



HERO OF ALLACROST – PROLOGUE

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I watched the men in the pale light of the blue moon. The dark cloaks they wore for warmth only better distinguishing them against the light sand for my trained eye. They were outsiders, easy to track. No wind muffled the sounds of their heavy armor, or covered their footsteps with sands from the great dunes. The Harrvah Knights, though powerful in their great city of stone, were powerless in the might of the desert. The desert was the land of the Muabi tribe, my tribe. Out here, a squad of troops such as this was no match for even a small group of Muabi. I noticed something different about this group though, this group had a recruit with them.

By his stride, I could see he was grasping his sword as he walked, a sign of the newest of soldiers. He was focused only on his steps, like the other men. The only warning these men had against intruders were their scouts and their great Mak'ok hounds. The dogs' keen hearing was aided further by their height as they towered over the men, but even their senses were no match for a properly trained Muabi warrior, and Harrvahn sentries were easily removed. The young one traveled in the rear, a mistake in other battlefields, but no matter here. The knights knew that no matter who walked the rear, they were ours if we so wished it. Better it to be the inexperienced one, than one of their own hides. He would

have to earn their respect before being allowed to walk in the middle of the caravan.

I knew where they were headed. They had taken an inefficient route, but not a poor one. We had seen that their water supply had been blocked, but such problems were not Muabi problems. The outsiders had built their grand city away from the water, because they could not tame the creatures there. Instead of trying to understand their problem, they ran from it. Perhaps better than them trying to destroy it.

As they arrived at the blue granite of the riverside, I heard their leader give his orders: "Open your ears and shut your mouths. Our mission is to unblock the water supply. Stay together and on guard, I don't want any heroes or fools dying on the surgeon's table tonight." The soldiers set up a perimeter guard as others began to scout the area. We had not seen what caused the stoppage specifically, ourselves not foolish enough to venture outside during the great storms. This last one had raged for days, and surely the city was in a panic. These men were desperate, and desperate men are foolish men. I left them to their work, and the creatures of the river that they so feared.

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Claudius watched as the men checked the area for dangerous elements. He hated it here, with only the lights of scrub grass torches to flicker and dart orange streaks across the metal of their armor. He had been left with the dogs, thought too inexperienced for the real work, for a soldier's work. Instead he stood holding harness straps for Mak'ok twice his height, who would surely pull him off into the desert were it not for their own fear of being lost in the wasteland.

The scouting knights, satisfied that the area was safe, returned to the others. Claudius was anxious about going inside, but he knew he had to prove that he was as able as the others. He was not the rear guard and the dog watcher, he was a soldier, a Knight of Harrvah.

"The water is definitely blocked somewhere in the cave," reported one of the senior knights. "You can normally hear it from here when it's running full force. There can't be more than a trickle moving toward the city."

"Form up," the captain barked. "Draw steel, we're going inside. Those who don't think they're up to it," he said, eying Claudius, "can stay outside and say hello to

the Muabi for us." The men chuckled at the joke, as Claudius rose to the bait. He dropped the lines and drew his sword, marching towards the cave.

"Recruit! We do not leave resources behind for the Muabi or anyone else to phantom away from us while our backs are turned." The captain gave Claudius an officer's look. "You sheath that sword and grab those lines. You'll be down there with us, but you have a role in this unit, just like everyone else."

"Yes, sir," Claudius managed. He trudged back to the lines but kept his sword in hand. He wasn't going to be caught unaware by the foul cave creatures, his captain be damned. The captain acknowledged this act of defiance with a grunt, and then turned to give orders to the rest of the men.

As they entered the cave, the smell was assaulting. The smoke from the torches mingled with the musty smell of rot and algae. To those used to the clean air and distant horizons of the desert, the cave was like entering a tomb. Some of the men blocked the smell with cloths in their free hands. Claudius, holding the lines for the Mak'ok, didn't have that luxury. His nose burned from the smoke, and his stomach turned from the knot of fear gripped there.

After twisting through the stone passage, they finally came upon a cavern where a large boulder could be seen blocking the stream. Even the captain was nervous being this deep underground, with the manner of creatures he knew to dwell within the cavern. "Get moving! Run the ropes, get some light up there. The rest of you stay close. Claudius, tie the dogs and make yourself useful." Claudius quickly complied, helping the men get the ropes off the backs of the Mak'ok.

Three men began to scale the rock to secure the ropes at the top, but the torch carrier lost his footing, and the light tumbled down the boulder to extinguish with a hiss in the stream. The three froze as they were consumed by darkness.

