

Final Sentence

by Val Evenstar

The young man sat at the small writing table, quill in hand. A small candle was at the center of the small yellow circle lighting his page.

This would be his last letter.

Tomorrow they would turn him over to the Calormenes, and he would die.

He dipped the quill in the ink and touched it to the paper.

O my sister and O the delight of my eyes, it began. May the great god Tash grant you endless days and a spirit of courage, for you shall soon be in need of it.

Know you that a great evil has befallen me, yet what was may seem, at first, to be a great misfortune can, at the conclusion, be a benefit. This the poets have said; this I have experienced.

Let it be known to you that on the third dawn of this great campaign, albeit a secret one planned specially by the Tisroc (man-he-live-forever), I was honoured by an audience with the commander of all the divisions ordered to the accursed Northern border.

Thus he spoke to me: "Son of Kidrashi Tarkaan, your deeds of valour and bravery have reached mine ears from many honourable warriors. They have spoken highly of your abilities and commend you for your most excellent conduct. Therefore, O young warrior, it has pleased the Tisroc (may-he-live-forever), whom I represent, to select you to attempt a most noble enterprise in the name of the inexorable god Tash."

After which he made known to me, in much detail, what I shall now tell you in brief: that I was to gage the defences of Anvard castle, in hopes of finding a weakness for our armies to exploit. I considered myself greatly honoured to be chosen for such an important endeavour, and as such was the nature of the feat, I was to go alone.

When darkness overtook the land, I journeyed on foot to the land of the North. Our armies were hidden very close to the River that borders Archenland, therefore I was not too inconvenienced in my travels.

For one day and one night I walked with the utmost care, so as to leave the Northerners ignorant of my presence or my mission. On the next day I reached my destination.

O my fair sister, it pains me greatly to narrate to you what next came to pass. For as I was attempting to enter the castle through a small, unguarded door I had discovered early in my survey, there came to me a young boy of perhaps ten years of age. He was fair of hair and skin, as are most Northerners, and he carried with him a small bow, such as those which are used to teach small boys the skills of archery.

Immediately he recognized that I was from Calormen, and addressed me: "Gracious Sir, whence travel you in so

undignified a manner, for I can see from your face that your ancestors were great Tisrocs of old."

To which I did not respond, for a mission such as mine required the utmost secrecy. I thought to come close to the boy with the goal of silencing him before he could alert the guard, and so I approached. "O my child, your discernment is far beyond your years, for I am indeed descended from the great and mighty god Tash."

Yet as I moved closer, a shadow fell over the face of the boy, and he quaked with fear. I quickened my pace so as to capture him the sooner, but he gave a great shout that surely would have caused the dead to come from their graves, and drew back an arrow on the string. Through my folly I decided that one so young could not shoot a man; yet even so did he, and his arrow found its mark on my leg. Whereupon I made my best effort to flee, but the barbarian guards quickly found and captured me.

I behaved in what seems to our people as a most honourable manner, calling down all kinds of curses and invoking the name of our god against them many times. O my sister, you know not the shame it causes me to write this to you now. For the veil has been removed from my eyes and it is terrible for me to recall in what a terrible, undignified, yea, barbaric way I behaved.

Nevertheless it came to pass that I was imprisoned in one of the castle rooms. Gracious sister, know you that I was in no way mistreated. The Northerners provided me with every comfort, and never attempted to harm me. Truly the tales told are in error, for these people are not the hideous barbarians we are told of in our youth, rather warriors with much honour and courtesy. O my sister, let not the cloud of doubt settle upon your fair brow, for in the course of this epistle I shall reveal to you all I have learned about these people and their lands, and all shall be made clear.

The Northerners were surprised to find that one of my race had entered their kingdom, nay, had very nearly entered their famed stronghold. As a young woman of your sharp mind may well discern, it was not long until their king came to me to find the reason for my presence. I, like a true warrior of Calormen, had sworn to myself and my superiors, in front of the statue of the great god Tash, to die before revealing any secrets that might be of use to our enemies. Then, O my sister whose wisdom is like unto the poets', imagine my shock when no threat of torture or any sort of physical harm was made unto me. The King of Archenland, whom they call Lune, was indeed most courteous and apologies most profusely for my injury, stating that the young man who had loosed the arrow was lacking in judgment, and that indeed he wished most earnestly to beg my pardon. So great was my surprise that I at once consented; and, upon bringing the lad before me, I noted a marked resemblance between the king and the boy.

"O most feared Barbarian King," I said, even before the boy, whose look was on the whole one of great pity and concern, "Do my eyes deceive me or is this young man your kith and kin, for he is as like to you as a son."

Whereupon the King acknowledged me in the most polite of manners and confirmed that the fair-haired youth was indeed his son.

"O great warrior," the young prince said, and continued with the greatest sincerity and not a few tears, "I must beg your pardon for the rash acts of my hands; for it was in fear that I loosed the arrow that now causes you much agony. It was neither the act of a man nor a prince, and for this I must cry you mercy, for despite my youth, such an act is unbecoming to any who dares name himself a man of the North."

Amazed at the warmth of his tone and the expression of his face, I granted him full pardon for the act, for his is yet a young boy, and his very apology spoke of more nobility and character than that of many young Tarkaans of Calormen.

Know then, O my sister, that over the course of my imprisonment I gained an understanding of these Northern barbarians, for I was living in the heart of one of their greatest cities, and was granted almost daily an audience with their highest officials. Their treatment of me was astonishing, for I was free to wander the palace with only a small escort. The people themselves were not afraid to address me; indeed, they were most eager to hear the tales of our fair Southern sands. In none of my many conversations did they call me by any derogatory or insulting name or act towards me in a condescending manner, as we have been told is their habit in dealing with our people. My sister, in the North men and women shine with the light of the sun, and not only from their fair features but from the generosity and kindness of their actions. Therefore you will understand how loathe I became to see any great misfortune befall their land.

