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The Tear in the Sky

by

Ryder W. Miller

The King Carlsbad stood before the assembled with dark tidings.

“Our nation is about to fall to the Telring hoards. We were prophesized to survive. We strove to bring our light to these dark lands, but we have not gotten the help we needed,” he said.

“The Five Kingdoms will not come to our assistance?” asked a farmer in the crowd.

“They had their own concerns and they will not be able to prepare for the onslaught. We have sent our best men to The Tunnel to hold them there, but they were not many. We should be able to hold them in the canyon there.”

“What will become of us?” a lady asked.

“We will either need to do their bidding or we shall perish, but there is another option. We can flee to The Five Kingdoms. They will take us in. Our forces will hold the Telring off so we can escape,” said Carlsbad.

“What will you do Lord?”

“I will stay to guard the hold, as it was the oath of myself and my forbears.”

“But they will outnumber us.”

“I know, but it will make time for you to escape,” said Carlsbad.

“What of the prophecy? What of those

Emper said would come to protect us?”

“We will not find out soon enough if it will come true. Our scouts will not return soon enough to let us know what has transpired, but we need to make preparations to leave. Their ways are strange and disturbing. Our way of life will disappear. We cannot anticipate what will follow. Though the world is magical we only have ourselves to depend upon.”

“Those who will leave must prepare now. They will soon be upon us and we need hold them off so there is time for the women and children to escape,” echoed Daba the Queen.

“I will wait for Emper to return,” said a young man.

“I will gather what men we can to help protect the caravan,” said another.

“We have a week ahead of them. When they arrive they will slay all that they must. Our town will then be theirs,” said Carlsbad.

“What of Emper?”

“We hope that he will survive and join us, but we all know that he is a strange one who has smoked too much of the Burrely Weed. He has visions, but for these matters we need depend upon steel and brawn, for which we are in short supply.”

The assembled grew quiet.

“I will stay so the others have more time to make it to The Five Kingdoms,” said a man.

Carlsbad smiled and said, “Raise your weapon if you will join us so the others have more time.”

A score did, but most in the crowd shuddered.

“There still may be time for help to arrive.”

“But from where? Those who stay will be doomed as well, but we will sacrifice so those who escape will have life,” said Carlsbad angrily.

“We will show them we are the light,” someone yelled in the crowd.

“Emper may have survived. Emper may have been right. He has been right before, even if he has not been heeded,” said another.

“He did help us make peace with the Five Kingdoms,” said another.

Carlsbad shrugged, “Maybe he was right. We do live in strange and magical times. But I do not think peace with the Telring is possible.”

Carlsbad look at his wife Daba and there was a sadness in his face that none had seen before. Then his disposition changed to anger.

“Go, I tell you. Go while you still can. I have failed you, but I will help ensure your escape. Don’t make me say so again. I command you. My queen Daba will lead you to the Five Kingdoms. We will send for you to return if we can make peace with the Telring, but that is not likely.”

“Thank you liege for what you have done. We have really prospered for a generation at the Hold,” said a woman in the crowd.

Carlsbad tried to smile in gratitude, but said instead, “Thank you, but I have failed you.”

#

It took a day for most of the residents of the Hold to gather to depart. A few left on horseback, but most pushed carts or wagons. Most were woman and children, but there were also the lame, sick, and young. There were also a few warriors with them, but most of the warriors, only a score now, stayed with Carlsbad.

In the morning light the king watched the procession leave. He looked dour and perturbed as they made their way into the hills. They would need travel for a week before they entered the protection of the Five Kingdoms. The Kingdoms would need children who would grow into soldiers and mothers to replenish their kingdoms.

The Telring would not dare attack The Five Kingdoms directly. There would be all matters of reprisal. The Five Kingdoms never really like Carlsbad, an illegitimate son of one of their nobility. He dreamed of a freer world. He dreamed of peace through compromise. He thought there was too much conflict with the Telring and that peace was possible. That was why he had struck it alone out in these contested areas. He wanted to bring the light out here to the crossroads.

But even among the Telring there were those who were unaccounted for also. There were those who would commit vandalism to The Hold. The Telring had eventually decided to occupy the disputed areas. They would reclaim these areas and The Hold would cease to exist in the process.

Carlsbad and his people did not belong with either The Five Kingdoms, of which they were viewed as an offshoot, or the Telring who they found very foreign. His dream of a Utopian peace was realized for a time. Many were happy and strived at The Hold. There were marriages, children, alliances, and friendships.

The Five Kingdoms was like a military

state, but it had survived. Every man need be a warrior there and every woman a mother producing more warriors. The Telring did not dare challenge it and it did not know what to make of The Hold which it treated as an offshoot that for a time should be left alone and studied.

