



The *Emerald* of TOZAR

A short story by Kevin Brink

Menela knew she was vulnerable. Her breathing was loud, much too loud, and the rough, scraggly bushes and sparse cacti did little to obscure her prone form, even in the night's darkness.

She was lying along a short ridge that encircled an oasis in the vast expanse of desert she knew as home here on the island of Brogat in a world we'll call Binnafor. In the oasis was a small pool, vital for survival during long treks across the hot sand, along with a few palm trees and other, smaller plants. On this particular night, however, the oasis also held something else. Something much more menacing and dangerous.

In the dim, orange, slowly-dying light from a campfire, Menela counted 12 of the raiders, most of them sprawled out haphazardly around the fire, their long, dusty thawbs now used as makeshift blankets and pillows. Two of the men, however, kept watch, sitting cross-legged on the ground with their long robes pulled tightly around them. Every now and then one of them would lean over to the other and spark a quiet conversation in an attempt to keep themselves awake.

But the raiders were not why Menela was here. At least, not directly. She was here for something still more interesting, something the raiders carried.

Something, indeed, they had stolen.

The Emerald of Tozar.

Now, if you don't happen to be from Brogat, you may not know about the Emerald of Tozar. Tozar, so the legend went, was a grand hero of old. He led a daring rebellion against a tyrannical ruler and legions of his savage followers. When at last, against all odds, his band of rebels conquered the ruler's last fortress, the evil king fled through dark caverns and passageways behind his stronghold. Tozar, unwilling to let the unjust leader escape, had recklessly followed after the king.

The evil king knew he could not outrun Tozar, so he formed a plan to distract his pursuer. In the catacombs was a secret treasure vault, which he had filled with all his most prized possessions. Chief among them was his brilliant green emerald, which seemed to glow with a light of its very own. The king believed Tozar would be so entirely awestruck by the brilliance of his treasures that he would end his pursuit, overtaken by the majesty, and thereby give the evil king a chance to escape. So, he led Tozar on, through passageway after passageway, deeper into the darkness, until he finally arrived at the torchlit cavern, filled with riches beyond compare.

The king's plan, however, turned against him. His love for gold and jewels was so great that when he came running into that secret treasure vault, it was he, not Tozar, that stopped short in awe, though of course he had seen it all before. Tozar, on the other hand, cared little for treasure,

and hardly noticed the shimmering jewels as he entered the cavern and quickly apprehended the stupefied king.

When the newly liberated people gratefully made Tozar their new king, he distributed all of the wealth from the evil ruler to the people, save only the treasured emerald. He kept it, so the stories say, not because of any particular love for jewels, but to serve as a reminder to all future rulers that people, not riches, were the most important part of any kingdom.

Sadly, the line of rulers after Tozar failed to keep his perspective, and though the Emerald kept his namesake, it became nothing more than a jewel to be fought for. It was stolen, sold, and then stolen again. Instead of remaining in the king's palace as Tozar had desired, a high-ranking official of the king would hire a band of mercenaries to steal it from a shop owner who had bought it from a strange hermit. It had changed hands so many times no one could truly say who it rightfully belonged to, but whoever possessed it was revered. Power and wealth seemed to follow whoever wielded it.

Without question, the Emerald of Tozar was the most prized and sought-after object on the entire island of Brogat, perhaps even in the whole of Binnafor. And now, it was a mere hundred feet away from where Menela now lay, as still as she could, watching and waiting.

She wasn't greedy. At least, not that she knew of. She grew up like most people on Brogat did: barely surviving, jealous of the king and his underlings, tempted by the lifestyle of the criminal raiders who at least seemed to eat better than the average, hard-working peasant. So when she heard not only that the Emerald had been stolen but that the band of raiders who had done it were passing right through her little village of Attianee, she didn't hesitate. She knew if she could somehow snatch the Emerald of Tozar from the raiders, she, her family, and even her entire village would immediately begin living a better life. And maybe, just maybe, she could somehow use it to find a cure for her younger sister, Voyen, whose worsening sickness was incurable by any medicine her family could afford.

So, she had bundled up as many supplies as she could in her haste and bolted out the door, leaving her parents and sister staring in confusion and wonder. She had quickly mounted the family camel and took off after the raiders into the desert, following their tracks at a safe distance to avoid detection for a full day and a half before the raiders finally stopped here, at one of the oases scattered across the harsh Brogat desert. And now, Menela watched and waited, as silently as she could manage.

