

Ch 8: A Secret Journey

After the brave company left the square of Cathadon, Grinlowe and Radu set to their work. There was a good day ahead of them and it would be foolish to waste it. So, they gathered their men from Tar Caldrieth and gave them all their orders and everyone went swiftly to their tasks; rebuilding walls, gathering armaments, and sending word out to their neighboring nations of Talirach and Ikthandia. Busily they made ready for war again. While Ellachan oversaw the soldiers, Radu and Grinlowe made certain that the citizens of Cathadon were evacuated to Angard before any fighting began. They called them all into the center of the city and took a roster of each family, so no one would be left behind. They took little with them; just enough personal items as they would need for the next few weeks, if even that long, and food and shelter would be in plenty for them at Angard.

The people of Cathadon lined up and were sent into the charge of Captain Bilworth who, along with an escort of soldiers, would lead the people to the Iron Citadel. If Cathadon fell in the battle to come, at least Blackthorn Keep would protect them until help arrived to fight off the onslaught. In a world without surety, fear spread quickly and the people had to be made as safe and comfortable as possible while they waited for the end; the final hour of battle which would decide the doom of Alinor. It was a hard time, but their spirits were kept high by the good soldiers who continued to show strength and perseverance.

Many drove, some rode upon horses; but most walked wishing to savor the brilliance of the world outside the walls of Cathadon, where they had been kept in fear and darkness for a long time. This exodus continued through the night and into the next day. When the sun was nearing noon as the many civilians left the city far behind them, one entered through the wide gates, riding upon a fine-coated brown horse. The rider's face was hidden beneath the shadow of a deep emerald cloak which shimmered in the daylight. Everyone who saw this strange traveler was filled with wonder at the sight of him. Slowly he strode into the city and was noticed by all, but stopped by none; until he reached the square of Tar Caldrieth and the voice of Radu shouted out to him. Radu stood before the hooded face of the rider and held his hand up. "I'm sorry, but we're evacuating the city and no civilians are allowed here. We're sending everyone to..."

Before he could finish, the rider interjected, inquiring, "Have they left yet?"

"Has who left?"

"The ones who were going to the castle. Did they leave?"

"Yes, this morning but why..." Again he was cut short, this time not by words but by what he saw. The rider drew back the green hood and behold; it was a young girl with long golden hair; Sarah Stanton. She freed her sunshine locks from the cowl and looked deeply into Radu's eyes.

"I have to go to them."

"No," he said suddenly, realizing the danger the governor's daughter would be in. "Are you insane?"

“If you’re concerned because I’m too young, then perhaps you should have stopped Alex and Jason from going. If you’re concerned because I’m a girl... well I appreciate the sympathy but I can take care of myself.” Now Radu could see that she wore a fine bow and a quiver of arrows over her shoulder. The bow was carved of smooth red cedar and was etched with silver and gold. The quiver she wore was leather, the shade of deep mahogany, and it held many green-feathered arrows. He frowned when he saw this, still feeling worry in his heart. However, Grinlowe approached and seeing the green rider, suddenly remembered what Alex and Jason had told him so long ago when they returned from the House of the Binding Root. They told him they had seen a mysterious hooded ranger donned in a green cloak. Now he realized that this young lady was that same cloaked person who dared to venture into the depths of Elmwynd Forest, which took no small amount of courage. Truly Alex and Jason were not two of a kind, for from this girl he also sensed overwhelming strength and courage.

Putting a hand on Radu’s shoulder, he shook his head and said, “Let her go. I know you don’t understand, but I can see that she is not an ordinary young lady, just as the two young men who broke the ranks of Morvael were not ordinary. Let her go, and I assure you, neither of us will regret it.” Reluctantly, Radu looked up at Sarah and slowly nodded in approval.

They led her north to the grassy plains and the cliff edge overlooking the black lake. She gazed out to the northlands and the high-set castle looming in the grey distance, but she showed no fear in her eyes, and proudly dismounted her horse. “I can ferry you across,” Radu said to her. “if you do still want to go.”

“I do.”

He took a deep breath and showed her down to the shore where Baron Deregos’ boat still sat from the day before when the six travelers were brought to the dark isle of Laraweth. But Sarah remained by her horse for a moment and looked into the fair beast’s eyes and stroked its mane, saying, “Don’t worry, Annie. I’ll be back soon.”

