

Tsalix Silverthorn and the Desert of Desolation

Chapter 1

Tsalix Silverthorn stretched his arms above his head, flexed his shoulders, and pushed himself into a sitting position on the edge of the bed in one of the royal bedrooms in the castle in Hayeli. He and his companions had spent three days recovering from their flight from Mount Jinee to Mount Deschee.

He thought back to the descent he and his companions had made from the high plateau to the edge of the Plain of Wanadsi, and the help that the people of Chushka had given them. Apparently, their help had been successful, for there was no sight of their pursuers. Here in Hayeli, he, Asur, and Kwercus had been treated like visiting royalty. They had been bathed in perfumed baths, massaged with heated oils, and fed exquisite food. Today would be their last day before they began the next leg of their quest.

He yawned and stretched again, just as there was a gentle knock on the door.

"Enter." He flexed his shoulders.

The door opened and Angelica, Elosa's daughter, bowed and entered the room. Tsalix began to rise to his feet, but realized he was clad only in breeches. Embarrassed, he drew the bed sheet around him.

"My lady," he said, with as much dignity as he could.

"Tsalix, I apologize for coming unannounced."

"There is no need to apologize," he blurted. "It is I who should apologize for staying in bed so long on a beautiful day like today."

Angelica smiled. "You do have a way with words, my brother." She crossed the room to a low chair that sat in front of a dressing tale, and seated herself. "You will be leaving soon," she said, softly.

Tsalix nodded.

"Then I would ask one boon of you."

"Anything, my lady."

"Anything?" She smiled. "Then only this."

She reached into a hidden pocket in her gown, and removed a small leather pouch. After making sure the drawstrings were securely tied, she extended it toward Tsalix.

"Carry this with you."

Tsalix took the proffered pouch and weighted it in his hand. There seemed to be a single object within.

"May I ask what it contains?"

Angelica's face froze. "No. And I rely upon your honor not to open it."
"Of course. I'll carry it with me to Mount Tsood, and return with it after we complete the next task."

Angelica shook her head. "No, Tsalix. When you find the talisman on Mount Tsood, replace it with the purse."

"As you wish." He gave a nod.

Angelica rose. "I know it sounds mysterious, and all I can offer is the assurance that in the future you will know why." She stooped and kissed him on both cheeks. "Go with peace, my friend."

As she left the room, Tsalix felt his face flaming. Reverently, he touched his cheeks where Angelica's kisses burned. He rose quickly, dressed, and went to the dining hall. Asur and Kwercus were already seated, eating their breakfasts. Tsalix sat beside them as a young woman approached the table bringing him a plate of food.

"You look extremely happy." Kwercus glanced at his friend.

Tsalix wondered if he should tell the other two about the pouch he had entrusted with, but decided it would be his secret – his and Angelica's.

"It's a beautiful day," he said.

"Aye," Kwercus replied. "And tomorrow, we leave for mount Tsood. I suspect the next days will not be as pleasant as the ones who have had here in Hayeli. What do you know of Shayeksten, the Desert of Desolation?"

Tsalix put his spoon down. "I spent a week on its edge when I served in the army. It is an inhospitable place – hot and dry. Very dry. We'll need to carry as much water as we can, for I know of no place to replenish our skins once we set foot on the sand."

Kwercus wrinkled his forehead. "Is there no other way to reach Mount Tsood?"

Tsalix reached across the table and put his hand on Kwercus's shoulder.

"There is no other direct way. We could follow the trail that leads beside the Tohkal River, to where it meets the Sea of Tabass. Then we'd travel along the cliffs that rise from Tabass. That way is much longer, and heavily patrolled. As inhospitable as Shayeksten is, it is the safer way to avoid capture. Few of Abaddon's forces venture into the Desert of Desolation."

"Then we'd better prepare for the worst," Asure said.

"Aye." Tsalix gave a nod. "Today, we gather our provisions. And early tomorrow, morning we leave Hayeli."