She kept her eyes on the flickering firelight and cautiously withdrew some of the dates from her pouch, snacking on them as she pondered her situation.

Menela had become harshly aware over the past few hours that she didn't have much of a plan. She knew she wanted to get the Emerald and return home safely, but simply running up to the raiders and rooting through their stuff wasn't going to work. Even if she could somehow steal it without them noticing immediately, they would be after her as soon as they realized what had happened. She needed some diversion, something to replace the Emerald with so the outlaws would believe they still had it until it was too late for them to come chasing her.

Menela had just packed a fresh mouthful of dates into her mouth when she heard a noise behind her. In an instant she flipped herself onto her back and whipped out her father's knife, her adrenaline spiking as she aimed the blade into the darkness.

"Easy Menela," a low, smooth voice drifted in from the darkness. She squinted a couple times before she could make out a form petting her family's camel, lying twenty feet behind her, trying to rest from the long journey.

"Surge? Is that you?" she practically spat out, trying a little less hard to be quiet for a moment.

"Of course," the voice returned easily as the form made its way around the camel towards her.

"Well, well... What in the world are you doing here?" Menela sputtered.

"Well, I figured you could use some protection."

"I don't need protection. Certainly not from you," she shot back, this time remembering to use a quieter voice. She quickly turned and glanced over the ridge behind her. So far, it seemed their presence hadn't been noticed.

Surge shrugged. "Company then?" he suggested. Menela made a point to turn back to him slowly.

"See previous answer. I don't need company, and I certainly don't need it — or want it — from you."

Menela knew Surge fancied her. He had made no effort to disguise it over the past year or two. And it wasn't that Menela didn't care for that kind of attention, but something about Surge and his overconfidence turned her off. If she could pick one creature to be stranded in the desert with, Surge would be pretty far down the list. Probably at the bottom. Somewhere beneath scorpions and venomous snakes.

Her scathing reply seemed to break through Surge's defenses for a moment. He slowed his

approach and appeared the least bit unsure, which gave her a small measure of satisfaction. But then he resumed his gait and plopped himself down on the sand next to her. A little too close. Menela scooted herself over to widen the gap between them.

"Look, I know you're still coming to terms with your feelings for me..." Surge began.

"I've come to very concrete terms and communicated them quite clearly, I think," Menela hissed back.

"But the fact is that you're out here in the desert alone with a band of dangerous raiders just over the ridge," Surge continued without breaking stride. "And do you suppose you're the only one with the bright idea to steal the Emerald? Others will be close behind you, and they likely won't be as nice — or good looking — as me." Surge grinned wide at her, but Menela didn't give him the satisfaction of her attention. Instead, she kept staring down at the ring of raiders.

"Well, since you're so keen to help me why don't you go back and intercept those dangerous pursuers for me? Fight them all off?"

"Of course I could," Surge answered back quickly. "But your mother and father —"

"You talked to my parents?" Menela interrupted, trying to look as disgusted as possible as she glanced over at him.

"Of course," Surge confirmed. "We — all your friends and family — were quite concerned for you," he said, putting on a worried expression that looked so forced it was almost comical. "Especially your father. He would've been here himself if you hadn't stolen —"

"Borrowed," Menela corrected.

Surge sighed but nodded. "Sure, if you hadn't borrowed his camel. And since my parents won't dare let anyone outside the family ride our camels, your father specifically requested me to come after you and make sure you were safe, since he isn't able to."

"Great. I'm safe. Can you leave now?"

"Well, safe for now. Who knows what might happen if the raiders discover you?"

"Well, the goal is to prevent that from happening." Menela glared over at Surge. "Which would work much better if I didn't have someone trying to talk to me."

"Sure, sure," Surge responded, apparently not noticing Menela's intended jab at him. "But they could. They could notice you're here. And then you'll be glad you have me by your side, protecting you, helping you escape home safely."

Menela rolled her eyes and breathed out a sorrowful sigh. She knew there was no way to get rid of Surge. He seemed to follow her around Attianee, and certainly out here in the middle of the desert there wouldn't be any dissuading him. As she resigned herself to this fate, a thought popped into her mind. After a few moments of silence, she spoke.

