

The Victor
A Tale of Betrayal, Love, and Sacrifice
by
Marlayne Giron

*"My heart overflows with a good theme; I address my verses to the King;
My tongue is the pen of a ready writer" Psalm 45:1 (NASB).*

Marlayne Giron

Chapter One

An icy wind streamed over the hilltop from the nearby sea, chilling the sentries who stood watch from high atop the castle's battlements. Below them in the dark courtyard a solitary figure in hood and cloak ducked under a stone archway, shouldering open the door to the gatehouse. "*Greetings on this frigid morn!*" he nodded to the frowning guard, throwing back his hood. He withdrew a small leather wineskin, uncorking the stopper with his teeth.

"Segrid, what are you doing here at this ungodly hour?" Thaddeus scowled, pushing away the skin. "You know drink is forbidden upon the watch!"

Segrid's hand flashed out and caught hold and with a violent yank, he pulled the guard forward into his dagger, impaling him. Blood spewed from the wound as he twisted the blade out, gutting him. Thaddeus's eyes stared at him in horrified surprise then he slumped lifelessly onto the floor. Segrid straightened, watching dispassionately as the pool of blood slowly blossomed outwards from the body, convinced that Thaddeus would not rise again. He grasped hold of the drawbridge's winch and began working it downwards to lower it for his Master's waiting army. Thus preoccupied, the assassin failed to notice the small page cowering within the shadows of a nearby alcove, awakened by his foul deed. Hardly daring to breathe, the trembling lad inched along the wall toward the rope that held the portcullis aloft, hoping he could escape the murderer's notice before he was slaughtered alike. With slow, quiet movements, he took out a small knife and quietly began to saw upon the taut rope.

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Baron Lucius of North UMBERLAND waited anxiously under the nearby boughs of surrounding trees staring intently at the slowly lowering drawbridge in anticipation. The wind was bitterly cold, but its incessant howling masked the rattle and chink of his men's mail coats and the snort of their impatient horses as they waited to commence their surprise attack. Suddenly, he froze in his saddle. With pounding heart, he watched the portcullis suddenly drop. The page had done his work before Segrid could kill him. The sound of his anguished scream instantly alerted all the guards upon the wall but it was too late!

Lucius had lost his advantage, but there was no turning back now... "*Fire the arrow!*" he snapped to the archer on his right. The archer stared at him in disbelief. "*Milord!*" he protested. "We're outnumbered three to one! '*Tis madness...!*"

"I've yet one chance at victory!" Lucius growled in the archer's face. "*Fire the blasted arrow!*"

With a grim frown of disapproval, the archer ignited his pitch-dipped arrow in the concealed campfire and shot high, giving the signal for Lucius' army to storm the walls. Trumpets blared forth from the trees, mingling with the screams of his men. "*Attack! Attack! Attack! Breach the walls! Bring Ellioth to its knees!*"

Armed with swords, crossbows, and arrows, Elloth's knights poured from their quarters in various stages of undress, fitting arrows to the string even as they ran. In short order their long bows and crossbows were returning fire, filling the air with a deadly hail of projectiles that slowly and systematically decimated their enemy outside the walls. Alarm bells pealed loudly, adding their clamor to the growing concert of war, clanging loudly for reinforcements to join the fray.

Out thundered Lucius' men on horseback, shooting a thicket of flaming and poisoned arrows over the walls, piercing many within. Those which found their mark, immediately felled

whom they pierced or ignited fires which divided the castle's attention between its' defenses and putting the flames out before they could spread. It was a clever but desperate ploy for Lucius had no real hope of victory through conventional battle; all he could do was diminish Eloth's forces until the King's sword of power had been safely secreted away.

Ephlal.^{i,ii}

Since the day he had first seen the powerful sword in action as a young squire in Eloth's service, possessing and wielding its power for his own use had grown into an all consuming fire. He had witnessed first-hand the blade's ability to protect its bearer from harm as well as to wreck destruction.

He was a young lad, still training as Eloth's squire at arms when he first witnessed Ephlal's power. He had been at archery practice when his shot went wild and pierced the King's unprotected breast. Eloth had toppled from the saddle, landing hard upon the grass. All began to run towards the King to render aid but Lucius arrived first, distraught with terror and remorse. He knelt besides Eloth but his attention was immediately arrested when he saw the King struggling to withdraw Ephlal from its scabbard. "Help me, lad," he rasped, blood seeping from his mouth. His lungs were quickly filling, time was running out! "Pull out the arrow, quickly!"

"But my Lord," Lucius had protested. "You'll bleed to death!" Eloth's eyes burned into him with urgency. Without further hesitation Lucius yanked the arrow out then helped him slide the blade from the scabbard.

"Don't touch the blade!" the king choked out a warning. Lucius backed away, his heart plummeting when Eloth turn white in his final death throes. At that moment, the blood from his wound dripped onto the glowing blade. There was a blinding flash of light that bowled Lucius over and when he got back to his feet, his view of the King had been blocked by the courtiers and physicians as they surrounded him.

"It's nothing!" Lucius had heard Eloth saying in a loud voice then watched in disbelief as the King stood to his feet without assistance and returned Ephlal to its scabbard as though nothing amiss had ever happened. "When I tried to dismount my foot caught in the stirrup and I fell." He explained. At that moment the King had given him a knowing smile and nod of thanks but never a word of explanation. After that Lucius began to observe things more closely. Despite the years that passed, Eloth never seemed to age. That started Lucius on his quest to learn more. Though he had been able to glean little of Ephlal's lore from the castle archives, like all in the kingdom, he had a healthy respect for the blade's awesome capability to decimate an entire army with a mere point of its blade or render an enemy harmless with the spoken word.

