



## NO MORE



WYLLA LOOKED UP through her tears at Benjiah, strung between the two poles. Watching him rolled through the crowd in his wooden cage had pained her, but when he'd emerged looking defiant and unbroken, she thought that perhaps she could endure this after all.

He had looked so noble, noble and beautiful. She saw Joraïem in Benjiah's quiet strength. They pushed him toward the scaffold, and he walked up the stairs without comment, pride and strength in his calm demeanor. Surely he was on his way to death, for short of Allfather reaching down from the heavens and plucking him out of their midst, she could see no way out for him now. And yet, though his death seemed inescapable, she hoped she would be able to watch with the same unbroken pride and defiance.

She had hoped this until she saw him chained to the poles. The way they jerked the chains tight, pulling his arms up so

hard into their unnatural position, smashed any defiant courage, any vision of standing before her people in this dark hour as the strong queen unmoved in the face of defeat. She was reduced to the role of tearful mother, weeping for her only son.

“Why do they need to be so tight?” she whispered through her tears to Yorek.

He placed his hand upon her shoulder. She felt his fingers squeeze her slightly as a sign of reassurance, and then he left them there to remind her that she did not stand alone.

Tashmiren, in his ornate coat of dark blue with a scrolling red pattern embroidered upon it, moved to the front of the scaffold. He turned his back to the crowd and whispered quietly to Benjiah. She couldn't hear what he was saying, but she'd seen the man around Malek's camp and knew him to be a smug, smirking fool. She could imagine the cruel taunts rolling from his lips, and for a moment, anger overcame her sorrow and she clenched her fists by her side.

Benjiah raised his head slightly, and Wylla could see from where she stood that he was saying something in reply. Whatever it was, it seemed to bring the short conversation to a close, for after just a moment, Tashmiren turned back to the crowd.

The next few moments were almost unbearable. Tashmiren walked slowly back and forth across the front of the scaffold, saying the most ridiculous things. He spoke of their rebellion against Malek and their surrender as though they had been naughty children who refused to come to supper when called. He mocked their celebration of the Mound rites and their worship of Allfather. He went so far as to suggest that Allfather was a fabrication, that Malek was their true god.

A cold shudder passed through Wylla. What if what Tashmiren was saying was true? It was a terrible thought, but even as Tashmiren rambled, Wylla couldn't quite dismiss it. After

all, there was a certain logic to his argument: If Benjiah truly was Allfather's prophet, why was he chained to these poles, about to die? If Allfather could not save his prophet from this ignoble death, then perhaps Malek really was the one great power of Kirthanin. Not a god perhaps, but a malevolent demigod toying with lesser beings.

Wylla composed herself and pushed the thought away. There was evidence, counterevidence, that a power in this world was arrayed against Malek, at times an apparently stronger power. She couldn't think clearly at the moment about exactly what it was, but she knew it was there. Still, as Tashmiren turned to face her son once more, having enumerated the charges against him, she couldn't help but feel unsettled by this scene and Allfather's abandonment of her son. At times she had felt anger at Allfather for allowing her husband to die as he had, and now Benjiah's life neared its end. She couldn't help but wonder if she'd been naïve to believe all her life in a God who'd not seen fit to protect either her husband or her son, though apparently both had been His chosen instruments.

Benjiah's head jerked up from where it had been hanging as he stared at the platform. She was once more caught up in the scene.

"So," Tashmiren was saying, "having heard the charges that Malek brings before you, have you anything to say?"

Wylla looked past Tashmiren at her son, who met Tashmiren's gaze with little expression. *What could he possibly say?* She thought. *Don't bait him, Benjiah. He only wants an excuse to make your death more painful.*

Benjiah said nothing for a moment, and then his eyes moved past Tashmiren to the crowd. Wylla realized that he was looking at her. Involuntarily she lifted her hand and stretched it out toward him, as though by doing so she could touch his face and comfort him.

Benjiah looked into her eyes, and she treasured the love she saw there. She gazed back, trying to make an imprint of that moment upon her heart for however long she should have left to live. His eyes flickered back from her face to Tashmiren's, and she could see his lips move, though she heard no sound. She sighed. She wanted his death to be as painless as possible, but if Benjiah needed to speak, so be it. If by looking to her he had found the strength, even to lift his voice in a whisper, she was glad she could be here.