"Get a light up there, now!" bellowed the captain. Claudius quickly snatched a torch from one of the men's hands and ran towards the rock. As he ran he could hear his feet splashing in the stream, and the shuffling of the dogs. There was another sound though, a deep, hollow click clacking, a sound that didn't belong. Claudius stopped, thinking perhaps it was a piece of his armor, that his movement was causing the foreign intrusion, but it continued, growing louder.

"Claudius! What are you doing? Those men..." the captain trailed off. He heard it too. The next moments added far more to the unseen. A loud clap, a scream, the sound of bone and sinew tearing, and an impact as a heavy object fell from the

rock into the stream in front of Claudius. The light flickered over the body of a soldier, who was now short a sword arm and a place to wear his helmet. Then there was a rush of air as a glistening black form sailed over his head into the center of the cavern.

With a feral cry and a snapping of immense claws, a colossal scorpion loomed over the men. "Form ranks!" came the orders. "Prepare to flank from the left! Sergeant Methus, feint your squad to the right." As the men readied to swallow their fear and charge the hellion, one of the Mak'ok snapped its bond and began to scramble to the exit. The scorpion clacked past the men in pursuit, piercing one soldier's breastplate with its jagged foot.

The soldiers attempted to strike the scorpion as it trailed the stray Mak'ok, but their swords glanced harmlessly off the dark carapace of its legs. The creature turned to face the threat, and sent four men tumbling to the rock with one of its massive claws as it twisted. The lance of its tail rushed down to pierce another through the shoulder, pumping venomous bile into his body. Carnage and panic filled the air now, the captain's orders going unheard. Claudius stood near the veteran, feet frozen, the blood pounding in his temples.

Another Mak'ok broke free, and the scorpion began its chase. It would not let a meal escape its pincers a second time. The captain took advantage of the diversion, and jockeyed his way through the mayhem of his men. With a diving roll between the legs of the scorpion, he swung to his feet and drove his sword into a gap in the scales of the monstrosity, the steel sliding into its body. A primal scream filled the air, as the beast backpedaled and swung a claw into the captain, driving him into the wall of the cave.

A few of the men had drawn bows now, in an attempt to damage the scorpion from afar. As its attention turned, Claudius could see the captain's sword still stuck fast in its belly. Sheathing his own sword, Claudius ran under the scorpion from behind and grabbed the hilt. Planting his feet against the rocks, he let the scorpion pull itself along the blade. The monster screamed as it tried to stop, but it had built up so much speed in an attempt to engage the archers that it could not stop in time. A bloody line was drawn from the captain's strike almost to the tail.

As blood cascaded down the rocks, the creature hissed and shrilled at the men. Its limbs rendered useless and its strength seeping from it, screaming was now its only defense. The remaining soldiers converged on it now, driving killing blows into the black skull of their adversary.

The threat removed, the men rushed over to the captain. Blood ran from his leg, and his breathing was labored. "You did well men. I'm proud, but we still have a duty to finish here." The able soldiers moved the wounded to the side and herded the Mak'ok that remained in front of the boulder. Lines were tied from the harnesses of the dogs to the blockage, and the men gripped the wet ropes themselves in an effort to speed the process. Straining with exhaustion from their battle, the men heaved against their new target. With a grinding of stone, the boulder was finally freed from its resting place. Water surged from behind the boulder, turning the trickle into a rushing river.

Limbs dangled over the side as the men loaded the dead and wounded onto the backs of the dogs. Their mission complete, they turned their backs on the darkness they had confronted, and began their ascent to the sands of the desert.

The journey home was a turmoil of emotions for Claudius. The young soldier felt happy at accomplishing the mission and saving the kingdom, but was saddened by the loss of his comrades. Scanning the faces around him, he saw his confusion was shared by the others. They walked in silence, until one of the scouts pointed out the sky.

The normally pitch sky now had tones of indigo, as if the sun was about to rise. As they grew closer, the colors brightened into reds and oranges. One soldier suggested that perhaps the water had already reached town, and a festival had been prepared for the victorious soldiers. Claudius was doubtful of this, as most civilians were long asleep at this hour. As they crested the last dune, the men finally saw the cause of the display. They looked down upon their homes and saw them ablaze, fire dancing from building to building.

The men's eyes widened with fear for their families and friends. They clumsily raced down the dune, barely staying upright. As they approached the gates, they could hear the screams of the populace. As Claudius passed through the gates, he could scarcely believe what he saw before him. Demons. Incarnations of evil that none of the soldiers had ever seen even in their darkest nightmares were raining destruction down upon the town. They brought death to all without prejudice, seasoned guard and innocent child alike.