"Say, Surge, you know, maybe you're right. I'm glad you're here."

"Really? I mean, of course you are. I knew you would be," Surge said, quickly recovering from his momentary slip of confidence. Menela nodded in the darkness, then turned and locked eyes with him for a moment.

"Yes. I actually really need you."

"Of course you do," Surge answered, his swagger back in full as he looked back at her.

"Yes," Menela continued. "So... If you could just head down there and kill all the raiders for me, that would be wonderful."

Surge's excited expression dropped, clearly unamused.

"Hilarious, Menela," he said.

"I thought so," she said, grinning with satisfaction and turning back to the raiders. One had gotten up to stretch and was wandering aimlessly around the area. Then, the man did something quite curious. He stopped by one of the satchels and casually withdrew an object wrapped in thick black cloth. As Menela and Surge watched, he slowly and carefully unwrapped it, eventually revealing a perfectly shaped green crystal, shimmering and shining with brilliance Menela couldn't have imagined, even in the dim light of the campfire.

"The Emerald of Tozar," Surge breathed out in quiet awe. Menela was wonder-struck as well, staring at the gleaming crystal. The other guard, apparently oblivious to what the first was doing, casually got up, but when he saw the first man holding the unveiled jewel, he started motioning angrily at him, trying to remain quiet so as to not wake any of the resting raiders but making his intent clear. The first man did as he was instructed, hastily wrapping it back up and clumsily dropping it into the satchel. He then continued his slow saunter around the dark oasis while the other man steadily berated him with an angry glare. Menela stared at the satchel, searing its size,

colour, and shape into her brain, before creeping off the edge of the oasis and back to her camel. Surge followed quietly behind her.

"I can see why people want it. It's almost as stunning as I am."

Menela skillfully but barely resisted the urge to punch Surge in the face, choosing instead to give her father's camel a neat pat on the side.

"And yet," she said, turning to look at him. "You don't see me running out for two days into the desert chasing after you." She gave him a look, and then settled in beside her camel, deciding that now would be a good time to catch up on some much-needed sleep. She hadn't had any since leaving her home, and she was utterly exhausted. Besides, the faint beginnings of a plan were starting to form in her head, and she thought resting her body might be a good way to let the plan take sharper form. Within a few moments she was fast asleep, clinging to the warmth of her camel.

The next morning she arose early, with the first rays of sun poking up from the horizon. Luckily, Surge was still fast asleep, sprawled out haphazardly on the sand next to his own camel. Menela crept back up to the ridge and peeked over it.

Several of the raiders were awake and starting to stir, but many of them were still slumbering, recovering from their escape. Menela's plan from last night was continuing to build itself inside her mind, and as she thought through it again, she felt even more confident. It might actually work.

Within ten minutes, Surge and all the remaining raiders were awake, yawning and stretching. The raiders quickly loaded up their camels and left the oasis, heading out across the desert sands that would soon become almost unbearably hot.

Menala didn't dare follow immediately. No, she must wait until they were quite a ways off, almost beyond sight over the horizon to avoid being noticed, and that meant waiting for at least an hour, perhaps two. Once the raiders had gone well beyond any danger of hearing them, Menala and Surge made good use of the oasis, letting their camels drink deeply and scouring the area for food. They found some figs and more dates, which they packed in their respective pouches.

It was then that Menala explained her plan to Surge, and though she hated to admit it, the plan necessitated a critical role from him. When she had finished, Surge stood up and started pacing around the oasis, rubbing his chin as if searching for a beard that had yet to form.

"Interesting," he said. "First off, it's good to see you came to your senses and realized how much you needed me." He turned and grinned at Menala who simply grimaced, unable to come

up with a clever response.

"On the other hand, it's crystal clear — perhaps emerald clear — that you still require some of my brainpower in order to pull this trick off." Menela rolled her eyes at Surge.

"As in, you don't like my plan?" she said.

"Oh, it's not that I don't like it. I think it's fantastic. Just not one that will work," Surge responded.

"Right. So you don't like it," Menela stated. Surge stopped pacing, as if considering Menela's assertion for the first time.

"I suppose," he conceded.

"So you have a better one?" she asked.