Its' hilt was crafted of gold inset with diamonds and opals. The scabbard also was of ancient make, crafted in white leather, and hand tooled throughout with golden thread and studded with emeralds. Embroidered upon it was the device of a Dragon coiled about the base of a flowering tree with a Lamb standing upon its' head. The time and manner of its creation were unknown; forgotten in the eons of time that had passed since its forging. Were it not for the hope of possessing this mightiest and mysterious of weapons, he never would have openly dared challenge the King he had once faithfully served. His men did not know that they were merely sacrificial pawns in a ruse to divert attention from his actual goal of stealing the sword!

"Go!" he shouted, shaking his fist in the air as the first wave of his army raised their ladders against the wall. "*Slaughter them all! Show no mercy!*"

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Upon observing the attacking hordes successfully scaling the outer bailey, Eloth's men took up positions upon the top to shove away the ladders and hew down the ropes before the encroachers could enter the city. Squires pelted them with rocks and poured boiling oil to slow their progress. Lucius' men fell back, screaming with pain and rage.

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"Penloth!" shouted Finrod, Captain of the Guard, as he ran to the stables. "Post thy archers every fifteen paces upon the wall; shoot the traitors down!"

"I never thought I'd see the day when I'd have to spill the blood of our own kinsmen!" Penloth shouted back.

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Lucius watched with growing anxiety as the ranks of his men swiftly dwindled under the fierce retaliation of Eloth's men. *'What is taking him so long? Where is Severn's signal he has acquired Eloth's sword?'* Lucius knew he should make his escape but still he hesitated, torn between his lust for the sword and self-preservation. As long as there remained the slightest chance Ephlal had been secreted away, he would wait until the last possible moment. At that moment, he spied a flaming arrow coming out of the castle ramparts from a balcony high atop the main house. *It was the signal!*

A sudden blast of trumpets issuing from the castle ramparts froze his heart in terror. Before Lucius' horrified eyes, the portcullis rose high and out of the castle gates rode a sortie of knights *led by the King himself on his white charger*. All blood drained from Lucius' face when he saw the weapon raised aloft in Eloth's hand. *Was it Ephlal or the replica?* He wasn't going to wait around to find out! Lucius dug his spurs deep into his horse's flanks and took off at break neck speed to the utter surprise of his men as well as the knights of Ellioth. A cry instantly went up from those upon the wall.

"Tis Lucius! He's fleeing!"

"Stop him! Drag him from the saddle!"

It was too late. Lucius was already halfway down the hill by the time riders jumped into the saddle to give chase. This was the signal for the attack to be pressed anew and concentrated upon the King himself.

Eloth lifted high his sword and spoke a word of command for Ephlal to render his enemies harmless but nothing happened. He stared at the sword, suddenly recognizing it for the counterfeit it was; oblivious to the hail of arrows speeding towards him.

"To the King! Protect the King!" shouted Finrod, running forward with raised shield. Three arrows immediately stuck fast into it which had been meant for Eloth. Eloth wheeled about, bent low and grabbed a large shield from a fallen enemy, raising it in the nick of time to prevent two more arrows from skewering him. He was soon surrounded by the seraph; their large shields taking a pounding from the incoming missiles until the enemy archers were taken out one by one. In a few moments it was over and the surprise attack had come to an end.

The seraph lowered their shields, greatly relieved but confused as to what was wrong with the King's sword but their questions died in their throats when Eloth slumped onto the ground. A lone arrow had breached their defenses and struck him in the shoulder. They all stared at him in dumbstruck horror. Such a thing had never happened before in all the long history of Ellioth. Eloth had never been ill, tired or even vulnerable...until this moment.

"Move aside!" shouted the court physician, pushing them away so the litter could be brought in. A small red stain of blood was seeping through Eloth's vesture at the shoulder where the arrow still protruded.

“Don’t let him escape with the sword!” gasped Eloth. “It’ll be the undoing of the kingdom!” As if in response, the ground below them rumbled ominously.

The warning brought Finrod immediately to his senses. "After him!" he shouted, running down the hill; his men close behind. Lucius had left murder and mayhem in his wake, riding down all who had stood in his way. The bodies of his victims littered the winding road all the way down through the village to the shore. To make matters worse, the path was not only clogged with the injured but those who sought to give them aid as well. Finrod watched with mounting frustration as the distant figure of Lucius took off on the main road for his Keep.

“Damn!” Finrod cursed, watching helplessly as Lucius’ figure swiftly disappeared. “Back to the armory! Have our horses readied for pursuit!”

As Eloth was rushed into the castle, he got but a glance of the injured and dead that lay scattered upon the tourney field; lamenting that he had been unable to protect them. He could feel in his body the ever increasing distance between Him and his sword as though a skein of yarn was swiftly unwinding and being stretched to the breaking point. With each moment that passed, he could feel his strength sapping.

“Summon my son,” Eloth whispered to the Chamberlain as he was carried past the man’s stricken face into his bedchamber. He was quickly transferred to his bed and his clothing stripped off while the physician made a poultice. The arrow would have to be removed and the wound cleansed, fortunately it had not been poisoned. He felt a small vial placed upon his lips and tasted the bitter flavor of laudanum upon his lips to dull the pain.

Joshua arrived moments later, his young face stricken with worry when he beheld His father. Eloth’s ashen face and fevered eyes frightened him as nothing ever had before. He clutched his father’s hand while the physician worked feverishly, feeling helpless.

Eloth soon drifted into a twilight sleep; his mind wandering in search of memories that would give him the clues behind Lucius’ betrayal and the day’s carnage. He struggled to recall his long years of service; first as his squire-at-arms then later as his Steward.

Distant memories and images of past events long forgotten or overlooked at the time played behind his closed eyelids: *Lucius as a young knight competing in the tourneys and losing consistently to Penloth; his consuming interest in the Lady Gabriele only to watch her give her heart to his rival then suddenly die of a mysterious illness. Lucius abandoning his knightly commission in favor of serving instead in an administrative capacity as Eloth’s Steward.* He felt a sharp jolt of pain when the arrow was yanked from his body.