“Fear not,” Grinlowe said. “I’ll take good care of her.” He gently stroked the animal’s smooth back and, gripping the colored reins, led her patiently back to the city where she could rest and eat in the stables. Then Sarah followed Radu down the sandy path from the high, grassy knoll and down to the wet coast. He helped her into the boat and sat himself behind the wheel. Jeremy had given him the keys before leaving for Angard with his employer.

Before starting the engine, he looked at Sarah, saying nothing; but she smiled and replied in a soft voice, “Thank you.” He nodded, again saying nothing, but started the engine and drove the boat across the surface of the lake. The air was moist and there was, as always, a malign fog settled about the mere, with the sun making little progress in trying to break the black roof of clouds which sheltered Laraweth from the light. Sarah drew up her hood and brought her cloak around her to stave off the chilling air, and looked solemnly at the pillars of the Bridge of Souls. Word had traveled swiftly to Enedor of the great battle that took place in the northlands and, looking at the ruins of the bridge, she saw firsthand the destruction that Orinost suffered from the advance of Alex, Jason and Felix. She also heard that three more had joined them in their journey, though she did

not know who they were. She did, however, know that seven was a much luckier number than six, and her presence would make a big difference in the outcome of their task. Once before, she had offered to help and Alex counseled her against it. Now journeying to the Dark Castle herself, armed with bow and quiver, fighting off King Vlad's hordes, she knew he could not turn her down again.

With these thoughts in her head she stared at the tall gates of Daeradon. As they approached, a flame of light sprung up from the heart of Orinost and pierced the ring of clouds above the island for but a moment, then with a great gust of wind forced out through the tunnels of the castle, the light dissipated and the rushing gale blew through the Daeradon and rocked the tiny boat. Sarah's hood flew from her head and her golden hair flowed in the misty air, her eyes full of shock, and her cloak flying like a green standard. The boat did not tip but swayed from side to side; and when the wind died down, Radu turned to her and said, "Are you *sure* you want to go in there?"

"More sure than ever," she replied with glassy eyes, full of concern.

"What the hell was that?"

"A sign that they need my help." Her words were desperate but her voice calm. Many things were turning over in Radu's head, but he drove the boat on through the archway beneath the Daeradon. Sarah seemed to sense a difference in the atmosphere as they sailed below the gates. The air seemed less thick than before, as if some great force had suddenly fled the area around the gateway, perhaps carried off by that gust of wind. At any rate, she had no idea what that sudden burst was, but good or evil, she had to go to them as quickly as possible.

After leaving the gates behind them, the shadow of Orinost grew nearer and nearer, blocking out the grey sky and filling the horizon with impenetrable darkness. The small craft approached the dark shore and the engine stopped. Swiftly, she leapt onto the sand and looked up at the towering vision of Orinost. As Radu looked also, he said, "Why do I suddenly get the feeling that I want to abandon my post in the city and go with you?"

"It's because you're concerned and I appreciate it; but I'll be fine. I'm through being scared. It's time for them to be scared of me. General Corvino, if anybody asks about me, my name is Sarah Stanton, and I'm just fine..." With bow in hand, she hurried up the shore to the forest path and disappeared into the trees. Making a final prayer for her, Radu started the boat and sped quickly back to the city. In the meantime, Sarah trekked through the silent woods of Dinorin, hoping to reach her friends quickly. The forest was dark and discouraging, but nothing could drive her now from her purpose. She had spent many weeks at home, worrying for their safety and the safety of her brother. She sat at home unable to do anything. She couldn't sleep; she couldn't eat; she couldn't work; but worst of all, she couldn't go to them. Now all of that was behind her. Danger or not, she had to do something about this.

The sounds of the wood did not scare her from her path and if something seemed like it would emerge to face her or drive her back, she simply flicked the bowstring with a 'twang' and whatever it was would scurry back into the bushes, terrified that the demon hunting archer goddess was in the woods again as she had been in the ages long past. In this way, no creatures of Dinorin dared to cross Sarah's path out of fear that they would

be struck down by the mighty arrows of the moon queen. They mistook her for Lady Entiana Luniel, but their fear was not misplaced, for Sarah's arrows were nearly as deadly. With her hooded cloak about her, she strode up the earthen trail until she came to the severed stump of a great tree, many meters in diameter. Here she sat and set out, upon the surface, some of the food she had brought in her pack, and began to eat. As she ate, she looked around the grove, though in retrospect, it may not have been so wise. She had felt she was making good time and pushed through the woods quickly and unhindered.

