

A Fire in the West

A FIRE IN
THE WEST

HARRY JAMES FOX

LUCIA MUDGWAY

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A Fire in the West

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Editing by Codi Ribitzki

Cover Painting by Evelina Valieva

Cover by Jay John Bennington

Map by Silvia Dobрева

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TO
OUR FAMILIES

Sic semper tyrannis
(Thus always to tyrants.)

MARCUS JUNIUS BRUTUS

MAP OF STONEGATE



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PREFACE

This book is the third in the Stonegate series. The first, *The Stonegate Sword*, was published in 2015 and received multiple awards, including a bronze medal in the 2016 Global eBook Awards. It tells the story of Donald of Fisher and how he came to change course from being a lore-man, or scholar, to a soldier and his adventures along the way. The second book, *The False Prophet*, continued where the first left off but contained enough background information to make it stand on its own. It received a silver medal from Literary Titan and other awards as well. This third book takes place a generation later and can also be read as an independent novel.

Lucia Mudgway from Australia and Harry James Fox from the United States are coauthors. For those interested in the setting of the novels, to include a mention of place names, these details are briefly mentioned in the afterword. Included in the final pages are also a family tree and additional maps of the Stonegate area.

We want to give credit to people who helped us bring this third work to completion:

Our principal editor, Codi Ribitzki, deserves much credit for refining and correcting the final product. She certainly made our job much easier. Other skillful editors were Leila König and Alice Lunsford.

Thanks are also due to Carroll Fox, who used her expertise as an English teacher to find and fix many errors in the early drafts.

Finally, we want to thank the many readers of early proof copies for their insights and suggestions. Mike Rundle was one. For the rest, you know who you are.

CHAPTER 1



An Incident on the Cash River

Look, it will be like a lion coming from the thickets of the Jordan to the watered grazing land.
Jeremiah 49:19 HCSB

The great cat lay on a granite ledge surrounded by clumps of ryegrass as tawny as his fur. His belly was full, and he had hidden the remains of a tender doe that would be good for several more meals. But that did not mean he was uninterested in the prey that stood several long bounds below. He was very interested. A human observer would have been amazed at his patience as he crouched with only his whiskers twitching.

He knew nothing of the concept of patience. When he observed prey, time passed with the speed of a hummingbird's wing. His brain was hard-wired to recognize prey. It had something to do with their nervousness, the fluttering ears, and the large eyes searching for threats. These particular prey were big, bigger than most, but still prey, and they held his complete attention.

But there were others there as well. They had a strangeness, a wrongness about them. They were tall, as if standing on their hind legs, and they had none of the mannerisms of prey. Their movements were deliberate, and they seemed to act like hunters, rather than the hunted. They made him uneasy. He caught their strange odor, and it had a wrongness as well. He could smell a hint of something else—another kind of wrongness, but of a familiar sort.

The cat had smelled it before, from charred vegetation, turned black. He had even seen the strange red flowers that flickered and glowed and seemed to eat growing things. The smell was distinctive, and these others, the not-prey, had a whiff of that strange odor about them.

For all his size and strength, he was a cautious creature. The prey were tempting, but he had no intention of moving closer. He kept his eyes fixed upon them, watching, waiting, watching. Even when some of the wrong-things moved away toward the water hole, he continued to lay still. Time meant nothing to him.



The breeze blew down-canyon as it often did in the morning. It softly caressed her tanned cheeks. She was glad that she had not used the stinky scent-blocker that Robby used, since it did not matter now. Her green eyes focused on a nearby serviceberry bush. She could just see the tips of the antlers of a mule deer buck. They had been stalking him for two hours, and they were very close.

Ari Westerly had been hunting several times with her cousin, Robby Fisher, but it had been frustrating. For one thing, they had to go a day's ride from Stonegate before they had seen many tracks. Deer were scarce, closer in, and there had even been talk about setting up a hunting season like the ancients had used. Even here, hunting was not easy. The big bucks, particularly, were wary and understood very well that humans were a deadly danger.

The antlers moved and the tips of the gray ears came into view. She could see the shape of the large antlers now. They were a dark gray at the base, corrugated, but shaded to beige, then bone-white toward the tips, which looked as sharp as daggers. Then she saw the black nose and the muzzle, and the large, dark eyes. She froze, motionless.

She and Robby wore dull brown tunics, and she wore dark green tights on her legs and matching sleeves. They had both daubed their faces with green and brown hunter's paste and branches dangled from slits in their clothing. She usually kept her blonde hair in a tight braid that hung down the middle of her back. Her body was thin and wiry, and she knew she was strong for her size. The bow she used had a heavier draw weight than most

girls her age could manage. She knew that deer had keen vision, but for some reason, they did not seem to see motionless things as a danger. The buck stared at them for a long minute, then turned away and took a bite of browse.

He took another step with his dainty legs, then threw his head up and looked at them again. She held her breath, trying to avoid blinking her eyes. Then he took another step and another. He was almost completely exposed. The buck lowered his head and turned slightly away. She started to draw her bow, but Robby motioned “no” with his right hand. She froze again.

