

The Wanderer and Tamerlin
(Jascin's Chronicle, Part One)

by

Anthony Simeone



He awoke to sunlight burning his eyes and a mind empty of the past.

Something was dragging him slowly through soft grass. He was on his back, and the light that stung his sight flashed between the lush boughs of trees high above him. A burning agony surged between his temples. Somewhere, dimly, he heard shouting, screams, and the clang of metal upon metal.

He tried to raise his head, and the pain split his skull. A moan escaped his lips as he slipped back into oblivion.

* * *

When his eyes opened again, they beheld a glorious dusk. In the cool of evening, the grass around him rang with the sound of insects heralding the coming of night. The canopy of trees above him revealed great patches of sky and streamers of clouds painted in vivid hues by the setting suns.

There was a tug on his leg, and he was torn from peaceful rest. He heard snorting and the sound of something...chewing.

He remembered being dragged, and the pain in his head that brought unconsciousness. There was little else beyond that.

Gingerly, he attempted again to lift his head. This brought on a throbbing ache, and starbursts swam at the edges of his vision, but he did not lose consciousness. His eyes came to rest on the hind quarters of a large, scaled beast. It stood on four legs, and a long, maned head at the end of a slender neck was ripping up mouthfuls of grass.

He noticed his foot was caught in the stirrups of a saddle attached to the beast. Sitting up, he reached forward to untangle himself. The beast looked back at him at that moment, and began to move. He found himself falling back as the beast began to walk in circles. It took several attempts, and several moments of cursing the beast, before he was able at last to free his foot.

He pushed himself to his feet, and almost lost his balance, when the beast came up next to him and held him up with its flank. The creature was a hand taller than him at its shoulder. The long head came around to nuzzle at his face, and he patted the ridges of the creature's snout in bewilderment.

He regarded the saddle the beast wore, and soon found himself lost in the complex patterns sewn into the tough material. Surely, this was a costly thing. Did it, and the beast, belong to him?

He looked down at himself, and saw he was clothed in thick leather dyed a rich brown. It formed what appeared to be a supple breastplate over his chest...some sort of armor. Beneath that he wore a plain tunic of a coarse black fabric. His leggings were of this same fabric, but his knee-length boots were fashioned from black leather. Steel bracers encircled his forearms and steel greaves protected his shins. He seemed dressed for war. But what war?

His hand shot up to his head, and he felt pain again. His fingers trailed lightly over a patch of dried blood along his temple. A blow to the skull would explain the headache...and perhaps the haze that obscured his memory.

He wore no weapons. An empty scabbard hung from a wide black belt around his waist. With a sharp motion born from a deep, sudden rage he did not understand, he wrenched the scabbard from his belt and tossed it to the ground.

Of a sudden, a deep sound cut through the darkening day. He looked behind him, back towards the depths of the forest. The beast, obviously his mount, stamped its feet and began to wicker as if in fear. It was the low note of a horn. It blew slow and long, the forest reverberating with its ominous echo.

His eyes were rapidly becoming useless as the night crept around him. They could not penetrate the shadows under the trees. All they seemed to show him now was the suggestion of vague shapes moving in the darkness of the forest.

Illusions of his mind or not, the sight set his pulse racing. He turned to the beast, saw it looking back at him. He gave its neck a sharp pat.

“You’ve taken me this far,” he muttered. “I trust you to lead us both to safety.”

At that, he swung himself up into the saddle with a practiced ease that astonished him. He urged his mount ahead with his heels. The beast, however, needed no such urging, and was at a full gallop in a matter of moments.

* * *

Confusion and anger warred in his mind as his mount raced him through the night. Time and his surroundings slipped by him unnoticed, his thoughts turned inward as he tried to delve into the murky depths of his past. Try as he might, only vague impressions of images and emotions came to the fore of his consciousness.

He rode in this desperate contemplation deep into the night, his head bent low over the neck of the beast. He took no notice of the forest giving way to the taller grasses of an open plain. Nor did he witness the rising of a bloated red moon, which was followed soon after by another moon that was waning to a green crescent.

Gritting his teeth, he pushed at his battered mind until it began to ache again. But it would not yield up the knowledge of self or circumstance that he sought. Who was he? He could not remember his name. He could not even remember the species of his mount, but yet retained the ability to ride like a madman pursued by unknown demons. His injury seemed to have left his unconscious mind untouched. So he was at the mercy of instinctual reactions, trapped in what felt like a stranger’s body.

It was this instinct that brought him back to awareness and saved his life. His eyes caught a shadow on the periphery of his vision. It was only then that he took notice of the land around him and his vulnerability on open ground. They were still rushing through the grasses of the plain. The forest he had awoken in was a dark line on the horizon behind him.