But looking now at this dark clearing, a daunting feeling came over her. Suddenly, the trees looked taller and grimmer, and the shadows seemed to grow with each moment. She looked suddenly toward the ground and tried to think of something else. Her eyes fell upon an old stone ring which rested a few meters from the stump; a grimy, dark water hole. Just the sight of it made her more afraid. She wrenched her gaze from the well and looked at her sandwich, trying to fight off the visions of fright. But even as she chewed, and counted how many ingredients were in her dinner, she suddenly found that she was no longer looking at her dinner, but staring at the hole again. It had not been more than a few moments that she had laid her bow on the ground, and already the evil forest was working its magic on her mind. Sorely, she turned her entire body away from the abyssal shaft and resumed her meal. She closed her eyes while she ate and blocked out all the sights of Dinorin. 'C'mon stupid,' she said to herself. 'You've come way too far to get scared now' When her eyelids parted, she was once again facing the hole. She didn't know how she had turned without her knowledge, but was growing weary of this. If it continued for much longer, she feared she really would go insane.

As she stared at the watering hole, voices resonated in her head. '*Why am I here,*' she thought. '*Why did I come? I should've just stayed home. I should've known I was no match for the might of Orinost...*' Her eyes grew wide as she thought this. Suddenly, she stood up and shouted, "No!" Her call of defiance echoed through the trees and birds and bats fled the woods in search of other homes. "Why am I thinking these things," she said quietly. Swiftly she looked from side to side as the voices ran through her mind again. '*What can I do? It's no use. I'm going to die here.*' She tried to shake them out of her head. "No! No I don't mean that!" '*They're going to find me. I know they will. They always do. They're going to find me...*' When finally these dire thoughts ceased, she looked ahead and from the depths of the pit came two black, slimy hands; rising up to grip the stone sides.

A low wail came from the darkness below and the thing began to climb out. '*Here they come. See them? They're going to eat me alive and there'll be nothing left for anyone to find.*' Even as these hopeless notions ran through her mind, she bent down to pick up her cedar bow. '*Don't bother. That won't protect you. Nothing can protect you...*' She ignored the discouraging voices and lifted the bow to her midsection. With a single pluck of the bowstring, a terrified wail sprang up from the pit and the hands disappeared from the edge, sinking back into the dark water. Suddenly, her head was clear and the shadows shrank back into the deep corners of the woods. Carefully, she sat down again and finished her supper in peace.

The sky was growing darker (if that was possible) as Sarah approached the six monoliths and reached the arching pass at the end of the forest. She had moved through the wood a bit quicker than her predecessors and still had the strength to go on, up the winding path around the great hill and purposed to reach the walls of the citadel before resting. But as she stepped to the foot of the trail she spied the movement of many shadows high upon the passes of the mount. Soldiers were moving down the side of the hill, carrying large, dark objects behind them. They advanced rapidly and Sarah saw fit to disappear. She ducked behind a thicket of trees and shrubs and waited. They marched in three groups of thirty units each; each group drawing a black wooden boat upon wheeled biers. Her heart was torn between staying hidden and attacking; but realizing their full numbers, she resolved to stay unseen until they had passed.

The soldiers at the head of each battalion carried long, shadowed pikes and tall shields and behind, they lugged the watercrafts, with swords sheathed at their sides and round bucklers strapped on their backs. They were dead, rotting, grotesque, and hungry for battle; among the highest ranking and most powerful warriors in the armies of the undead. Unbeknownst to either Sarah nor the gruesome soldiers, they were marching against orders. But their leader, an obnoxious skeletal officer, was too proud to care. Lord Golgotha had realized this officer's folly, and that such an attack would only alert Cathadon to the oncoming assaults, and so sent his lieutenant Garrenor to order their return to the castle. Due to the unexpected interference from six intruders, the skeletal soldiers never received this order, and marched now to the possible ruin of their force. However, Cathadon still was not ready to face an attack so soon. At least Sarah thought she could help a little. Running deeper into the thicket, she fired an arrow far through the wood until it found its mark in a tree several yards from the head of the troupes. Hearing the sound of the strike (but not the bowstring), they turned their attention to the area where the arrow hit. While the soldiers all moved forward to investigate, leaving their crafts behind, Sarah crawled stealthily beside the third and final boat, and with a dagger she kept on her belt, she began stabbing through the wood on the side, toward the rear. Quickly, she looked up momentarily to make certain their attention was still diverted. Skeletons are vicious in battle and are not easily dealt with; but among their many strengths their intelligence is less than praiseworthy.