He took another couple of steps and was completely exposed, perhaps thirty yards away. He turned his head to look up-canyon as if he smelled a scent from that direction. Robby smoothly raised his bow and drew it. She followed his lead, bringing the thumb of her right hand to her cheekbone. They both loosed their arrows at the same instant. It was noisier than she expected, since the silence was so profound. There was a sharp *snap-twang*, and she saw her arrow arch up, perfectly in line with her target just behind the buck’s shoulder, and disappear.

The buck jumped, and with a springy, bouncing lunge disappeared behind some small pines. Then everything was quiet, except for a branch that she heard crack farther to the left. She lowered her bow and allowed the tension to start draining from her arms and legs.

“I think we missed,” whispered Ari. “I can’t believe it. He was well within range.”

Robby turned and smiled. His face looked comical, streaked with the brown and dull green smears, and his nose was sunburned and peeling. “We didn’t miss,” he said. “That was a good shot, Ari. I think we got two pass-throughs.”

“Let’s go and see,” said Ari, starting forward. But Robby put a hand on her arm.

“Not yet. Let’s sit down and wait awhile.” He proceeded to do just that, lowering himself to the pine needles and resting his back against a tree. She also sat beside him, shaking a cramp out of her left arm.

“Why can’t we go look?” she whispered.

“We don’t want to scare him. He has been hurt, but if we don’t chase him, he will feel weak and will lie down. But he will keep watching behind

him. In time, when he has lost enough blood, he will go to sleep. Then we can follow his tracks.”

“How long do we have to wait?” asked Ari.

“Oh, about as long as it takes to eat breakfast,” said Robby. “But since you always gobble your food down, we will have to wait even longer than that.”

She punched his arm. “That wasn’t nice. I don’t gobble my food,” she said. “But it takes you longer since you eat enough for two normal people.”

“Ouch,” said Robby. “Don’t keep doing that. But don’t worry. I expect if we find our arrows, they will be bloody.”

They sat in silence, listening to the breeze in the treetops. They heard the scolding cry of a Steller’s jay. A short time later, they saw the busy black shape of a pine squirrel, frisking on a branch. Robby pulled out a water bottle and offered her a drink. She accepted with thanks and enjoyed the taste of the spring water even though it was warm.

Robby was nearly twenty years old and was almost exactly a year older than Ari. They were first cousins but had been raised almost as brother and sister. They had been involved in many adventures and were nearly inseparable. But Robby had been attending the military academy at Stonegate for two years now, so she did not often get to see him. It was August, the academy was taking a holiday, and she and Robby had decided to go deer hunting. She had been practicing archery every day for weeks, getting ready for the trip.

Carla, Ari’s mother, was an artist with a bow and arrow. She had a gift and made it look easy to put an arrow in the middle of the target. It was not easy for Ari. She had to work at it. She knew that she was a decent archer. She also knew that she could never match her mother, even though her mother was on the edge of old age, over forty.

Robby was probably a bit better than she at hitting targets, and his bow had a much heavier draw weight. He was about six feet tall, and his shoulders and arms were muscular, developed by years of hard work on the farm. His hair was almost black, with reddish highlights, and curly. This was strange, since his mother’s hair was still a pale blonde and his father’s ash-brown with blonde highlights, though he had gray at the temples. Ari loved her Aunt Rachel and Uncle Don almost as much as her own parents.

Robby touched her arm and motioned ahead. They stood, placed arrows on their bowstrings and began cautiously walking to where the buck had

been standing. They searched for a few minutes. Robby was annoyed that he could not find his arrow, but they found hers right away. It was sticking in a small hummock, and, as Robby had predicted, it was glazed with dried blood. Nearly dried, that is—a few drops were still tacky to the touch.

“My arrow probably slid under the pine needles,” he said. “We might never find it. Let’s follow his tracks.”

The trail was not hard to follow. The buck had been running hard, and his hooves had left dark scars on the forest floor. They also found a small drop of blood here and there. But there was not much. Ari became concerned. Surely, if the buck had been mortally wounded there would be more blood to find.

“I think we only scratched him,” said Ari. “There are only a few drops once in a while.”

“Yes, but look here,” said Robby, and he pointed to a small oak brush. “See the frothy blood here? He blew that out of his nose. He has been hit in the lungs.”

A few minutes later they found a patch of matted leaves, soaked with blood. But the buck was gone, and the tracks were indistinct. It was as if he left walking rather than running. Robby now looked worried, and they puzzled for a while, trying to find his trail. Ari found more drops of blood farther up the hill, and they continued on.

“I had hoped to find him where he had laid down,” said Robby. “I don’t like seeing him get up and go on farther.”

But then Ari looked ahead and saw a tan shape under some low-growing juniper. It was the buck. They approached him cautiously, but it was clear that his life had slipped away. Ari lifted his head by tugging on his antlers. It was surprisingly heavy. His eyes no longer glistened. They seemed to be covered with a thin film, much like a frosty window on a winter day.

“He’s beautiful,” whispered Ari. “Robby, why did we do this? It seems so wrong, now. Why didn’t we just let him live?”

“I know,” said Robby, giving her a hug. “There is a wrongness about death. I feel it too.”