Wylla lost sight of Benjiah's face. Tashmiren had all but turned his back to the crowd and moved closer to Benjiah, and it seemed from where Wylla stood that a series of hostile whispers passed between the two men. Then Tashmiren stepped back, and she could see Benjiah's face once more.

She gasped at what she saw. Gone was the impassive face of calm defiance. It had been replaced now with a kind of ecstatic exuberance. He lifted his head as high as he could hold it. His blond hair fell away from his eyes, and she could see them clearly, no longer cold and resigned but bright and shining. At that very moment, he opened his mouth again, and this time his voice boomed, every bit as loud as Tashmiren's had been. His voice resounded above them, and to Wylla's surprise, she realized he was singing.

*Peace, my son, and lay you down,  
The sun has gone away.  
Wake and find the dawn at hand,  
Tomorrow is today—  
Tomorrow is today.*

What song was that? What words were those? What did they mean? Wylla looked to Yorek as though to ask, but before she could, Benjiah started the song over again, this time even louder, more clearly.

*Peace, my son, and lay you down,  
The sun has gone away.  
Wake and find the dawn at hand,  
Tomorrow is today—  
Tomorrow is today.*

Tashmiren seemed incapacitated by the bizarre turn of events. He stared dumbfounded at Benjiah. Once more she turned to Yorek as the song ended, but the sky seemed to crack and brilliant sunlight burst through the grey clouds. She looked up at the tiny crack, which quickly widened, magnifying the intensity of the light and blue sky many times over. She raised her hands instinctively, for her eyes weren't ready for the brilliance of a sun they had not seen in more than half a year. Her eyes flickered shut despite her desire to gaze at the blue.

The piercing bright light shone through her closed eyelids, making it only just bearable. Gasps and groans rose around her, and she felt jostled by the crowd as people shifted and squirmed, trying to shield themselves from the light. Both friend and foe alike, having lived and moved in semidarkness for so long, had been similarly stunned by the sudden burst of the full light of day.

Then, over the mumblings and murmurings she heard Benjiah call out, clear and strong. "Behold, he comes!"

The words rang out across the plain, and still Wylla could not open her eyes to look at her son or to try to see what he meant. Despite her inability to look for herself, Benjiah spoke again and her question was answered.

"The Father of Dragons! He comes!"

Benjiah stared at the golden forms approaching. An image of dozens of dragons winging their way through the air had flashed rapidly through his mind, their powerful wings beating as they flew eastward toward Tol Emuna. As the image

passed and he looked west at their barely visible approach, he thought to himself that he'd never seen anything so beautiful.

The crowd started to move as though waking up from a daze. Benjiah looked down at men and women, Malekim and Great Bear, and even Vulsutyrim opening their eyes as they began to get used to the bright sunshine. The break in the clouds had continued to expand, and now as Benjiah looked heavenward, blue sky stretched across the horizon. It was almost as beautiful to Benjiah as the dragons.

Despite the confusion in the crowd, three facts became apparent to Benjiah. The first was that the Vulsutyrim had heard his cry and were moving to prepare. The towering forms of the giants were in motion, and all around the moving giants was a growing commotion of men, Malekim and Great Bear scrambling to get out of their way. Some Vulsutyrim were gathering in the middle of the crowd, generally away from the scaffold and piles of weapons where they had been stationed, while others were moving away from the crowd, back in the direction of Malek's camp where Benjiah had started his day.

At first Benjiah wondered why, but then he thought of the great shields that he had seen the Vulsutyrim use in the skirmishes and battles against dragons along the Barunaan. Whenever dragons appeared, the Vulsutyrim came together under those shields, which did a remarkable job of protecting them from the dragon's fire. They had seemed from a distance to be wood with some kind of inflammable cured hide stretched over it. Surely the giants were headed to the camp to defend themselves.

The second fact that became clear to Benjiah was that the Great Bear were taking advantage of the Vulsutyrim's distraction to reclaim their weapons. A brief struggle took place around both mounds of weapons. The Nolthanim left behind by the giants were quickly overpowered by Great Bear, who armed themselves, established a perimeter around the

weapons, and began distributing swords, bows, and axes as quickly as they were able. The sight of the furious Great Bear wielding their staffs excited Benjiah almost beyond reason. He strained against his chains, but they held him tight. He felt discouraged by his inability to break free, but he did not despair. The dragons were coming, the enemy was in disarray, and the Kirthanim were beginning to rearm. Hope rose in him, even though he was still held fast.