She swiftly stabbed at the wood until she had made a hole all the way through the planks, and continued to hack away until the hole had grown large enough to allow a fair amount of water into the body of the craft. She looked up again and, seeing that her enemies were still busy, she started working on the middle boat. She had nearly broken through the wood when the skeletons had discovered that their investigation was unfounded and were returning to their crafts. Silently and fast as the wind, Sarah slipped off the trail and into the shadows again. The undead warriors returned to their formations and resumed their carrying of the boats, unaware that one was useless and another was weakened. So, twice doomed, the legion of skeletons marched onward toward the shore, led proudly by their ignorant captain.

Sarah almost felt like laughing when she imagined the surprise that would meet them while sailing across the lake. However, her fear for her own people was too strong

to let her to smile for more than a brief moment, and then she solemnly resumed her journey. She steadily climbed the long, winding path up the side of TAMB HENNETH and was growing very weary as the night stretched on. She should have rested before, but didn't feel safe lying down anywhere since leaving the shores of Cathadon. What can one do when sleep seems impossible, and yet carrying on is unbearable? She pushed the question aside and continued lurching up the stony cliffs as the moon passed by overhead, untiring as it sailed through the sky.

Finally, the trees parted and she saw the gates of Orinost, the tall spires of the fortress looming over her ominously. The city was ancient and terrible, surrounded by a great wall and a gate like a huge fanged mouth rested opposite her, covered by a wooden drawbridge. An eerie mist hung in the air and wrapped itself around the mighty turrets of the castle, trying in vain to strangle them. Over the entryway was a large stone sphere, set into the wall with a line splitting it across the midsection. Sarah took one look at this and knew what it was, (Having been told many old fairy tales as a child) crawling into a copse of trees to avoid being seen, should the wicked eye open. Now she knew she would not have the strength to enter the city tonight. Sleep was heavy on her, even before the walls of this citadel of pain. She lay down in the thicket of bushes, curling up and covering herself with her soft, emerald cloak and fell asleep with her bow and quiver tightly hugged in her arms.

When she awoke, she did not know if it was morning or night, but she trusted that her body had slept for as long as it needed to recover. She glanced down at her watch and struggled to read the time; it was 10:36. She trampled through the wooded thicket to where the walls of trees met the air and looked south from the side of the mountain. There was growing light in the distance, beyond the looming clouds; it was morning. She did not notice what the time was when she fell asleep, but at any rate, she at least *felt* well rested. She made her way back to where the walls of Orinost rose up from the precipitous cliffs which formed the deep moat chasm. She sat there long in the shadows of the trees, staring up at the gates of the city and thinking of a way to get in. No doubt the others had some kind of magic assisting them. Sarah, however, was all alone and had to infiltrate the citadel unaided. The chasm was impassible and the gates were strong; and the great eye sees everything, aside from the thousands of guards who must be stationed upon the horned battlements.

"I can't get in through the front," she decided. "Maybe they didn't either. Maybe there's another way." She resolved to find an alternate gate and snuck around the eastern side of the city, following the long walls. She crept through the underbrush so as not to be spotted by the sentry, her forest cloak keeping her well hidden. When she reached the eastern wall, she heard the roar of water and peered into the canyon to the river-moat below. On the east side, the river met with a great earthen cliff which ran up to the very base of the city wall and a tremendous waterfall pouring into the river. At the top of this fall the water ran from a garden just outside the city. Sarah quickly ran toward this garden and found that it led to another entrance into the city. When she stepped through the marble archway, her eyes met with a horror that she could only see in some nightmare.

It was an ancient courtyard of yellowed marble, filled with statues; thousands of statues. But the entire garden was submerged beneath the black waters of the long moat, which ran to the edge of the courtyard where it fell many hundreds of feet into the chasm and the river. These were the Sunken Gardens of Orinost, and no one knows for certain where these statues came from or who made them, but they crowded this flooded terrace in a painfully twisted manner, lined up like columns or stacked upon each other; the lower ones completely drowned underwater. Upon the heads of some, were large slabs of marble, such that the statues made support pillars; and upon those slabs were more statues supporting more levels. There were stairs and walls and balconies and banisters; all made of these poor statues.