Ari ran back down the trail to find Charlie, who had stayed with the horses. Charlie was at least ten years older than Robby and worked for her parents

on Westerly-stead. He was big and strong—and slow. It wasn't just his large body that was slow moving. His mind seemed to work slowly, too. Some people thought him backward, yet she knew he was really quite intelligent. But it was as if time ran more slowly for him than normal people. He was clever in working out problems, such as figuring out the proper saw-cuts to build rafters. Her father, Howard, often said he did not mind that Charlie was slow since he always came up with the right answer in the end.

Charlie was patiently waiting in the shade, holding the lead ropes attached to the horses' halters. He saw her coming and stood. "Hello, Miss Ari," he said. "You seem to be in a hurry. Did you get one?"

"That we did, Charlie," she answered. She was a bit out of breath and did not say much. She took her horse's rope and slid her bow into its case. "Robby is field dressing him. He is a nice buck. I think Mum will be a bit surprised."

Charlie tightened the cinch on his horse, a tall, rangy black. He wrinkled his brow. "What will surprise her?"

"You know what," she answered. "We've gone out several times and always returned empty-handed. But not today."

"Maybe you should catch your breath," Charlie suggested. "There is no hurry."

"I know. You are never in a hurry. But we need to get him back home and hanging in a cool shed. We don't want the meat to spoil."

On the way back, Charlie pointed out the paw-prints of a mountain lion. "He looks to be a big one."

"I didn't see him," said Ari, scanning the hillsides above them. "But the track does look fresh."

"You almost never see them. But he is up there somewhere. Probably watching us right now."



Butchering animals and caring for the meat was second nature to Robby. He had the buck dressed and almost skinned when Ari and Charlie rode up. Charlie removed the panniers, which were large canvas bags, from Peg's pack saddle.

Peg was a tall bay mare. She did not like the smell of blood and refused to go close to the fallen buck. She snorted and stamped a forefoot. Ari groaned. She did not want to deal with a temperamental mare.

“Easy, there, Peg,” said Charlie. He spoke in a soothing voice and patted her neck as she danced in place. Ari took the meat sacks from the panniers and passed them to Robby.

“I hope she doesn’t cause trouble,” said Robby as he finished the skinning and wiped the blade of his knife. He took a hatchet and divided the carcass into quarters. The small blade made chopping noises like a man splitting wood for a fire.

It did not take long to get the panniers filled. Ari took Peg’s lead rope so Charlie could lift the first pannier. He approached Peg from the off, or right, side. Peg tossed her head and snorted again while sidestepping to the left. Her eyes showed white at the margins. Robby stepped forward and took hold of her halter so that both he and Ari could hold her in place.

Ari patted Peg’s nose and kept speaking to her. “Easy girl. It’s all right.”

Charlie hooked the leather loops of the first pannier over the wooden X-shaped crossbucks of the pack saddle and let Peg take the burden a bit at a time. She seemed unsteady.

“Robby,” said Charlie, in his slow, measured voice. “Come here and lift part of the weight. I’ll get the other one and we will balance the load.”

Robby did as he was told. When Charlie approached with the other pannier, Ari gently twisted Peg’s ear to distract her.

She remembered an old horse trainer telling her: *A horse can only keep one idea in his head at a time. Twist his ear and he won’t think of anything else.*

Peg did settle down as soon as both panniers were in place, and Robby helped Charlie transfer the hide and head to the center of the pack saddle. Then they covered everything with a tarp. When the load was secured with a pack cinch and rope and the hitch was tied, Charlie checked their work. Finally, after his deliberate inspection was complete, they mounted and took the trail toward home. It would take five hours, but it was downhill—an easy ride.

Ari went first, riding on Rusty, her little roan gelding. He was not a sprinter, but was agile and had endurance. She also liked his easy gaits; he was smooth and collected.

The trail led easterly, and they crossed from the first valley to another by angling upward to cross over a rocky ridge. Patchy brush covered the slope.

Robby spoke from behind. His voice was low, but his tone was urgent. "Quick," he said, "we've got to get out of sight. Turn left and get behind those bushes."

Ari looked back. Robby had been bringing up the rear, but he was spurring forward in a trot. She saw him pointing and reined in that direction. She urged Rusty into a gallop as they dashed toward cover.

Once hidden, they turned their horses to face each other. "I saw riders on the far ridge," said Robby. "I don't want them to see us."

"Why not?" asked Ari.

"Because they look like Raiders."

CHAPTER 2



The Academy

Since they have led My people astray saying, ‘Peace,’ when there is
no peace...

Ezekiel 13:10 HCSB

Donald of Fisher scratched his head, then closed his eyes as he squeezed the bridge of his nose. He looked up at his niece, Arielle. “Are you sure, Ari?” he asked. He kept his tone neutral, but she heard a note of doubt, and she felt her cheeks grow warm.

“Uncle Don,” she said, “of course I’m sure. Who else could they have been? They had their shaggy dun ponies; they were armed for war...”

“But what color were their shields?”

“Some red, some black, some red and black. That is the colors the Raiders use, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” answered Don. “Yes, it is.”

Ari stood and faced him. “You are going to say that the Raiders are a thing of the past, aren’t you? But I know what we saw.”

“Very well, Ari, I believe you. Please sit down.”

She complied and Don continued. “But we have had reports like this before.”

“Maybe those other reports were true.”

“I don’t think so. There have been attacks on travelers—on caravans. But the attackers always turned out to be common thieves.”

