

Prelude

The Three

Our sacred mission: to bring the souls of men unto Christ while the world shall stand.

Countless stars blanketed the heavens of the night. The cold-crisp mountain air high atop the Rocky Mountains sharpened my ancient senses. I looked to my two missionary brothers, one older, one younger. We have been on a mission, lo these many years. We have been cast in prisons, placed down into the earth, thrice thrown into a furnace, twice put into a den of wild beasts. We were delivered from all this—and much more—by the power of God. We three, have stayed on the earth to do our Father's work. No one knows our names, but we have ministered unto all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people. Here amongst the beauty of this earth my two brothers and I seek counsel from the Father. Though Christ blessed us that we should not feel pain while on our earthly missions, we still worry for our charges.

My brothers and I huddled close to the campfire...not for warmth, but to pray for guidance as we pondered the problems of my recent charge: sixteen-year-old Sydney Morgan.

In a matter of hours her world tipped upside-down. She learned her mother had cancer, endured her estranged father's re-entering her life, and worried for her mentally-challenged sister. At her breaking point, Syd encountered the stone. As she touched it she was thrust through time to Helaman and his stripling warriors.

In this ancient world, Syd was mistaken for a young man when she fought Captain Helaman's second-in-command, using her martial art skills. Syd did not correct the assumption, believing in order to return home she could not reveal her true gender. Many trials befell her: convincing Helaman of her time travel, teaching the stripling warriors karate to lessen their battle injuries, and her biggest trial – one she may not survive – falling in love with Tarik, Helaman's second.

“She has the courage of a lion,” my elder brother said, as his sincere eyes gazed at me through the tailings of campfire smoke. He wanted to soothe my worry, make me believe that where I sent her would make her strong.

“She shall learn her true mission and make a difference in this world,” my younger brother added, patting my shoulder. “Do not fear. By the Father’s power she will be delivered out of the depths of war.”

I prayed my brothers were correct, for I know Satan’s powers are mighty.

... and I continued to pray for Sydney.

One

He Will Not Suffer That We Should Fall

Battle near the city Cumeni

63 B.C. Twenty-and-ninth year of the Nephite/Lamanite War

§ Sydney §

An eerie quiet stole over the gory ground laden with bodies of horses, men, and young warriors. I surveyed the area around me. I'd heard about the devastation of war in my own time, the twenty-first century, but being a girl of only sixteen I'd never actually seen it up close, never fought in a battle ... until today. Death was cold, grisly, and unforgiving. The scent of blood snaked through the land as steam rose from the dead. Division banners lay broken and discarded. Earth mourned her burden. The engagement for Cumeni, which had been furious and long, was finally over. Helaman and his stripling warriors, aided by Captain Gid and his troops, had won this horrific battle. Lamanites, who escaped death, ran off to fight another day, in another city. Victory was ours, but at a high price. I'd never seen anything like this, and I prayed I never would again.

Blood ran down my left arm and dripped to the ground. The sleeve of my karate gi gaped with a hole where I had been stabbed. Grabbing the moist material, I ripped off

the sleeve and tried to tie the scrap over my wound.

“Here, let me.” Chief Captain Helaman came to my aid. The mighty captain tugged off his helmet, setting it on the ground. Metal dented. Plumage tattered. His bearded and chiseled face was smeared with mud and blood. Taking my wounded arm in his huge, battle-scarred hands, he studied the damage. As he pressed on the puckered skin, blood oozed from the hole. I winced in pain, biting my tongue. He delayed no longer and quickly wrapped the wound, tying a firm knot. Looking at me with his copper-colored eyes, he said, “Mariah should see to you.”

“I won’t go. Not yet.” I didn’t know what I would do if he forced me. I glared at him with determination. “You said we’d find him.” He knew who I meant. He must wonder why I cared so much, since he thought me a young man. I quickly added, “Tarik was my mentor. I owe him.”

Helaman held my gaze for a moment. I wished I could read his mind. Finally he turned away, picked up his helmet, and tugged it on. “We shall find him...eventually.” Turning his attention from me, he cast his look over the savaged battleground.