But the Telring had left The Hold alone for almost a generation. It had been a time of an uncertain peace. And then there was mad and silly Emper to chronicled the time. Emper was the child of a farmer and as a kid he reveled in games of warfare. He was so skilled that most knew to leave him alone. He could win duels he did not want to be in or he did not start. Since a child he had not started any contest. But then he went mad. He stopped cutting his hair, drank too much Mead, and smoked the Burrely Weed. He would rave on.

Carlsbad remembered his early days when he had also drank too much Mead and occasionally smoked the Burrely Weed. There were those moments where The Dream seemed like it was achieved. It was the idea that mankind could be at peace with each other. That happiness and peace were possible. Those were high and enjoyable times. One could believe that life could be enjoyed. That people could be happy. That there could be hope for a better world.

The Hold for a time was a fulfillment of that dream, and Emper was its spokesman. Many thought Emper was wild and crazy, but he had a way with people and words. Though he was part of the joke, he was telling the joke. He made people smile, sometimes cry, but usually reflect.

One night at a party where people were reading poetry Emper stood before the crowd laughing.

“We will survive. We will be appreciated. We can make peace.”

There was a smile on his face that few others there could match. It would have

seemed mad in The Five Kingdoms, but here in this Utopia by the riverside it seemed almost magical, for some even divine. There was a bemused look on his face, almost angelic. Emper had said that The Hold would be protected because it changed the world.

Emper had said a lot of things, especially after some Burrely Weed and Mead, but this was remembered. Many had taken it to heart. Emper tried to give up being a warrior, but he conceded that the world was what it was.

“Out of the sky they will come to help us,” Emper said in a stupor before a crowd on a night of a party.

Carlsbad often smiled when Emper’s name was mentioned. “It took all kinds,” he would say. He was too inspirational to be merely a town fool.

There had not been any attacks on The Hold, but if one traveled too far into the areas of the Telring there was the occasional reprisal. Things had changed in Telring with there new leaders who wanted The Hold.

On those party nights this seemed inconceivable to Carlsbad and Emper while reveling in the festivities.

Carlsbad for now had given up hope. Mad Emper had ridden out with the troops to see if an arrangement could be possible. It had been weeks before any of the scouts had returned. There were not big numbers involved here. The Telring could only muster a few thousand. The Hold had only a quarter of that.

The Five Kingdoms had a dozen thousand at their disposal, but they never really liked the residents of The Hold. They viewed it as a political protest. Some even saw it as a thorn in their side. Here they were arguing that peace could be made with the Telring, that a permanent army was not necessary. That a constant state of warfare could be avoided. But in this new generation the dream had disappeared. The wild Telring now attacked

members of the Hold if they homestead in the west.

When he thought of Emper, he could not forget those high times when The Hold was gathered in revelry and the dream of peace was realized, at least for a time. But now it seemed as if those times were over.

The Hold had grown quiet. There were only a score of men assembled waiting for direction. In what had been a market place filled with produce, there were only piles of food with no vendors. There were no screams of playing children. There were no women talking. The Hold was not completely silent, but the life that they all cherished was no longer there.

Carlsbad decided to hold a meeting to strategize. He was not sure how to hold the keep, but that was not really their goal either. They just needed to delay the onslaught so the women and children could make it to The Five Kingdoms. But there was still the hope that Emper would return with the forces necessary or be able to make the peace.

“What are our options Carlsbad?” asked one of the king.

“I don’t know yet. They should be able to hold them for sometime at the Tunnel,” said the King.

“But what about when they break through?”

“They will be happy with just taking The Hold. We will greet them and surrender. Their lusts should stop here,” said Carlsbad.

“Surrender?”

“If we fight them here they will go forward to catch the woman and children. If they think the battle is over they will leave the others alone. If necessary I will challenge their leader to a duel,” said Carlsbad who had declining gray hair.

“I will do so in your place,” said a stout

soldier.

“No it will be I,” said Carlsbad.

“Why not just join them in arms?” said another in the group.

“There are not enough of us. We must delay them here. We will have them wait here. But there is still hope yet. Maybe our forces have driven them back at The Tunnel. We still have to wait to hear from them,” said Carlsbad.

A few men took up posts to keep a look out for the scouts to return, but The Hold had grown silent. The pigeons had returned in force to the Hold, eating debris off the streets. There was no one to chase them away. A few of the domestic dogs had been abandoned, but the soldiers, when they could, shared their food with them.

Often Carlsbad could be seen at the high lookout himself waiting for the scouts to arrive. There was sadness about him, but also a deeply felt anger. His powerful silhouette could be easily recognized from a distance on the battlement.

It had been three days since the members of the Hold had left for The Five Kingdoms that a few of the scouts had arrived. There was great cheer among the new guardians of the Hold. Emper was among them, but though saddened to see the Hold empty there was a bright light about him. Though there were losses, somehow there were good tidings. Emper carried a large pack on his shoulders, but he did not seem burdened. Carlsbad asked them if there was time for a feast.