Eloth’s eyes flew open and he almost reared out of his bed. Joshua tightened his grip on his father’s arm; his eyes wide with alarm. The physician gently pressed Eloth back down. He lay back and that was when he saw the counterfeit sword lying next to him; his heart filling with dark foreboding. He never would have been injured had he borne the real Ephlal. It could be of no real use to Lucius or to anyone else for that matter but its loss would have a profound effect upon his kingdom as well as him personally; the ramifications of which had never been known before. The ancient runes etched into the flat of the real Ephlal proclaimed a solemn warning to any that desired to use its power for their own selfish gain.

"Beware! I am Ephlal, Sword of Kings! Unsheathe me only in dire need! I serve not the self-seeking ambition of men, nor suffer the stain of innocent blood upon my blade. I am the Guardian of the Peace and Preserver of Life. None save He to

whom I am bestowed and His appointed heirs may handle my blade lest I smite them with death!"

Eloth closed his eyes again as his shoulder was packed with poultice and clean wrappings, fresh memories cascading in one after another. How they begun discovering discrepancies in Lucius' accounting of the kingdom's output in food, timber, service, and taxes which Eloth had attributed to lack of attention to detail as well as the many personal belongings that had somehow found their way into his chambers *quite by accident*. All had been returned immediately to him but Lucius' once pleasant demeanor turned sullen as had a number of those within his circle of influence. When they openly began exhibiting surly attitudes towards others in his court Eloth had decided that enough was enough. With sincere regret, he had released Lucius from his duties, gifted him with a baronet and a castle on a parcel of land in token of his past years of faithful service and allowed him to take those with him whom he chose as his vassals; effectively inviting him to leave.

Lucius had accepted the endowment in stony silence without a word of gratitude. The following week he packed his possessions, removed his men and took occupancy within Ravenhurst Keep in North Umberland with all the sulkiness of a spoiled child denied the singular toy he most desires. He answered none of the missives Eloth sent to him throughout the years and received no visitors.

There had been no word from him until a fortnight ago when his messenger and personal valet had arrived requesting that they be housed in Lucius' old chambers in order to prepare it for his imminent visit. Eloth had greeted the news with great joy and given them every courtesy, even down to the particular linens and soap he knew Lucius favored. Yet their behavior had been peculiar from the first for they refused to join his household at meat and had kept to themselves until early this morning when the surprise attack had been launched and his sword stolen.

Eloth returned to the present and looked upon his son's face; it was etched with worry. He cupped his hand upon Joshua's cheek to comfort him.

"The time has come, my son; time for thee to take thy first steps into manhood; the kingdom needs thee..."

He tasted again laudanum sliding down his throat and fell into a deep sleep without dreams.

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Finrod strode into the castle armory, muttering curses under his breath.

"Finrod, have I heard the rumors aright?" bellowed Penloth the moment he appeared, frightening his squire who was fastening his armor on. "Is it of a truth that Eloth wants Lucius delivered to him *'alive and unharmed'*?"

"You heard correctly," Finrod growled, lifting his arms high so his squire could suit him up. This was greeted with exclamations of disbelief followed by a volley of inquiries from the other knights.

"Leave me in peace! Plague me not with questions!" Finrod bellowed, sorely displeased with his orders. The seraph exchanged glances amongst themselves then fell silent. Better to leave him alone than to push the issue, unless one was spoiling for a fight. Their armor fastened on, the knights hurried to the stables to find their horses waiting for them; already saddled and bridled.

"Mount up!" Finrod commanded, cinching in his sword belt. He swung up into the saddle of his Destrier, waiting impatiently for the others to follow suit, then spurred his horse. The knights thundered out of the gates, their hearts burning with fury.

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Lucius tore through the countryside as though the very hounds of hell were on his heels for so would they be in the form of the King's knights. His steed was covered in foaming lather, but he refused the poor beast even the slightest rest. He needed distance between himself and Eloth's knights or there would be no escape for him. If he could get enough of a head start, he might evade capture by fleeing into the wilderness or taking ship out of a distant seaport before word got out. But first he needed provisions and the gold he had been carefully hoarding. By late morning, his horse was stumbling with exhaustion, but it managed to reach the outer wall of his Keep before refusing to go any further. Lucius leapt from the saddle summoning all within earshot to attend him swiftly! Servants came running and were instantly alarmed at the look of naked panic in his face.

"You!" Lucius barked, pointing at his steward. "Fetch me wayfarer's food and water skins enough for a fortnight! You!" he pointed to the Ulster. "I want a fresh horse immediately! Have him saddled and ready to ride in ten minutes! The rest of you, prepare for battle! Gather thy arms and go forth! The seraph are coming!"

Exclamations of alarm issued from the ranks of his young squires. The seraph were Eloth's fighting elite and the model to which Lucius had constantly held them up to in sorry comparison. *Did he really expect squires-in-training capable of defeating a company of battle-hardened knights?*

"What became of those who sallied forth this morning?" asked a young squire. "Were you not victorious?"

"Is his terror not answer enough for you?" answered the Ulster angrily. "Our Master returned alone." He turned to Lucius. "Do you truly expect us to triumph where thy warriors could not? Are we not merely fool's bait to buy thee time for thy escape?"

Lucius stared at him, filled with indignant wrath at the shrewd guess. He raised his riding crop and whipped the man across the face with a curse. "Speak not so to me when the seraph are already riding here with their swords drawn!" he hissed. "Think ye they will stop to ascertain the particular guilt of thee in these matters before disemboweling the lot of you?" He rounded on his squires. "All of you! Borgreth, Golbreth, Ranulf! Go! If you've not the stomach to save thine own skins then by all means linger here and await certain doom!"