Most wise sister, you have enough discernment even at your young age to know that the simple actions of a people cannot truly change a man's heart. I beg your understanding, therefore, as there is a most important aspect of this tale which I must now relate to you.

It came to pass that as I was in my quarters, and the guards were outside the door, out of earshot. I felt a mighty and magnificent presence in the room with me, such as I have never seen nor heard of before. When I turned I beheld the most wondrous sight – a great Lion, whose very face was the sun itself. O my sister, believe not the lies of our peoples, for surely no demon could have spoken with such love and nobility as did that Lion. For spoke he indeed, and thusly: “My child, why do you hate me?”

My rebel tongue refused to utter any words of great intelligence, therefore I answered that all Calormenes were raised to hate him as a monster. To which he asked again: “Why do you hate my people?”

I replied truthfully that I did not hate them anymore. “Do you not love them?” he asked me, and I said that I did not know.

“Do you wish to love them?” he asked.

Again I did not know. Then, low and calm as the strong current of the sea, he said, “Do you wish to love me?”

O my sister, if you had seen him then and experienced what I had, you too would have responded in the like. For at that instant, yea, still, I wanted nothing more than to love him with all of my being, and I made this known to the Lion.

“Then love my children,” he told me, and the next moment he was no longer there.

O dearest sister, most beautiful and wise sister, as you love me hear out these my words. For as a result of this encounter, and my interactions with the people of Archenland and especially that with the King himself, I became convinced that to dishonour the Lion would be more of a sin than to curse the name of Tash himself. So it was that I willingly told King Lune all that I knew of our plans of attack, and how he might best defend himself against our armies, and where he might find them.

Now, O my sister, calm yourself and sit you down again. For it was no easy action to take, nor an easy decision to come by. My words have been sufficient, have they not, in explaining my change of heart in regard to the Northern peoples. Count it no betrayal on my part, rather a great service, that I have done such as I did. Should my father disown me now, it would weigh heavily on my heart and the sun would become dark in my eyes. For now I must

make known to you my impending fate.

O my sister, as I love you I would never wish to cause your heart sorrow. Yet I am afraid that I must.

Know then that I, being aware of the how and where the Calormene force is scheduled to attack, have decided to do whatever is in my power to halt their endeavor. Therefore I shall return to the camp at first light.

The words now spread themselves slowly across the paper, O my sister, as my tears for you and my family fall fast.

There is no simple way to reveal to you what shall come to pass. I love you, O my sister, and I do not wish to burden your heart. Yet I would keep your love, and to do so I must remain the man and brother you admire. I am a warrior, and you are one at heart; therefore prepare yourself, O my sister, for my fate is this:

I return tomorrow in advance of a small force from Anvard. As a warrior and son of Kidrash Tarkaan, I shall walk boldly into the camp. I harbour little hope that news of my capture has not reached the ears of my commanders. Therefore you know most acutely what I must suffer. These laws of our country are cruel indeed, O my sister, to condemn to death a man guilty of nothing more than a few days in the house of his enemy. In the North such things to not happen; laws there are truly formed by just men, not by scheming, greedy Tarkaans and Viziers. Your tears now wet the paper, sister, but read on and hear my earnest plea.

Come to the North, O my sister. It is a good land filled with good people. They will open their homes and their hearts to you, and you will be free to be the warrior princess you were meant to be. I hear that a young woman may wed whomever she pleases here, or not even wed at all. When I saw the lush forests and teaming rivers, I thought of you, dearest sister. More than any perfumed bath or lavish couch of silks, they would please and delight you. Do not spend all your days in our desert home, dear one. For though you may have luxuries to please the body, you will not have the freedom your spirit requires.

Yet I digress, and from these pleasant thoughts I must turn now to complete my tale.

Well it is that you know what will befall me. The captains of all the regiments and the warriors and fighting men will gather to give me trial and enforce the sentence. Even the sentries on the hills will be distracted; it is at that time when the men of Archenland will attack. For our weapons will be lowered and our quivers out of reach; the army shall be forced to retreat or be destroyed.

Do not harbour for me any hope of rescue, O my sister. Indeed I keep none for myself. If you knew the commander as I do, you know that he would never spare a traitor even if Tash himself tried to intervene.

Mourn not my passing, O my sister. For I would rather die the honourable man I have become than live the slave of a most despicable Tisroc. Understand then why I have done this; I know my father will not.

It is with much sorrow and love that I now take my leave of you, O my precious sister. I shall carry this letter with me in hopes that my commander may yet have mercy and deliver it to you.

May the gods delight in you even as I do.

Your brother whose love will never die.

“O my father, the trumpets announce the enemy upon the hill!” a young Tarkaan cried.

The older man looked up, then across at the young man in front of him. He was bloodied and bruised, yet his eyes shone with defiant fire.

“Rally the horsemen. We attack at once.” The man stalked away and said, without a trace of emotion, “Kill the traitor. Burn the body.”

The prisoner's eyes widened, but he stood firm.

“It shall be done, O my father,” the young Tarkaan replied, and then paused. “O my father, this man was of noble descent. What message shall I send to Kidrash Tarkaan?”

The old commander stops for a second. “Tell Kidrash that he fell in the Western campaign.” He resumed his quick march away.

“I have a letter,” the prisoner said, low and intense, pain running through his voice. “It is for my sister. For the love of Calormen, take it to her!”

The young Tarkaan dug in the prisoner's mail and withdrew a crumpled parchment.

Sneering, he dashed it to the ground and ran his scimitar through the prisoner's heart, then rushed to join the battle.

