grass. They had no power over her. They would take her at the height of her beauty, with no shadow of fear in her eyes. The glen, too, on this bright day of autumn at the edge of winter, seemed to face its destruction undismayed, at the peak of its loveliness.

"Your life is not your own to set aside."

She did not know from whence the thought came, and it was not welcome. At the same time it came to her, she began to feel afraid of burning. The fear was unconnected with the thought, but both pushed her in the same direction. She resisted it.

"There is no escape," she said.

"You must try something." Again, the answering thought did not seem to come from her own mind.

"I would rather be with you," she said, for she believed that God himself was speaking to her.

"Set aside what you desire, and follow me."

"Lord, I will," she said, and it seemed to her that she had never said a harder thing. Yet as soon as she had spoken, she saw that she had a chance: the Carratril, the cold, swift stream that watered the glen. A prayer passed through her mind like lightning: "I am yours, Lord; take care of me." Then she was running as she had never run before, flying over the golden grass toward the river.

The fear of burning was hot and terrible within her now, and the surrender to death that she had felt only a moment before seemed inconceivable. Yet through the midst of her fear there ran the awesome confidence that she had spoken with God, and was obeying him. It was his business, and his alone, to deal with all that happened to her.

The wall of fire was very close now upon her left. She could smell the smoke and feel the heat. The Carratril was only a

score of strides away, but the fire was almost as close. She put her whole being into the desperate race. Her hair whipped wildly in the wind, and her lungs cried out for air. Then the fire caught her.

Her hair took furious flame immediately, and all the rest of her felt scorched. Her worst fears about the pain were short of the reality. She felt she had run into Hell. She screamed out her breath, and then sucked scorching air into her straining lungs. She was still running, but she knew that in an instant she would collapse into even greater agony, until death relieved her.

But suddenly there was nothing beneath her feet, and she was falling through blessedly cool air. With a fearful crash, she plunged into icy water. Blackness closed over her head, and a swift current swept her away. A prayer that never found words was the last of her fleeting thoughts.

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Sir Drantar's face was grim and cold as he surveyed the burning village and the trembling captives. At any other time he would have been happy to hear that Sir Cygnak was dead, but now it left him in command of a mission he despised. He was the leader now, and had to give orders instead of only follow them.

He looked at the cold, swift river, and thought with a sick heart of Cygnak's last deed. He had raped and murdered one of the most beautiful of the captured women, and flung her body into the icy stream. He had considered this his due, as the leader of the mission. Soon afterward there had been no sign of him but a bloody patch of ground beside a covered well. Drantar did not know who had murdered him, and did not

care. Cygnak had deserved such a fate for long years, and it had come to him at a very fitting moment – if only he, Drantar, had not had the misfortune of being second in command.

A dark object came floating down the stream as Drantar watched. He was soon fairly sure that it was a dead body, but he himself would not have attempted to recover it. One of his knights pushed it to shore with a long spear, and lifted it out all wet and dripping. It was a dead woman. The knight laid her on the bank, and Drantar approached to examine her. Her hair, hands, and feet were badly burned, but her face was almost unscathed. It was clear that she had been very beautiful.

The knight turned to Drantar, and asked, "What shall I do with her?"

Drantar cared little. He hated slaughter and debauchery, but the Karolans were enemies: he did not have to respect their slain. He disliked the sight of this woman lying dead on the charred stream bank. She was like a trampled lily – a silent and damning witness against Norkath and all its servants. He would have her removed and thrown somewhere else where no one would see her. "Tie her over your horse," he commanded the knight sternly. "We will not leave them even the consolation of burying their dead."

Drantar scanned the wider scene. The destruction Fingar had ordered was complete, but the knights he must now command looked a disordered rabble. Some of the captured women and children were not even properly bound yet. He mounted and rode through the smoldering village, barking out imperious orders.

