

A person stands on the peak of a dark, jagged mountain, holding a bright, glowing orb high above their head. The scene is set against a vibrant sunset sky with a large sun low on the horizon. The foreground shows a body of water reflecting the golden light of the sun. The overall mood is one of triumph and achievement.

Judith Tarr

*Avaryan Rising
Volume I*

The Hall
of the
Mountain King

THE HALL OF THE MOUNTAIN KING

Sample Chapter

Avaryan Rising: Book One

Judith Tarr



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Dedication

For Meredith

ONE

The old king stood upon the battlements, gazing southward. The wind whipped back his long white hair and boomed in his heavy cloak. But his eyes never blinked, his face never flinched, as stern and immovable as an image carved in obsidian.

The walls fell sheer below him, stone set on stone, castle and crag set in the green Vale, field and forest rolling into the mountain bastions of his kingdom. North and west and south, the wall of lofty peaks was unbroken. In the east lay the Gate of Han-Ianon, the pass which was the only entrance to the heart of his realm. On either side of it rose the Towers of the Dawn. Gods had built them long ages ago, or so it was said; built them and departed, leaving them as a monument, the wonders of the north. They were tall and they were unassailable, and they were beautiful, wrought of stone as rare as it was wonderful. Silver-grey under stars or moons, silver-white in the sun, in the dawn it glowed with all the colors of the waking sky: white and silver and rose, blood-red and palest emerald.

That same stone glimmered still under his feet although it was full morning, the sun poised above the

distant Towers. An omen, the priests would say, that the dawnstone had kept its radiance so long. Against all reason, against all the years of hopeless hope, he yearned to believe in it.

oOo

From his post at the southern gate Vadin could see the lone still figure dwarfed by height and distance. Every morning it stood there between sunrise and the second hour, in every weather, even in the dead of winter; it had stood so for years, people said, more years than Vadin had been alive.

He swallowed a yawn. Although sentry duty was the least strenuous office of a royal squire, it was also the least engrossing. And he was short on sleep; he had been at liberty last night, he and two more of the younger squires, and they had drunk and diced and drunk some more, and he had had a run of luck. In the end he had won first go at the girl. This time, at the thought of her, it was a smile that he swallowed.

Swallowed hard and as close to invisibly as he could. Old Adjan the arms master asked very little of the young hellions in his charge. Merely absolute obedience to his every command, absolute perfection in hall and on the practice field, and absolute stillness while on guard. One's eyes might move within the sheltering helmet; one might, at regular intervals, pace from portal to portal of the gate, which was when one could glance upward at the flutter of black that was the

king. For the rest, one made oneself an image of black stone and lacquered bronze, and made certain that one observed every flicker of movement about one's post.

It had been excruciating at first, that stillness. Raw boy that he had been, brought up wild in his father's castle in the hills of Imehen, he had imagined no torture greater than that of standing in armor with his spear at one precise angle and no other, hour upon hour, while the sun beat down upon his head or the rain lashed his face or the wind bit him to the bone. Now it was merely dull.

He had learned to take his ease while seeming to stand at rigid attention, and to set his eyes to their task of observation while letting his mind wander as it would. Now and then it would wander back to his eyes' labor, contemplating the people who passed to and fro in the town below. Some approached the castle, urchins staring at the great tall guards in their splendid livery, one at each of the lesser gates and half a company at the Gate of Gods that faced the east; at servants and sightseers and the odd nobleman passing within or going out.

At the very beginning of Vadin's watch, the Prince Moranden himself had ridden out with a goodly company of lords and attendants, armed and accoutered for the hunt. The king's son had had a glance for the lanky lad on guard, a flicker of recognition, a quick smile. A proud man, the prince, but never too proud to take notice of a squire.

Vadin glanced at the sun. Not long now before Kav

came to relieve him. Then an hour of mounted drill and an hour at swordplay, and he was to wait on the king tonight.

A signal honor, that last, rarely granted to any squire in his first year of service. Adjan had been sour when he announced it, but Adjan was always sour; more to the point, the old soldier had appended no biting sarcasm. He had only growled, "Pick up your jawbone, boy, and stop dawdling. It's almost sunup." Which meant that he was pleased with his newest and most callow recruit, gods alone knew why; but Vadin had learned not to argue with fortune.