Ari said nothing. Don looked at her and sighed. She set her jaw. *The problem is not convincing him. He knows me. Convincing someone else will be the problem.*

“Where is Robby? Why did you come alone to tell me?”

“Mum asked Robby to help her drive some cattle out of the orchard. Then he was going to see if you were at the academy. I told him I would come here to see if you were in the lore-house.”

“That makes sense.” Don stood and took his floppy felt hat from a peg. “Let’s go to the academy. I want to hear this from him, too.”



Twenty years before, the Raider attacks had ceased. The decisive defeat of the False Prophet’s army had ended not only open warfare but also the raids from the West. Don had hoped that the scourge of the Raiders would never return.

The Raiders were mercenaries, paid by the False Prophet to spy, harass, and sow confusion among the towns and cities east of the mountains, called the Western Wall. In the lands farther west, they served as the Prophet’s tax collectors and enforcers of his will.

But even though the Prophet’s army had been defeated, his rule had not ended. Many had hoped that the collapse of the Prophet’s grandiose plans and his humiliating defeat would cause his long-suffering people to rise against him. In fact, there had been word of insurrections, even an attempted palace coup, but the Prophet had crushed them all.



“Uncle Don,” began Ari as she gathered her things. “What do you think this means?”

Don looked at her as if his thoughts were far away. He stared at her for a long moment. He had a faint smile on his face.

“Why are you looking at me so?” asked Ari, rubbing her cheek. “Do I have dirt on my face?”

“For once, no,” said Don, giving a chuckle to show he was making an attempt at a joke. “No. I was just thinking that if you had red hair, you would look just like your mother the first time I ever saw her.”

Ari had heard that story many times. She knew he had first met her mother, Carla, when he and several friends had rescued her, Ari’s Aunt

Rachel, and four other girls from a Raider camp where they were being held as prisoners. Rachel was now Don's wife and Carla his sister-in-law since Carla had married Ari's father, Howard, Rachel's brother.

She sighed, smelling old books, a musty hint of mold and old leather. Don was filling a saddlebag with a notebook and some items from a drawer. The room had many bookshelves crammed with books, and one wall was nearly covered with swords and armor—old battle trophies. "I suppose," she answered, finally. "But why would the Raiders come back? How did they get past our patrols?"

Don threw the saddlebags over his shoulder and led his way toward the stable. He walked with a limp, his hair was shot with gray, and there were deep smile lines on his ruddy cheeks, but she thought he looked young for his fifty-odd years. "I am afraid that our patrols are not likely to have seen these Raiders, if Raiders they are. We send them out too infrequently, and most of the watchtowers are no longer manned."

At the stable, Don saddled his horse, Skipper, and led him out into the square between the lore-house and the Quill and Sword Inn. Ari led her mount out behind him. They tightened the girths and then mounted. He and Ari rode down the wide street leading to the Gate of Weeping, the north-facing gate leading out of Stonegate. Ari admired Don's mount. The blood bay color was striking. His shiny red coat contrasted with his midnight-black mane, tail, and stockings. The only white was a tiny star in the center of his forehead. She liked her horse, Rusty, but he was a full hand-and-a-half shorter, and his coat had none of the glossy sheen of Skipper.

They spoke little except for a few pleasantries, but Ari was comfortable with silence. She knew her uncle often seemed distant, lost in his own thoughts. But at other times he was warm and friendly and seemed to dote on her.

Leaving the gate, they took a narrow road to the northwest that passed by a prominent grassy mound. It did not look significant, unless one knew it was the mass grave of thousands of men who gave their life trying to conquer Stonegate, long ago. The victims were nameless, but a black granite tablet stood nearby, inscribed with words wishing they would sleep in peace.

Halfway between the burial mound and the horse troop barracks stood their destination. The academy was a two-story building with two wings.

It was quite modern, built of white stucco with a pitched red tile roof. The wings half surrounded a grassy lawn that nestled invitingly before it. Another principal feature was a large parade ground where cadets drilled and did weapons practice. A low wall surrounded the campus, perhaps ten feet high. The wrought-iron gates were open and a lone guard in a small guardhouse waved them through, giving Don a snappy salute.



They left their horses in a stable which stood beside other outbuildings behind Academy Main, the principal structure on the campus. Robby's horse was tied there, switching flies with his tail.

They entered through the back door and went directly to Don's office, at the end of a short hallway. Voices murmured, but they could not make out the words. They entered the room, Ari a couple of steps behind Don.

The office was large enough for a desk and a small conference table. A window with real glass panes gave light enough, so the lamps were unlit. An elderly man with a weather-beaten face was sitting in a side chair. Ari recognized him as Gray John, an old battle companion of her uncle and chief military instructor at the academy. Robby was leaning against the desk, arms folded, his face set and somber. Two other men sat at the table.

"There you are, Robby," said Don. "We've been looking for you."

"I thought you would be here, Father," said Robby, looking at the floor. He seemed withdrawn, almost sullen. He did not smile.

Don directed Ari to a chair and sat down himself. "Ari told me what you saw. Why don't you tell me your side of the story?"

Robby looked up. "I don't have a side. We identified a patrol of Raiders in full armor heading west, away from Stonegate."

Don turned to the man next to him. It was Thomas of Longmont, Stonegate council member and another old friend that he had fought beside. "What do you think, Thomas?"

