

REFUGE

*Wo unto all those that discomfort my people, and drive, and murder,
and testify against them, saith the Lord of Hosts; a generation of
vipers shall not escape the damnation of hell.*

-- Doctrine and Covenants, 121:23

Dolban, 917

Pounding hooves broke the dawn's stillness. Church soldiers broke past the doors at Dolban, entering the former manor house. The intruders overwhelmed the Servants of Saint Camber, and the atrocities began.

The new decree stipulated that uttering Saint Camber's name merited punishment. On the first offense, the culprit could expect a flogging. The second time would result in the loss of their tongue. A third offense meant burning at the stake. The soldiers proceeded to inflict all three punishments on the shrine's inhabitants.

During a flogging, one malicious captain chose to interrogate the laymen between lashes. He managed to extract the information that some Deryni families lived in the neighboring village of Dolbanus. He gave the information to the commander, who dispatched men to investigate.

Zenos was working in his fields when he heard the approaching horses. He probed toward the sound, and felt the riders' murderous intent. He dropped the plow and ran for the cottage. Inside, Sariah washed the dishes as the children played.

Get the children, we're going to the root cellar, he Sent. He moved to Sariah's side, took her hand, and shared what he had sensed in the riders.

Sariah responded by picking up her shawl and wrapping Alexander in a blanket. Zenos grabbed a blanket for five-year-old Gwendolyn, and they hurried to the cellar. The root cellar lay on the farthest side of their fields, where a natural hill provided a perfect storage place. Leaving the shrubs that covered the hillside proved to be a blessing today, making the entrance difficult to spot. Hushing the children, Zenos and Sariah listened to the riders arriving.

Curses punctuated the air when they found the cottage and fields deserted. The soldiers retaliated, throwing torches on the thatched roof and riding repeatedly through the fields. The family huddled in terror and prayed that they might escape discovery.

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In the dying light, the smoke and shattered buildings settled into dark shadows. The scent of burned flesh filled the air around the desecrated shrine and the surrounding countryside. The Servants of Saint Camber remained physically, as still, broken figures impaled on stakes. Inside, the altar and images lay shattered, mute testimony of hatred against anything Deryni.

In the growing darkness, Zenos furtively peered from the shelter of the root cellar, then formed the courage to step outside. He pushed aside the tall shrubs, and risked climbing to the top of the hill. No sign of the soldiers remained on his farm, nothing moved. Remembering the shrine, he hurried to investigate. The horrors in the courtyard broke his heart, and Zenos vowed to keep this knowledge

from the children. The walk back was quick, and he re-entered the hole.

"Sariah, the soldiers seem to be gone," he whispered.

The pale woman peered at the opening, and smoothed her sleeping son's hair. "Is anything left out there?" she asked.

"There's still smoke outside. No one at the shrine survived," replied Zenos. "We should leave the area tonight. We don't know what light will bring." He touched her hand, sharing the images from the shrine.

Sariah lifted Alexander in her arms, and beckoned for Gwendolyn to leave her dark corner. Too terrified to move, the young girl failed to respond. Zenos crawled to his daughter and took her in his embrace. She burst into tears, clutching at her father for reassurance.

"I love you, poppet," he soothed, "it's all right, the bad men have left now."

Gwendolyn's tears slowed as the day's terror eased a little. "Papa, the noise was so horrible. Are you sure the bad men are gone?"

"I looked outside, and nothing is moving. It's dark now. Come with me, we're going to see if we can save anything from the cottage."

Zenos set her down, and Gwendolyn took her father's hand. He led his family outside. Nothing remained of the perfect furrows or rows of wheat. Horses' hooves had churned the soil and plants into mud. Not a stalk of wheat remained standing, wasting months of hard labor. Even Sariah's herb garden hadn't escaped. Thyme and rosemary stalks littered the trampled ground. As they walked, Alexander awoke in his mother's arms, and Sariah shushed his cries. She sang softly to the toddler, and he calmed.

The fire had consumed most of the cottage. Zenos didn't dare announce their presence with a torch.