"Of course!" Surge responded emphatically.

"Ok. Let's hear it," Menela said. In response, Surge started pacing again, continuing his failed attempts to coax hair from his bald chin. A moment later, he snapped his fingers and turned to Menela.

"I've got it!" he said, and launched into a detailed description of his plan. When he had finished, Menela just stared at him.

"I know," Surge said, smiling broadly. "You're simply astounded at how perfect my plan is, right?"

"Surge, that is literally the exact plan I explained to you five minutes ago with a single, insignificant change."

"What? Of course not. Your plan would've never worked. My plan, however, is flawless," Surge said, his smile only weakening slightly. Menela exercised her eye-rolling muscles again.

"Um. Ok, sure. How about we do that plan then?" she said.

"Great! I knew you'd come around," Surge responded emphatically. "Now... Should we head on out?"

Menela walked to the closest edge of the oasis and climbed up the ridge a few steps until she could see the entire horizon. First, she looked East, where the raiders had headed. They had become distant specks, barely visible, and she satisfied herself that they were unlikely to notice them if they started after them now. Then, she twisted around and followed the horizon line back West, searching for pursuers.

"Looks like we're all clear," she said.

"Then let's get going," Surge said, grabbing his pouch and moving towards his camel.

Menela nodded and followed suit. A couple minutes later both of them were back out on the flat, endless desert, following a combination of camel tracks and the faintest traces of dust from the fleeing raiders in the distance.

Minutes turned into hours in the hot desert sun. Menela and Surge followed as straight as they could, keeping the raiders in front of them, urging their camels on. Surge, as always, talked far too much for her liking, but she supposed it was probably better than the silence she had endured for the first leg of her journey.

Probably.

Finally, the sun slipped behind the Western edge of the world, and the coolness of night began to set in. Menela and Surge talked through the plan again, firming up details and ensuring they both knew what to do when.

Dim light turned to darkness, and they pressed on, eager to get to the camp of the raiders and set their plan into motion. The darkness made it harder to follow the tracks of the raiders exactly, but a couple hours later they made it to another oasis the raiders had found, a dim campfire lighting the way. It was time.

They quietly dismounted their camels and laid them down before taking positions. Menela crept silently up the edge of the oasis, much as she had done the previous night, before Surge had arrived. She still wished she could convince herself that she could do this all without Surge, that she didn't actually need him at all, but it was no use. For now, she had to admit she needed him.

Surge took his position. He crept stealthily around the oasis, roughly opposite from Menela. Then, they both waited, for what they hoped was an hour or more, though time was hard to tell in the darkness. They had to ensure their ruse was as convincing as possible.

Then, suddenly, a shout rang out in the dark desert air, stirring the raiders that had already fallen asleep and jolting Menela herself to attention. Surge was scrambling frantically over the edge of the oasis, muttering incoherent half-sentences about being saved at last, about how thirsty he was, about how he never thought he would make it.

It took the raiders a moment or two to fully become aware of where the noise was coming from, but when they did, Surge's rambling was momentarily drowned out by the piercing sound of metal as they withdrew their scimitars. Within ten seconds Surge was fully surrounded by a ring of sharp metal, all of the raiders now fully alert and on guard.

"Woah, woah!" Surge said, attempting to motion them down with his hands. "I mean no harm or risk to you fine sirs. It's incredible to stumble upon a group of respectable gentlemen out here in the desert, and just as I was on the verge of exhaustion! You truly are a sight for desperate eyes."

Surge was speaking loudly, far more loudly than necessary, so Menela couldn't quite make out the raiders more appropriately-volumed response, but it was nonetheless clear they weren't immediately convinced. Surge kept his act up very calmly, seemingly ignorant of the danger, emphasizing his gratefulness at having found some men that would save him from death of dehydration in the hot, arid desert.

"... steal what?" Surge's voice suddenly spiked in response to an apparent accusation. "No no no no, I assure you, I'm not here to steal a thing, save perhaps a drop or two of water! I've been roaming the desert for days looking for someone, anyone, that might guide me to some civilization. And lo! Here you are, just as I was giving up hope."

The raiders started to lower their guard, beginning to dismiss Surge as exactly what he appeared to be: a slightly deranged, heat-stricken, wayward traveller who was a few hot hours away from fatal exhaustion.