The third fact that came to him was that the crowd nearest the scaffold was in utter turmoil. He couldn't see exactly why. He imagined that there had been far less room for the crowd to maneuver as the Vulsutyrim started moving away. The waves of displaced bodies had nowhere to go as they came crashing up against the great structure. Also, the captains of the Kirthanim had been near the scaffold, off to Benjiah's right. Likely they had the same idea the Great Bear did—get to the weapons. That the general confusion was an opportunity for them to break free of their guards and rally to the weapon deposits, he didn't doubt.

*Mother.* He surveyed the crazed scene swiftly to try to see her. He scanned the place where she had been, but he saw few distinguishable faces in the seething mass.

A movement on the scaffold drew his attention to something happening even closer to home. Tashmiren had summoned the large Nolthanim soldier, the man Benjiah assumed was his executioner. They stood close by, not two spans away, heads bent together so they could hear each other above the gradually increasing din. Tashmiren was looking sideways at Benjiah and pointing to the man's sword.

The wave of bodies that had pushed Wylla sideways past the scaffold had been irresistible. Had she not gone with it, she would surely have been trampled. As it was, it was all she could do to keep her footing. Yorek had almost gone down as well,

and both of them probably owed their lives to Rulalin, who first steadied Wylla and then grabbed Yorek, who had started to fall. When the sideward movement ceased, more or less, Wylla looked back up at the scaffold. She was too close to the side to see Benjiah, though the near pole rose high enough that she could still see the top of it.

Wylla turned from the scaffold to Rulalin. She knew what she must ask of him, and she knew that he'd have good reason to resist. She must persuade him, and quickly.

"Rulalin!" she called above the groans and chatter as she grabbed the man's arm.

He turned to look at her, then leaned in close to hear her.

"Benjiah," she said loudly into his ear as she pointed toward the scaffold.

Rulalin pulled back slightly and searched her eyes.

She reached up with both hands and took hold of his face, firmly but tenderly. "I need you. You were willing to help last night, and you are the only one who can help me now."

Rulalin looked up at the scaffold, then back at her. "I will do what I can."

Rulalin pushed through the crowd, his face still tingling from the touch of Wylla's hands. It was that touch, even more than the break in the clouds, that brought light to his darkness. The night before, he'd had some hope that he might be able to free Benjiah and get away from the camp. Maybe, he'd thought, they'd be able to evade capture for as much as a day, and for that day, he would be Wylla's hero and protector. Here, now, there was little hope of that. Whatever was going on, whether the dragons really were coming or not, he wasn't going anywhere with Benjiah even if he did manage to free Wylla's son. It was, quite literally, broad daylight, and that scaffold was surrounded by servants of Malek. Rulalin was under no illusions about getting Benjiah free and getting away.

Even so, when Wylla touched his face and looked into his eyes, he knew that he would do everything in his power to save the boy. Rulalin had lived much of his life in disgrace for what he had done in service to his obsession for her, and he was willing to die doing what he could in service to her, to Wylla herself. He owed her more than that, but he would give her what he could.

It was only a span or less to the stairs that led up to the platform, and yet getting there was like wading upriver through rapids. The tide of humanity pushing against him was almost impenetrable. Almost miraculously, he was able to find cracks here and there, tiny gaps between people, and the next thing he knew he had reached the bottom of the stair.

It was there that he met his first deliberate rather than incidental obstacle. A clear-headed Nolthanim soldier had escaped the drift of people a moment earlier by gaining the second or third step. He'd also managed to keep anyone else from using the stairs as a haven from the mad pushing and shoving. Rulalin had no doubt that he was looking out for more than his own welfare. He was there to make sure no one gained access to the prisoner.

The man had not yet noticed Rulalin's interest in his location, for there were many people before him, and Rulalin had approached from beyond the edges of his peripheral vision. Even so, Rulalin had no illusions about being able to draw his sword. Even if the quarters hadn't been so close that it was all but impossible, that movement would betray his intent long before he could attack. He needed another way.