Some were in the likeness of men or women, some like animals; all were sad and in tortured positions. Yet each one served an architectural purpose, like a garden built out of people. Only in this city could you find such a garden, where humans are used as building material, marble though they are; the idea was no less frightening. She stepped under the decaying archway and descended the stairs until, ten steps down, she met the dark surface of the water. She stooped down to peer into it and sniffed the air above. The stench was foul and the water was murky and black. Resolving not to touch it, as she caught an ill feeling from it, she walked instead along a marble platform which rested just upon the surface and ran along the edge of the atrium.

Ahead she saw many post and lintel archways whose tops rested above the water and decided to work her way across the sunken garden by way of these. There were wide gaps between these archways filled with towers of statues placed upon each other like tall pillars whose heads just peeked out of the murky pool. She stepped cautiously upon these, hopping from one to the other with carefully balanced jumps. Because the heads were not flat, it was often difficult for her to keep her footing and her little black shoes would, at times, slide against the wet marble causing her to nearly fall off. But she was nimble and settled herself once again on the head and jumped to the next. When she reached the first archway top, she noticed that time had battered the structures and left gaps in certain places. Looking into the water, she could see that there were many columns of statues which supported these platforms, but was unsure of how sturdy they were after these many centuries. Perhaps one step and the entire lintel would collapse.

With this in mind, she looked ahead to the remainder of the garden all the way up to the walls of the city where the tiers of Orinost rose up, and plotted her course. She chose a route across statues and platforms and made a quick dash across them. She cleared the first lintel without danger, leapt across another array of statue heads, and onto a second lintel running straight toward the doors. This was broken more severely than the first and two steps caused a rumble from below. Swiftly, the columns began to break under her gentle weight and the platforms lurched from side to side. Like lightning she leapt from the teetering section and cleared the remainder of the long marble beam, landing on the final set of stairs. She turned around to watch the entire trestle crumble and disappear into the black depths below. She breathed a sigh of relief and continued up the round, half-submerged staircase to the large patio and the great doors cut into the very city walls.

Through these she entered and was met with a large stairwell with rugs of deep garnet and white marble steps, both running upward and descending deeply into the castle. She thought hard and decided that her friends most likely went down into the heart of the fortress, and so she trekked downward into the shadows of Orinost, taking with her only a small candle to light her way. The stairs were deep and slowly changed from ivory marble to dark, cold stone; and the walls ceased to be pleasing to look at and became dank and green with moss and mold. The air was dead and Sarah placed a fold of her cloak across her nose and mouth to filter out the foul smell which hung about. She pulled her hood forward and drew her cloak about her, both to warm herself in the sudden chill and to keep her identity hidden from any servants of the castle who may spot her.

She feared now, more than ever, that she had made a mistake in coming here. Her head echoed with thoughts that something terrible would catch her, but her feet continued down the stairs, one step at a time, never pausing or tiring. Finally, when the stairwell had become as dark as the ashen valleys of Gothizar, she stepped down to the stone floor and found a metal door in front of her. She made a brief prayer to the saints in Heaven and pushed against the doors until they opened just enough to peer inside. All beyond the heavy doors was pitch and nothing moved or made a sound, but a terrible odor rushed toward her and she coughed. It was the smell of decay and now she was sure that anything that lay on the other side was long dead. She cautiously opened the doors a bit more and ventured inside. Torches mounted upon the walls of the deep chamber illuminated it enough for Sarah to realize that it was a crypt, seemingly forgotten for many long years, nestled within the earth.

The light was now just sufficient for her to extinguish her half melted candle and leave it against the wall. She had grown somewhat accustomed to the stench of the air and saw old caskets placed in hallowed alcoves in the walls. There were several other doors like the ones through which she entered, including one set upon a high flight of stairs. There were cobwebs everywhere and ancient statues of saints and holy men watching over the rested deceased, with wooden coffins upon stone biers and altars. She knew the nature of this castle and its many crypts; that at any moment these caskets could burst open and enemies could emerge. She kept an arrow set into her bow in case that happened and was ready to fight if necessary. But she turned to the high stairs when she heard the groan of metal hinges and the lofty doors began to part. She dove behind a granite altar and peered up at the doorway as faint light began to flood through it and several shadows stretched down the steps...