What did he mean ... *eventually*? Tarik and Abraham had been captured. With every moment that we waited, they could be taken farther away. This thought made my heart pound wildly against my ribs. And the farther away they were from this battlefield, the further away they were from the safety of what had been written. The *Book of Mormon* said all the stripling warriors lived through battle, but said nothing about those who were captured. Plus, that was before I came crashing through time and took Tarik’s place by delivering his littler brother, Lib, to his mother. I tried to calm my breathing to stave off panic and, just as I thought myself successful, doubt on a wave of nausea

crowded my senses. He *had* to survive. The scriptures said the warriors were saved because of their faith. Tarik had faith ... more faith than I had.

Ximon, my black-and-white speckled Great Dane, who had traveled through time with me, nudged my hand, drawing my attention. I gazed down on the blood-stained dog. He tilted his head, empathy in his doggy eyes. Somehow the animal understood the horrors I'd lived through this day and was reaching out to console me. I gently stroked his soft head. He licked my hand as his long, thin tail wagged slowly back and forth, not with joy, but with sympathy.

Helaman trudged through the carnage. I followed. The few stripling warriors who accompanied the captain now trailed at a respectful distance, waiting to do their commander's bidding. The captain looked out on the horizon of devastation and butchery. His jaw clenched, his cheek muscle twitched, and I wondered if he were looking for the place where he'd last seen Tarik and Abraham.

I thought of the last time I'd been with Tarik. It was before dawn. We'd freed Lib and were heading to camp, when Tarik decided he had to join in the fight. The scene of our parting flashed to my mind. Tarik, a strong, brave Ammonite, looked down on me with his royal blue eyes – inherited from his Nephite mother. He pulled his eight-year-old brother's clinging arms from about his neck, gave the boy a squeeze, then passed Lib to me. We had found Lib in a cage inside the Lamanite camp. He'd been badly beaten. Bruised and frightened as he was, the child's arms went about me in a vise-like hold, afraid I would leave him. I wouldn't. Tarik was the one who would leave. Lib couldn't bear his brother's parting and buried his face against my neck.

Turning my thoughts to the present, I followed Helaman's gaze, desperately

looking for a familiar clump of trees or pile of rocks. The forest was charred. Black, dead trees stood as if in memorial for those who had fallen. All the rock formations appeared the same. Helaman uttered, “They were near the swampland when they were overcome.”

Again my mind flashed back to dawn, when Lib and I had crossed through the marsh. Our journey had been long and tedious. Biting insects, snakes and the threat of crocodiles kept us on the move. But even though the swampland had been treacherous, the city Cumeni was the most frightening.

“We shall search the marsh,” Helaman muttered, but his attention was on something else. He walked over and stared down on the moccasin of a stripling warrior peeking out beneath two slain Lamanites. He quickly dragged the bodies away. I held my breath and worried my teeth over my bottom lip. With great ... even reverent care, the captain turned the young warrior over. A stab wound leaked blood from the middle of his chest. The warrior’s head lolled to one side ... and then his eyes fluttered.

Alive!

Yes!

I kept praying that my presence in this time changed nothing. The *Book of Mormon* said the stripling warriors came out of battle alive ... still I worried. There was nothing written about a karate girl crossing through time and training the warriors to lessen their injuries. My being here could have changed everything, so I kept a pray on my lips.

Helaman scooped the young warrior into his arms and stood. Relief washed over the captain’s face. Handing the young man to two other soldiers, he said, “Take him directly to camp. See that Mariah cares for him straight away.” As Helaman watched

them leave, he shook his head and gave a deep sigh. He turned back to me, picking up our previous conversation. “Little One, we will find him. For now”

He didn't finish. Captain Gid rode up on his tireless black mare, pulled back on the reins, and dismounted. He was flanked by a few of his battle-weary commanders on their horses. Unlike the stripling warriors, they were soldiers of the Nephite army, who had fought for many years. The stout man had lost his helmet. His hair was matted with blood and mud. The scimitar cinched beneath his belt was blood stained. A large dent creased his metal breast plate, but he stood tall and unhindered as he addressed Helaman: “Your boys fought a noble fight, Chief Captain.”

“I fear I have lost many,” Helaman sighed. I knew the mantle of surrogate father weighed heavily on the chief captain's — the prophet's — shoulders; his burden tremendous.

