

Tide of Talons

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Prologue

He stared up at the knot in the wooden board above his head. It was unremarkable, just one of a thousand wooden swirls onboard the prison hulk. But this one was his knot, the one that he studied by feeble lamplight from his damp hammock, night after night. It gazed back at him, offering its cycloptic challenge to the grubby man swaying below. The light would be put out soon, plunging the pendulous array of weary convicts into the darkness of yet another night on board the prison ship, *Kornwallen*.

The vessel listed slowly but steeply on the shifting tide. The one occupant currently on his feet – the guard – steadied himself against the moist hull, and compensated for the ship's movement as he made his way to the far end of the deck. The groans of pain, exhaustion, illness and torment which filled the air, were abruptly drowned out by the deafening creak, as the ship shifted unwillingly on the water.

The guard peered into the gloom of the iron cells against the far wall, before unceremoniously, wordlessly extinguishing the single lantern. One hundred and twenty men in hammocks, along with the eight more concealed within the iron cages, were plunged into instant darkness. The guard navigated his way to the stairs by the meagre moonlight which now trickled in through the ragged portholes, to the sound of the clanking of the chains which linked each man to his

neighbour through his leg irons.

The man below the wooden knot remained staring at the same point above him, even though all he could see was empty blackness before his eyes.

'Lassel' came a rasping voice from the man next to him, 'Lasse, can you hear me?'

'Shhh!' he hissed in response, not fancying the vicious rebuke from the guard for talking after dark.

'Lassel' came his neighbour's voice again, 'Can you feel—'
And then he felt it.

The gentle listing of the ship had not quelled, as it usually would on the tide, instead the motion had continued to swell, joined too by the yawing of the bow. His hammock swayed dangerously to the side and, to the sound of chiming irons and cries of annoyance, he toppled to the rotten planks below, landing painfully with his arm beneath him. The chain around his ankle dragged his neighbour from his bed too, and the whole row of men clattered to the deck.

Cries could be heard from the crew and guards overhead, unintelligible but rife with panic. The motion of the boat had not stopped, and she rolled terrifyingly, slamming convicts against the hull. Lasse could not be sure whether the cracks he heard were those of splintering wood, or bones breaking upon impact.

Before any of the men could find their feet, the rolling vessel had transformed the bulkhead alongside them into the floor beneath them, torrents of water sloshing into the midship. Screams of pain and horror were cut short, as every man fought to keep his head above the rising waters.

Looking to his left, Lasse saw his neighbour's motionless form knocking against the hull, as the eddying seawater toyed with the unconscious man. Every movement dragged at the chain around Lasse's ankle, hauling him below the surface of the ever-rising water, slicing against his skin and adding his blood to the churning mixture of fluids. Above the gurgling of his ship mates, and the creaking of rotten beams, Lasse noticed a fresh sound, a hammering, thundering sound upon the timbers over his head, as if something were clambering,

clattering all over the *Korvallen*.

Something floated against him and pushed him back against the floor, which had now become the wall behind him. He grappled with the object and shoved it away, so that he might gain space to force his head back above the surface. As he did so, the swaying ship cast a shaft of moonlight through the porthole above him and, as it alighted on the object, Lasse could see that it was the body of one of the guards. His head was missing. As the moonbeam loitered on the scene, Lasse could see too the claw and tooth marks around the open neck wound, the man's dark blood seeping into the water around him.

This new horror upon horror caused Lasse to gasp involuntarily, just as a further yank from the leg iron dragged him beneath the icy water. His lungs filled with salt water, and he convulsed, a deeper blackness swam before his eyes, he felt astonishingly heavy, despite his emaciated form. Then, he was falling. With a mind wrenching roar, the hull of the ship gave way and a huge section of timber fractured beneath him, thrusting him out into the gelid currents beyond.

Up and down lost all meaning, as he was tossed around in the maelstrom beneath the crumbling ship. Hands clawed at him in the darkness, the seawater in his lungs freezing and choking him from within. He lost consciousness.

He awoke, retching a concoction of wet sand and stomach acid onto the dunes. It was still night, behind him the waves broke upon the shore, ignorant to the trials of the souls of the *Korvallen*. From somewhere Lasse heard a shout, but his vision swam and the miserable starlight provided only a misted blanket of illumination. He heard the shout again, closer he thought, a man's voice, but cut off shortly in the midst of whichever syllable he was uttering, his word instead becoming a splutter of anguish. Then more silence, save for the breaking waves and the grasses upon the sand dunes.

