

A Suit of White Armour

Prologue Chapter 1

Wisps of green glimpsed streaming across her peripheral vision, streaks elongating out and into the beyond, no sense of texture or detail, her focus purely set dead straight ahead; another set of stones set one upon another resolved at an ever increasing velocity, willing her body to relax, crouched over the mass of muscle pounding away incessantly beneath her. Vertical acceleration and then the impact of landing, no time to catch her breathe, eyes stung through the cold air whipping away errant drops from her tear ducts; senses blaring for attention, warning of overload, every muscle in her body screamed at her to stop this agony, lactic acid taking its inevitable toll, still Ruth urged the horse forward, onwards.

Time standing still, measured in fields covered in the merest of widening four-legged steps; substantial walls and thick fences dispatched with arrogant ease, slowly the mare began to falter, the young girl dipped the fine pleated leather reigns, hugging the neck of the sweating animal, lather coated her hide as per the finest of wool dappled across a new born lamb.

‘Where have you brought me?’ The young girl whispered, pirouetting off the narrow back of the mare, dropping to walk steadily alongside, her body letting her know in no uncertain terms the pounding it had taken; moving her face, wincing at her cheeks and mouth, the realisation that her whole expression had been transfixed into the widest of grins. Reaching behind her, wide shoulders flexing, the girl eased the rough leather pack from her back, eyes fixed upon but consciously ignoring the pouch of water and sustenance carefully wrapped, instead she reached for the large wooden brush.

‘First you, Danteen.’ Quiet words softly spoken, the mare responded with a snort, finally halting, the large white muzzle sniffed the air questioningly. Large strokes made with the hardwood brush, flecks of white foam intermingled with the steam evaporating in undulating waves across the horse’s side, the occasional shake and role of muscles under the tan hide evidenced a patience for her mistress, looking longingly down and into the valley.

A purse of her lips. ‘Not on the cards, not for you Danteen, not for me.’ The young girl stuck resolutely to her task, meticulously grooming the snorting mare.

Working on automatic, Ruth's eyes trekked back across the landscape they had cantered through and across, the lush green grass and crops no longer a blur, soft ground rich in nutrient and mineral wealth, stone walls interlocking and risen over many a generation criss-crossed across the land, the most intricate of jigsaw puzzles belying the craftsmanship and attention to ensure each and every wall would stand for many more generations in the Tusk family household.

Ruth looked out across to her right, her eye line followed Danteen as the mare gave a final shake, mane proud and tufted, ruffled by the play of the growing breeze.

A nod and rub of her chin, a quick shudder recognised the dampness across her torso from the sweat cooling and condensing, an arch of shoulder blades, spine responding to the moisture accumulating, one bead at a time.

The smile filtering unwarranted, subconsciously back across her aching face, the natural funnel presented for her attention, set in front of her, the Caladian Hills drew her eyes naturally up and onwards, past gossamer threads set high above, belying the vast tumbling mass of water she knew the waterfalls to be, hints of colour diffracted through the barely resolved spray.

Every shade of green present, intermingled by a gentle brown of rocks peaking through, the lush landscape unravelled before her eyes; a scene she knew as well as she did the features of her mother and father, yet one she always picked a fresh detail from, the hawks black specks high above constantly circling, scanning for prey.

Her full, fleshy lips pursing closely together, arms wrapped around her and a gentle rocking motion to accompany the shiver; katabatic winds gathering momentum off the distant hills brought a cutting edge, a purity to the cold. Altostratus bands of cloud formed high above, set against the piercing blue sky backdrop, the sun began its final descent, re-entry, wrestling its way past layer after layer of ever thickening distant water vapour, absorbing radiant heat with it; wrapping her legs into her body, a foetal position, the steady rhythm of the shiver intensified, chattering of teeth doing little to steal the smile set across her features.