“At dinner we will hear your tidings,” he said to them giving them time to rest and prepare for what may be their last feast.

“We have good tidings and they can wait until dinner,” said Emper, though bedraggled as usual, but now there was a look of optimistic certainty in his face.

“We lost many, but we prevailed through

providence and assistance,” he said. “But the story could wait until dinner. We have traveled far and fast these three days to tell you these good tidings.”

Those still assembled at the Hold, all men, prepared a meal baking a lamb. The food was modest, but all were prepared for the good tidings that Emper would share. Carlsbad sat at one end of the table, while the seat of honor at the other side was left for Emper. It was decided that Emper would tell the tale before they ate. He moved to the middle of the table, finding a chair closer to The King, to tell his tale.

“The other men are on the way, we received help and we were victorious. They are on foot so they will still be a couple of days,” said Emper.

“How were you victorious?” asked the Carlsbad.

Emper began, “Our forces were joined at The Tunnel. Our prayers were answered. On the heights, above the canyon, we could see the Telring forces approaching from a distance. They were a few days away when we could see their dust. We knew that we could not defeat them, but in the crevices of the tunnel we could restrict them and hold them back if necessary. We could also clog up The Tunnel so they would not be able to make their way through.

“We had men on the cliffs and forces to block their way in the tunnel, but their numbers were larger than we were prepared for. As they had threatened, they had the forces necessary to destroy the Hold. We had hoped that we could hold them off at the Tunnel and maybe convince them to go back. We were successful because men had arrived.”

“Where they of The Five Kingdoms?”

Emper continued “No. We were not sure where they were from. But they came out of the sky. There was a tear in the sky. There was

a hole in the sky that they came through.”

“Magic!” said Carlsbad.

“Our prayers were answered. There were not many of them, maybe a thousand, but they were fierce to behold. They came with long poles, poleaxes of sorts, and metal hammers. We could never make such things. They wore heavy black “fabric,”” said Emper who put some their “cloth” on the table.

“What manner of cloth is this? It is tougher than any fabric I have ever seen.”

After trying to tear it, Carlsbad took out a knife and tried to cut the black shiny material, but unsuccessful at first he held the blade at a sharp angle and using his strength pierced the material.

“Not a strong as armor, but one cannot tear it with one’s hand. One could travel light with it and it shines. I bet it would keep one dry,” said Carlsbad.

“Yes it would,” agreed Emper.

“Tell me more,” said Carlsbad.

“They ran out to meet the Telring in the field before The Tunnel. They did not wish to wait in the Tunnel to ambush them. With these extra numbers we decided to start the battle in the field. If we needed to we could retreat to The Tunnel to hold them off.”

“Where they were from?” asked Carlsbad.

“They said they were from ‘N’Yauk.’ They were a thousand strong and ready for battle. The strange gear they wore disturbed the Telring. They came out of the sky and the Telring fled before them. They were impressive to look upon, but if you ask me not fully prepared for what was likely to transpire. They did not have swords or shields, only poleaxes and hammers as I have said.”

“Where are they now?”

“They returned from whence they had come through the sky. They ate a meal and

they returned. They didn't say much, but they ate a lot. They talked kind of strange, but did not say a lot. From 'N'Yauk' they said, but they said it with a strange accent. One said he was from 'Brook Land.' Some said 'The Island.' They did not want to build a fire, but they did so carefully. We ate 'Foul' and 'Stake' and they told us their story. They were men who died putting out a great fire. They actually put out fires. That was their original mission."

"I would have liked to have met them," said Carlsbad.

"We even said so, but they said they did not have time to rest. When they died in the big fire defending the "Two Towers" they were given a choice. They could rest or go forward to help others. Most chose not to rest. These were the men who decided to go forward. These were the men who went on to fight the good fight, our fight."

"I wish they could have stayed," said Carlsbad sadly.

"I do not think we will be hearing from the Telring for some time. There was thunder and lightning when the men from 'N'Yauk' and "The Island" arrived. I do not think they all will be returning either. There are other

battles for them to fight. They said there was no time for them to rest. There were other fires. There were other battles."

Carlsbad was silent for a moment and then he began with a pronouncement, "We will send for our people and invite those from The Five Kingdoms to come and join us. We will become an annex of The Five Kingdoms again and send word to The Telring. There are those that one cannot negotiate with. Those who join us from the Five Kingdoms will enjoy our freedoms for a while. Let us feast now. There are magical forces who care about our freedoms and struggles."

There was now merriment in the hall because the men were tired and hungry.

"One of them forgot this," said Emper giving a helmet to Carlsbad.

"What is this?" he said before they began to eat. "It is of one color and flexible, but it does not break easily. Strong enough, but not of metal. I have not seen this material before. Such foreign lettering as well. I wonder what it means?"

"NY FD."

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