Menela grinned. It seemed their plan was working, at least so far.

One by one the raiders re-sheathed their scimitars with another sound of metal on metal. A few of them went back to their places next to the fire, eager to resume sleeping, while a few others were more suspicious and continued to question Surge.

"... water? Any water?" Surge voice rose high enough for Menela to pick out again. One of the raiders, having apparently become uninterested with the newcomer, started moving back to his place near the fire, which Surge presumptuously took to mean he was leading him to his personal supply pack. Surge brashly stepped in front of him and quickly snatched up the man's pack, beginning to root around in it.

"Hey! That's mine!" the raider shouted, drawing his scimitar again and waving it in Surge's direction.

"Hey, thanks brother!" Surge gushed, apparently oblivious to the blade and the man's frustration. "Say, you've got some good stuff in here! Dates? I'm famished!" he said, casually grabbing a handful and dropping them into his mouth.

Still gripping the pack and grabbing assorted items out of it, he began to clumsily wander away from the fire towards the pool of water on Menela's left. She readied herself; her part of the plan was coming up.

Most of the raiders now resumed their places lying by the fire, chuckling to each other about their comrade's misfortune, while the raider whose pack Surge had stolen followed closely behind him, trying to make his displeasure understood and himself menacing enough for Surge to return his supplies. The two original guards, amused by the sequence of events and glad for a break in the monotony of sentry duty, casually followed as Surge led the three raiders further and further away from the fire towards the pool on the other end of the oasis.

Menela's heart was racing, watching the raiders carefully. She had to admit that Surge continued to play his part beautifully. He displayed a profound lack of concern for the unfortunate raider's scimitar, instead treating the trio as if they were some old friends he had happened to meet up with, and who would of course do anything for him. The raider attempting to retrieve his pack seemed so confused at Surge's lack of perception towards his threats that he didn't know how to proceed. Menela only hoped he wouldn't eventually get frustrated enough to simply try to stab Surge through.

They took another step, and she raised herself up on her hands. She forced herself to count to ten, and then, as silently as she could, she crept out of the shadows into the exposing light of the campfire. The sand allowed her to move quietly, but she had to be quick. Surge could only keep the three wakeful raiders entertained for so long.

She scanned the area around the fire frantically, looking for the satchel she knew held the emerald. It felt like an eternity, but she spotted it a few moments later. She sacrificed a bit of quiet for speed, hoping any of the half-asleep raiders would assume it was only one of their comrades moving about.

The satchel lay just beside one of the raiders. Menela tip-toed up to it, crept down, and plunged her hand inside. She reached around for a moment before grasping something solid, wrapped in cloth. It took a few tries to get a firm grip on it with her heart racing, but a second later

it was within her trembling fingers. She slowly pulled it out of the satchel, each second feeling like an eternity, each moment worried a sleeping raider may open their eyes and discover her, or one of the guards may get bored with Surge's antics and turn around to find her stealing their prized treasure.

She pulled the Emerald of Tozar all the way out of the satchel and unwrapped it as quickly as she could, her hands still shaking. As she finished freeing the jewel from the cloth, she sucked in a quick breath despite her need to remain silent. It was absolutely breathtaking, shimmering and shining in the light from the campfire, and seemed to draw her in to look deeper and deeper into its beauty. She knew she must be imagining it, but the jewel seemed to pulsate and vibrate in her hands like it had a life of its own.

Menela shook her head, freeing herself from her trance-like state, and laid the emerald down in the sand. She grimaced as she did, hating to put such a beautiful object in the dirty sand, but she needed two hands for what came next. She used the black cloth from the jewel to wrap up the coconut she had brought along from last night's oasis, and quickly shoved it into the satchel. She could hardly believe the plan was working so far, but amazingly, it was. No raiders had detected her yet. She started making her way back to the relative safety of the darkness beyond the ridge lining the oasis, and was halfway there when she realized with a jolt of horror that the emerald still lay uncovered in the sand behind her. In her rush to plant the decoy emerald, she had forgotten the real one behind! She froze, and then slowly turned around, scanning for signs that the raiders might notice her presence soon.