“What would you have me and my men do?” asked Gid. After witnessing how the captain and his troops had come to our aid during battle, my opinion of Gid had risen drastically. No more did he appear to be the cantankerous, rebellious soldier. Instead, he was a devout man-of-arms, loyal to his people and their cause.

Helaman stared at the captain, and said, “You could not have reached Zarahemla in a day. What happened to the prisoners in your care?” Prior to this siege, the Lamanite prisoners we had taken when the city Cumeni first fell had grown so numerous we had been forced to guard them with swords in hand. Helaman commissioned Gid and his spare troops to take them to Zarahemla. They had no sooner left when I came upon another army of Lamanites, waiting to attack us, camped on the other side of the forest south of the city.

“We were overpowered, sir, as you warned we might be.” Gid looked down at the ground for a moment, his army’s failure a hard fact to face. He then looked to the chief captain, a bit contrite and a little humbled.

“Though it is a loss that the prisoners escaped, I am very grateful you returned.” Helaman laid his hand on Gid’s shoulder. “You can give me a complete report later, after we have seen to our men. Many have been badly wounded and many more, I fear, are dead.”

Gid’s empathetic eyes studied Helaman. Their leader-to-leader look said they knew all would be revealed in due time, for now a painful task lay before them.

Glancing at me and my injury where he had tied the make-shift bandage, Helaman said, “Syd’s wound needs fresh dressing. See that some of your men take him to Mariah.”

The captain reached for me. I stepped back and Ximon growled at the commander. Petting the Great Dane’s head, I countered, “I’m not going anywhere. With Tarik and Abraham captured, my place is here with you.” Though my arm throbbed, I was determined not to be bullied and glared up at Helaman almost daring him. I was glad he did not know I was a girl, for most assuredly he would demand I leave at once.

Captain Gid looked at my hastily wrapped arm where blood leaked from beneath the wet material. His eyes trailed up to my face, and I saw admiration in his gaze. He then glanced at Helaman. “Should I use force?”

“No! But if he passes out from loss of blood, it shall be on your head,” Helaman said to Gid, but gave me what I supposed was a fatherly wish-you’d-do-as-I-ask look. But I wasn’t sure, since I hadn’t really been around a father for over ten years. Images from my time crowded my mind: my mother lying in her hospital bed after surgery as the

doctor told her yes, the lump was malignant and they'd performed a mastectomy; my mentally-challenged sister, Gracie, scared to stay with the bishop while Mom recovered; and my absentee father, who was back in my life, arguing with me on the hospital lawn. I shook my head. I could only deal with one world at a time.

Gid turned and gave the order to one of his commanders to begin the task of stacking bodies of the noble fighters. Another commander was ordered to take his squad and dig a mass grave.

As we made our way through the battlefield, we found men dazed yet walking, men who rocked back and forth holding their wounds while others lay on the ground sobbing and pleading for help.

I quickly forgot my own wound as I helped Helaman. Though I concentrated on the task at hand, I subconsciously listened for a familiar voice, hopeful that somehow Tarik had escaped his captors.

We came upon Dagan and Amos, a couple of stripling warrior commanders, with a few of their troops. Dagan had a wound in his right leg, which seemed not to impede his walking; Amos a huge lump on his forehead. They were relieved to see me. Dagan took me aside. Amos was close on his heels and towered over the warrior who looked as mean as a Harley Davidson driver, but wasn't. The hefty Dagan asked, "What happened in the Lamanite camp?"

His question reminded me how lucky Tarik, Lib and I had been. I answered, "We were captured and held by Captain Nelek." The captain's fleshy image came to my mind: black, fathomless eyes gazed with hatred, jowls rested on his collar bones, and his short, squat, one-armed body unbelievably commanded power.

“No one has lived to escape from him,” Amos uttered, disbelief framing his hound-dog face.

I thought of how Tarik and I had been bound in the captain’s tent with no possibility of escape, and how Nelek raised his sword above my head with all the intention of killing me. A frisson streaked over my flesh. My wounded arm throbbed. I fought dizziness, forcing myself to keep talking: “He would have killed us if word had not arrived of Helaman’s attack. Nelek left to lead his men. Tarik and I escaped, found Lib, and here I am.” I could not give them a detailed account. The horrors of those moments clung to me like sticky spider webs.