While his mind reflected, his eye had been recording on its own, independent of his will. The Lady Odiya's elderly maid scuttling on an errand; an elder of the council with his followers; a gaggle of farmfolk come to market, taking time to gape at the glowing wonder of the castle. As they wandered back down toward the town, they left one behind, a man who stood still in the road's center and stared up at the battlements.

No, not a man. A boy perhaps Vadin's own age, perhaps a year or two younger for his beard was just beginning, very erect and very proud and patently no rustic. He could not but be Ianyn, blackwood-dark as he was, yet he was got up like a southerner in coat and trousers, with a southern shortsword at his side.

Vadin would have called him a paradox but for the flame of gold at his throat, the torque of a priest of the Sun, and the broad white browband that marked him an initiate on his seven years' Journey. This one was

young for it, but not overly so; and it explained the lanyn face atop the dress of the Hundred Realms. No doubt the trousers were a penance for some infraction.

The priest left off his staring and began to walk, drawing closer to the gate. Vadin blinked. The world had gone out of focus. Or else —

If Vadin's training had been beaten into him even a little less thoroughly, he would have laughed. This boy with the face of a mountain lord, who carried himself as if he had been as high as all Han-Ianon, was hardly bigger than a child. The closer he came, the smaller he seemed. Then he raised his eyes, and Vadin's breath caught. They were full of — they blazed with —

They flicked away. He was only a ragged priest in trousers, standing not even shoulder-high to Vadin.

And Vadin was flogging himself awake. The boy was almost through the gate. With haste that would have won a scowl from the arms master, Vadin thrust out his spear to bar the way.

The stranger halted. He was not frightened; he was not visibly angry. If anything, he seemed amused.

Gods, but he was haughty. Vadin mustered his harshest tone, which was also his deepest, booming out in most satisfactory fashion. "Hold, stranger, in the king's name. Come you out of the Hundred Realms?"

"Yes." The priest's voice was as startling as his eyes, a full octave deeper than Vadin's but eerily clear, with the soft vowels of the south. "I do."

"Then I must conduct you to his majesty."

At once, the order went, without exception, without

regard for any other order or duty. Beneath the stoic mask of the guard, Vadin was beginning to enjoy himself.

He had the immense satisfaction of collaring an armed warrior, a full knight to boot, and ordering him – with all due respect – to hold the gate until Vadin or his relief should come. “King’s business,” he said, careful not to sound too cheerful. “Standing order.”

The man did not need to ask which one. The torque and the trousers made it obvious.

Their bearer looked on it all with the merest suggestion of a smile. When Vadin would have led him he managed to set himself in the lead, striding forward without hesitation, asking no direction.

He had a smooth hunter’s stride, barely swaying the black braid that hung to his waist behind him, and surprisingly fast. Vadin had to stretch his long legs to keep pace.

oOo

The king turned his face toward the cruel sun. Again it was climbing to its zenith, again it brought him no hope. Once he would have cursed it, but time had robbed him of rage as of so much else. Even the omen of the dawnstone meant nothing. She would not return.

“My lord.”

Habit and kingship brought him about slowly, with royal dignity. One of his squires stood before him in the armor of a gate guard. The newest one, the lordling

from Imehen, for whom Adjan had such unwontedly high hopes. He was standing straight and soldierly, a credit to his master.

“Sire,” he said clearly enough, if somewhat stiffly, “a traveler has come from the Hundred Realms. I have brought him to you as you commanded.”

The king saw the other then. He had been lost in his guard’s shadow, a shadow himself, small and lithe and dark. But when he lifted his head, the tall squire shrank to vanishing.

He had a face a man could not forget, fine-boned and eagle-proud, neither handsome nor ugly but simply and supremely itself. The eyes in it met the old man’s steadily, with calm and royal confidence; almost, but not quite, he smiled.

Almost, but not quite, the king returned his smile. Hope was rising once more. Swelling; quivering on the edge of fear.