Unable to resist any longer, her eye line switched to the distant commotion across and down from the valley, a shake of the very earth herself as the vast beasts cantered to and fro, five figures working their way amongst the twelve four legged animals contained within the circular field; one man stationary at the centre, orders bellowed, his body language clearly throwing forth his intentions, expectations.

Planets orbiting the star to be found at the centre of the solar system, an inevitable draw to the gravitational well pulling all inwards, so the mix of horse and men worked their way around the grim-faced man at the epicentre, doing a poor attempt to hide his growing satisfaction. A slathering, rough tongue licked up the side of her face, Ruth barely flinched.

‘I know, Danteen, I know, but not the reality for you or I; not today nor tomorrow.’ The girl reached unseeingly into her backpack, pulling out a carrot, tossed into the air; the gentlest of neighs followed by a snort and air forced through nostrils, contented chomping ensued.

Hands now cradling her chin, fingers wrapped around her broad cheekbones.

‘So there you have it, a mix of colts and yearlings.’ A slight shake of the head intermixed the shivering, her eyes still struggled to see the giant babies as anything less than the stallions they would grow into given time.

The arrogance and pride an instinctive part of the breed, charging to and fro, stamping down upon the forgiving earth, sudden acceleration and sprinting from one of the distinct figures to another, treats and praise issued then so continued the training. Obstacles added and taken away, she could sense even from this distance the natural joy, a symbiosis of purpose between horse and man, one of the many training fields under her father’s direction that would provide towards the next generation of Chargers for the King’s Army.

The scene one of relaxed intensity, all present aware and skilled in their roles, the diminutive two legged figures controlling the vast colts with seeming ease, the four legged beasts snorted and bucked with pure energy, rearing and smashing back to the absorbent mix of tired grass and scuffed earth; and yet the figure bellowing in the middle, directing orders, correcting here and there, never stationary, attention always moving from one figure to another, praise and adjustments dolled out in equal quantities.

Her gaze left behind the training field, taking in the slightly smaller, less thickset horses in a dividing set of stone walls; animals looking on with a sense of envy, continually wondering what could have been.

Moving gracefully from one clump of grass to another, occasionally grazing as they elegantly cantered to and fro, a lifetime of carrying messages stood in front of them, the fillies and mares looked on with a degree of resentment to their brothers playing soldier in the adjacent field, their genes telling them that they were built for more than simply running one piece of information from point A to B, or if they were to be found wanting in that role, future

breeding stock and confined to this and that field, little chance to find their way across the vast, open space of Pantogan and beyond.

The young girl sensed the horse behind her once again. ‘I know what you are thinking, Danteen, me too.’ Any essence of a smile dropped from her features. ‘At least you get the chance to stretch your legs, canter across this playground, the kingdom your own training circuit.’ Ruth reached up to pat the mare’s neck, warm to the touch; a familiar frown grew. ‘Me?’ She glanced down, eyes taking in her broad shoulders, thickened waist and muscled thighs. ‘I hardly fit the bill for one of the female waifs they place on the Envoys now do I?’ She looked up to the sky, tears glinted in her eyes, hating herself for it, seemingly always returning to the splinter nestled deep within.

‘Your gender prevents you joining the King’s Army as a Charger, as does mine, one to wield the lance and shield, yet you get to fly across this landscape, one of the King’s Envoys...’ A wrinkling of her nose, the question not needing to be asked, rhetorical in its nature, the infected splinter dug deeper.

Movements quickly made, her eyes set, contact with the horse she knew as well as any human, both communicating clearly their intention. Swinging herself onto the muscled back, a final glance back towards the distant set of fields, stallions, mares and yearlings part of the machine to keep the King’s Army in their most feared, vaunted weapon.

Leaning forwards, she whispered in a bass tone. ‘Fly, Danteen, time to fly.’

This time there was little sense of finesse or grace, all muscle and power, both rider and horse driving forwards, digging deep into the yielding earth, no quarter offered or given, both threw energy outwards, away and against a reality that they could not change, a role neither would assume.