This veiled threat had the desired effect. With dark looks of resentment in his direction, they gathered up what few weapons they could find and ran out on foot, hoping the advantage of a surprise ambush would turn the tide in their favor. Little more than a half hour's walk from the Keep, where the foliage was thick and path twisted, they took up offensive positions, concealing themselves in the forks of trees, behind rocks, and upon overhanging hillocks. With shaking hands they hurriedly strung and drew their crossbows and longbows taut, nocking poisoned arrows into place and fully expecting to see the scarlet plumes of the seraph appearing over the rise at any moment. With nervous sweat flowing down their bodies they waited, faces twitching and muscles straining. Five minutes passed then ten. Their aching muscles quivering with pain and exhaustion, they began to lower their weapons in bewilderment.

Fifteen minutes passed...*surely Eloth's knights would have sped after their master as soon as they could?* Twenty minutes. There wasn't even so much as a dust cloud upon the horizon to mark their coming.

Forty-five minutes...and still they waited. After a full two hours their grumbles filled the air. Lucius had made out as if the seraph were already in hot pursuit of him yet here they sat twiddling their thumbs! Maintaining vigilance was impossible! The noon sun was beating down upon them and there was no breeze to dry their nervous sweat. Another excruciating hour passed without event. *Where on earth were they?* A number of them had fallen asleep and were snoring loudly. Those who remained awake found their limbs growing stiffer and their wits duller by the moment with nothing to do but to sit perfectly still in absolute silence. To add to their discomfort, they had left without provisions. There was but one skin of water to share between fifty and no food! Borgreth squinted his eyes against the brilliant afternoon sun wondering if Lucius had even told him the truth...perhaps things really had gone well in Ellioth and this was his deranged idea of a joke. When the distant thudding of approaching hoof beats was first perceived, it barely registered on their conscience, so lethargic had they become. When the ground began to tremble beneath them, it was with stiff limbs that they struggled to arise.

"Up ye lousy sluggards and look lively!" Golbreth yelled, struggling to find his weapons. Upon the horizon, silhouetted against the sun, the outriders of Ellioth crested the hill, their standards snapping smartly in their wake.

"*Bows at the ready! Bows at the ready!*" he hissed in panic, struggling to nock his crossbow. Fear coursed through their veins while their stiffened fingers endeavored to reload their bows in time to take aim. Seconds later, the knights thundered under the very trees in which they were hidden...

"*Now!*" Sir Finrod cried aloud, wheeling his horse about and jumping the tall hedge that bordered the road. Lucius' squires gaped in astonishment, stupidly watching the seraph split off into a dozen different directions, wheeling and checking with such speed that it was impossible to target them. The knights eluded the poorly shot arrows as if they were bodiless phantoms! The shots went wide, fell harmlessly to the ground or stuck fast into the boles of trees. In contrast, the seraph's arrows answered with deadly accuracy, picking off each assailant as though he were a stationary target in a tourney match. Sir Finrod laughed aloud at their foolishness for he had anticipated just such an ambush and planned accordingly. Four of his knights had ridden forth to block the escape routes from Lucius' keep, then the rest of them had ridden hard to just where he expected Lucius to lay an ambush then had made his men to dismount and take a rest. They took their ease, and ate and watered their steeds while Sir Eric went forth to spy out the road ahead. He returned later with the report that a trap was indeed waiting for them. With a wicked grin, Finrod gave orders for two of their number to remain on guard in turns while the others rested, guaranteeing a long, boring wait for Lucius' underlings! He would wait just long enough for their wits to dull with boredom and then attack after a satisfying rest. Next Sir Penloth was sent forth, returning later to report that their would-be assailants were snoring loud enough to wake the dead. They had immediately mounted up and ridden hard, allowing the thunder of their approach to serve as a merciful notice to the sleepers of their imminent peril.

"Up there!" shouted Sir Penloth, pointing to a young squire in the fork of a spruce tree. Sir Eric, whose double crossbow was already loaded, sent a black hafted arrow whizzing into his unprotected breast with a curse, furious at having to shoot mere children. The lad fell with a cry of anguish to the grass, clutching at the arrow protruding from his breast in a welter of pain. Lucius' squires sent an answering volley of arrows back at them. Sir Penloth heard the whine of one as it sped past his head, narrowly taking off his right ear. He wheeled about, cursing at himself to keep moving. An inch closer and he would have been dead; armor or no for crossbows could pierce even the heaviest steel plating. Fortunately, only a small number were armed with

such weapons and they had little skill. The poor lads were so panicked most of their shots were wasted. It wasn't long before they ran out of arrows and unable to replenish their supply, were forced to drop to the ground and engage the seraph in hand-to-hand combat. Finrod didn't know whether to laugh in derision or weep with anger at their folly. They were barely out of puberty and thus no match against the expertise, strength, and skill of his men!

"Lay down thy arms!" he shouted, beating a young boy before him onto his knees. "Lay down thy arms! For pity's sake, lad, don't make me slay you!" But the boy fought as if he had gone mad; tears of pain and fear running down his youthful cheeks. Finally it was over; his body lay motionless, beaten to the ground. Overcome with revulsion, Finrod paused to dash angry tears and sweat from his stinging eyes, realizing his fatal error too late. He heard the faint twang of a bowstring and felt an impact against his chest that sent him stumbling backwards. He looked down in wide-eyed disbelief at the feathered haft protruding from his breastplate and opened his mouth to cry out.

"*Finrod!*" bellowed Penloth, galloping to him. Finrod looked toward him, dazed, then fell forward, dead before his body even hit the ground. The arrow was poisoned.

Penloth leapt from the saddle and went to his captain, turning him over and searching in vain for a pulse. Finrod's eyes were open but fixed and unseeing. Penloth sagged in grief, heedless of his imminent danger at the hands of the same archer, who, encouraged by his recent success, had taken aim again, this time upon him. He drew back upon on the crossbow, aiming for Penloth' unprotected neck.