Surge was still holding up his part of the plan off to Menela's left, talking up a storm and acting like a madman. As Menela watched, the raider who was still attempting to retrieve his pack finally got angry enough to reach over and shove Surge hard to the ground before hovering his blade near his neck. Menela's heart stopped for a moment, but Surge quickly returned the man's satchel, and the raider responded by pulling his scimitar back and re-sheathing it. Menela breathed a quick sigh of relief.

She had just taken her first hesitant step back towards the emerald, hoping to reclaim the jewel now lying vulnerable in the sand, when she heard Surge say the next keyword they had agreed on in their plan.

"... sleep now anyways, shouldn't we?" He seemed to be suggesting the raiders all go to sleep. Clearly, he had noticed Menela starting to head back out of the oasis, and assumed the plan had worked and that she had successfully retrieved the emerald. She tried to motion to him to keep the raiders occupied longer, but it was too late. She dropped limply to the ground as a couple of the raiders lazily glanced back. Luckily, her plan to blend in as just another raider sleeping by the

fire worked, at least for the moment, as the raiders didn't react to her presence. She felt her heart thumping into the sand, and her mind raced with what to do next. Should she scramble over to the emerald and try to grab it? Should she leave it in the sand, hope that the raiders didn't notice it, and retrieve it tomorrow morning after they had gone?

The raiders turned back to Surge for a moment, and Menela made her decision. She scrambled to her feet and raced over, choosing speed over silence. She slowed down just barely enough to reach down and grab the brilliant jewel from its place in the sand and kept running straight, retaining much of her momentum and aiming for the opposite side of the oasis. She dared not look back. She had to make it to the darkness before any of the raiders happened to wake.

The edge of campfire light seemed a mile away, and time felt slower as Menela ran with every bit of strength she had towards it, throwing her arms forward with every stride. Every second that ticked by, she expected a startled shout to echo from behind her, followed swiftly by the sound of scimitars being unsheathed. If that happened, she knew she would die. Surge was able to pass for a lost wanderer, but there was no way that story would work for a girl running away from their camp with an emerald in her hand.

Amazingly, she came within diving distance and lunged without restraint over the ridge of the oasis, not bothering to worry about her landing. She flew over and landed heavily into the sand on the other side. Luckily, it was a soft patch of sand, and she didn't feel any sharp pain that would indicate a broken bone. She laid there for several moments, breathing heavily, listening for any indication she had been noticed before she escaped to the curtain of darkness. For a second or two, she thought she had made it safely.

Then, to her horror, she heard startled shouts, and the telltale sound of metal on metal...

Despair welled up inside Surge. He tried hard to convince the raiders that they were imagining things, but he also couldn't give himself away. He was forced to shrug and follow along as they investigated what he knew was Menela, holding the priceless emerald, entirely defenceless against the small army of men carrying torches now heading out into the darkness to hunt her down.

"You! You watch him. I don't trust this." One of the raiders said, glaring at another raider who was apparently of lower rank and pointing at Surge.

"Hey hey, you don't need to worry about me," Surge said, trying not to betray his anxiety over Menela's plight. "In fact, I'll help you look!"

"No. Sit down," the raider said, pointing his scimitar with more intent than any of the others

had. Surge immediately knew he couldn't continue his carefree madman act with this one.

"Um. Right," Surge said, dropping to the sand. Now they were in trouble. Menela would surely be discovered, and almost certainly killed. It would be hard to convince the raiders that he wasn't in on the whole thing, which meant his own survival had suddenly become doubtful. The plan that seemed to be going perfectly a few moments before had suddenly begun collapsing around him, and Surge felt powerless to do anything.

The moments ticked by. Surge tried his usual tactic of making light conversation with his new guard, but the man just stared at him, unflinching. All the rest of the raiders had gone out, scouring the area for the shadow they had seen escaping. Surge expected another round of shouts at any moment, followed by the terrifying screams of Menela's life being ended. He closed his eyes and tried not to think about it.

"... couple camels!" Surge suddenly heard a shout from one of the raiders.

"Oh, those are mine!" he called without thinking.

"Thought you said you were wandering on foot," his guard said, pressing the scimitar against his chest.

"No no no no, I never said that," Surge said, though he really had no idea if he had or not. "Those camels are the only reason I'm not already dead; they kept me alive long enough to find you gentlemen."

"I don't believe you," the guard said, but he still pulled his weapon back a foot.