Sariah, I think that we must risk handfire, he Sent.

Dare we? she protested.

A torch burns brighter than handfire, and we must be away soon, Zenos insisted.

Swallowing hard, Sariah nodded silently in agreement. Guided by handfire, the couple searched for usable items. They found a small cooking pot, a cloak, a half-sack of flour. Sariah's heart sank as she spied the shattered remains of pottery, lying on the ground beside their charred bed. The traces of red and blue paint triggered memories...

She was seven years old again, and her father was a freedman on Carthane land. Though they always had enough to eat, coins for gifts were impossible to find. On Sariah's birthday, her father gave her a small package, wrapped in homespun cloth. Opening the folds, the small girl discovered a homemade horse. A red and blue saddle graced its back. The painted accents never faded, and the figure had never left her bedside table since.

They broke Racing Wind, love? Zenos put his arm around his wife's shoulders.

Now human fear has robbed me of all my past, sighed Sariah.

Zenos understood all too well. They had left all behind in Carthane, to begin again in Dolbanus.

A year's effort had earned them a respectable home and farm, and they coexisted peacefully with the Servants of Saint Camber.

Now all the earthly things they had valued were lost. Nevertheless, Zenos gathered his family in a wide embrace. They were all alive and together, he couldn't ask for more. In his heart, he offered a prayer of thanks for their safety.

The family gathered all the precious items into a bundle, and began walking toward the mountains. If the situation in Dolbanus was so precarious, they couldn't return to their relatives in Carthane. They knew that a haven for Deryni existed, and hoped to find the way there. Zenos and Sariah took a shortcut through the woods, thus shielding the childrens' eyes from the grisly remains around Camber's shrine. However, nothing could shield them from the scent of charred flesh, which pervaded the area. Nothing living stirred as they left Dolban. Gwendolyn quickly grew tired, and Zenos had to carry her.

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Despite their urgent pace, dawn came too quickly. An hour before the sun rose, they reached the road. Fields extended for miles. Exhausted, the couple realized that soldiers could easily find them here. Craning his neck, Zenos glimpsed something moving in the distance. Frantic with worry, he tried to form a plan. Even if there had been a Portal right next to them on the path, neither he or Sariah had the training to use it.

There's no use in running, love he Sent to his dear wife. *We should face our fate with dignity. Be prepared to put Alexander to sleep. The children needn't suffer too much.*

Straightening their shoulders, the small family walked on, refusing to succumb to fear. A small covered cart took shape in the distance, and slowly approached them. Zenos gathered mental strength as the vehicle reached them and stopped. The driver wore a simple, homespun tunic and leather breeches. Piercing brown eyes emerged from craggy eyebrows, and a full, graying beard proved that he was past his prime.

To Zenos' surprise, the man smiled at them. "Good morrow," he greeted. "Few folk travel this early."

Zenos didn't know how to answer. A family of four, on foot, grimy and exhausted, had few alibis in trouble-ridden Gwennydd. He simply smiled in return, and replied, "My name is Zenos, and these are my wife and children."

The driver's gaze darted between the bedraggled family and the rising smoke from Dolban in the distance. "You poor folk," he murmured. "You came from yonder village?"

Zenos nodded in mute reply.

"My name is John," the driver said. "Where do you travel?"

The couple scarcely dared admit that they were Deryni refugees from Dolban. Unable to find words, Zenos simply lowered his eyes and said nothing.

"I have witnessed many atrocities in religion's name," John reassured. "No one deserves to have their home destroyed. Climb in my cart, and take some rest. I know of a glen a few hours away where we can find shade and protection from prying eyes."

Incredulous, the Deryni couple stared in turn at John, then at one another. Could it be possible to find a friend in such circumstances?

Arms turned into lead gratefully eased the children into the cart. It was heavenly to sit still, out

of the open, and relax. Arms wrapped around one another, childrens' heads on their laps, Zenos and Sariah fell asleep.

Before midday, the cart stopped with a jolt. The family awoke to the fresh scent of pine needles and flowers. Peering outside, they saw that they had reached a forested area. John appeared at the back of the wagon.

