

From the rise where he waited, his bay mare shifting nervously under him, Kherin could see the remains of the village, an acrid smoke from the burned out buildings drifting on the warm wind. The raiders had done their worst with it and its inhabitants two days ago, which was when word had come to him that the so-called Free People had not turned from their outlaw path. They were now threatening the borders of the Khassan empire. As Khassan's Warlord and Commander, Kherin had summoned his Khori, his elite guard and the pick of the nation's army. They had ridden hard to the desert fringes. By the time they arrived, however, there was nothing to be done for the people of the dead village save avenge them.

The rules of warfare temporarily leashed the Khori's wild desire for blood. The enemy must be warned, must be given the chance to leave in peace and go back to their arid homeland – keep that peace and trouble Khassan no more. Kherin had sent a messenger with the terms at dawn.

Automatically Kherin soothed his horse as she tossed her head and snatched at the bit. It came to him suddenly, as such Seeing always did, that something was about to happen – something that shadowed the sun and chilled the sweat that trickled down his spine. A death? Defeat? The Khori did not acknowledge defeat. While he had led them, they had known only victories. He was the Chosen and Consort of the Goddess, ever under the shelter of Her wings. He reminded himself of this, yet still the eerie feeling persisted. Whatever was coming, it smelled as rank as the drifting smoke, forerunner of death and betrayal.

The banners above his head rippled lazily in the warm wind. He could hear the chink and creak of mail and leather behind him. His two captains, Tarvik at his left, and Jeztin at his right glanced at him, perhaps sensing his unease. Jeztin – friend of his boyhood, brother in all but blood – would know what was in his mind, as he always had, a shared Gift that had saved both their lives over the years. Silently he sent a prayer to the Goddess. Let me be mistaken. Let this not be a true Seeing.

It was a prayer he already knew was fruitless. Two riders were approaching – no, two horses. One with a rider, and one a led horse, wild with terror of what it carried. Just out of bowshot, the rider pulled up, and the other horse galloped crazily up the hill. Kherin found the horse's spooked mind with his own, calmed it enough to let Jeztin ride to where it stood, head down, trembling, its burden a shapeless mass strapped to the saddle, leaking blood.

"This for your terms!" the rider yelled, spitting into the sand. "We are the F'Dawi, the Free People, and we go where we please, and do as we please! No spineless City dweller dictates to us! A pox on your cursed High King, and on his Warlord! And a pox on your filthy, false goddess!"

Tarvik had an arrow nocked to the string, but Kherin's gesture stilled him. In that instant, as the Goddess spoke to him, he knew what had to be done, saw it clear and flawless in his mind.

"Jeztin?" he queried, knowing already what his friend had found. Between

Jeztin and himself, there was rarely need for words. Jeztin shook his head. The messenger had been one of his company. "So. The Mother has taken our comrade into Her Lap. It is now for us to take the bloodprice. For blood of ours shed, blood must pay." He knotted the reins on his horse's neck to free his hands, drew his twin swords, raised them. "For the Goddess!"

His Khori howled their assent, as Kherin led them at full gallop down the slope into the heart of the enemy. The Free People broke before their impact as a clay pot shatters under a hammer's blow. The wedge of their charge split the enemy's ranks, and the Khori began a methodical slaughter, singing as they killed.

Despite being outnumbered three to one, the battle was soon over, the Khori victorious. The wild tribesmen, for all their ferocity, were no match for the skill and discipline of the Khassani troops, and their devotion to their commander. For Kherin, and the Goddess he served, they would dare any danger, even unto death.

And inevitably, some of them had paid that price.