A moment later both camels were led over the short ridge down the slope of the oasis. Surge swallowed hard and wondered if there was anything in the camel's packs that would fully unveil his deception.

Three of the raiders began to search the camels and their packs, eyeing Surge as they did so, while the rest of the raiders continued to search the perimeter. Surge was amazed Menela hadn't been found yet, but it could only be a matter of time. If she had run off in a random direction, the raiders might possibly assume the set of footprints she left behind had come from him, the wayward wanderer, but he felt sure they would still see her small form running off into the distance. They would see her, run her down, and kill her.

Somehow, however, the minutes ticked by, and one by one the searching raiders returned to the oasis, and either looked over the camels themselves or returned to their spot by the fire,

defeated.

"I told you you were imagining things. You fellas are a bit jumpy, aren't you?" he said to a couple of them, trying hard not to show his utter astonishment that they had failed to find Menela. They only glared at him as they kept walking. At one point, a raider went to the pack Surge knew had held the emerald, and reached his hand inside. Based on the interaction of the guards the previous night, Surge guessed there was some sort of rule amongst the raiders against unveiling the emerald, and he hoped his presence would further help to discourage them from doing so. Surge was relieved to see the raider withdraw his hand from the satchel and nod to another man, apparently satisfied that the hard object wrapped in thick cloth was indeed the emerald. At least their decoy worked.

As another raider stepped over the ridge into the oasis looking dejected, Surge took a moment to count the raiders that had returned from their search of his friend. He got to nine just as another man returned. That meant only two raiders were still searching for Menela. He couldn't imagine what sort of trick she could've pulled off to suddenly disappear, but it seemed like she just might make it out alive. Exactly how he would now escape to rejoin her, however, remained a mystery...

The seconds ticked by as Menela breathed shallow breaths, shutting her eyes tightly against the invading sand. Her right arm, contorted awkwardly in her haste, was beginning to go numb, but she didn't dare try to move it. Not yet.

She was rather surprised her hasty attempt to hide had worked so far, but she wasn't sure how many of the raiders were still looking for her. Any tiny little movement could still give away her location.

Menela was buried in a hole, one she had dug for herself in the soft sand where she landed from her awkward leap. She knew there could be no outrunning the raiders, so she had dug furiously until there was enough of a depression to crawl into. Then, she shuffled sand on top of herself, hoping that the darkness would obscure any pieces of her that still were uncovered. And, so far, it seemed to be working.

She forced herself to wait another ten minutes or so, until she was quite certain all the raiders had returned to the oasis. Then, she began to move, slowly unearthing herself. She had lost all feeling and control of her right arm from the lack of circulation, but it soon began to tingle, and a couple of minutes later she was out of the sand pit with her limb becoming more functional by the second. She walked a few dozen feet away from the oasis before turning back to look at it,

surveying the situation.

Surge was still in there, and it seemed that the camels had been found and taken into the oasis. Even if Menela had wanted to simply leave Surge out here, she couldn't. She needed him to somehow escape from the oasis with the camels and then, of course, they needed to leave for Attianee immediately. The original plan was for Surge to eventually decide to set out into the desert again, maintaining the appearance of a madman. The raiders would likely be glad to simply be rid of him. Their plan had not, however, counted on the camels being seized by the raiders.

Almost absent-mindedly, Menela took out the emerald and stared into it. Its beauty took her breath away again; shimmering and glinting, seeming to glow on its own accord in the darkness. Her heart started racing with the sudden realization that she had actually done it. She had succeeded in retrieving it, the Emerald of Tozar, the most prized jewel in all of Brogat, and had avoided at least immediate detection. It still seemed impossible, but yet here she was, standing in the desert, holding it like it was some child's toy.

She shook her head, reminding herself to focus on staying alive. She wasn't out of danger yet. Menela started pacing, still a safe distance away from the oasis, trying to think through a plan of action, when a movement from the oasis caught her attention. She dove for the ground, lying as still as she possibly could.

A lone black form emerged — a man, she realized a moment later — and then, behind him, a camel, its humps providing enough of a contrast to make it instantly recognizable.

Surge? Menela thought, incredulous. Surely he couldn't have just convinced them to give him back one of their camels and send him away.