"We have been discussing this with Robby, here. It is hard to believe, but... I take it you witnessed the same thing, Ari?"

"Yes, I did," answered Ari. "We know what we saw. And Charlie saw them too."

“Well, I for one don’t doubt you in the least, lass,” said the third man, whom Ari knew was Colin McCoy, another family friend. “That is not the issue with me, and I hope you understand that.”

“I think I hear a problem coming,” said Don. “So, what is the issue?”

“The main issue is what we should do about this news. The problem will be convincing Stonegate to do something about it.” He turned toward Ari and fixed his blue eyes on her. She noticed that his hair was as red as her mother’s and only had a few flecks of gray. But he was burly, while her mother was slight. *I wonder if Colin and my mother are related.* After a pause, he continued, “No offense, now, but people will say you young people let your imaginations carry you off. And Charlie, you know he’s slow. My mother would say he’s slower than creeping ivy.”

“But Mister McCoy, it seems to me what matters is what’s true,” said Ari. She wanted to say more but held her tongue with an effort. “And Charlie may be slow, but he’s not stupid.”

“Not a bit of it, lass. I wish Charlie was helping us here at the academy. As for truth, that was well said. In the end that’s all that matters. But people will believe what they want to believe, and they won’t want to think that the Raiders are back, with all that might mean.”



Don and the others questioned the two young people for perhaps a half-hour. Then they took a break to find some lunch. Most of the staff were away on holiday, but they found bread, sausage, and cheese, and brewed tea to go with it. They ate at the conference room table and tried to decide on the best course of action.

Don noticed that Robby seemed tense and tried to set him at ease. “Tell me, Robby,” he said. “Why were you and Ari riding up there in the first place? I don’t remember you saying anything about it.”

“I’m sorry, Father,” said Robby. “Ari and I have been planning a hunting trip for weeks. I’m sure Mother knew all about it. I assumed you did, too.”

Don glanced at Gray John, then looked back at Robby. “I see,” he said. “I will discuss this with you later.”

“I know. Never assume,” replied Robby. “It won’t happen again.”

Thomas of Longmont cleared his throat. "That's all well and good," he said. "But we have a problem here. Two problems, actually."

"Let me see," said Gray John. "The first problem is the False Prophet. Sending out his Raiders again means he has something in mind, and he is willing to risk alerting us. Why would he risk that unless he feels very confident?"

Don nodded. "I see what you mean. We need more information about what is happening in his dominion."

"What you are all talking around," said Colin, "and forgive me for being so blunt..." He paused for a long moment. "You know it will be very difficult to convince Stonegate to take this report seriously."

"We have not been talking around it," said Don. "We have bludgeoned it to death."

"We have two votes on the council," said Thomas. "Mine and Rachel's. You won't have a problem convincing us."

"Yes, and thanks," replied Don. "But every faction on the council will have reason to put off a decision, and two votes won't be enough. They will all say Rachel is siding with me and her son. They know we are close friends, so your vote will also be seen as biased. The mayor's father regarded me as his bitter enemy until the day he died. Everything I suggest, he opposes, just as his father did before him."

"There is one bright spot," said Gray John. "The commander of Stonegate's horse troops does not need the council's permission to send a patrol west. Hamway is a good man. I trained him myself. I will speak with him."

Don looked at Gray John and smiled. "Well, old friend, if anyone can convince him to investigate, it's you. I'm just sorry that you aren't still leading the horse troops, yourself."

CHAPTER 3

†

Home Fires

A time to love and a time to hate;
a time for war and a time for peace.
Ecclesiastes 3:8 HCSB

The stable was quite small; it only had four stalls. But there was a breeze-way down the center wide enough to hold a wagon and a four-wheeled carriage. So it served as a carriage house as well. Don unsaddled Skipper and placed the saddle and blankets on a stand in the tack room. Then he led him out the back door and down a lane to the horse pasture. When he removed the bridle, Skipper nodded his head as if in appreciation, then walked a few paces, lowered himself to the ground and rolled. He obviously was enjoying himself.

Don watched him and was suddenly reminded of Old Robert, who had taught him most of what he knew of horses. Robert had been commander of Ariel's horse troops during the war against the False Prophet, long ago. The old man had taught him much, and he remembered the day he had died in battle, a crossbow bolt in his side. Don still blamed himself for his death. Robby, his son, had been named for his old mentor, and Don told stories about him to his children.

He did not want Robert to be forgotten, not that there was much chance of that. He lay buried in the nave of the largest church in Ariel, and he was still considered a folk hero by the people of the area. Don rarely thought about it, but he knew that he, himself, was famous in song and story as the

Lore-man on the Red Horse. He had traveled there several times with Rachel and had been warmly received. The elders of Ariel had asked if Don might be buried beside the old warrior. They even showed them a vault that had been prepared for that purpose.

No one likes to think about their own mortality and still less those they love. Rachel had been strangely upset, and the elders had quickly assured her that she would tender them a great honor if she gave permission to be buried there, too, at Don's side. They had both thanked them and promised to give the matter serious consideration. They had discussed the matter several times and had yet to come to a decision. Rachel considered the subject morbid even though she understood that it was considered a great honor. Don was tempted to give permission and even write it into his will since he was not held in great esteem by many Stonegate leaders. But Rachel had a family plot at Westerly-stead and that complicated matters.