At last he had his troop organized. The captives were blindfolded, their hands were bound securely behind their backs, and each one was tied on a knight's horse ahead of him in the saddle. The knight who had recovered the dead woman

had draped her behind his saddle like a sack of flour, with ropes clumsily tied around her waist to hold her on. It was a sloppy, undisciplined job, but Drantar let it pass: he was in haste to leave the scene of devastation, sell the captives in Cembar, and rejoin the main Norkath army. He shouted a command, and the whole cavalcade moved off at a brisk trot. The only sound besides the horses' hoof-beats was the suppressed weeping of the captives.

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As consciousness slowly returned to Naomi, her first awareness of herself was as someone badly hurt in several different ways. She was not dead, as the Norkaths had thought her, but for a long time she felt that she was very near it. Her hands, especially her left hand, ached and burned almost as though they were still in the fire. Convulsive coughing racked her: her lungs had filled with water, and not all of it had drained out immediately when she was tied head downward on the horse. The jolting trot, the knotted ropes pressing into her stomach, and her awkward position draped over the horse all increased her misery as she became aware of them.

She remembered that she had fled from the fire and been washed away in the Carratril. It was strange that the strong current had not dashed her to death against the rocks. But it had dashed her against them, for she knew she was injured by more than simply fire and near-drowning. Her head ached badly. Her arms and shoulders seemed to be full of bruises, and without knowing exactly why, she had the impression that she had been struck much harder far down on her back. In sharp contrast, her legs did not seem injured. They did not

hurt, at least. In fact, she could not feel them at all, or move them.

It took her a moment to realize how strange this was. She could not feel or move her legs. She tried her hands, and found that she could wriggle them, though they were stuck firmly under the ropes that bound her to the horse. She was never allowed the slightest doubt as to whether she could feel them. But her legs were different. They were numb as she had not known any part of her body could ever be. It was as though they were not there at all, but she knew they were. Looking under the horse's belly, she could easily see her feet hanging limply down, badly burned, on the other side.

She groaned, and coughed again. For a moment her vision went black, but then she recovered and could think again. She had been horribly injured and half-drowned in the Carratril. Now she was tied to a horse. Whose horse? Some Norkath knight's, she guessed – one of the victorious Norkaths who had burned Glen Carrah. From the sounds, she knew that there were other horses near her. She raised her head and tried to see them, but immediately pain stabbed through her and she grew dizzy, so she dropped her head and tried no more. She wondered what the Norkaths would do to her. She wondered what had happened to Hannah and the children. Perhaps they were dead, and therefore safe from further harm – as she herself was not.

Suddenly she remembered why she was still alive, not burned to ashes with the beauty of Glen Carrah. She remembered the voice that had called her to run, the voice she believed had been God's. "Father," she groaned, "what have you done to me?"

She was silent for a while, in her misery, not trying to think or understand anything. The horse jostled her continually. She

felt more helpless and hopeless than she had ever imagined possible. Presently, a memory came unbidden into her mind, prodding her dulled consciousness. It was not a vivid memory of time and place, color and motion, but only bare words and the voices that had spoken them, long ago: "...what if God places in your hand an adventure whether you want it or not? Could you accept it with trust?" Her father had spoken those words, in his kind, deep voice that she longed to hear again with all her heart.

And she, Naomi of Carrah, had answered, "Knowing that my life is God's, I can trust him for all that comes into it." She had said that in a voice of absolute confidence and courage, as if she were a martyr. She had not known what she was speaking of. Now she knew. Now she knew what an incredible thing she had said she could do.

She considered that for a long moment, as best she could. Every jolt of the horse sent a fresh pang through her aching head. Her thoughts themselves were painful also. She had been proved a fraud. She was not what she had thought herself.

Yet the merest hint of another train of thought flitted through her mind, and she caught at it. She had not intended to boast when she had made that reply to her father. Perhaps she had been boasting, without being aware of it – in her present weariness and agony she could not judge. But she knew there had been another reason for her words, and she clutched at that reason with all the strength she had left, determined to understand it.

She had said she could trust God, because she had believed that he would help her trust. Why had she believed that? It was hard for her to think through her headache and her pain, but at last the answer came. She had believed that God would help her trust him, because it was right to trust him, and he would

always help her do what was right and avoid evil. When her own strength failed, God's strength would be there to sustain her. She had believed that. It had not been in her own strength that she was boasting, but in God's.

