

Tsalix Silverthorn and the Scepter of Destiny

Chapter 1

Tsalix wedged himself into the cleft in the rock, placed his ear against the smooth obsidian wall and listened. Above him on the steep hillside, huge polished slabs of stone perched precariously. Through the rock he could hear the footfalls of the approaching riders on their enormous wolacs. Tsalix listened intently, trying to read the signature of the heavy, armored six-legged beasts. Each one had a slightly different gait, and someone with an experienced ear could identify each wolac by its tread.

Tsalix grimaced as he thought he recognized the footfalls of Nash Doitsoh's wolac. The hoof beats were drawing nearer, and the young warrior forced himself even further into the crack in the rock wall at the base of Mount Jinee. He shed his breastplate to lose another couple inches, but still he felt as if his ribs were cracking from the pressure of the obsidian against his back and chest, until the crevasse widened and he popped into a small cave. He plummeted to the floor and took deep breaths, ignoring the pain in his bruised ribs, then reached back through the crack and retrieved his breastplate, sword, and knapsack. He could see his footprints outside the opening, but knew he had no time to obscure them.

Tsalix turned around and viewed his surroundings. In the dim light that filtered through the opening, he could see the cave's roof was just slightly higher than he was tall, and the room was about six feet in diameter. He pressed himself against a side wall when he heard the wolacs stop outside the narrow channel that led into the cave. They were breathing hard and whistling through their gaping mouths that were bracketed with two sets of enormous pincers.

Tsalix had met many men on the field of battle, but had never had the pleasure or the misfortune to have crossed swords with Captain Doitsoh, Prince Abadon's lion-headed henchman, although he had witnessed his ruthlessness often. Tsalix's mind raced as he tried to think what Nash Doitsoh's move might be. But before he could think further, a double-edged battle ax, a tsenil, was thrust through the cleft until it touched the back of the cave. Slowly the blood-red steel head turned and twisted as Doitsoh probed the cavern.

Tsalix slid silently until he forced himself against the front wall of the tiny cave next to the opening. Above the entrance in the dim light, he could see

a narrow shelf of rock. Carefully he raised his body from the floor, and with his muscles straining, pulled himself onto the shelf. The head of the tsenil twisted and moved back and forth as much as the narrow opening allowed. It looked almost alive and as if it were trying to sniff out Tsalix's scent.

Nash Doitsoh's voice roared into the cave. "You are trapped, Silverthorn. Your footprints condemn you. There is no way you can escape. I know you are in there. Come surrender to me, and I will let you live."

The wolacs keened their approval.

Tsalix forced himself to lie silently on the rock shelf. His heart was beating so loudly he was afraid Nash Doitsoh would hear it.

One minute passed. Then two.

"I will count to three, Tsalix Silverthorn, and then my offer is withdrawn – and you will die!"

Tsalix tried to calm his heart and mind as he lay motionless on his stone bed. He knew if he surrendered he was a dead man anyway, despite Doitsoh's proffered amnesty.

"One."

The commotion outside the cave subsided as the other warriors silenced their steeds, watched, and waited.

"Two."

One of the wolacs stamped a foot and screeched a plaintive cry that echoed in the cave.

"Three."

The head of the tsenil was withdrawn from the cave.

"So be it. You have made your choice and sealed your fate," growled Doitsoh.

The sound of steel on stone rang loud and clear as war hammers pounded on the hillside, and a shower of rocks began to rain down into the opening of the cavern. With a shout from the men outside the cave, a slab of rock broke loose and thundered into place blocking Tsalix's exit and sealing his tomb.

"Sleep well," Nash Doitsoh roared, although Tsalix heard it only faintly through the pile of rock.

Through the stone, Tsalix's ears picked up the muted raucous laughter of Abadon's men as they turned their wolacs and rode away. One of them pounded the butt of his tsenil against the stone slab as a final goodbye. It sounded like a bass drum as it reverberated through the cave.