Sergeant Methus, now the senior soldier, began to give orders. "Claudius, you are the fastest runner here. Go to the castle and speak with the commander of the Royal Guard. We need to know what is going on, and if he has a plan. And we must know if the king is safe."

Claudius nodded. He knew that a soldier's first duty was to his king. He darted

off in the direction of the castle steps. The rest of the soldiers turned towards their enemies. Their exhaustion turned to rage as they charged the abominations, their war cries joining the cacophony.

The young warrior raced through the streets, terror filling his heart, but giving him the drive to continue. His mind wanted to question why this was happening, and where these demons had suddenly come from, but Claudius pushed the thoughts down. He had to focus on his task, on reaching the king and his Royal Guard. Racing up one of the long, curved stairways to the castle, two winged gargoyles appeared in front of him, blocking his path. Not missing a step, Claudius drew his sword and boldly leapt at the demons. With two swift swings, dark blue blood fell to the stone, bubbling as it sizzled on the ancient rock. Claudius continued on, leaving the corpses behind him.

Arriving at the throne room, Claudius could see the king, a man who had fought for the peace and prosperity of his people, now fighting for his own life. He was surrounded by his Royal Guard, some standing, others littering the floor, their sacrifices already made. The brilliant white of his night robes stained crimson and purple from the blood of his allies and his enemies. Demons flew from the shadows, taking turns at falling the Knights of Harrvah. The group moved deeper into the throne room, constantly being pushed back by the horde. Behind them, the grand balcony opened up to the moonlight. Even if they avoided the approaching demons, they had no ground to run to.

Claudius moved through the grand room quietly, hoping to remain hidden long enough so he could somehow aid his king. As he approached, the moon was suddenly eclipsed by an armored silhouette landing on the balcony. Abandoning his stealth, the young knight darted through the enemy lines from behind. Only the element of surprise kept the demons from cutting him down as he raced past.

The king now noticed the form moving among the hellions. He opened his mouth to speak, but was cut off as he saw Claudius' sword whistling towards his head. It stopped mere inches from the king's face, the claw of a goliath on the other side of the blade. Claudius was locked in combat with the great demon, strength flowing through him that should not have existed. This close, the king could see Claudius' eyes, eyes filled with passion, rage, and power.

Claudius kicked the demon off his blade to end the stalemate, nearly falling over from the force. The two charged each other, each determined to vanquish his opponent. A might battle cry escaped Claudius' mouth as he leaped and drove his blade into the skull of the colossus. It remained standing for a short moment, its claws still anxiously twitching with the need to tear into the flesh of their enemy, before falling to the stone.

A dark figure, wrapped in long flowing robes, floated just beyond the balcony, his silhouette framed by the moon behind. It watched the deep azure eyes of Claudius, hesitating, weighing its options. Claudius ached for the figure to come within range, to engage him in battle. However, the figure merely smirked, before vanishing into the wind. The demons in the throne room then ceased their assault, retreating into the shadows. They left the corpses of their fallen brethren behind, a reminder of the horrors that had been done.

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Two days had past since the massacre, and the chaos and fear of that night still gripped the survivors of Harrvah. Bodies needed to be buried, homes rebuilt, lives reclaimed. The people seemed to have forgotten how to smile.

Claudius was in the barracks, putting on his formal armor. He thought it rude to be parading in a knight's finery when so many had lost so much, but when called by the king, one must observe protocol. He met the other survivors of the water cave mission outside, the rising moon giving a ghostly light to their polished armor. There were a little over half of those who had returned that night, the demons claiming the rest. Led by their captain, they marched for the castle.

Entering the throne room, Claudius could still see remnants of the battle; blood stains on the floor, holes in the stone walls. The men all fell to their left knee, placing their right arms across their chests in salute. The king sat upon his throne, the fading sunlight framing his weathered face. He commended the knights for saving the kingdom not only once, but twice in the same night. "Under these dire circumstances, it fills my heart with pride to see young knights still loyal to their duties," the king remarked. "I'm sure you are all aware that our kingdom still lies in danger to the same dark threat. We know not when to expect another attack. That is why I ask all of you, despite the losses and wounds you have suffered, to continue to defend Harrvah as the true knights you are."

