

THE PROLOGUE (To Legends of the Ruby Heart)

Laughter fills the smoky tavern, lit only by oil lamps and a huge fire under a roasting pig. Platters clatter and wine goblets clink as toast after toast is shouted across the room. Children play near the fire under the watchful eye of hunting dogs as they gnaw on left over bones.

At the head table a man leans back in his chair accepting the joy of his people. Beside him his wife gently rocks a cradle, while the infant peacefully slumbers. The child is the reason for the celebration. In his time, he too, will rule these people.

The sound of clattering hoofs and jingling harnesses intrudes upon the room. Leather-shod feet slap on cobblestones. The wooden door crashes in and light flashes from slashing swords. Tables and benches clatter to the ground. People scramble to escape.

The man jumps to his feet, snatches the baby and tucks him under his arm and, moving swiftly, dashes to the back door. He grabs a heavy black cloak and, wrapping it around himself and his child, steps out into the blacker night. He pauses for a moment to remove a chain with a large ruby from around his neck and tucks it into the child's wraps.

"May it bring you peace and safety, my son!" he whispers. Trying to ignore the screams of his people he scurries, keeping to the shadows, bending and twisting and ducking to keep out of sight. He moves around the lake, heading for the temple at the top of the cliffs. At the edge of the village, he glances back to make sure he has not been followed, then he bends low and slips through the moon-streaked grass toward the steps of the temple. The thud of horses' hooves burst from the street behind him, but he continues to run, chanting a prayer to his god to make his feet as wings. As he reaches the steps three horsemen surround him, their hooves clattering on the marble. He turns to face them, drawing himself to his full height and squaring his shoulders, slowly moving backwards up the steps toward sanctuary.

Two men dismount. He keeps moving backwards, even when one man steps behind him, his sword drawn. For a moment they all stand still, black shadows against blacker shadows. The man behind shoves him forward and the man in front wrenches the baby from his arms, tossing it to the third mounted rider. A flash of gold catches the man's attention and he reaches for the chain with the ruby. He never feels the sword as it slashes through him. His body falls into the lake, the chain, slipping from his fingers, settles in a puddle of gold close to his lifeless body.

The invaders disappear into the night, their hoof beats fading to silence. Smoke thickens the air and billows over the lake. Flames lick up through thatched roofs and an answering throb of red glows from the depths of the lake. Just one beat, then all is still.

Excerpts from "The Legend of the Ruby Heart"

A book still in progress

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