“Where is Tarik?” Dagan asked, looking around, expecting to see Helaman’s second-in-command.

I rubbed the back of my neck and turned my head so they wouldn’t see the tears I fought. Not looking back at them, I said, “Don’t know. He sent me to deliver Lib to his mother. I haven’t seen him since we parted. He must have met up with Abraham during the battle because Helaman said he saw them.”

As I pressed my lips together, I remembered Tarik’s parting kiss. I cherished the memory of his soft lips on mine and how he stole my breath away. When we pulled apart and I looked into his dark, blue eyes heightened with long, thick lashes, I knew I loved him and always would. I couldn’t imagine my life without Tarik. And now...

“Remember the story I told you about Tarik and Abraham trapped in a tree by an old jaguar?” Dagan asked.

I recalled the tale, nodded, and looked at the hefty man before me whose bulky muscles and mean scowl could freeze even the fiercest attacker. At this moment, his

brows knitted together with concern.

He continued, “That was many, many years ago, before either Tarik or Abraham had seen battle and before you trained them. Do not concern yourself, my brother. The Lamanites will not be able to keep them captive.”

At that moment, Helaman motioned for us to come to his aid. He directed Amos and Dagan to take their troops to search another area for the living. They nodded a good-bye to me as they passed. Dagan gave me a look that said keep the faith.

As the day dragged on, we learned many of Gid’s men had died, which fed the nagging anxiety I carried on my shoulder. Ximon proved excellent at sniffing out the living. As the dog zeroed in on a foot clad in the familiar moccasin of the Ammonites, or a shield emblazoned with their colors, we’d pull the warrior out and find him alive. This happened over and over. We quickly fell into a routine of the troops immediately taking those who looked the most grave to Mariah and her nursemaids in camp.

The long abominable day became hot, humid, and even more miserable. Weak from loss of blood, I knew I should stop, but I couldn’t. My frantic need to help Helaman until we could go search for Tarik outweighed my physical discomfort.

Helaman watched over me. I knew he was biding his time until I collapsed, so he could send me to Mariah. I kept working the best I could, forcing myself to think past the pain and weakness which threatened to buckle my knees.

Finally in the distance, I heard the familiar voice my ears had been attuned for, calling my name. At first I wasn’t certain, having been fooled many times by other voices. I whirled about to find *my warrior* walking through the smoke tailings of the charred forest, carrying a wounded warrior brother in his arms.

Tarik!

I wanted to run to him, hold him, and cry. I knew I couldn't, not with the warriors watching. It took all the strength I had left to restrain myself. As Tarik approached, I saw he carried ... Abraham.

"He still breathes," Tarik uttered as Helaman took the stripling warrior from him.

"I shall see your friend is cared for," Helaman said.

I looked into Tarik's face and everyone else faded from my view. My eyes brimmed with tears as I surveyed the battle-weary warrior who stood before me, covered with ash, mud, and blood. I thought he was the most handsome man I'd ever seen. Oh, how I yearned to wrap my arms around him, to breathe in his soul. He studied me as well, and I knew he also wanted to embrace me. The dizziness I'd fought pitched to new heights. I could hardly stand.

But I had to.

I must be strong.

Tarik was back!

"You are hurt?" He reached for my wounded arm, but stopped as I flinched away.

"I'm fine," I lied, playing tough and fighting the thick and heavy gauzy clouds gathering in my vision.

Tarik hesitated only a second, then scooped me up in his strong arms. I couldn't help myself, I leaned my head against his chest. I felt the thump-thump of his heart and knew I was where I belonged.

I was home.

"Is Lib well?" Tarik asked as he hurriedly carried me down the trail away from

staring eyes and toward camp.

“... with your mother,” I managed to say. My eyelids felt weighted. I could hardly keep them open, and since I knew my Tarik was alive ... and I had delivered the good news that his little brother was safe with Bella, I felt my mission complete. I could finally rest.

“Syd ...” Tarik’s panicked voice came from far away. “Stay with me,” he pleaded. I didn’t understand what he meant. Of course, I was with him.

Darkness crept upon me, and I heard no more.