The mingled light of the moons was a murky yellow, and by their glow he saw that they were racing toward another stretch of wood.

The shadow that had caught his eye was coursing along the ground at an equal pace with his mount. Something in the sky...

He craned his neck and saw a black form soaring above him. It beat heavy wings, and seemed to have the silhouette of a man. He gave it only a glance before turning back to look out over his mount's neck. The cover of the woods was still far ahead.

He drew on the reins clutched in his hands, and the beast lurched to the right. He pulled the reins again to send his mount veering to the left. A rush of air pressed down on his back, and he heard a hissing from above. To his left, he saw a long wooden shaft slam into the earth. His mount screeched and galloped faster.

His eyes were locked on the distant tree line ahead. His mount's flanks heaved with effort, its breathing becoming a rasp in its chest. The thing in the air circled and fell behind, and he surmised that it went back to retrieve its weapon.

As the woods loomed larger and larger in his sight, he noticed three dark shapes launch themselves from the treetops into the star-laden sky. They took wing and banked sharply in his direction.

He had suspected there would be more than one of the creatures hunting him. Whether they had anything to do with his head wound he could not know, but he had left his mind open to all possibilities. He had to make it to the trees. The things may be able to roost in the boughs, but their flight would be hindered in the wood. Perhaps hindered enough for him to escape them. If he remained in the open much longer, they would have him.

He dug his heels into his mount, pushing the animal to the limits of its endurance. The beast's eyes rolled madly and froth fell from its mouth. But on it ran.

The flying creatures bore down on them. As they approached, the moonlight revealed something of their features to him. They indeed had the bodies of men merged with the aspects of predatory birds. The feathers of their massive wings glistened. Their hands were like his, five-fingered, but ended in talons. Their feet were the clawed feet of raptors. Their heads were similarly reminiscent of birds of prey, with cruel beaks and unblinking eyes fixed on their prey. They flew in a triangle formation, and he could see that the one at the point carried a spear of some kind. The two that followed the leader held something supple between them. He knew that it was a net of some kind.

Cursing, the rider hunched over the pommel of his saddle. He maintained the beast's headlong run as his attackers approached. As they passed over him, he saw the leader raise its spear as the two others swooped low to snare him. At the last moment he swung himself off the saddle, gripping with hands and feet at the girdle that held the saddle on.

He clung beneath his mount as the grasses rushed by under him, lashing his back. He felt a thud jolt his mount, but it did not scream or collapse to crush him with its weight. Avian cries rang out, and he smiled grimly at the frustration he heard in them.

He swung back onto the saddle, and saw that he was almost at the tree line. He also saw the lead creature's spear lodged into the thick material of the saddle. His smile became a grin of relief and satisfaction. With one hard yank, he had the spear out and clutched it as if it were a lance. It was good to have a weapon in hand, even one as strange as this. The wooden shaft ended in a two-pronged head fashioned of some light metal.

He glanced around and above him, but saw no sign of the flying creatures. He slowed his mount. It obeyed the reins willingly, exhausted as it was. As they came within a few short spans of the wood, he felt a rush of wind behind him. A dead weight slammed into his back. Coarse fibers entangled him as the spear was knocked from his grasp. The momentum of the net carried him out of the saddle and he fell heavily to earth. He landed on his stomach, and he gasped like a fish pulled from water as the wind was pushed out of him.

Above him, he heard screeches of triumph.

* * *

Trying to catch his breath and still his pounding heart, he rolled onto his back. He could see the four creatures slowly drifting out of the sky toward him. They were still calling out in their harsh tongue, obviously savoring the moment. Toying with him. He tilted his head back as far as he could, scanning the forest. There was no sign of his mount.

He managed to get himself into a crouch. His arms were pinned to his torso, but his legs were free. Standing up, he strained at the net with all the strength he could manage. It was no use. The heavy fibers were woven into cords as thick as two of his fingers. The net was a complicated tangle, and he had no hope of undoing its snares from within. They would have to be cut...

Remembering the spear, he began to hunt through the grass for it. A glance over his shoulder showed him that the leader of the flying creatures had landed and was stalking quickly toward him. The others were still circling low.

An edge of true panic began to spread through him. He bolted suddenly for the woods, the squawking of the creatures following close behind. Sprinting the last few paces, he finally reached the sheltering trees. The darkness was almost total in the forest. He crashed blindly through underbrush, low limbs grabbing and scratching. The calls of his pursuers could still be heard, but they were dulled by the dense vegetation.