"If you care to stretch your legs, I'll cut up some bread and cheese," he offered. Hunger rumbled instantly, the family hadn't eaten for a day now. Water from a nearby spring quenched their thirst. After eating and washing up, Zenos and his family felt somewhat normal again.

John asked yet again, "Where do you intend to go, my Deryni friends?" He raised a hand to stop any interruption. "Only Deryni or Servants of Saint Camber would have fled Dolban today."

Zenos swallowed hard, finding it impossible to break contact with the probing eyes. He reached out tentatively with his mind, wondering if John were Deryni, too. He felt a force akin to shields, something that he had never felt before. If he wasn't Deryni, how could he shutter his mind so effectively? Nonetheless, the man had proved trustworthy to that point.

Should we trust him, Sariah? he Sent.

He already saved us, I don't think he'll turn us over to the soldiers now, she replied.

Zenos decided that he may as well tell all. "We have heard of a haven for Deryni, somewhere in the mountains, but its location is secret. We never thought that we might have need of it ourselves."

John settled into a more comfortable position. "I have walked the face of this land for many years, and I have seen great changes. It is part of human nature to forget its lessons from the past. The children of Israel wandered in the wilderness for forty years. Through their tribulation, they learned to be obedient. They were blessed, yet they still fell gradually into wickedness and were conquered.

"A group of the Lord's people gathered under the guidance of Christ our Lord. It was a glorious time." John's eyes took on a faraway look as he continued. "The streets of Jerusalem were dusty, and the city abounded with souls ready to hear the word of God. And one pivotal Passover evening, a group of thirteen men gathered in an upper room, and sang and prayed. Jesus broke bread and administered the wine. Then everything changed. He was taken by the Romans, slain, and rose from the dead three days later. He only tarried a short while, and he left few shepherds to tend His sheep. His people faced new tribulations under Roman rule.

"Life moves in these cycles, my children, and we are to learn from experience. I know a family that will guide you to the Deryni haven."

A look of wonder crossed Zenos' face. "Are you a priest?" he queried.

"I have tasted of the mysteries, and have seen many things. Beyond that, I am bound in what I may share." The enigmatic man proceeded to prepare the cart for departure.

Sariah followed John, curiosity bursting. "Then you must be a saint. The Servants of Saint Camber said that the blessed Camber is capable of helping those in need."

"My dear child, I am not Saint Camber," John assured her. "I am but a humble servant of God. May I prove worthy of His blessings. Allow me to help your family, and then I must leave."

John refused to give more details, and proceeded to take them to a safe location. He remained mostly silent during the journey. No one seemed to suspect his cart or stopped it, although they heard troops passing more than once. Finally, they arrived at a small house in the foothills of the mountains. A kind family greeted them, and offered a hot meal inside.

John prepared his wagon. Bidding farewell, Zenos and his family wept at his kindness.

"I must ask again," pushed Zenos. "Who are you really?"

"A simple servant of God," John replied.

"May I have your blessing?" Zenos pleaded.

"Certainly, my son. Benedicat dominus." Zenos opened his mind as he received the blessing, and felt the touch of Power. In awe, he regarded the dark eyes that met his own. Wonder filled his being as Zenos watched the "servant" get on the cart and drive away.

The Deryni family cared for them for a day then took them to the Haven. The family enjoyed a warm welcome, and knew that they could finally rest. A week later, the homily at Mass came from John, chapter 21.

"Then Peter, turning about, seeth the disciple whom Jesus loved following; which also leaned on his breast at supper, and said, Lord, which is he that betrayeth thee?"

"Peter seeing him saith to Jesus, Lord, and what shall this man do?"

"Jesus saith unto him, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? Follow thou me."

"Then went this saying abroad among the brethren, that that disciple should not die: yet Jesus said not unto him, He shall not die; but, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee?"

Zenos and Sariah looked in one another's eyes as they realized what a blessing their escape had been, and offered thanks to God in their hearts. After the mass ended, they sat still for a time, savoring the peace they could feel all around them, as if surrounded by angels.