Lasse vomited again and wiped his mouth. The iron manacle was still around his ankle, but the shattering of the ship had pulled the slackened chain free. Putting the sea behind him and the sand beneath his feet, he began his blind

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stumble away from the beach. There was pain coursing through every inch of him, yet he staggered on, losing his footing more than once. Soon, the ground dropped away in front of him, and he toppled, tumbling head over heels several times on his descent from the dune, refilling his lungs with sand, along with his ears, nose and eyes too. Rolling into a tepid pool at the base of the slope, he turned onto his back and gazed helplessly to the distorted stars above. His nose was broken, and blood seeped down his face. Other parts of him were probably broken too, for all he knew, but now was a moment to simply lie and be.

Above the pounding in his ears, he heard something move in the grass.

'Who's there?' he spluttered.

No answer came, save the clear sound of bodily movement against foliage.

'Speak!' Lasse demanded, although the sound that came out of his mouth was an unintelligible gurgle.

Nobody spoke. But Lasse heard something enter the waters of the shallow pool in which he lay. Unable to move, he lay still staring at the stars, which appeared now a little clearer, but still fuzzy, listening to the approach through the water. A dark shape loomed over him, blotting out the twinkling pinpricks above, and he heard heavy breathing.

'Who is it? Who's there?' he choked, helplessly.

He could now feel the breath too, hot in contrast to the night air, warming his cracked skin unpleasantly.

'Who is—'

And then he got his response. There were no words, but a sound like the bark of a sick dog, which became a hiss and then ended. A sound which turned Lasse's already churning stomach and brought fresh bile to the back of his throat. The shape loomed closer, bigger against the night sky and exhaled its foul breath straight into Lasse's open mouth. He felt his stomach contort with revulsion, tried to cry out, but choked on his own blood. Then he heard voices, men's voices nearby. He tried again to call out, but the shape pressed its weight onto his chest and squeezed what little air there was from his lungs.

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Men's voices, shouting, getting nearer. The thing on top of him reacted to the sound, releasing the pressure and darting from his field of vision.

Lasse rolled onto his side, gasping for breath. Somehow, he regained his feet, and continued unsteadily away from the dunes, heading in what he believed to be an inland direction. Behind him he could hear the men's voices. But not shouting. They were screaming. And then, they were silent.

He was not sure how he managed it, but before too long he felt cobbles beneath his feet, and he felt the glow of firelight against his face. But he almost wished that he had perished upon the waves or in that pool among the dunes. The town, his town, was ablaze. People hurried about him, shouting, wailing, and buildings burned on all sides. His vision still struggling, he managed to orientate himself and make his way across the town square and located the end of his own street. It had been more than two years since he was last there, the memories, some happy, some not so, now eradicated by all that had followed. A figure bundled into him in their haste, and sent him tumbling to the gutter. No apology or assistance came, and the stranger was gone into the night. He clambered back to his feet, some small amount of clarity knocked back into him, and saw the door to his own house across the road. The buildings on either side were on fire.

The front door, when he reached it, was not locked. He entered from the havoc of the street into the unexpected calm of his own small living room, dancing flames casting mesmerising shadows from beyond the window.

'Kaya!' he called out, his voice still failing him. 'Kaya!'

There was a sound from the boards above his head, as someone moved upstairs. He hurried to the foot of the stair, tripping over a pair of large boots as he went. Men's boots. Not his. As he climbed to the second stair, she appeared at the top of the flight, her silhouette unmistakable.

'Lasse?;

'Yes dear.'

'You're here? You're alive. I thought you were-. What is happening out there?'

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'I don't know. But we must go.'

She clomped down the wooden stairs, meeting him near the bottom. She embraced him awkwardly; he winced in pain at her otherwise welcome touch.

'You're hurt,' she declared, holding his chin and inspecting his face. Her soft features were exactly the same as the last time he had seen her, save for her eyes, which now held something different, something affected, deep within them. 'How did you get out?'

Lasse shrugged, 'I'm not even sure how. The whole town is on fire, we have to go now.'

'Go where?'

'Anywhere Kaya, anywhere!'

She glanced around the living room uncomfortably, her eyes alighting on the pair of large boots in front of the fireplace. When she looked up, her eyes met Lasse's, and they held one another's gaze, each apparently waiting for the other to speak.

'I thought you were gone forever,' she said, eventually.

Lasse snorted. 'Are you coming or not? You will die if you stay here.'

'But I need to wait for—'

'He isn't coming back, whoever he is.'