Soon, in his fear and exertion, he could hear nothing but the din of his mad run and his labored breath. He crossed into a small clearing filled with moonlight. Halfway across, he was struck from behind. He stumbled and crashed into the brush headlong. He slid to a halt on his stomach, his heart feeling as if it would explode. A shadow loomed over him. Hands slipped into the cords of the net, and he was dragged deeper into the shadows under the trees.

Then a weight pressed down on his back, and a strange, sweet musk made his nostrils flare. There was the unmistakable scrape of metal on leather. A curved silver blade drifted into his field of vision.

“Sshhh...you make much noise,” came a whispered voice. “You will bring the bird-men. Listennnn...”

He tried to quiet his frantic thoughts. If his assailant wanted to kill him, he would be dead. He concentrated on listening. After a moment, he could hear the distant beat of wings, and rustlings in the tree tops.

“They hunt for you. But Jala catches you. It is for Jala to decide what is done with you.”

The blade moved closer to his eyes. It flashed in the moonlight, then was jerked suddenly from his sight. He braced himself for the cold metal and death.

What he felt was the blade slicing through the net. In moments he was free, the tangled ropes falling away from him. He lay there for a while, waiting for his mysterious savior’s next move. When nothing happened, he slowly pushed himself up to rest on his haunches and looked around.

A form crouched in the darkness nearby. He could hear snuffling, as if something was scenting the air. Then the silhouette shifted. He saw luminous yellow eyes regard him from the shadows.

“I can kill one bird-man,” said the voice again. He heard an unmistakable feminine quality to it, merged with a rumbling tone reminiscent of an animal growl. “But Jala cannot kill four at once. That is why we must move silently. Can you do this?”

He nodded. Without hesitation, the dark shape shot past him with barely a rustle of the dead leaves that littered the forest floor. He took one last look into the clearing, and turned to follow.

The journey that followed was an agonizing eternity for him. His rescuer set a grueling pace that he could not match. His eyes watered from the strain of trying to pierce the darkness. He continually stumbled over roots and snapped twigs under his boots. This caused the strange woman to hurl hissed curses at him.

She gradually drew further and further ahead of him, until he lost all sight of her. He stopped, straining his ears. There was utter, unnatural silence in the wood, as if all the small creatures had been scared away. He began moving again, standing up from the crouch he had been in for what seemed an endless age. He picked his way through dense branches now. The trees’ needles pinched his skin, but he pressed on.

The thicket became denser still, and he was plunged into complete darkness. The limbs of the trees crowded in on him. He was forced to raise his arms straight out in front of him, palms facing forward, and he gave a great heave through the brush.

He stumbled forward, the branches giving way easily, and burst into sudden light. Blinded for an instant, he blinked in bewilderment at the sight of a roaring campfire. The high flames danced in a ring of stones. Beyond the flames sat a man leaning against a dead tree. The stranger rested on a soft overlapping of rugs that covered the bare earth.

A flowing beard, shot with grey and woven in places into long braids, obscured much of his face. The man’s skin was deeply tanned and weathered, etched with deep lines. The face of one who is much-traveled. He was dressed in a flowing red tunic and a plain black cloak. A conical headdress woven with intricate sigils covered his head and ears. The man was drawing on a long

curved pipe the color of bone, and regarded the newcomer through the drifting smoke. After a moment, he took the pipe from his mouth, smiling, the lines around his eyes crinkling with mirth.

“Greetings, wanderer. Come, join me at the fire. I am Tamerlin.”

* * *

“I...I didn’t see your fire,” stammered the man with no memory.

“Ah, yes, the foliage presses quite close in the forests of Tamaranth,” Tamerlin said, and the newcomer thought he caught the suggestion of mischievous laughter in the bearded fellow’s eyes.

“Tamaranth?”

“Indeed,” said Tamerlin, gesturing grandly with his pipe at the dark woods surrounding them. “But come, do sit, you are surely in need of respite. And fear not, I have seen to your equus.”

“Equus?”

“Your mount.” Again, Tamerlin gestured, and the man noticed his mount was standing near the woods at the opposite edge of the clearing. It regarded him with peaceful eyes, and tossed its shaggy mane in what seemed to be a gesture of greeting.

“How...how did you know that is my mount?”

“It was obvious that he recognized you. Come, come, it seems you have many questions, and mayhap I can provide some answers.”

The man took several cautious steps toward the proffered place by the fire before stopping abruptly. He realized that in his surprise at meeting this Tamerlin, he had somehow forgotten about the creatures that attacked him.

“No disrespect, friend,” he said to Tamerlin, “but if you know so much, then tell me why I am being pursued by winged terrors!”

“Winged terrors?” said Tamerlin, incredulous. “If you mean the Gryph, the avian people of Tamaranth, I fear you are mistaken. They may be fearsome when provoked, but they are no terrors, not when compared to many other things that haunt the world. I should tell you that we are not far from Dhar, their greatest settlement. And with recent... occurrences in Tamaranth being what they are, any trouble they may have given you was doubtless done in defense of their lands.”