Then she came to the great question. It burned in her mind as hot and painful as the fires of Glen Carrah. Was it true? Would God really help her? Could she trust him even now? It did not seem very likely. He had hurt her so much. She had wanted to die. He had called her to live, and her life had become full of agony.

But the whole question turned on who he was. If he was all that she had always believed him to be, he had indeed the right to do this to her, and the power and wisdom to turn all her pain to blessing in the end. From childhood she had known God's promises from the Books of the Travelers, and as one of his people she had applied them to herself. God had never promised her a life without pain. He had promised that he would work everything that happened to her together for her good. Nothing that she was experiencing now proved him a liar.

Back in Glen Carrah she had believed that whenever anything God did or allowed seemed strange to her, it was only because she did not have his wisdom or understand his plan. It was much harder to believe that now. It was much harder to believe that he was truly good, when with every step of the horse she wished for death, yet feared its approach, and when she drew every breath with teeth clenched against her pain. Was God what she had always thought him? Was he loving and good, wise and powerful and faithful?

A sudden realization changed Naomi's thoughts completely. She need not try to determine whether God was good. She need only wait and see, for the moment of crisis had come.

Here, now, God would prove himself or fail to do so. If he was with her now, if he was helping her trust and hope in him now, he was proven faithful. If he had forsaken her, he had broken his word and was proved a liar.

And then for a second time Naomi's world changed in a moment. The change was a return to her spirit's habitual attitude. She had been thinking about God, as if God were in her mind, awaiting her judgment. But the habit of her life was to turn outward to him, in love and supplication, not inward to her own thoughts and judgments. He was wholly beyond her. Her whole being waited on his will and choice, but he did not wait on hers. She felt that all her painful speculation was simply irrelevant, swept away by the reality that descended upon her.

"I am yours, Lord," she had said when he had called her to run. All her thoughts and questions were shallow nothings compared to those four words. She belonged to him, and he was her Lord and God.

"Father," she prayed, "come to me and help me trust you. Be with me and comfort me, and do with me as you will." Though it seemed right to her to speak the words, she felt she was asking for something that had already been granted. Through all her wondering and questioning she had still been trusting, though she had not known it. She had still been his. He had not left her.

Naomi remained miserable, fading in and out of full awareness of her surroundings, but there was a core of peace in her because of her restored trust in God. As time went by, her coughing subsided, but she grew colder and the aches in her back and shoulders grew worse. At last twilight began to fall. There came a shouted order from the captain of the Norkaths, and the cavalcade bunched up and came to a halt. At last,

looking beneath the belly of her horse, Naomi could see some of the others in the company. She could hear bustling and the unloading of horses, and also the soft weeping of women and children.

She felt the knots around her loosened, and she was carried ungently to a forest clearing just off the road. The Norkath who carried her dumped her down carelessly near the edge of the clearing. "I would have sworn she was dead, but she isn't," she heard him remark to a comrade. "I heard her cough and groan behind me as we came along. She still breathes even now, but I doubt she'll last much longer."

Naomi felt that he was probably right. She lay awkwardly huddled and unable to adjust her position, shivering in her damp clothes. Her head was against the leaf-covered ground, and she did not even try to raise it. She could see the Norkath knights taking their blindfolded captives off the horses, binding their feet, and laying them in ordered rows on the ground. She recognized many of the captives, but she did not see Hannah or any of the children she had been caring for. She supposed that they were dead. The Norkaths built a large fire in the center of the clearing. Naomi felt only the feeblest touch of its heat where she lay. She longed to be closer, and to feel warm again.

She heard the leader of the Norkaths speaking imperiously to his troops. "I and five others will go off in search of a house where we may ask our way to Bratca. All the rest of you must stay here. Set a strong guard armed with crossbows, and keep a sharp watch. Conduct yourselves like knights at war. I will return soon. Farewell." He and the knights he had chosen rode away into the falling twilight. Ten other knights took up crossbows and posted themselves as guards all around the clearing.

