

Chainfire

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Extract

How much of this blood is his?" a woman asked.

"Most of it, I'm afraid," a second woman said as they both rushed along beside him.

As Richard fought to focus his mind on his need to remain conscious, the breathless voices sounded to him as if they were coming from some great dim distance. He wasn't sure who they were. He knew that he knew them, but right then it just didn't seem to matter.

The crushing pain in the left side of his chest and his need for air had him at the ragged edge of panic. It was all he could do to try to draw each crucial breath.

Even so, he had a bigger worry.

Richard struggled to put voice to his burning concern, but he couldn't form the words, couldn't get out any more than a gasping moan. He clutched the arm of the woman beside him, desperate to get them to stop, to get them to listen. She misunderstood and instead urged the men carrying him to hurry, even though they were already panting with the effort of bearing him over the rocky ground in the deep shade among the towering pines. They tried to be as gentle as possible, but they never dared to slow.

Not far off, a rooster crowed into the still air, as if this were an ordinary morning like any other.

Richard observed the storm of activity swirling around him with an odd sense of detachment. Only the pain seemed real. He remembered hearing it once said that when you died, no matter how many people were there with you, you died all alone. That's how he felt now—alone.

As they broke from the timber into a thinly wooded, rough field of clumped grass, Richard saw above the leafy limbs a leaden sky threatening to unleash torrents of rain. Rain was the last thing he needed. If only it would hold off.

As they raced along, the unpainted wooden walls of a small building came into view, followed by a twisting livestock fence weathered to a sil-

ver gray. Startled chickens squawked in fright as they scattered out of the way. Men shouted orders. Richard hardly noticed the ashen faces watching him being carried past as he stiffened himself against the dizzying pain of the rough journey. It felt as if he were being ripped apart.

The whole mob around him funneled through a narrow doorway and shuffled into the darkness beyond.

“Here,” the first woman said. Richard was surprised to realize, then, that it was Nicci’s voice. “Put him here, on the table. Hurry.”

Richard heard tin cups clatter as someone swept them aside. Small items thunked to the ground and bounced across a dirt floor. The shutters banged back as they were flung open to let some of the flat light into the musty room.

It appeared to be a deserted farmhouse. The walls tilted at an odd angle as if the place were having difficulty standing, as if it might collapse at any moment. Without the people who had once made it home, given it life, it had the aura of a place waiting for death to settle in.

Men holding his legs and arms lifted him and then carefully set him down on the crudely hewn plank table. Richard wanted to hold his breath against the crushing agony radiating from the left side of his chest, but he desperately needed the breath that he couldn’t seem to get.

He needed the breath in order to speak.

Lightning flashed. A moment later thunder rumbled heavily.

“Lucky we made it into shelter before the rain,” one of the men said.

Nicci nodded absently as she leaned close, groping purposefully across Richard’s chest. He cried out, arching his back against the heavy wooden tabletop, trying to twist away from her probing fingers. The other woman immediately pressed his shoulders down to keep him in place.

He tried to speak. He almost got the words out, but then he coughed up a mouthful of thick blood. He started choking as he tried to breathe.

The woman holding his shoulders turned his head aside. “Spit,” she told him as she bent close.

The feeling of not being able to get any air brought a flash of hot fear. Richard did as she said. She swept her fingers through his mouth, working to clear an airway. With her help he finally managed to cough and spit out enough blood to be able to pull in some of the air he so desperately needed.

As Nicci’s fingers probed the area around the arrow jutting from the left side of his chest, she cursed under her breath.

“Dear spirits,” she murmured in soft prayer as she tore open his blood-soaked shirt, “let me be in time.”

“I was afraid to pull out the arrow,” the other woman said. “I didn’t know what would happen—didn’t know if I should—so I decided I’d better leave it and hope I could find you.”

“Be thankful you didn’t try,” Nicci said, her hand slipping under Richard’s back as he writhed in pain. “If you’d pulled it out he’d be dead by now.”

“But you can heal him.” It sounded more a plea than a question.

Nicci didn’t answer.

“You can heal him.” That time the words hissed out through gritted teeth.

At the tone of command born of frayed patience, Richard realized that it was Cara. He hadn’t had time to tell her before the attack. Surely she would have to know. But if she knew, then why didn’t she say? Why didn’t she put him at ease?

“If it hadn’t been for him, we’d have been taken by surprise,” said a man standing off to the side. “He saved us all when he waylaid those soldiers sneaking up on us.”

“You have to help him,” another man insisted.

Nicci impatiently waved her arm. “All of you, get out. This place is small enough as it is. I can’t afford the distraction right now. I need some quiet.”

Lightning flashed again, as if the good spirits intended to deny her what she needed. Thunder boomed with a deep, resonant threat of the storm closing around them.

“You’ll send Cara out when you know something?” one of the men asked.

“Yes, yes. Go.”

“And make sure there aren’t any more soldiers around to surprise us,” Cara added. “Keep out of sight in case there are. We can’t afford to be discovered here—not right now.”

Men swore to do her bidding. Hazy light spilled across a dingy plastered wall when the door opened. As the men departed, their shadows ghosted through the patch of light, like the good spirits themselves abandoning him.

On his way by, one of the men briefly touched Richard’s shoulder—an offer of comfort and courage. Richard vaguely recognized the face. He hadn’t seen these men for quite a while. The thought occurred to him that

this was no way to have a reunion. The light vanished as the men pulled the door closed behind themselves, leaving the room in the gloom of light coming from the single window.

“Nicci,” Cara pressed in a low voice, “you can heal him?”