The man seemed a bit confused, unsure of where to go, scanning the horizon aimlessly. He started slowly leading the camel back the way she and Surge had come from, back toward Attianee. Menela was cautious, but slowly eased to her feet. She bent over in half, trying to stay low to the ground while still moving quickly, and trotted after the form, quickly gaining ground. Once, the man suddenly turned around, and Menela was forced to drop quickly to the sand. The man, after continuing his scan, apparently didn't notice her, and soon resumed his slow, hesitant gait.

Finally, she caught up to him, but stayed hidden behind the camel as she tailed him. It was impossible to be certain, but it seemed it was indeed Surge, having somehow escaped with one of the camels. She grinned and shook her head, for once a little eager to hear one of Surge's stories.

Risking it all, she called out cautiously in the dark silence.

"Surge?"

The man jumped several feet off the ground and let out a yelp that seemed to go on forever.

"Ahhh! What, what in the world?!?" Surge danced around the sand, seeming to lose his mind in his moment of terror, which Menela would've thought entirely hilarious if they weren't trying to escape from a band of 12 murderous raiders.

"Surge, Surge, calm down!" she whispered harshly.

"Woooah, boy, you freaked me out!" Surge said, still much too loud for Menela's liking. He sucked in a couple of heavy breaths, and then sat himself down in the sand.

"Woooah," he said again, a little softer this time, putting his hand on his chest as if to forcefully slow his racing heart.

"Settle down, settle down," Menela said. Then she turned to the camel and patted him on the neck. It was her fathers, she recognized, and she was more than a little glad it was Surge's camel that had been left behind. She was also quite pleased the animal hadn't spooked when Surge started shouting.

"You good now?" Menela asked Surge after a couple more seconds. He was still sitting on the ground with his hand to his chest, but he nodded several times. Menela walked over to him and extended her hand. He stared at it, incredulous.

"Look, don't get used to it," Menela said, referring to her offer of assistance. "Consider it a thank-you for doing your part."

"Oh sure," Surge said, grasping her hand and pulling himself to his feet. "Fair trade," he said, brushing himself off and putting on one of his signature grins.

"So... They just let you go?" Menela said, nodding her head back to the oasis. She started to mount her camel.

"Yeah," he said, nodding his head and scanning the camel, trying to figure out how to mount it himself. "I sweet-talked them into it." Menela grimaced. She knew that probably meant the raiders had finally gotten so thoroughly annoyed and frustrated with Surge's constant and irritating talk that they had gladly sent him away from the oasis, if only to get some peace. Menela begrudgingly offered her hand again to Surge and pulled him up behind her on the camel. She didn't enjoy the thought of being in such close proximity to him for a long period of time, but there wasn't any

other way to get them both back to Attianee.

"I guess I'm surprised they were that kind," she said.

"Well, I think I still had them pretty well convinced I had no idea where I was or where I was going," Surge said as he settled himself behind her. "They must have figured sending me back out into the desert, even with a camel, was essentially a slow, thirsty death sentence."

"Ah. Right." Menela said.

"So, how are you alive?" Surge asked after a couple moments. Menela grinned.

"Buried myself," she said.

"Woah, really?" Surge exclaimed, not bothering to hide his awe.

Menela nodded and continued. "Yep. Threw some sand on top of me and waited them out."

"Wow. That's... Kind of impressive," Surge conceded slowly. "And you got the Emerald."

The fact sunk in yet another level deeper for Menela, and she slowly pulled the jewel out of her pack as her camel continued its slow gait home.

"Yes. I suppose I did," she said, letting herself get lost in its beauty for a moment.

"You know," Surge said, interrupting her daze. "My father will expect you to replace his camel with some of your newfound wealth." Menela turned and grinned over at Surge.

"I think I can handle that," she said.

Then, she dropped it back into her satchel, looked out at the dark horizon, and sighed deeply. She thought about Voyen for the hundredth time since leaving Attianee. Hope rose steadily inside Menela, hope for her sister to finally be rid of the dreadful disease that had plagued her almost since she was born. There truly was a chance at a brand new life for her...

This is not the start of the story. Nor is it the end. The narrative of The Emerald of Tozar stretches farther in both directions.

But it is here we will bring this particular chapter to a close.

Thanks for reading. Let's do it again soon.