Skipper rolled completely over on one side then back over to finish on the other side. Robert had said that this was a good sign. *If he rolls to one side, then completely over to the other, he's a good horse.* Don did not know if that was true, but Skipper was a good horse. But he was no warhorse like Snap who had carried him safely through many battles. The sad thing about owning and loving horses was that they died too soon. Snap had been put out to pasture when too old to ride. Don had himself found him dead, lying in knee-high grass. His great heart had failed him, at last.

Don hung up the bridle and walked to the house. It was a modest two-story dwelling, built of brick. The black grillwork over the windows contrasted with the white shutters and front door. He did not climb the two granite steps in front but continued to a side door that gave access to the kitchen. He entered and saw Sara, his daughter, kneading a bulging mound of dough. She turned and smiled. "I can't hug you, Daddy; my hands are covered over in flour."

Don gave her a hug and kissed her cheek. "That's fine. I can hug you," he said. "Where is your mother?" Sara was a happy twelve-year-old with rosy cheeks, full lips, and beautiful golden chestnut hair. She was just starting to show some graceful curves, though she still had the figure of a wood sprite. She was a girly-girl, with little interest in outdoor things, though she did

enjoy horseback riding with her big brother. She also enjoyed teasing him unmercifully.

Sara told him that Rachel was in the study, so he walked that direction, lobbing his floppy hat at a hat rack in the hall. He met her at the study door while in mid-stride. They almost collided, and Don took advantage of the moment to steal a kiss. "How are you, Blue-eyes?" he asked.

She patted his cheek. "I am glad to see you. Robby stopped by. He was upset about something. He said he didn't want to worry me, but of course, that made me worry." She paused for a moment as she led the way to two easy chairs between their two desks. "Oh, he said they got a nice buck. I will look forward to some venison."

Don followed her and they both sat. "As will I," Don said, after a moment. "But you had reason to worry. I don't know why he did not tell you—or why he did not tell me about the hunting trip, for that matter."

Rachel put her hand to her mouth and her blue eyes widened. She had her blonde hair pulled back in a bun, and there were a few snow-white threads at her temples. Otherwise, she could have passed for a young woman in her late twenties. Time had been kind to her, despite the grief she had endured. "Oh, Don," she said in a whisper. "I'm sorry. I knew about it and forgot to mention it. Going hunting, I mean. But what else happened?"

Don told her the whole story. He had no problem convincing her that Robby and Ari had seen a Raider patrol, but she saw instantly that they could not easily translate that information into decisive action. She relaxed a bit when Don explained that Gray John was sure he could convince Commander Hamway to send out a patrol.

Don and Rachel discussed the bad feelings that Mayor Billings bore, approaching hatred toward Don. "I don't think he hates me," said Rachel. "He and I often disagree, and he chafes at a woman being on the council. He often says my Christian beliefs always encourage sentimentality and weakness. He says I avoid the hard decisions. But his father has poisoned his view of you."

"I know, dear," said Don, rubbing his brow. He looked out the window and could smell the newly mown hay. The memories came rushing back. He remembered the plan of the present mayor's father, also called Mayor Billings, and Lord Allen, the marshall of Stonegate, to mutilate the prisoners

of war before sending them home. They believed this stern action would cause them to fear, and that would prevent any future invasions. Don and Rachel had opposed this strongly, and the rift that this created had never healed. It was all the more galling to the leaders that Don and Rachel's views had won the day.

Rachel put her face in her hands. "I can hear them now," she said. "If you had only not been so weak and sentimental, we could have prevented another invasion, forever."

"Now, Rachel," said Don, as he patted her shoulder. "We don't know they plan to invade. This could just be a probe. They may just be trying to gather information. We need to be doing the same."

"No, darling," said Rachel. A tear formed at the corner of her eye. "It is beginning all over again. This time the False Prophet will have learned from his mistakes. I fear for us all."



That night at supper, Don chatted with Robby and Ari, briefly reviewing once more what they had seen. Ari often shared a meal with them, so it was no surprise that she did so this night. Sara insisted on sitting at Ari's side. Don blessed the food and invited God's presence. As usual, there was lively chatter, except that Robby seemed a bit subdued. They spent little time talking about the Raiders, nor even what should be done about them.

The room was a comfortable one, with a high ceiling supported by rough-cut beams. The table glowed with beeswax, and the cutlery was sterling silver. An antique crystal vase held several fresh-cut roses, and the remains of a pot roast, carrots and potatoes held center place. The window was open, and a gentle breeze blew through the room. Ari then asked about the academy and Robby's first year there.

"You see Robby all the time, Ari," said Rachel. "Don't tell me he never talked about his first year?"

"He never has, Aunt Rachel," said Ari. "But we have him trapped now. So tell us, Robby, how was it?"

Robby looked at Don for a long minute. "I will be glad to, Ari, but first let Father explain why he started the academy in the first place."

Don hesitated for a long moment. It seemed that he might make an excuse and not answer the question at all. Finally, he spoke, "Not too many people have ever asked 'why,' Robby. Now that I think about it, that does seem a bit strange."