Richard had been on his way to meet up with Nicci when troops sent to put down the uprising against the brutal rule of the Imperial Order had accidentally come upon his secluded camp. His first thought, just before the soldiers had blundered upon him, had been that he had to find Nicci. A spark of hope flared down into the darkness of his frantic worry; Nicci could help him.

Now Richard needed to get her to listen.

As she leaned close, her hand sliding around under him, apparently trying to see how close the arrow came to penetrating all the way through his back, Richard managed to clutch her black dress at the shoulder. He saw that his hand glistened with blood. He felt more running back across his face when he coughed.

Her blue eyes turned to him. “Everything will be all right, Richard. Lie still.” A skein of blond hair slipped forward over her other shoulder as he tried to pull her closer. “I’m here. Calm down. I won’t leave you. Lie still. It’s all right. I’m going to help you.”

Despite how smoothly she covered it, panic lurked in her voice. Despite her reassuring smile, her eyes glistened with tears. He knew then that his wound might very well be beyond her ability to heal.

That only made it all the more important that he get her to listen.

Richard opened his mouth, trying to speak. He couldn’t seem to get enough air. He shivered with cold, each breath a struggle that produced little more than a wet rattle. He couldn’t die, not here, not now. Tears stung his eyes.

Nicci gently pressed him back down.

“Lord Rahl,” Cara said, “lie still. Please.” She took his hand from its hold on Nicci’s dress and held it against herself in a tight grip. “Nicci will take care of you. You’ll be fine. Just lie still and let her do what she needs to do to heal you.”

Where Nicci’s blond hair was loose and flowing, Cara’s was woven into a single braid. Despite how concerned he knew her to be, Richard could see in Cara’s posture only her powerful presence, and in her features and

her iron blue eyes her strength of will. Right then, that strength, that self-assurance, was solid ground for him in the quicksand of terror.

“The arrow doesn’t go all the way through,” Nicci told Cara as she pulled her hand out from under his back.

“I told you so. He managed to at least deflect it with his sword. That’s good, isn’t it? It’s better that it didn’t pierce his back as well, isn’t it?”

“No,” Nicci said under her breath.

“No?” Cara leaned closer to Nicci. “But how can it be worse that it didn’t rip through his back as well?”

Nicci glanced up at Cara. “It’s a crossbow bolt. If it were sticking out his back, or close enough to need only to be pushed just a little more, we could break off the barbed head and pull the shaft back out.”

She left unsaid what they would now have to do.

“His bleeding isn’t as bad,” Cara offered. “We’ve stopped that, at least.”

“Maybe on the outside,” Nicci said in a confidential tone. “But he is bleeding into his chest—blood is filling his left lung.”

This time it was Cara who snatched a fistful of Nicci’s dress. “But you’re going to do something. You’re going to—”

“Of course,” Nicci growled as she pulled her shoulder free of Cara’s grip.

Richard gasped in pain. The rising waters of panic threatened to overwhelm him.

Nicci laid her other hand on his chest to hold him still as well as to offer comfort.

“Cara,” Nicci said, “why don’t you wait outside with the others.”

“That isn’t going to happen. You’d best just get on with it.”

Nicci appraised Cara’s eyes briefly, then leaned in and again grasped the shaft jutting from Richard’s chest. He felt the probing tingle of magic follow the course of the arrow down deep inside him. Richard recognized the unique feel of Nicci’s power, much as he could recognize her singular silken voice.

He knew that there was no time to delay in what he had to do. Once she started, there was no telling how long it would be until he woke . . . if he woke.

With all his effort, Richard lunged, seizing her dress at the collar. He pulled himself close to her face, pulled her down toward him so she could hear him.

He had to ask if they knew where Kahlan was. If they didn't, then he had to ask Nicci to help him find her.

The only thing he could get out was the single word.

"Kahlan," he whispered with all his strength.

"All right, Richard. All right." Nicci gripped his wrists and pulled his hands off her dress. "Listen to me." She pressed him back down against the table. "Listen. There's no time. You have to calm down. Be still. Just relax and let me do the work."

She brushed back his hair and laid a gentle, caring hand to his forehead as her other hand again grasped the cursed arrow.

Richard desperately struggled to say no, struggled to tell them that they needed to find Kahlan, but already the tingle of magic was intensifying into paralyzing pain.

Richard went rigid with the agony of the power lancing into his chest.

He could see Nicci and Cara's faces above him.

And then a deadly darkness ignited within the room.

He had been healed by Nicci before. Richard knew the feel of her power. This time, something was different. Dangerously different.

Cara gasped. "What are you doing!"

"What I must if I'm to save him. It's the only way."

"But you can't—"

"If you'd rather I let him slip into the arms of death, then say so. Otherwise, let me do as I must to keep him among us."

Cara studied Nicci's heated expression for only a moment before letting out a noisy breath and nodding.

Richard reached for Nicci's wrist, but Cara caught his first and pressed it back to the table. His fingers came to rest on the woven gold wire spelling out the word TRUTH on the hilt of his sword. He spoke Kahlan's name again, but this time no sound would cross his lips.

Cara frowned as she leaned toward Nicci. "Did you hear what it was he said?"

"I don't know. Some name. Kahlan, I think."

Richard tried to cry "Yes," but it came out as little more than a hoarse moan.

"Kahlan?" Cara asked. "Who's Kahlan?"

"I have no idea," Nicci murmured as her concentration returned to the task at hand. "He's obviously in delirium from loss of blood."

Richard truly couldn't draw a breath against the pain that suddenly screamed through him.

Lightning flashed and thunder pealed again, this time unleashing a torrent of rain that began to drum against the roof.

Against his will, hazy darkness drew in around the faces.

Richard managed only to whisper Kahlan's name one last time before Nicci opened into him the full flood of magic.

The world dissolved into nothingness.