'I know,' she conceded quietly, 'I've packed a few things,' she waved the sack that she was clutching.

'Do we still have the horse?' he asked hopefully.

'Had to sell it.'

'We won't get far on foot,' he mused, 'but we must go.'

Kaya nodded and they headed for the door. They scuttled across the street, leaning on each other for support. Lasse's vision still swam, his other senses also struggling to compensate.

'What is happening?' begged Kaya, grabbing a woman as she hurried past.

'Soldiers are coming.' Replied the woman, breaking free of Kaya's grasp to hurry on her way.

'Whose soldiers?' asked Kaya, as the woman retreated across the street, 'Whose soldiers?!' she repeated more

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intensely, but the woman was out of earshot.

'It's not soldiers you need to worry about,' panted a passing man, his face blackened with smoke and dirt.

'What do you mean?' asked Lasse, groggily.

'There's worse things in this night than soldiers and blades. You not seen?'

'What do you mean?' implored Kaya. But the man too had hurried on.

'Quick, follow me,' said Lasse.

'What?!' gasped Kaya, as she scampered across the road behind her husband.

'I'm getting us a horse,' he called back.

The passageway at the end of their row of small houses led, as Lasse recalled, to the livery stable. It was worth a chance, he reasoned. Turning the corner, they saw the stable ablaze. As they hurried closer they could hear, behind the closed door, the whinnying of an animal in distress.

'Wait here,' said Lasse, hurrying forward.

'Be careful!' demanded his wife.

The stable door was hot to the touch, but he managed to lift the wooden bar and heave one side open. A plume of flame and a rush of dark smoke hastened out. A panicked horse shoved the door fully open, erupting into the night air in an explosion of embers. A flaming timber crashed onto his shoulder, causing him to howl in agony. But there was no time for pain, he had to set it aside.

The horse circled maniacally in the yard several times, stamping and rearing. Lasse, noticing that the horse's tail was on fire, approached calmly but swiftly, clasp the bridle, and leading the animal directly to a water butt against the stable wall. As the wild-eyed animal tossed its head, Lasse managed to douse its hind quarters in rainwater, cooing into its ear until it gradually calmed. Still clearly jitterish in the presence of the flames, the horse nonetheless allowed Lasse to saddle it, and he led the beast back to the alleyway where he had left Kaya. She was nowhere to be seen.

Screams reached his ears from a hundred unseen mouths. Male, female, old, young, this night had brought terror upon

everyone. As the wind whipped hot dust against his face, and he struggled to maintain a hold upon the restless horse, he looked around frantically for Kaya. He turned his head, as one scream among the chorus struck a familiar note, to see her emerge from the shadow between two buildings. Her face was contorted in horror, her bare arms folded across her midriff. Holding his gaze, she tried to call out to him, but no sound came from her mouth. She lifted her right arm to reach out to him, but as she did so, she released the pressure on the fresh wound across her stomach, allowing a torrent of blood to spill onto the gravel at her feet.

Lasse's eyes and mouth widened simultaneously, as he discarded the reins and hurried toward her. She lifted her left arm ready to embrace him, but in so doing, relinquished all remaining support on her abdomen, letting her intestines fall from her lacerated belly, where they landed with a sickening wet sound as they met the ground. Lasse rushed to her side as she fell, the pool of blood expanding rapidly around her.

'Kaya! Kaya dear!'

Her eyes were glazed, her mouth locked in a warped, rictus grin.

'KAYA!' he shook her, and blood poured from her mouth, her body limp. Something moved in the darkness between the two buildings, something big. A horrifying sound followed from the same direction, a sound like the scraping of slate tiles magnified a thousand times, like the guttural hiss of some angry beast. An explosion of flame behind revealed an inexplicable silhouette – something huge, bigger than a man, reared on hind limbs, and he saw a gargantuan mouth open, issuing forth the horrible sound once more.

Terror truly gripped Lasse. He let Kaya's limp form drop to the dirt and scuttled backwards from the looming horror. The horse stood stomping, several paces away and, before he had time to think any more, he found himself in the saddle, urging his mount across the cobbles, accelerating toward the city gates. All became an incomprehensible melee of sound and smoke and flame and darkness and terror. He blocked it from his mind, focusing on clinging to the horse's mane as it

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pelted through the gates and out into the welcome cool darkness of the fields beyond.

As the emotions broiled within him, he found himself longing for his hammock aboard the prison hulk, longing for the tedium of studying his wooded knot. Longing for any time before this night.

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