

The Eyes of Sandala

By

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1

SIX MONTHS EARLIER...

They came from the sea, slipping quietly into the small channel. The silver moonlight faded behind them as one by one the sleek boats disappeared under the moss laden branches of gnarled trees along the bank. Blackened faces hid the oarsmen's fair-skinned features and blunted any moonlight that seeped through the thick cypress. Inside the boats, metallic weapons laid bundled in dark cloth.

For nearly a mile, the crafts glided forward, barely disturbing the dark water. The rugged men who powered the muffled oars studied the heavy tropical foliage surrounding them. It was dark and forbidding. Who knew what lay hidden there?

An unpleasant odor of exotic flowers mixed with the stench of rotting trees assailed them. It drenched the air, making it heavy and pungent, and dropped on the boats as if trying to engulf them.

As the inlet narrowed, a figure in the lead boat stood, swaying gracefully, the craft dipping in response. He gestured to the other boats and after two more pulls, the rowers quietly shipped their oars, turning to the left with the last stroke. Each boat found purchase in the soft silt, and whispered to a halt.

The leader, Galt, a chiseled man with hard features, listened for any indication their arrival was detected, but the nightly racket of the crickets and frogs droned on. He waved them forward and the men rose quickly, stepping softly into the shallow water. Lines were formed from each craft to a small clearing several boat lengths away. Bundles were passed from one set of hands to the next until all the provisions were stacked on dry land.

Galt took pride in their precision, evidence of his role in their demanding training. He ordered them to divide the provisions and weapons while he joined the two other leaders. He kept his voice low, but there was little to say. Each knew their area of responsibility. He realized it was more an unspoken need for last minute companionship, a comfort in kind, before they went their separate ways.

High in the canopy of trees that loomed over them, an owl hooted. Galt froze everyone with a raised hand then turned his gaze upward. The rest waited, muscles bunched with tension, trying to see beyond the shadows. Finally, Galt shook his head, whispering to a man beside him. "Grelag."

The man went to a nearby crate, opened a small cage and reached inside. He turned back and saw Galt point to a large tree at the edge of a clearing. Gingerly, he removed a hood from the creature he held.

The grelag was a half snake, half lizard abomination. As long as a man's forearm, its appendages ended in needle sharp claws. The venom from its bite could kill a man in less than a dozen breaths.

"Hunt," the man said to it, gesturing upward as he set it on the trunk of the tree. Quickly, it began to slither toward the top.

The men stood rooted to the ground then Galt heard a noise from above and shared a knowing look with the others. Something small hit the dirt in front of them. It was the grelag, what was left of it. The head was sliced off and blood oozed from the torn tissue around its neck. From overhead the owl hooted its mellow call once again.

Galt stared disbelieving at the dead creature. Sweat dampened his forehead. Abruptly, he pointed to two men beside him and pointed up the same tree. Sharing a fierce look, they placed knives between their teeth and began to climb. Galt judged they were halfway to the top when he heard a grunt. One of the men came crashing down, bouncing hard off several branches until he landed with a thud at the base of the tree. Galt hurried to the still form and turned him over. Eyes looked back vacantly.

Galt muttered an oath and looked back toward the tree heights, waiting. Seconds later, the second man tumbled down,

landing in an awkward heap. Blood gushed from an ugly gash that ran from ear to ear.

The rest of the men began to grumble but Galt's quick, slashing hand silenced them. Their fear was betrayed by their wide, unblinking eyes. Disgusted, he spat, chancing another glance toward the forbidding treetops. What kind of creature was up there?

Finally, a man beside him broke the silence. "Do we pull back?"

"No," Galt said harshly, "but send two men back to tell the captain we have been discovered."

"But I thought..."

"Keep your wits," Galt spewed. "This changes nothing."

Tight with tension, the men gathered their gear and moved out. A large group headed northeast towards lush valleys filled with abundant crops. Another angled sharply east. They would skirt the shoreline until they came to a daunting mountain range dotted with the gold and silver mining communities of Oreon. Galt led his company due west towards countryside marked by rolling hills and wealthy farmlands. For a long time, his worried gaze drifted frequently to the tree tops.

High above, orange eyes watched the two remaining men retrace their steps to the inlet before they shoved off in one of the crafts and head back out the river to the sea.

When they disappeared from view, the owl hooted once again, its cry haunting the night. A few seconds later, its call was answered, and that call re-echoed across the land.

Gradually, a thick part of the tree's main trunk changed color and the orange eyed 'owl' became identifiable as a small person. Satisfied the alarm had been raised, the 'owl' wiped blood from a knife before scurrying down the towering tree.

A lean, athletic figure, its physique showed the subtle beginnings of maturity. Clad in a leather tunic, a light spear was clutched in one hand. A jagged knife hung from one hip, and a full water skin dangled from the other. A bow and quiver filled with arrows lay strapped across its back.

Avoiding the invader's tracks, the figure started north at a steady trot, a tuft-eared lynx keeping pace nearby. The runner's eyes turned coal black as they adjusted to the darkness under the trees. The significance of the mysterious interlopers

was obvious. The invasion had long been foretold. No one knew when it would begin, only that it was inevitable. So the watcher raced for home to warn of the strange men who had entered Sandala under the cloak of darkness. They were enemies, to be sure, because anyone who stole ashore in the dark of night was no friend.

The journey of several hundred miles was of no concern. The watcher could run for hours, rarely stopping for rest or water, taking nourishment on the move. Hard training underscored the importance of the task. Hundreds of watchers were posted throughout Sandala, entrusted with the safety and livelihood of thousands.

Obstacles that would trip a less-skilled individual were dodged because of a special lens that produced keen night vision. Gradually, the darkness of the night passed into the hazy dimness of a chilly dawn. The sun would rise in another hour, and the midnight marauders would be miles away. Home called to the ten year old so she increased her pace. She remained calm, almost stoic, despite the drama of her first kill.