The boy stepped away from his guard, one pace only, as if to shake off the intruding presence. Something in the movement betrayed the tension beneath his calm. Yet when he spoke his voice was steady, and unlike his face, incontestably beautiful. “I greet you, my lord, and I commend your liege man’s courtesy.”

The king glanced at Vadin, who was careful to wear no expression at all. “Did you resist him?” the king asked the stranger.

“Not at all, my lord. But,” the boy added, again with his almost-smile, “I was somewhat haughty.”

From the glitter in the squire's eyes, that was no less than the truth. The king swallowed laughter, found it echoed in the clear bright eyes, and lost it in a dart of memory and of old, old grief. He had not laughed so, nor met such utter, joyous fearlessness, since —

His voice came hard and harsh. "From the Hundred Realms, are you, boy?"

"Han-Gilen, sire."

The king drew a slow breath. His face had neither changed nor softened. Yet his heart was hammering against his ribs. "Han-Gilen," he said. "Tell me, boy. Have you heard aught of my daughter?"

"Your daughter, my lord?" The voice was cool, but the eyes had shifted, gazing over the southward sweep of Han-Ianon.

The king turned, following them. "Once on a time, I had a daughter. When she was born I made her my heir. When she was still a young maid I consecrated her to the Sun. And when she reached the time of her womanhood she went away as all the Sun's children must do, on the seven years' wandering of her priestess-Journey. At the end of it she should have returned, full priestess and full wise, with wondrous tales to tell. But the seven years passed, and seven again, and she did not come. And now it is thrice the time appointed, and still no man has seen her, nor has she sent me word, I have heard only rumors, travelers' tales out of the south. A priestess from the north, Journeying in the Hundred Realms, abandoned her vows and her heritage to wed a ruling prince; but nay,

she spurned the prince to rule as high priestess in the Temple of the Sun in Han-Gilen; she went mad and turned seer and proclaimed that the god had spoken to her in visions; she . . . died."

There was a silence. Abruptly the king spun about, swirling his black cloak. "Mad, they call me. Mad, because I stand here day upon day, year upon year, praying for my daughter's return. Though I grow old and soon will die, I name no heir, while yonder in my hall my son leads my younger warriors in a round of gaming, or sleeps deep beside his latest woman. A strong man is the Prince Moranden of Ianon, a great warrior, a leader of men. He is more than fit to hold the high seat."

The king bared his teeth, more snarl than smile. "No man should grieve so for a daughter when such a son has grown to grace his hall. So men say. They do not know him as I know him." His fists clenched, hard and knotted, thin as an eagle's claws. "Boy! Know you aught of my daughter?"

The young priest had listened without expression. He reached now into his scrip and brought forth a glitter of metal, a torque of gold twisted with mountain copper.

The king reeled. Strong young hands caught him, helped him to a seat on the parapet. Dimly he saw the face close above his own, calm and still; but the eyes were dark with old sorrow.

"Dead," he said. "She is dead." He took the torque in hands that could not still their trembling. "How

long?"

"Five winters since."

Anger kindled. "And you waited until now?"

The boy's chin came up; his nostrils flared. "I would have come, my lord. But there was war, and I was forbidden, and no one else could be spared. Do not fault me for what I could not help."

There had been a time when a boy, or even a man grown, would have been whipped for such insolence. But the king swallowed his wrath lest it destroy his grief. "What was she to you?"

The boy met his gaze squarely. "She was my mother."

He had gone beyond shock, beyond even surprise. For that tale too had come to him, that she had borne a son. And for a priestess wedded to the god to conceive a child by any mortal man, the penalty was death. Death for herself, for her lover, and for their progeny.

"No," said this young stranger whose face in its every line spoken poignantly of her. "She never died for me."

"Then how?"