"Penloth! *Move!*" hollered Sir Matthew, leaning forward in his saddle and snatching him away just as the arrow pierced the ground where he had been only a moment before. Penloth hung on till he was out of harm's way then slid off, landing on his feet.

"Enough of this! Let us put an end to this miserable battle!" he grunted.

"Aye, I've no more stomach for it either!" Matthew agreed, swinging his bay about.

Penloth unsheathed his sword. "*seraph to me!*" he cried.

The seraph roared in response and pressed the attack, their patience gone. They stood in their stirrups and physically hauled the squires down from the trees, hacking at them until they were too exhausted or wounded to oppose them any longer.

"Mercy!" cried Borgreth, throwing down his weapons. His companions gaped at him in shock then swiftly followed suit, throwing their bows and swords into a pile before Penloth's feet. With the last weapon flung upon the ground, they fell onto their knees, hands upon their heads in defeat.

"*About bloody time!*" Sir Eric snarled, smacking Ranulf upside the head in anger. "Five minutes more and you would all have been carrion fodder!"

Penloth wiped his sweaty brow, relieved they had given up before his men had been forced to slaughter them all. He raked his eyes over the "field of battle," in disgust. Flies were already gathering about the dead in sickening clouds. It was a virtual repeat of the morning's bloodbath! He felt like retching his guts out.

"Collect their weapons and truss them up," he wearily directed his men, returning to where Finrod's body lay. He knelt by the still form, touched his cheek in a silent gesture of farewell then shrouded him in his own cape to keep the insects off. Sir Bors stacked and tied the abandoned weaponry together while the others tied up the captives. They lay spent and docile as lambs on their sides, hands lashed behind their backs and drawn down to their ankles.

"No sense marching them back to Lucius' Keep since they will only slow us down," Sir Bors said, straightening from his task. "We can retrieve them on the return trip, but Finrod we must send back to Ellioth for an honorable burial."

Penloth nodded in agreement, noting how the vultures were already circling overhead, waiting for their grisly feast. "Sir Bors, bear our captain back to Ellioth," he said, lifting the body of his friend and gently laying him belly down over the knight's horse. "Falstaff, you shall keep watch over the rabble and keep the vultures away until we return."

"Yes, Captain," responded Bors and Falstaff, momentarily startling Penloth. With great heaviness of heart, he suddenly realized that he had been promoted into Finrod's position because of his death. It brought him no joy for Finrod had been like an elder brother to him. Dashing aside his tears, he grumbled to his men: "Refill thy quivers with Lucius' arrows and if he offers us further argument he shall have a taste of his own venom!"

"Lucius is long gone by now!" smirked Golbreth, lifting his head with difficulty to gloat at the knights. "He took off hours ago!"

Penloth turned back to stare at him as if the information were of little concern. "Off to the seaports in disguise is he?" he replied, eyebrow arching. Golbreth gaped in response. Penloth continued. "The King has dispatched knights to intercept him at all seaports and the roads there are under surveillance even now. Lucius will have to prove cleverer than a fox if he expects to elude Eloth's nets!"

After carefully collecting all the arrows they could find, the seraph remounted and galloped the remaining distance to Lucius' Keep without further incident. For all intents and purposes, it looked as if it had been completely abandoned. Penloth had his crossbow at the ready and unsheathed his sword, wanting to be fully prepared should there be a second ambush waiting for them. They scanned every window and doorway for signs of life or hidden archers. If it took them a lifetime, he would hunt Lucius down and nail his foul hide to the nearest proclamation post with the word "*TRAITOR*" branded upon it! They rounded the hedge and found the gates gaping wide open and livestock wandering freely. Suddenly a cloaked figure on horseback shot past them at breakneck speed, making a beeline for the forest.

"*It's him!*" shouted Sir Eric, pointing. The figure on horseback gave a swift look behind him then spurred his horse faster.

"Don't allow him to reach those trees!" cried Penloth, unable to believe their good fortune. They galloped like the wind after Lucius' fleeing figure.

Lucius crouched low over his saddle in terror as the wind whistled through his streaming black hair. There having been no other horse available, he had been forced to wait around for hours to give his horse adequate rest, hoping the ambush would have made flight unnecessary. But when he had spied the seraph approaching, he fled rested horse or no. Though they were only a furlong behind, they were swiftly overtaking him. His horse was already exhausted and refusing to go above a canter. He withdrew the crop and flogged its rear quarters harder, causing its flesh to run red with blood, but the stubborn animal only slowed its pace more.

"Faster, damn you, faster!" he screamed. But the seraph were swifter and what was more, they had split off into two companies, approaching him from behind like the point of an inverted arrow, cutting off his escape. The thunder of their hooves pounded loudly in his ears, but he dared not look behind a second time to see how close. A large gray stallion suddenly reared before him and Lucius found himself flung bodily onto the ground. He landed hard with Penloth on top. The air was forcefully expelled from his lungs as the knight's heavy body and armor were brought fully to bear upon his chest.

"*The horse! Grab his horse!*" shouted Penloth as the frenzied animal neighed and danced about them in panic. Sir Eric jumped down and grabbed the halter of the spooked animal, bodily pushing it away as Penloth grappled with Lucius upon the ground. Penloth twisted about quick as a cat, dug his right knee firmly into the small of Lucius' back and yanked his head back by his hair, instantly terminating his struggles. Before Lucius could blink an eye, Penloth had him hopelessly hog-tied. He was roughly hauled back onto his feet by the front of his tunic.

"Impudent knave!" he snarled at Penloth. "Thou shalt rue this mishandling of me!"

Penloth growled. "Where is the King's sword?"

To his surprise Lucius actually smiled at him. "I know not," he replied.

"You're the father of lies,"ⁱⁱⁱ Penloth growled, grabbing a handful of his tunic at the throat and drawing him close. "Tell me now and I may let you keep all of your fingers."

Lucius looked his arch-enemy right in the eyes. "I know not where Ephlal is and that is the truth," he hissed.

