Let Him Die

Black Haven

Reyne

The sole of Aderlee's boot rested on Reyne's butt for only a second before shoving him forward. The orange door from the underground compound flung open just in time for Reyne to stagger through it. The ebony veil covering the dismal landscape proved only fractionally better than what the black-flamed hearth offered inside the complex. With his hands tied in front, Reyne stumbled, lost his balance, and hit the ground hard. His utter confusion suffocated the visceral response of the beast lurking in his soul.

He thought he was on Evidar. He wasn't.

He thought the man who'd sent him to die was the Devil's Blacksmith. He wasn't.

He thought that the man was Mera. He was... and he wasn't.

He thought the Mera-look-alike remained sequestered in the underground complex. He didn't.

The man who was Mera-but-wasn't appeared from out of nowhere and glared downward at Reyne.

Reyne looked up into the dark eyes of the Mera doppelgänger and knew he was about to die.

If fated for death in this miserable realm, Reyne wouldn't go down easy.

Reyne shot up.

Half bent over, he drove his shoulder into the man from Black Haven who

looked just like Mera. Reyne's six-foot plus muscular frame delivered a powerful blow. The soles of the man's shoes slid backwards several inches before friction took hold. Black Haven's version of Mera stood his ground.

Both bodies came to a stop. Reyne straightened up in an instant. Yet with both hands tied, Black Haven's Mera easily grabbed onto Reyne's arm and, with an iron grip, secured Reyne from further eruptions.

"Reyne Brenton, I'd like you to answer a question for me. Maybe we can help each other after all. Perhaps your imminent death can be avoided."

"Can't be!" A woman's voice cut through the ever-present ebony veil of Black Haven.

Reyne's head spun toward the sound. The dim light penetrating the ashen-gray sky of a world forever in darkness offered little illumination. Yet, Reyne's Tartican-born eyes opened wide to see through the darkness. He spied Gina, peeking out over a pile of rocks not more than thirty feet away.

Gina jumped out from where she'd been hiding and shouted, "Mera!" faster than Reyne could react. Reyne watched helplessly as she raced to the man thought to have been killed on Tartica by an arrow from an Evidarian assassin meant for him. Tears dripped down her cheeks as she ran. Reyne wondered how Gina's cautious life in the shadows as a killer for hire could be tossed aside so carelessly.

As she sprinted, her face lit up. And Reyne heard the joy in her voice when she called out, "Mera, you're alive."

Before Gina could reach the man she claimed to be her mentor and the only genuine friend she ever had, Reyne shouted, "GINA, NO!"

His plea died on the wind as an arrow flew over Gina's shoulder. It missed her ear by inches. Her arms shot forward as though somehow reaching to snatch it out of the air.

Reyne knew before transfiguring to the realm thought to be Evidar, Gina would have focused her mind, opened her Third Eye—as Mera taught her to do—and called on her special ability to move faster than any human alive. She'd seize the arrow in flight before it delivered death. Not this time: Gina's Third Eye was blinded in the transition through the Void.

It all happened so fast.

And then... came the sound; a gentle *thwack* flittered on the air announcing the arrow found its target. Through soft delicate flesh, it bit deep into the man Gina believed to be Mera from Tartica. Black Haven's version of Mera remained upright for several seconds as she continued racing forward. As he dropped, Gina fell to her knees. "NO!"

Her soul-piercing screech drove deep into Reyne's heart.

For the second time in mere days, Gina couldn't save Mera.

Aderlee, the man whose boot sent Reyne through the orange door, immediately shouted a war cry. He fled past Reyne. He charged past Gina. He headed straight for the rock pile from where the shot originated.

Where Red stood her ground.

With bow in hand, Red swiped her free arm downward. In one fluid motion, she snatched an arrow from several she'd planted upright in the dirt and nocked it to the bowstring. Her movements were seamless. Practiced. Skilled.

She drew back the arrow... and let it fly.

It all happened in less than a heartbeat.

Aderlee stuttered forward a few steps. With the bolt half buried in his orbital cavity, he crumpled to the ground like a marionette whose strings had been cut.

Men and women from behind the mound of rocks framing the orange door, allies of the dying man, popped out from myriad hiding places. Reyne made out twelve pairs of retinas reflecting back what little light Black Haven offered. The eye-shine, like that of a cat in the night, was the telltale sign of people born to the darkness. Armed and angry, a dozen combatants fired arrows at Red's position. They flew straight with purpose, but she ducked behind a massive boulder as the barrage whizzed overhead.

Sprouting up from under leaves and dirt, archers from Red's tribe responded en masse. Reyne reeled. This wasn't the way it was supposed to go down. Dangled as bait, the plan called for only the two women to both save him and kill the Devil's Hammer. It was obvious to Reyne the operation was more extensive and better planned than he'd been told.

New-Neladith lied.

It tasted like betrayal.

Still, he blamed himself. He knew better than to trust new-Neladith; despite his reservations, he did. Yet, it was clear to him that neither he nor Gina were the target of either team.

Arrows whizzed overhead while Gina crawled on hands and knees to the body of the man she thought to be Mera. Tears filled her eyes. Reyne never thought Gina was capable of such feelings.

Screams of pain, shouts of anger, and threats of retaliation filled the air. Men and women were dying in the skirmish.

Gina wormed her way to Mera, sat up with her legs crossed, and cradled Mera's head in her lap. Ignoring the din of battle and the danger all around him, Reyne's heart went out to her. Gina's longing gaze into the dying man's face told Reyne she cared naught for any of it. She looked like a vulnerable little girl, not the stone-hearted assassin he knew; helpless, as Mera's life slipped away before her... for the second time.

With both hands still knotted together, Reyne grabbed Gina's arm. "That's not the Mera we know."

Her confused look replied where words could not.

Reyne squeezed her arm, "Let him die. That... ain't... our...Mera. And that ain't the Neladith who killed Daedyn."

A man burst through the orange door.

He dodged, dipped, and avoided everything Red's tribe fired at him. He skirted every effort to drop him. A heartbeat later, he was hovering over Gina with an arrow seated in a bowstring pulled tight. He pointed it directly at Gina from only feet away. Unable to invoke her ability to move beyond normal human speeds to disable, disarm, or even race from the scene, Reyne could only look on as she faced certain death.

He coiled, ready to throw himself at Gina's antagonist. A sudden knife to his throat from behind stilled his hand. He tensed. His muscles locked. Helpless, anger roiled in his core. The beast lurking in his soul fed off his rage. It laughed

at his feeble response. *Let the monster out*, he thought. At that instant, before he could, everything stopped.

No one moved.

No one spoke.

No arrows zipped past.

No screams of anger.

Enemy combatants froze in place.

Gina looked up from the dying man in her arms.

In a slow motion, her head turned upward to meet the gaze of the would-be killer looming over her.

Reyne's gaze locked on the man standing over Gina. With his bow and arrow cocked and ready, the man took aim at Gina's face.