The boy closed his eyes upon a grief as stark and as terrible as the king's own; his voice came soft, as if he did not trust it. "Sanelin Amalin was a very great lady. She came to Han-Gilen at the end of its war upon the Nine Cities, when all its people mourned the death of the prince's prophet, who had also been his beloved brother. She stood up in the midst of the funeral rites and foretold the fate of the principedom, and the Red

Prince accepted her as his seer. Soon thereafter, for her great sanctity, she was taken into the temple in Han-Gilen. Within a year she was its high priestess. There was no one more holy or more deeply venerated. Yet there were those who hated her for that very sanctity, among them she who had been high priestess before Sanelin's coming, a proud woman and a hard one, who had treated the stranger cruelly and been deposed for it. In the dark of the moons, five winters past, this woman and certain of her followers lured the lady from the temple with a tale of sickness only she could heal. I think . . . I know she saw the truth. Yet she went. I followed her with the prince hard upon my heels. We were just too late. They threw me down and stunned me and wounded my lord most cruelly, struck my mother to the heart, and fled."

His breath shuddered as he drew it in. "Her last words were of you. She wished you to know of her glory, of her death. She said, 'My father would have had me be both queen and priestess. Yet I have been more than either. He will grieve, but I think he will understand.'"

The wind sighed upon the stones. Vadin shifted in a creaking of leather and bronze. In the world below, children shouted and a stallion screamed and a tuneless voice bawled a snatch of a drinking song.

Very quietly the king said, "You tell a noble tale, stranger who calls himself my kin. Yet, though I may be mad, I am not yet a dotard. How came a high priestess to bear a son? Did she then lay aside her vows? Did she

wed the Red Prince of Han-Gilen?"

"She broke no vows, nor was she ever aught but Avaryan's bride."

"You speak in riddles, stranger."

"I speak the truth, my lord grandsire."

The king's eyes glittered. "You are proud for one who by his words is no man's son."

"Both of which," said the other, "I am."

The king rose. He was very tall even for one of his people; he towered over the boy, who nevertheless betrayed no hint of fear.

That too had been Sanelin, small as her western mother had been small, yet utterly indomitable. "You are the very image of her. How then?" His hand gripped the boy's shoulder with cruel strength.

"How?"

"She was the Bride of the Sun."

So bright, those eyes were, so bright and so terrible. The king threw up all his shields against them. "That is a title. A symbol. The gods do not walk in the world as once they did. They do not lie with the daughters of men. Not even with the holy ones, their own priestesses. Not in these days."

The boy said nothing, only raised his hands. The left had bled where the nails had driven into flesh. The right could not. Gold flamed there, the disk of the Sun with its manifold rays, filling the hollow of his palm.

The king slitted his eyes against the brightness. A deep and holy terror had risen to engulf him. But he was strong and he was king; he reckoned his lineage

back to the sons of the lesser gods.

"He came," said this child of the great one, "while she kept vigil in the Temple of Han-Gilen where is his most sacred image. He came, and he loved her. Of that union I was conceived; for it she suffered and came in time to glory. You could say that she died of it, by the envy of those who reckoned themselves holy but could not endure true sanctity."

"And you? Why did they let you live?"

"My father defended me."

"Yet he let her die."

"He took her to himself. She was glad, my lord. If you could have seen — dying, she shone, and she laughed with purest delight. She had her lover at last, wholly and forever." He shone himself in speaking of it, a radiance touched only lightly now with sorrow.

The king could not partake of it. Nor, for long, could the stranger. He let his hands fall, veiling the brilliance of the god's sign.

Without it he seemed no more than any other traveler, ragged and footsore, armored with pride that was half defiance. It kept his chin up and his eyes level, but his fists were clenched at his sides. "My lord," he said, "I make no claim upon you. If you bid me go, I will go."

"And if I bid you stay?"

The dark eyes kindled. Sanelin's eyes, set with the sun's fire. "If you bid me stay, I will stay, for that is the path which the god has marked for me."

"Not the god alone," said the king. He raised a hand

as if to touch the boy's shoulder, but the gesture ended before it was well begun. "Go now. Bathe; you need it sorely. Eat. Rest. My squire will see that you have all you desire. I shall speak with you again." And as they moved to obey: "How are you called, grandchild?"

"Mirain, my lord."

"Mirain." The king tested it upon his tongue.

"Mirain. She named you well." He drew himself erect.

"What keeps you? Go!"

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