There was no time to waste, and Rulalin had but one idea. He let himself drift behind the stairs with the natural movement of the crowd until he stood a half step behind the stair where the soldier stood, then he raised his right hand slowly and cocked it. Striking quickly, he grabbed the man's knee and pushed it forward. As he'd hoped, the

man's leg buckled and he teetered. Holding tight, Rulalin seized his opportunity and pulled.

It worked. The soldier pitched off the stairs into the crowd of people, and Rulalin immediately pulled himself up onto the stair. Another Nolthanim close by, saw the first man's fall, which cleared a space for him, and he leapt onto the bottom stair to come after Rulalin.

Rulalin did draw his sword now, and only just in time. The Nolthanim drew his and Rulalin was able to deflect the first stroke, though the force of it pushed Rulalin down against the stairs. He was desperate, lying on his back and in a vulnerable position. With his left hand he grabbed the hair hanging loose on the Nolthanim's head. He pulled it sideways at an awkward angle and heard the man grunt with the sudden jerk of his head. With the man's neck exposed, Rulalin swung his head forward and hammered it with his forehead as hard as he could, twice. The first time he hit mostly chin, but he pulled the man's head back harder and the second time he struck the exposed, fleshy part of the neck.

The soldier sputtered and Rulalin jerked up violently as he continued to pull the man with his left hand, and he managed to roll the Nolthanim off the stairs. The soldier fell into the jostling crowd, and Rulalin wasted no time in turning and scrambling the rest of the way up.

The executioner drew his sword and handed it to Tashmiren. The long, shiny blade gleamed in the bright sunshine, and Benjiah strained again against his chains, pulling with all his might. Allfather had spoken to him and assured him that this day was not his last. Benjiah knew what he'd heard hadn't been a dream or an illusion. Even so, he could not break the chains, and Tashmiren was drawing nearer with the sword, an even crueler, more insolent grin on his face than before. Benjiah kept pulling.

Tashmiren walked slowly, savoring Benjiah's helplessness. Though not entirely rational, the thought occurred to Benjiah that if he was to be cut open while chained between these poles, he'd rather the executioner do it than Tashmiren. The executioner drifted closer to Benjiah as well, but he had stepped to the side in deference to Tashmiren, who had obviously pulled rank and laid claim to this kill. Benjiah felt his anger and frustration returning. He wouldn't die by this man's hand. He just wouldn't.

Tashmiren stopped and held the sword up to Benjiah's neck. He could feel the sharp point against his vulnerable flesh, where Tashmiren pressed none too gently, and he stopped pulling against the chains for fear his motion, though slight, would get his throat cut. Tashmiren laughed softly. "Boy, dragons or no dragons, nothing can save you now."

Benjiah didn't reply, but he met Tashmiren's gaze evenly. Despite what he thought Allfather had promised him, he found it difficult to be hopeful in his current situation. Even so, though he might die, he wasn't about to plead, beg, or grovel, or lose his composure in any way that might suggest Tashmiren had gotten to him.

Benjiah was vaguely aware of the sounds of a scuffle not far away. Tashmiren must have heard it too, because he turned his head for a second and then turned back. He must not have seen anything of note, because his face betrayed no concern. "For whatever reason, your death is important to my master. Had things gone as planned, though, I would have been only a spectator to it. Now, I get to do it myself, and when this little commotion is over, I'll stand before him and take the credit and glory for making sure his will was done despite what has transpired. All in all, this day is working out well for me."

"The storm is broken and the dragons are coming," Benjiah said quietly. "I would be cautious about dreaming of your reward too soon."

Tashmiren lowered the sword so he could move in even closer. He stepped up until his coarse hair brushed Benjiah's cheek. "Your dragon friends couldn't deliver your army before, and that was before we'd decimated your ranks of men and Great Bear. They certainly won't deliver you now."

Tashmiren motioned with his free hand to the crowd. "The Bringer of Storms is here, as are his brothers and the rest of Malek's host. The coming of the dragons is only a momentary delay at best. In fact, it is fortuitous. They're saving us the trouble of climbing the mountains to find their gyres and hunt them down. It would have been a time-consuming and tiresome process."