The rest of the party sat around the fire eating and drinking. They drank a good deal, and their talk grew louder. The watchmen were annoyed at being kept away from the merry meal, and the one nearest Naomi actually set down his bow and joined his comrades at the fire. Some of the men there began dancing about, while others boasted loudly about impossible feats of arms.

Naomi saw all this, fully aware of what was passing, but feeling that it meant nothing to her. She was not thinking now, only watching and feeling. She was going to die and leave this world, and nothing in it mattered anymore. She watched it dully, cold and hurting and helpless at the edge of the light.

A loud and confident knight stood up, boasting that he would prove himself a stronger man than any other there. He was drunk, no doubt. Yet the wine did not make the evil in him – it only released it. With raucous laughter he strode to the row of captives, and chose one for himself. He heaved her up by her bound arms, and carried her roughly into the circle by the fire. There he stripped her quickly, ripping her clothes away with strong and ruthless hands. She screamed for help, and prayed and struggled frantically, but he only laughed at her. The other men sat around, unmoving, each watching with his own mixture of admiration, envy, and horror. None moved to help the woman.

Beyond the circle of the firelight, Naomi also watched – and could not watch unmoved. What was happening by the fire mattered now, whether she felt it or not. If there were something she could do to stop it, she must do it. But there was nothing. She was helpless and mortally hurt. Yet no – the guard's abandoned crossbow lay beside her on the ground, loaded, only a step away. Reaching it seemed impossible, but she could see no escape from her duty to attempt it. She might

be dying, but she could still act – and she must. “Lord, I am yours,” she said. “In your strength let me save her.”

Naomi stretched herself out across the fallen leaves, trembling with pain and effort. As she had expected, her hands did not reach the crossbow. She tried to push herself toward it, but her legs would not move. She felt anchored to the ground. Furious anger at her helplessness rose in her heart.

She dug frantically through the leaves with her hands, trying to find some purchase. Her scorched fingers met a root, and she grasped it in both hands. She gave an involuntary gasp of pain as she began to pull, and blood seeped out through newly-opened cracks in her burned hands. She strained with all her strength while waves of feverish weakness broke over her. Yet she felt herself sliding across the dry leaves. A moment later her hands closed around the loaded crossbow.

She could not lift it, so she aimed from the ground. She sighted along the straight, smooth arrow, aiming for the center of the Norkath’s body as he struggled with his captive and pranced around her in drunken lust. She wondered if she had the strength or courage to force down the hard iron trigger in cold blood with her scorched fingers. She wondered if the bow would shift with the effort and kill the woman she had hoped to save. She aimed as best she could, gritted her teeth, and pulled the trigger with a whispered prayer.

She heard a horrible scream of pain and rage, and found she had unconsciously closed her eyes at the moment of shooting. She opened them again and saw what she had done. The arrow had struck the Norkath in his stomach and pierced him through. The woman was unhurt. The man staggered a few steps, groaning and gripping the arrow, and then fell on the ground and lay there writhing. The woman crouched down and tried to cover herself with the ripped pieces of her

clothing, ineffectually with her bound hands. None of the other Norkaths moved for a long moment. The watchmen looked fearfully into the woods, their crossbows ready. No one noticed Naomi, lying like a dead thing on the ground, her bleeding hands still clasped around the crossbow. It seemed to her that a long time passed, and still nothing happened. A few men moved by the fire, and a few drank stoically from the wineskins, but none spoke or laughed. The half-naked woman shivered on the ground, despite the nearness of the fire. Naomi thought vaguely that she should let go of the crossbow and push it away from her, but she did not. She felt she had spent the last of her strength.

She heard the sound of footsteps on the leaves, both of men and of horses. Several Norkaths leading their horses passed by her, just between her and the fire, almost near enough to trample her. In fact, the first man to pass her stumbled over the crossbow and kicked it cleanly out of her bleeding hands.

Sir Drantar and his five scouts had returned. He left his horse at the edge of the clearing, walked up to the fire, and stopped. The wounded man, who had already begun to unclthe himself before he was shot, lay at Drantar's feet. Drantar looked around the camp with a cold gaze. He pointed to the man and woman on the ground before him.