Penloth stared intently at him; studying him carefully. He had known the miscreant since they were very young and could tell when he was lying...however, on this one rare occasion, he could tell that Lucius was speaking the truth.

"Search the Keep from top to bottom," he gritted out to his men. Although he believed Lucius was telling the truth, he did not want to return to Ellioth without being able to tell the King they had thoroughly searched for it. He tossed the end of Lucius' lead to Sir Eric. "Hog tie him."

"Yes, Captain," replied Eric, pushing the struggling Lucius onto the ground.

Penloth allowed himself the momentary luxury of a relieved exhale, glad to be rid of the Lucius' malevolent presence for at least a brief moment. He felt as though he had just gone a few rounds with a twisting, spitting serpent. *Would that Eloth had not ordered him returned alive! Of all the blood let upon the sod that day, Lucius' should had been amongst it. No doubt the rogue probably considered this display of mercy a sign of weakness and would do everything in his power to ensure them a miserable return to Ellioth.*

With the Baron safely indisposed of, they split up and took the rest of the day and evening searching for the King's sword. It was nowhere to be found. With grim hearts they bedded down for the night. They were up at the crack of dawn the next morning and resumed their search in the surrounding village to no avail. They even ordered the villagers to search as well but they found nothing.

Penloth didn't understand how Ephlal, the most well known weapon in the entire kingdom could have just vanished into thin air; Lucius simply hadn't had the time to hide it so completely.

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It wasn't until late in the afternoon that they prepared to make their return trip to Ellioth; their hearts leaden at the thought of having to tell their king of their failure to recover his sword and fearful of what it might portend. After reprovisioning themselves from Lucius' storerooms, the knights were ready for the turn trip. Penloth exited the Keep to find his comrades already mounted and waiting patiently for him. Tethered to his saddle horn stood the Baron, his black eyes glaring hot daggers of naked hatred at him. He had been given nothing to eat or drink since his capture.

Averting his gaze, Penloth mounted, hackles rising on the back of his neck. They were soon off with the Baron and the reminder of his household in tow. Though Penloth refused to confirm his suspicions by turning around, he could feel Lucius' eyes upon him throughout the

remainder of the day. Despite his efforts to appear unconcerned, he grew more unnerved by the hour and flinched at every abrupt sound. At one point he almost fired off his crossbow at a swooping raven. The seraph exchanged glances amongst themselves but pretended they didn't notice out of sheer respect. They wondered when Penloth would finally reach the end of his legendary short temper and take matters into his own hands.

A twig snapped under his horse, making him jump in surprise. Penloth balled his hands into fists of rage and swore under his breath for the hundredth time.

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Night was nearly upon them when they finally reached the site of the failed ambush. The knights wearily dismounted and made a bivouac to rest for the night. After making sure Lucius' bonds and those of his men were secure, they kindled a small fire and ate a simple meal of fresh game, wayfarer's bread, cheese, and dried fruit. After a few moments' conversation, they wrapped themselves in their cloaks and bedded down with Sir Eric and Matthew taking the first watch. Night settled upon the earth, the stars came out, and the crickets began their serenade.

But Penloth could not sleep despite his fatigue. Lucius lay not more than fifteen arms length away, linked to him by the end of a rope. He didn't need to open his eyes to know that the Baron was still boring invisible holes into his skull with his beady, black eyes.

Damn him; does the viper never sleep?

With a muttered curse, Penloth turned his back on him, too obstinate and proud to get up and move out of Lucius' range of sight. The night dragged on while he continued to lie upon the cold, hard ground in mounting frustration, listening enviously to his comrades snore loudly in deep contentment. He watched the moon rise high into the night sky and was still awake when she began her slow descent, growing more desperate by the minute for the blissful forgetfulness of sleep.

"*Hooo Hoo Hoo Hoo!*" cried a great horned owl somewhere nearby. Penloth bolted upright to find Lucius smirking at him.

That was bloody it!

He flung off his blanket with a snarl, sprang to his feet and marched over to where the baron lay on the grass, his sword already out of its sheath. The sentries came running up to see what was going on, hoping their Captain was not going to disobey orders and dismember the baron (much as they would have enjoyed it personally). Penloth stood with his arms at his sides, his sword out but lowered, contemplating how much liberty he could take in dealing with the baron without violating his Lord's command. He racked his brain for a moment, chewing on his mustache in frustration when sudden inspiration struck him.

He pointed at the sullen baron with his sword.

"String him up!" he ordered watching for Lucius' reaction upon hearing the rest: "*...by his ankles, upside down on yon tree limb! We'll see if he'll be so bloody well inclined to stare with his innards in his throat!*" Satisfied with his harmless but effective vengeance, Penloth marched back to his spot and lay back down, eventually falling asleep despite the baron's caterwauling. He awoke feeling very pleased with himself the next morning and ate his meal, totally unconcerned by Lucius' curses as his legs slowly and very painfully regained their circulation after he was lowered onto the ground.

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The return to Ellioth the next day was much slower than he would have liked as they were now obliged to reduce their gait to accommodate that of their prisoners who were forced to walk. Penloth rode in the rear, growing more and more furious by the moment; his patience and

good humor again dissipated by Lucius' unrelenting glare of hatred. He glanced back just in time to catch him averting his eyes before he could be seen, fearful of what Penloth might do to him next, but it was too late. Penloth had reached his limit! He stood in his stirrups and called an immediate halt. The other knights watched in silent fascination as he dismounted, wondering what he would do next and quietly placing wagers amongst themselves.

Penloth glared at the baron in black frustration. The snake deserved death thrice over for his crimes and yet there he stood, arrogant as a peacock, insolently defying him to try something, knowing he couldn't harm him! Penloth was stymied; what could he possibly do that would teach the jackal a good lesson and yet not disobey his orders? At that moment, his horse swished its tail right into the Baron's unappreciative face. Lucius stepped back with an oath, raising his bound hands to fend off a second swipe.