"With honor, your majesty," the men replied in unison. The king smiled and bowed his head slightly towards the knights. They rose, took a step backward, and began to file out of the throne room. "One last thing captain. May I have one of your knights for a moment, the one on the end there?" the king said, pointing to Claudius. "He is yours for as long as you desire my liege," replied the captain. The rest of the men departed, and Claudius resumed his position in front of the throne, down on one knee.

"Please, be at ease," the king offered. Claudius stood, his eyes failing to hide both the nervousness of being addressed by the king, and the anxiousness of what he might have to say. "What is your name, young warrior?" the ruler asked. "Claudius Toratine, sire."

"Well first, Claudius, let me thank you for saving my life during the attack. It was quite a feat you performed. I would have to say, I have never seen anything quite like it."

"Thank you, your majesty," Claudius humbly replied.

"However, that is not what I really wanted to talk to you about," the king began. "There is an old legend that has been passed down among the monarchs of this kingdom, as well as others, for several generations.

ONCE OF THIS WORLD, A GREAT EVIL BEGAN TO CAST  
CHAOS UPON THE LAND. THOUGH FINALLY DEFEATED, THE  
EVIL GRABBED ONTO THE THREADS OF FATE, TO ONE DAY  
RETURN. DRAWN BY THE DUTY TO HIS PEOPLE, A WARRIOR  
WILL APPEAR, FOR HE IS THE KEY TO BRINGING PEACE  
UNTO THE WORLD ONCE MORE.

"It's just an old legend, but all legends have at least some small amount of truth to them," the king explained. "I plan to announce this to the kingdom tomorrow, so that we may all have hope in our hearts that this warrior will appear. It is hope that keeps us together in times such as these.

"Now, the reason I am telling you this now is that I have an assignment I would like you to take."

"Sire!" Claudius snapped to attention.

"Due to our situation, and the losses in our ranks that we have already suffered, I do not want to spare any of our able men that I do not have to. The defense of our home is our top priority, and I am sure you agree. However, I have two tasks that I would like you to perform.

"The first, is to travel to our neighboring kingdoms and spread word of what has

happened here. This tragedy must never be repeated elsewhere. The second task may prove to be more difficult though." The king looked into Claudius' eyes, which now contained none of the primal fury that had gripped them the night of the attack.

"Claudius, I want you to find the hero spoken of in the legend."

"But sire," Claudius interrupted nervously. "I have no idea where to look for this hero. Where would I start?"

"I do not know," the king replied. "Perhaps the other kingdoms who have heard this legend as well can help. They may have clues to this riddle for you."

"I understand that you are new to the knighthood, and I know that this is not an easy task to undertake. If you feel you are unable to undertake this mission, I will understand."

Claudius looked down for a moment, consumed by his thoughts, and the gravity of what the king had asked of him. His head raised, his voice confident, he said: "Sire, I would be honored to accept this mission and the responsibilities that come with it. I promise you that I will find this warrior."

"Excellent. Your confidence is very reassuring to these old ears," the king said with a smile. "You will leave in the afternoon tomorrow by sand glider. Tonight you must prepare yourself. It is a long journey to the mountains and the Lambdor Kingdom."

Claudius crossed his right arm to his chest, bowed slightly towards the king, and left the throne room. The heavy wooden doors closed loudly behind him. The doors had been untouched during the attack. There had never been time to shut them.

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As Claudius slowly walked through the remnants of the city, he thought about how much this mission meant to these people. Claudius lived with the Taolins, his adopted family. At the age of six, Claudius' village had been destroyed by the Muabi in an unprovoked attack. After witnessing the murder of his parents, he fled from the village with his older sister.

The siblings wandered the desert for four days before they collapsed in each others arms. The frail, dehydrated children were paralyzed by exhaustion as the sun's heat poured down upon them. A caravan of traveling traders making their way to Harrvah spotted the two. When the merchants reached Claudius, they found him unconscious and on the verge of death, gripping his sister's hand. A hand that, despite the heat of the desert, was cold with death.

The Taolins treated Claudius well, and loved him as if he were their own. The father, Marcus, was a kind, middle-aged craftsman. He had thick brown hair, and a mustache that collected sawdust from the carpentry that filled his day. The mother, Vanica, was a practical woman. She tended to their small garden, and kept the household running smoothly.

The pair had a daughter, Laila. Nine months younger than Claudius, she had a contagious cheerfulness about her. With her long brown hair and soft features, she was a popular dance partner at festival celebrations. She and Claudius got along well, and had spent many days in their youth going on imaginary adventures around Harrvah.

As he turned the corner, Claudius could see his home down the street. Fortunately, this district had received less damage than some of the others. After leaving the throne room the night of the attack, Claudius had raced home and found that his family was safe, if not terrified. He had breathed a sigh of relief that few had been able to that night.