"This man intended to rape her?" he demanded of one of the soberest of his knights.

"Yes, Sir, he intended to," said the knight.

"Did he do it?" asked Drantar shortly.

"Sir, he did not," said the knight. "He was shot, Sir."

"Who shot him?" asked Drantar sharply.

"I do not know, Sir,"

"None of my watchmen shot him?" asked Drantar.

"They did not, Sir."

Drantar reached down and lifted the wounded would-be rapist from the ground. He had bled a good deal, but was still conscious. Drantar slapped him in the face. "Stand up like the man you are not," he shouted. The knight stood, on unsteady legs. Drantar stepped back.

"Look!" he cried in a commanding voice. "Here is a knight of the great land of Norkath, exhibited before you. He is drunk, and has exposed himself. He is bleeding from a bolt that has gone through his guts. He intended to rape a bound captive whom he had been ordered to sell as a slave in Bratca." Drantar raised his voice in thundering denunciation. "This is not a man!" he cried. "This is not a knight, or a soldier. This is a craven, a fool, a weakling who cannot control his lust. Could he not have found harlots enough to content him at a time when we are not at war? Could he not conduct his own raids of rape and murder when they would not hamper the wars of Norkath? Could he not have the honesty to be an outlaw and a bandit, since he has one's heart? But I intend to lead men and knights, and I will."

His sword leaped from its sheath and in a single motion he beheaded the man standing before him. The body and head fell together on the ground. Drantar's blade ran with blood in the light of the fire. His voice was strong and cold. "Take warning!" he said. "You are no longer under Cygnak's command. Thus shall all be served who cannot conduct themselves as knights of Norkath, and as men."

Drantar roused several of the most drunken of the knights around the fire. He slapped them with the flat of his sword, cursed them coldly and got them on their feet. "Go find an inn, and buy clothes for this woman," he said to them. "And if you are mistaken for Karolans and taken as slaves, it is a small loss! I give you no gold; the price of the clothes you must take from

your pay. Now go! Or I will have more heads yet this night!" He turned to survey the rest of his men. "Bring all that remains of the wine, and pour it in the fire," he said. "Cygnak thought a cohort of knights should be supplied like a wine-merchant's caravan, but I do not. It was my folly that I did not pour it in the stream at Glen Carrah."

Some time after this Naomi felt herself lifted, almost gently, and carried to the fire, where she was laid down again on the dry, warm ground. She was sure she would have died of cold if this had not been done. As it was she slowly sank into an unconsciousness that was not much like the sleep she had known when her body was whole, but was much, much better than waking.

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The first thing that Naomi was aware of when she woke up in the morning was that she was still very badly hurt. The second thing was that she had just been lifted in someone's arms. A hood was over her head, and she could see nothing.

"She it was who shot the craven last night," said the man who carried her, whose voice she recognized as the Norkath leader's. "She – a crippled woman – proved herself better than any of you, for she stopped an evil thing that you watched with leering grins! But she must die, for we cannot sell her as a slave, and she is guilty of shooting a Norkath knight, however deserving he was. I will take her into the woods and kill her, and hide her body so it will bring no trouble on us. I return soon! Conduct yourselves like men in my absence!"

Naomi felt herself being carried a substantial distance at a fast walk. Now and then tree branches whipped against her, so she knew they were going through the forest. Finally the

Norkath cursed, set her down, and took off her hood. The moment of her death had come, she supposed. Her heart was beating fast, but she felt little fear. Yesterday she had wished for death, and if God willed that it should come to her today, that did not seem to her an evil. Still, she did not wish to meet death completely helpless. With a painful effort, she freed her arms from the new cloak that had been wrapped around her, and then looked up at the Norkath. She was surprised to see that he had not drawn his sword.

Naomi looked straight into his eyes. "Are you not going to kill me?" she asked.