They all had heard the story of the war with the False Prophet many times, so Don talked about the first years after peace had been restored, and the army had been demobilized. The allies of Stonegate had returned to their homes, and Don and Rachel began married life together. Don had, for awhile, kept himself busy around Westerly-stead, the combination farm-ranch owned by Rachel's family. The estate had been evenly divided between Rachel and Howard and their two younger twin brothers, Levi and Lucas. But Howard gradually took over most of the daily management of the property. Then Don and Rachel had built their own home about a half mile from Westerly-stead. Don began spending more time at the lore-house and bought a half-interest in that institution. But he found that the world of study and learning did not interest him as much as it had before circumstances forced him to take up arms.

It was Gray John that suggested he establish an academy to train young men in military science. Don was skeptical, thinking there would be little interest in this kind of training. But he finally agreed to start a trial class on strategy and tactics, trying to capture the lessons learned in their recent struggle. They had no buildings, and the leaders of Stonegate offered no assistance, but they set up a six-week camp and invited twenty youngsters from good families to attend. It combined weapons training, horsemanship, and classes on how to lead men in combat. They even taught the rudiments of gunnery and allowed the trainees to load and fire the field artillery.

Tuition barely covered the cost of feeding the appetites of the young trainees, but the first session was a great success. Many prominent citizens encouraged Don to set up a longer program. And the academy was born. The faculty was chosen from men with combat experience, men like Don, who were looking for a challenging profession now that fewer warriors were needed for defense.

Don looked at Rachel as he finished explaining. "Your mother, Robby, encouraged me to do this," he said. "I think she was tired of me being underfoot."

“Not at all, dear,” said Rachel with a smile. “But as soon as this house was finished, I could see you needed something to do. I could tell that the lore-house was not going to be enough.”

“It was a risk,” said Don, with a bit of a smile. He mopped up a bit of gravy with a crust of bread and chewed it. “We took most of our savings to buy the land from the city and build the campus. Even now, the academy does not make much profit. We could probably have made more money if we had simply left it with the money-lenders.”

“That was interesting, Uncle Don,” said Ari. “But no more excuses, Robby. Tell.”

“It is not that it is a secret or anything,” said Robby. “But unless you have been through it... It’s just hard to explain. But the first year was hard; it was very hard.”

“Was it the hazing?” asked Rachel. “We warned you about that, son.”

“The hazing was part of it. But there are strict limits on that, so it was not too bad. The upperclassmen are not allowed to make slaves of the grunts, so we did have time to do our studies. Part of it was the lack of sleep. We had to stand guard on a twenty-four-hour rotation. But part was the competition. I thought I would have no problem doing well, but everyone in my class was as good as me, or better, in almost everything. It was discouraging. I wanted to make you proud, Father, and I was far from the top of the class.”

“Not that far, Robby,” said Don. “And you did make me proud. You did not give up even though I knew it was harder than you expected.

Robby brightened a bit at that. “Thank you for saying so.”

Robby told a few stories about his experience and even made jokes about his problems, which caused a ripple of laughter around the table. He also mentioned that twelve of the first-year students had dropped out. But that was about average, and that was why the academy allowed sixty to enter the first year. After that, they kept the class size at around fifty, which meant that a little over 400 cadets were enrolled.

“Uncle Don,” began Ari, “I don’t understand why the cadets are all boys...”

“There are many reasons for that,” interrupted Don. “A practical reason is that parents would never allow their daughters to attend. I am sure you know the other reasons. Young men hope to make practical use of their

training. Women have no hope of a military career, so they would not invest so much time for no good reason.”

“Yes, I know very well what you mean. But my mother proved that she was the equal of any man when it came to archery.”

“She certainly did, Ari, but she is one in a thousand.”

“Why couldn’t you put on a short course for girl archers and let my mother teach it? If the class was all girls, parents may not object if their daughters dearly want to go.” *I hope Uncle Don can see that I am right, and we can never have too many trained archers.*

Sara spoke up, “What a good idea, Ari.”

Don and Rachel looked at each other for a long moment. Rachel winked at him.

“I think she has a point, dear,” said Rachel. “You have a good head on your shoulders, Ari. We could hold school when the young men are away on maneuvers.”

Don smiled at her and Sara. Ari felt satisfied. She would love to attend such a school, herself.

CHAPTER 4

†

Green River Surgery

You are going to hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, because these things must take place, but the end is not yet.

Matthew 24:6 HCSB

Abel stood and massaged a knotted cramp in his lower back. His examination room was really a tent and the afternoon sun made it uncomfortably warm, even though he had rolled up the back wall had to provide some ventilation.

He stepped out to view the line of waiting patients. They were all sitting on low benches under several cottonwood trees. A young nurse, Anna, sat under a canopy behind a wooden camp table. She was recording patient information in a ledger as he approached.

“Anna,” said Abel. “I need to take a break. Hold my patients for a half hour.”

“Of course,” she said with a smile. “We only have twelve waiting, and you certainly have seen more than your share.” She reached for an hourglass and turned it over.