Penloth grinned, instantly struck with inspiration. "Since thou art so determined to stare at something, my good baron, then I suggest you feast yer eyes upon this!" With swift yanks, he shortened the length of Lucius' leash until his face was mere inches from the rear end of his horse with orders that his hands be tied behind his back. Lucius glared at him in outraged disbelief, instantly comprehending the humiliation Penloth had planned for him.

Every time the bloody animal relieved itself of gas and waste, he would be the first to know about it! Penloth grinned at him with supreme self-satisfaction and turned about, not giving Lucius the opportunity to even think of a good comeback! Penloth's only regret was that he had not thought of it earlier.

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If their pace had been sluggish before it now slowed down to a snail's crawl for Penloth was determined to allow his horse to gorge itself and drink at will (which was practically every few paces) to insure that Lucius' return to Ellioth would be a memorable one.

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When the seraph finally reached the village outskirts two days later, Lucius was completely befouled and apoplectic with suppressed rage. They were greeted by people who had lined up on either side of the road to watch their procession, and after taking one look (or whiff) of Lucius, burst into derisive laughter. Those who didn't laugh pelted him and his men with whatever was close at hand...mostly rotted vegetables.

"Bloody traitors!"

"Murderers!"

"Yer not fit to clean Eloth's boots!"

They rode up the hill and finally through the portcullis, drawing abreast of the tourney field which quickly emptied of squires who ran forward to watch. One young man plucked an extremely ripe tomato off the top of a nearby basket and bulls-eyed it smack into Lucius' face. It exploded upon impact, splattering into his black hair and beard, and running down his neck onto his front vesture. There was a burst of appreciative laughter from the other onlookers which died the instant Lucius directed his murderous glare upon them.

"Penlorian!" snapped Sir Penloth, glaring at his brother. "That tomato wasn't yours to throw! Reimburse that farmer at once for his loss!"

The crowd erupted into gales of laughter, infuriating Lucius all the more.

Penlorian pointed to the farmer in his own defense. "He asked me to throw it in the first place!" he protested.

"Oh, never mind, then!" replied Penloth with a snort of laughter.

Lucius ground his teeth and screamed in rage.

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Lucius and the other prisoners soon arrived before the castle doors. Penloth and his men dismounted while above them curious courtiers peered over numerous balconies and out of windows to watch. Stable boys took charge of their horses while the castle guards removed the prisoners for judgment. When they came to take custody of the Baron, Penloth waved them off, wrapping Lucius' leash tightly about his fist.

"Not this snake," he said, rubbing his reddened, watery eyes and runny nose. "I wouldn't wish this stench on my worst en...uh...I'll just take him myself."

"Is something amiss, Sir Penloth?" inquired a young lad before the doors to the Great Hall. Penloth looked down to find Eloth's son, the crown Prince, Joshua, looking up at him.

"Aye, milord," he replied with a meaningful wince. "I thought to teach the wretch a lesson but ended up riding downwind of him for the better part of a bloody hot day!"

"Oh," replied Joshua, observing the baron's filthy and extremely pungent clothing. Lucius lunged forward at him, snarling like a mad animal as if to rend him to pieces. Joshua fell back in astonishment, his eyes round with surprise at the force of his hatred. Their former steward had never behaved so to him before. Penloth choked back hard on his rope collar, forcing him to his knees with the point of his sword.

"*Down, knave!*" he snarled as though the Baron were an errant hound. "Before the sun sets on this day I'll see thee properly trounced, orders or no! Excuse me, milord, but I must see this criminal to his trial!" He turned about, dragging the struggling baron forcibly behind him into the hall.

"I'll not forget this," Lucius choked out in a dangerous voice. "You'll live to regret this!"

Penloth rounded on him menacingly, all patience evaporated. "One more word from you, Lucius, and orders be hanged; I'll deliver thee to Eloth *without* thy forked tongue in thy head! Is that clear?"

Lucius favored him with a venomous look, but gave no further argument for the rope had been pulled too tautly about his windpipe. Penloth turned again, hauling him up upon his feet and forcefully thrusting him through the double doors into the Hall of Judgment.

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After leaving him in the care of the court guards, he went in search of the King. He found Eloth in the antechamber with his physician at his side. His face was drawn with pain, pale and had a sheen of cold sweat. The sight made Penloth's blood run cold.

"Milord," he began, bowing briefly. "We have captured Lucius and his men--"

"What news of Ephlal?" interrupted Eloth, his eyes earnest.

Penloth shook his head with profound regret, feeling like a failure. "We made a thorough search but found nothing but these..." He held out his hands and in them were partially crafted hilts and blades, all made to resemble Eloth's sword. "We found them in the smithy...apparently bad copies that were thrown aside."

Eloth's face, if possible, became even grimmer than before. "I must render judgment first and then we shall meet in council to decide our next course of action. I'll leave thee to Lucius, my good Captain." He sat down for a brief moment, looking utterly exhausted.

It was all Penloth could do not to weep at the sight of his King so enfeebled. He returned to the great hall and found his men.

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An enormous mob had already amassed within; pushing and showing each other to find a place from which to view the trial. The moment they entered the chamber the court began tittering and making snide remarks about Lucius' rank "aroma."

One by one he sought out each whisperer and glared at them with his baleful eyes until they shut up. The other prisoners were brought in and made to stand behind Lucius to await judgment. Some had to be carried out, others hobbled in leaning on canes, crutches or carried in upon litters. All had been wounded in some fashion or other but had been tended to mercifully.

The court heralds blew on their trumpets, signaling the arrival of the King. Eloth entered the hall and a hush descended as they looked upon him. For the first time in their living memory, he appeared older, weary and in obvious pain. His arm was wrapped in a sling and he had to walk with the assistance of his Chamberlain and physician. His face was drawn and gray and he moved slowly. A murmur of alarm began to ripple amongst the assembled onlookers as one by one they noticed that he did not bear Ephlial as he had ever done.