“What occurrences?”

“Well now, outsiders roaming the land, disturbing the peace of the forest. The Gryph are very protective of this wood.”

“Do these...Gryph use horns when they hunt?”

“Horns?” Tamerlin said, raising the tuft of an eyebrow. “The Gryph have no need for horns other than their own throats, which can make mighty calls when need be. If you heard hunting horns,

they were doubtless the work of some other presence in the wood. Small wonder the Gryph attacked you. Most often they do not care to distinguish between the intentions of ground-dwellers.”

“Perhaps this...other presence has something to do with me”

“Mayhap, friend,” said Tamerlin. “But you are wounded. Were you injured by the Gryph?”

Reaching up to touch his head, the man gave a bitter laugh and said, “No... I have no remembrance of how I came by this wound. I have no remembrance of my own name.”

Tamerlin leaned back against the fallen tree, drawing deeply on his pipe, great billows of smoke rising from his lips. His gaze discomfited the man, who felt as if the strange older man was peering through his flesh and into his spirit. The man with no past was fearfully beginning to wonder if he had strayed into a trap, when of a sudden Tamerlin spoke again.

“It is truly a terrible thing, to forget oneself...to forget even your name. An old legend tells of a hero who defied the tyranny of a powerful and evil wizard. The wizard used his vile magic to strip the hero of his memory. The hero, desperate to regain his past, traversed the world, seeking a way to lift the wizard’s spell.”

“And did this hero regain his memory?” asked the other, quietly.

“He did,” said Tamerlin. “But only after a long and bitter quest.”

“What was his name?”

“His name,” said Tamerlin, “was Jascin.”

There was something familiar about the name for the man, and in hearing it spoken there was a stirring of something nebulous in his mind. Suddenly, he felt as if unknown eyes were watching him. With one fluid motion he spun and dropped into a defensive crouch, reaching for a sword that wasn’t there. Slipping slowly and silently from the shadows into the firelight was a sinuous form.

Walking on two legs and balanced on the balls of its feet, the creature was covered in black silken fur. He noticed a feminine curve to its waist and hips. A leather loincloth and vest of crude make were its only coverings, while a fetish of some sort dangled on a rawhide cord between its breasts. The face was feral, the mouth and wide nose tapering to a slight snout. A mane of silver-grey flowed over its shoulders. Yellow, almond-shaped eyes watched him warily beneath long, pointed ears.

“Ah, Jala,” said Tamerlin. “Returned from your evening jaunt, I see. We have a visitor, dear girl.”

“You were the one that helped me,” said the man as he rose from his crouch. “I thank you.”

“Jala helps herself by keeping you quiet, so bird-men not spear her.” She slinked into the clearing and moved next to Tamerlin, where she curled up on the rugs.

“Jala has been with me for some time now,” said Tamerlin, resting a hand on her shoulder. “She is of the Jaka people. I am helping her in her search for her tribe, who she became separated from

by unfortunate circumstances. In exchange, she serves as an extra pair of very keen eyes and ears that can be quite helpful in times of need. As it seems you already know.”

The man heard Tamerlin’s words dimly, his mind still swirling around the name he had heard the older man speak. His thoughts had become sluggish, and he wondered if he had been put under a spell. He swayed where he stood, feeling the exhaustion of the day’s rigors threatening to overtake him.

“We are on our way to the city of Cymril, to see an old friend of mine,” said Tamerlin. “You may accompany us if you so wish. The Cymrilians are a very wise people, and may have some insight into your condition. Come, rest, and decide in the morning.”

His movements slow and deliberate, the man stepped onto Tamerlin’s ornate rugs and sank to his knees. His eyelids drooped as he stared into the flames of the campfire. The older man’s words were soothing and eased the confusion in his mind. Jala was already asleep, her regular breath the sound of soft purring.

“It has been too long since I last visited the capital of the Seven Kingdoms, friend,” said Tamerlin.

“Jascin...” muttered the man, as he laid down and slipped closer to the peace of a dreamless rest.

Tamerlin smiled to himself. “Yes...Jascin. Have you ever heard the song called ‘The Gleaming Walls of Cymril?’”

The man who took the name Jascin did not answer. He lay asleep on the rugs as Tamerlin took up the first verse of the song, his voice lilting into the night:

*My lady love
Has skin as fair
As the gleaming walls of Cymril.*

*My lady love
She loves to dance
In the gleaming halls of Cymril...*

As he sang, a gentle breeze arose, as if to carry his voice to the two moons that stood watch overhead.