He quietly opened the door and entered the dark house, the candles long since extinguished. After slowly climbing the creaking staircase, Claudius entered his room and lit the candle on his dresser. Packing for a trip through the desert was never an easy one, especially when traveling by sand glider. Bring too much weight, and you could be inviting your own death. However, not having enough supplies could prove just as fatal. Gathering his essentials into a leather pack, his hand slipped and metal utensils clattered to the floor. Claudius quickly gathered them up and added them to the bag as well.

"What are you doing?" came a voice from behind. Claudius turned to see Laila standing in the doorway, her arms crossed upon her chest. He had not woken her; she showed no signs of ever being asleep. "You're leaving again aren't you? I know you're a knight now Claude, but you still have an obligation to tell us when you're leaving."

"I wasn't trying to hide anything," Claudius protested, trying to cool the heated glare coming from his sister.

"Well you sure look suspicious sneaking around the house and packing a bag while everyone else is asleep."

"I was going to tell you tomorrow before I left, honestly. It's just... I don't know how long I'll be away this time." Claudius turned away from Laila and resumed his packing. "I already made up my mind about this one, and I don't want you, or mom, or dad to try and stop me."

"What do you mean you don't know when you'll be back? And why, in the middle of a crisis, is the king sending out a unit of knights? Our home is still in..."

"There is no unit," Claudius interrupted. "It's just me."

"What?! Are you insane? You could get killed out there by yourself. Do you think that just because you saved the king against that demon that you're invincible now?"

"I could have been killed every time I left this place," Claudius said in a calming voice. "Don't worry, I don't plan on dying any time soon."

Laila's fury had been reduced to a worried frown, but she still was not about to accept her brother rushing off on a fool's errand, especially not all by himself. "Where are you going?"

"I don't know the exact route yet, but my first stop is Lambdor Kingdom." Laila just stood there, rendered speechless by this. She rarely left the walls of the city, and Claudius had only recently begun to venture further in his service with the knights. Now he would be going places that they only knew of from the stories that the traders told, and the lessons they had learned in school.

Claudius stood and looked at his sister. "It's late now," he said. "You should go to bed. Don't worry, I won't leave without saying goodbye tomorrow."

Laila looked back at Claudius. He could see that she was trying fiercely to hold back her emotions. She turned and slowly walked back to her room down the

hall.

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Claudius slept late the next morning. He knew it would be awhile before he would be able to sleep in his own bed again. While they sat eating brunch, Claudius told his parents about the task the king had given him. Laila just stared at her food, not eating. While sad to see him go, the Taolins could see what this meant to Claudius. They gave him their blessing, Vanica with a collection of herbs from the garden, Marcus with a finely crafted wooden box to store them in.

Later that morning, the king addressed the populace of Harrvah. He spoke of the pain and loss they had suffered, and that they had to remain strong through these dark times. He then spoke of the legend, and of the hero it promised. And though he mentioned that the hero was being sought out, he did not mention that it was Claudius who had been given such a seeming impossible task. As his words carried through the streets of the city, hope and passion seemed to return to hearts of the crowd. For the first time in three days, Claudius was able to see joy on the people's faces.

Noon approached, and Claudius, clad in light armor, made his way to the sand dock. Several of his fellow knights were there to greet Claudius and his family, and then to say farewell. After exchanging salutes and a few hugs from his comrades, Claudius bid farewell to his parents. Vanica hugged him for a long time, and Marcus gave words of advice and encouragement as he struggled back his tears.

Laila stood near the sand glider, a small one person raft standing on long wooden skis with two large sails above. "Claude, I, I..." She did not have the words.

Claudius just reached his arms around and held her for a few moments. "Take care of yourself Laila." He released her, and with a smile, walked past her towards the glider.

"Smile more," she blurted. Claudius stopped and turned. "I've noticed you're been smiling less and less lately, but I never really told you. I want you to smile more Claude." She paused. "And, I think your real family would want the same thing."

Claudius walked back to her, put his hand on her shoulder and gently spoke.

"Laila, you are my real family."

Laila stared as the tears poured down her cheeks. She could do nothing but watch as Claudius boarded the sand glider, secured his gear and checked his ropes. With a push from two of the deck hands, Claudius raised the sail and caught the stiff desert wind. He sailed along the dunes, a crest of sand rising behind him. Laila stood at the end of the dock and stared at the horizon, until long after he had already vanished from her sight.