Drantar pulled her to a tree and sat her up against it. He sat against another nearby. "I have not before seen courage like yours," he said. "I chose, last night, to save you, though it is against the orders of my king. There was supposed to be a pony here, tied to this oak. The Cembaran innkeeper from whom I ordered it has played me false. I would have tied you on it, and sent you back to Karolan with a veil to hide your face. But now it cannot be, and I have no more time."

"What will you do with me then?" asked Naomi.

"That must be your choice," said Drantar in a voice that had become cold again. "There are no houses or inns to which I could bring you in the little time I have. If you will, I will lay you on some woodland path, and wrap you in the cloak again. If you are found before the night you may be taken to a warm place. Then your life will be saved. But I warn you that you are not likely to be either free or happy with those who find you. The other choice is death. I will kill you now if you wish, to spare you further suffering. A death stroke carries no pain, and much is in store for you if you make any other choice."

“The life of those who belong to God is not their own to lay aside,” said Naomi. “Take me to a forest path, and go back to lead your men. I thank you.”

Drantar lifted her again and strode swiftly off through the forest. He soon found a little footpath that ran beside a frozen stream. He set her down on it, and put a skin of water and some food beside her. Then he turned away and left without a word.

Naomi lay still and silent where he had left her. She thought only a little of his strange, callous mercy. The strength she had mustered to face his sword-stroke, and sustained to make the choice he gave her, faded quickly. The day was cold, and her body deeply hurt. Her pain did not cease or ease. She prayed that she would be found and cared for. Then she prayed that she would not be found; that she would die quickly and gently of cold as the night fell. She prayed that Jonathan was alive, and looking for her. Then she prayed that he was dead, but had loved God before his death and was now safe in Heaven. She did not know what to ask for, so in the end she said, “Father, do with me and those I have loved as you will. I trust you.” Then she drank from the cold, clean water Drantar had given her, pulled the hood of the cloak over her head, and lost awareness of herself.

She did not exactly fall asleep, but she rested, and her thoughts wandered dreamlike around a hundred irrelevant, nonsensical paths. She became aware of her surroundings again a little after sunset. She was deeply chilled. She realized that the day had passed and she had not been found, and so she guessed her death was imminent. She was very hungry, but her hands were too numb with cold to open the bag of food that Drantar had left her. She gave it up and tucked them as

best she could back into her cloak. Her consciousness slipped away, and she gave herself up for dead.

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In the chill dawn, two women came along a forest path in Cembar to draw water from a stream. One of them was old, hunched over and darkly hooded, while the other was very young, dressed lightly for the weather, and shivering with cold. The sight of a dark bundle lying on the path brought them to a sudden halt. The young woman quickly bent over it and carelessly drew aside the hood. "Here's a strange thing, Varga," she exclaimed in the Cembaran language. "A pretty woman, mayhap just your sort, alone sleeping in the woods. But she's dead of cold, or looks it."

"And not much use to me then, Brint, would she be?" asked Varga gruffly. Nevertheless she knelt beside the body and put her hand gently across the mouth. The next moment she had wrapped the cloak tightly around the motionless figure, and yelled to Brint, "Go and fetch the horse! She is still alive! Hurry, or I'll make you as cold as she is."

Brint ran as fast as she could back to the narrow wooden house where she and Varga lived, for there was nothing she feared more than being shut out in the cold. She came back panting hard and leading a lame pony. She and Varga together heaved the woman's inert form onto the animal's back.

They laid her in an upper room of their tall, narrow house. They made up the fire, and gave her a hot, strong drink when she was conscious enough to swallow it. They removed her clothes, which were burned and dirty, and tended the scorched skin they found beneath them before dressing her in new, clean clothes that fit her well. They cut her hair, removing all that

was burnt and frazzled. Then they left her alone, in the bed beneath a heavy blanket, and went back to other business.

Naomi had submitted to all of it, semi-conscious and vaguely surprised to be alive, but very thankful for the kind actions and the warmth that gradually crept into her body from the roaring fire and the drink. When her rescuers were gone she slipped from partial consciousness into deep sleep, or the nearest approach to it she had had in some time. Though her dreams were uneasy and shot through with lingering pain, she slept a long time.