Again, Benjiah held his tongue. The man made him so angry, and he knew that was exactly the point. He wanted to see Benjiah's frustration and anger so he could laugh as he struck the killing blow. Benjiah clenched his teeth and said nothing.

Tashmiren stepped back and raised the sword to chest level this time. "All right, boy prophet of Allfather, no more talk. Now you die."

As the last phrase slipped from Tashmiren's mouth, Benjiah felt the pull of *torrim redara*, and suddenly Benjiah found himself in slow time. He was struck, as always, by the instant silence, and he closed his eyes for a moment and breathed a sigh of relief. He opened his eyes again and looked at the man holding the sword. This was but a temporary stay of execution. When he entered the normal stream of time, Tashmiren would move quickly and swiftly to kill him.

*Benjiah.* It was the voice he had heard clearly for the first time in the storm while sailing south from Col Marena and most recently just moments ago. It was the voice of Allfather; he was sure.

*Benjiah.*

"Yes, Allfather, I am listening."

*Can you break the chains?*

Benjiah strained against them again, but even in slow time, they held him fast. “No, I cannot.”

*Nevertheless, they will be broken. Can you deliver yourself from the man before you?*

Benjiah looked at the raised sword. “No, I cannot.”

*Nevertheless, you will be delivered. You will be delivered, and when you are delivered, you will know that the fate of men is in my hand and no other. You will know that all I have promised, I will do. Look to your left.*

Benjiah turned left as far as his chains would allow. At first, he saw only the executioner’s big body, for he had taken up his position there and stood frozen, watching Tashmiren threaten Benjiah. Beside the executioner was the pole, and more than that, Benjiah couldn’t see.

“I don’t see anything.”

*Look more closely.*

Benjiah refocused, noticing for the first time something that was mostly obscured from his vantage point. Between the pole and the executioner he saw a glimpse of what appeared to be a crouching man moving from the side of the scaffold where the stairs were toward the pole and the Nolthanim guard.

He craned his neck even farther back, despite the pain that shot through his arms as he stretched them awkwardly in an attempt to get a better glimpse, and he was stunned by what he saw.

*I have raised up a deliverer, and he will save you from the hand of your enemy.*

“But that’s Rulalin Tarasir, my father’s murderer.”

*It is. He murdered your father, but today he will deliver you.*

“I don’t understand.”

*You will. For now, just see and understand that my arm has not grown short so that it cannot save.*

“I see and understand.”

*Good, now return to real time and see what I will do.*

Benjiah felt the pull and knew by the noise and commotion emanating from the crowd that he had left *torrim redara*. He looked up at Tashmiren, whose mouth was just closing behind a final taunt. Benjiah looked at the man's mocking eyes and said, "You fool, you're already dead and you don't even know it."

Before Tashmiren could react, a cry of pain drew his attention to the side, and both he and Benjiah turned to see the body of the Nolthanim executioner sliding off Rulalin's blade onto the platform. Benjiah turned quickly toward Tashmiren to drink in the sudden appearance of surprise and fear on his face as realization of his predicament set in.

"What are you doing?" Tashmiren said, turning defensively toward Rulalin, Benjiah now forgotten amid the more pressing matter of self-preservation.

"What I've wanted to do for a very, very long time."

Tashmiren stepped back slowly. "You wouldn't dare."

"Oh I would," Rulalin answered, stepping forward.

"You swore your allegiance."

"I did."

"You're breaking your oath."

"I am."

"Malek will kill you."

"Not before I kill you."

Tashmiren, holding before him the sword he'd had to borrow, nervously glanced sideways at Benjiah. "If you want the boy, just take him."

"I will, after I kill you."

Tashmiren lunged and tried to land a desperate stroke, but Rulalin easily deflected it, and with Tashmiren off balance, he slashed the back of the man's leg. Tashmiren howled as he dropped to his knees, blood seeping through the back of his cloak.

Grimacing, the wounded man looked up and directed seething hatred at Rulalin. Through clenched teeth he said, "You fool, you treacherous fool."

"Yes." Rulalin nodded. "That is exactly what I have been, but I am a traitor no more. I serve Malek no more."