Abel nodded and walked behind the stone building that held their supplies and the tiny operating theater. He came to his own tent and poured a glass of water. He wiped his brow and sank into his folding chair. His gray tunic was stained, he noticed. *I probably should change into a clean one.* He rubbed his thumb over the embroidered crimson cross over his right breast. *At least here the Prophet’s poor folk can see the cross on display.*

The Green River Surgery had been set up eight years ago. Abel had convinced the chief surgeon of the House of Healing that the Prophet's lands were closed to them and that was not likely to change. The Gray Pilgrims, sent out as roving healers to many isolated villages, had been expelled. The Prophet was sure they were spies as much as healers, and there was much truth to that. They did collect information and sent regular reports on conditions they encountered.

Desperate people, seeking medical care, had continued to take the long road to the House of Healing. But the way was difficult, and those who most needed care often found the journey impossible.

Abel was the one who conceived the plan of setting up a semipermanent surgery far to the west on the very border of the Prophet's lands. It had taken several years to put it into full operation, but it had been a success.

The sick, injured, and diseased could reach the Green River in a few days' travel from Prophet City. Abel had feared, at first, that the Prophet would drive them away by military force. But he had chosen to allow them to stay, unmolested.

Like the wandering Gray Pilgrims, the surgery had medicines based on formulas and compounds dating from the elder days. The healers were trained in a rigorous course of study and understood much of the ancient medical lore. Even though the surgery looked rude and primitive, the medical care they provided was far better than anything found in the Prophet's lands.

But there were limits. Their antibiotics could cure many infections, but they could not save a leg black with gangrene. Treatment often required amputation, which they could perform on-site. The medical books of the ancients enabled Abel and the other healers to diagnose many diseases, but that did not mean they could always cure them. They knew much, but they also knew how much had been lost. It was often frustrating.

Abel walked back and told Anna to send him the next patient. A tall young man with a full beard entered. His left arm was wrapped in a bloody bandage. Abel carefully unwound the black, crusty cloth to expose a mangled hand. The arm was swollen, red, and angry-looking.

"We will be able to treat this," said Abel, "but it was good that you did not delay, Mr..."

"Logan," the young man responded, "Tom Logan."

“Mr. Logan,” said Abel, “we will have to clean this up and put you on some strong medicine. Did you have any trouble getting here?” He took a swab and began to clean the wound.

“No trouble, but there were, well, a few bad moments.”

“What bad moments?”

The road was blocked for a long time by a thousand horsemen in full armor. But that was not all.”

“What else?”

“There were a lot of little cannons on wheels pulled by horses. At least a dozen. It was hard to get around them, I can tell you.”



After sundown, they stopped seeing new patients, and the healers made the rounds of those who were in bed. Then they had their common meal. With guards, nurses, healers, and attendants, the cooks usually had about forty mouths to feed, in addition to the patients. The surgery had become an open-air hospital.

Thad, Abel’s oldest friend, kept the records. He was a better administrator, allowing Abel to focus on patient care. Thad was also an excellent surgeon, and he performed several procedures a day in the operating theater.

Thad and Abel retired to Abel’s tent and discussed the problems of the day, as they usually did. The western sky was red and mauve as they lit an oil lamp and relaxed over cups of hot tea.

“Any items of interest from the West?” asked Thad. He flexed his long fingers and brushed back a lock of dark hair.

Thad has surgeon’s fingers. I wish I had his skill with a scalpel.

“As a matter of fact, yes,” answered Abel. “You know we have often heard rumors of a military buildup. Reports of cannon fire, and the like.”

“No doubt about it. I have read your reports—the ones you send to the chief surgeon. I wonder if anyone else reads them.”

“Yes. It is like dropping a rock down a deep well and listening for a splash that never comes.”

“Something new today?”

“What would you say about a report of a dozen field artillery pieces on maneuvers with one thousand heavy cavalrymen in full armor?”

“You don’t say. By all that’s holy—Abel! That would have been enough to turn the tide of battle in the last war.” Thad’s face went pale, and he sat bolt upright in his chair. “You have to do more than file another report.”

“I shall write a report tonight, but this time I will also send a message to Donald. Stonegate has to know about this.”



Five wagons loaded with food and medical supplies had arrived that day and would be returning to the House of Healing in the morning. They would be carrying three seriously ill patients and the money that they had collected in fees over that last two weeks. They would also carry Abel’s report, which was almost ready. Most of the document consisted of information about patients treated and a list of needed supplies. Information relating to the Prophet’s dominion, and especially military matters, was usually included in a coded addition. Abel wrote the message about the heavy cavalry and field artillery on a scrap of parchment, encoded it, and then made a clean copy. He folded it in a parchment envelope and sealed it with red wax.

It was dangerous to send an uncoded message, but Abel had no choice when he wrote the next one. He had never set up such an arrangement with Donald. If the messenger was intercepted and the Prophet learned that he was reporting such sensitive information, reprisals would be swift.

Abel remembered the communications that existed twenty years before. In those days, there had been an elaborate system of heliograph stations and messenger pigeons. *If only the old system had been kept up, Donald would have the message in hours instead of days.*

Abel wrote the message in a long letter to his old friend, but he dared not be too specific. He and Donald had ridden far together and had shared the dangers and hardships of battle. He felt like a prophet of doom, but Stonegate must be warned. War was coming. He felt it in his bones.



The Gray Pilgrims traveled through many wild and hostile lands and were only very rarely robbed. They were armed with a sword and crossbow, but these were for defense against wild animals. Even the most hardened high-waysmen knew the Pilgrims would treat them with no questions asked, so