Joshua drew close to his father's side and laid his hand upon his injured arm, fear in his eyes. Eloth patted his hand but it did little to comfort him.

The Chamberlain pounded his staff for silence. Eloth lifted his face and stared at his former Steward, his gray eyes stern beyond endurance.

The Court Chamberlain stood forth amidst a brief fanfare and read the charges aloud from a scroll.

"Baron Lucius of Northumberland, thou art accused of attempted assassination, high treason, and rebellion against the Crown. For each of these crimes, death by fire is the penalty-

A loud cheer erupted from the crowd in unanimous approval. The Chamberlain held up his hand for silence, scowling.

"Dost thou have anything to say in thy defense before thy judgment is pronounced by the King?"

Lucius' mouth twisted into an ugly sneer. "I recognize not the authority of this court!" he spat, straining against his bonds. All in the court gasped angrily at his sheer effrontery, hoping Eloth would condemn him to a slow, painful, and torturous death.

The Chamberlain glanced at the King for a brief moment, took a deep breath and with a frown of disapproval, continued.

"Despite the gravity of thy transgressions and unrepentant conduct, the King has waived the penalty of death in the hope you shall find repentance. Instead of death by fire, upon thee and thy fellow outlaws is laid eternal banishment from this Kingdom..."

The roar of the astonished crowd in response immediately cut him off and the Chamberlain was forced to pound his staff again for silence.

Lucius was *livid*! Eloth's show of mercy was the final humiliation! Better to die cursing him in flames than to accept clemency like a whipped cur!

"I want none of thy stinking mercy!" he shouted, lunging forward. Sir Eric could barely hold onto him and required the aid of four other knights to keep the baron subdued. Lucius' face was beet red with fury, spit flying as he flailed about.

"I would prefer the dignity of the flames to thy mercy!" He screamed. He rounded on the agitated crowd, his black eyes blazing. *"What is Eloth but a benevolent dictator and the kingdom of Ellioth the dwelling of sheep?"*

"T'was I who governed this miserable kingdom for years without number! 'T'was I who labored like a lap dog in his service whilst he sat upon his golden throne!" Lucius whirled back, directing his invectives at Eloth's impassive face.

"Never more shall I bow my knee in mindless submission to Him I do not own as King! I shall be my own master! I will raise mine own throne upon the rubble of Ellioth and it shall be my throne which ascends above the heights of the clouds! Do you hear me, Eloth? Do you hear me?!"^{iv}To punctuate his utter contempt for his former lord, Lucius twisted his mouth and spat upon the marble dais before Eloth's feet.

A hush descended upon the Hall; all eyes fastened fearfully upon Eloth as he rose with difficulty to his feet. He came down the dais towards Lucius and despite the fact that he no longer had his sword and was injured, Lucius blanched in terror; his knees buckling beneath him; all bravado and arrogance gone. Eloth stopped before him, his gray eyes blazing. Lucius' entire body shook with uncontrollable fear and his bowels were loosed.

"Lucius of Northumberland," Eloth thundered in a terrible voice. "Thou art stripped of thy title, property, citizenship, and lands and art forever banished from Ellioth and My presence. Upon the morrow, thou shalt be put upon *The Dark Angel* with thy fellow traitors, towed out to sea and set adrift. Henceforth, thy name shall be remembered as a curse and byword and thy name blotted from the annals of Ellioth!"

Bile rose in Lucius' throat as his anger rekindled. His hands balled into fists of helpless rage. *"I care not for thy judgments! I swear to thee this oath, Eloth: Thou shalt rue this day in great bitterness and mourn that Thou didst not destroy me when it lay within Thy power!"*

Eloth regarded his former steward and once most trusted servant with an impassive face, but in his gray eyes was an unfathomable pain that only Lucius could behold.

"I know," was Eloth's silent reply.

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The following morning a council was called and it was decided that a search of the entire realm for Ephlal would have to be mounted immediately. The longer it was gone, the greater the peril both to the King personally as well as the kingdom. Emissaries were sent out to the four corners of the land with orders to not return until they had retrieved the sword. Each of them bore a Royal Warrant bearing Eloth's seal, requesting shelter, food, protection and assistance be provided to each during their quest to find the sword along with carrier pigeons, a small sack of gold coins and wayfarer's food.

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The same afternoon at high tide, *The Dark Angel* was towed out to sea by Eloth's flagship, *The Morning Star*. The prison ship had been stripped of its rudder, anchor, and navigation instruments, leaving its doomed passengers to the whim of the wind and the currents. The captives watched diminishing Ellioth with numbed expressions as they were towed farther and farther out to sea, leaving many aboard *The Morning Star* to wonder how far they would travel before it was set adrift. When the sun began to dip below the horizon, and after sight of land had long since vanished, Eloth leaned down to cut the tow line himself.

"No!" screamed Lucius, hurling himself upon the railing. *The Morning Star* swiftly tacked and came about, changing course back for Ellioth leaving them powerless to follow. He raised his arm over his head and shook his fist at the departing ship in rage.

"You'll not be rid of me so easily, Eloth!" he screamed, his voice carrying well across the water. *"Our paths shall cross again and when they do, thou shalt pay heavily in innocent blood!"*

Eloth turned his back upon *The Dark Angel*, his heart leaden. "Oh, Lucius, Lucius..." he murmured, "...how art thou fallen..."^v

He turned away as did the rest of the crew and did not notice the small sailboat that met the Dark Angel upon the edge of the horizon nor the lone figure that was assisted onboard before it disappeared from site.

- i Ephlal is “judgment” in Hebrew
- ii Hebrews 4:12
- iii John 8:44
- iv Isaiah 14:12-15
- v Isaiah 14:12