With that, Rulalin drove his sword through Tashmiren's gut, just below his rib cage, until the tip of the blade came out of the man's back. Benjiah watched him drive the killing blow home, swiftly, deftly, almost effortlessly. He held Tashmiren upright, and then, after a moment, when he was sure Tashmiren was dead, Rulalin withdrew his sword and let the body fall.

Rulalin looked down at the dead man and turned with a grin to Benjiah. "I've been waiting to do that a long time."

Benjiah looked at Rulalin, a mixture of wariness and gratitude within. Allfather might have raised up Rulalin to deliver him from Tashmiren, but the traitor was still his father's murderer. How exactly Benjiah was supposed to respond to this turn of events was something Allfather had neglected to mention.

Rulalin did not wait for Benjiah's response. Glancing quickly left and right at the stairs on either side of the scaffold, Rulalin stepped closer to Benjiah. "I don't know how much time we have up here before we get company, so I'd better see about getting you down."

As Rulalin moved aside to examine the chain that held Benjiah's right hand tight, Benjiah saw that at the front of the scaffold, directly behind the place where Rulalin had killed Tashmiren, a man had been lifted up onto the stage and was now crouching, moving stealthily forward. It was the man Benjiah had noticed moving through the crowd, fury in his face as Benjiah sang.

As soon as the man realized that he'd been seen, he leapt toward Rulalin. Sunlight glinted off the dagger he was holding in his hand. Benjiah called to Rulalin, "Look out!"

It was too late. Rulalin had just begun to turn when the man buried the dagger up to its hilt in the small of his back. Benjiah saw the look of pain and surprise on Rulalin's face as he heard the blade go in, be withdrawn, and then be thrust in again.

Rulalin's sword clattered to the platform floor, and Rulalin fell past Benjiah with a crash and lay still.

"You have served your purpose," the man murmured as Rulalin fell. "I have no more need of you."

The turn of events caught Benjiah completely by surprise. Allfather had said Rulalin would deliver him but nothing about any of this. Now Benjiah seemed to be right back where he had been. Where was his deliverance going to come from now? This man intended his death as surely as Tashmiren had.

He looked into the man's eyes. They were dark and cruel, and the hate that burned in them was far deeper than Tashmiren's. He bent over and grabbed Tashmiren's body, which was lying right in front of Benjiah, and roughly pulled and tossed it aside. The man seemed strong, but Benjiah noticed he limped a little. He faced Benjiah again, this time with nothing separating them.

"I have big plans, and you can't be allowed to ruin them, child of prophecy or no," he said, stepping forward with the dagger, ready to strike Benjiah's exposed chest.

As the blade rushed in, the light and warmth that Benjiah had felt beside the Kalamín flowed through his body. The dagger kept coming toward him, but it seemed to be moving slowly now. Benjiah felt a rush of strength as he pulled with his right hand, ripping the chain from the iron ring on the pole and slashing the chain across the face of his lunging attacker.

The blow was sudden, fierce and startling. The man's head snapped back as the chain struck him, lacerated the side of his face, and drove his stab attempt wide of the mark. In fact, the dagger flew out of his hand and dropped over the edge of the scaffold. Benjiah pulled with his left hand and again ripped from the iron ring the chain that had only moments ago withstood all his struggles. He dealt the man a second blow, this one across his chest, sending him staggering back a few steps.

Benjiah felt the relief in his arms, free of their painful positions at last. Half a span of chain dangled from each wrist, but his arms were loose and he was free. The man who had stabbed Rulalin was dazed and off balance. Benjiah lowered his shoulder and struck the man hard enough to send him tumbling backward. He rolled over completely and fell off the front edge of the scaffold and into the crowd. Benjiah quickly looked around him for any other surprises, but he was alone on the scaffold.

He was alone on the scaffold, but he knew he had to get off it. An almost inexhaustible supply of men could be sent to kill him up here. He had to get away. The question was how.

He looked up at the horizon, which had been lost to him in the dramatic events of the last few moments. Swooping down out of the sky was the golden form of a dragon, dropping lower and lower and flying faster and faster. The dragon was flying right toward the scaffold, right toward him. As the dragon's intent dawned upon him, Benjiah braced himself. In a matter of seconds, he was firmly gripped in the talon of the dragon and soaring up above the scaffold, the crowd, and the battle beginning down below.