

Knights in Red Coats

by Jane Johnson

Chapter One

Society Girl

"Margaretta!" a high-pitched voice called.

I closed my eyes for a brief moment, before turning away from a plot of nurtured lilies. Mother came towards me, the flounces of her train bouncing over the grass as she hurried over as fast as she dared in this polite society.

"Yes, Mother?" I folded my hands as I spoke, bowing my head a little, hiding my irritation.

"I need to speak to you a moment. Can you come inside?"

Mother's Swedish accent grew stronger as always in moments of great excitement. I cast a glance over my

shoulder at the young English officer escorting me,
assuring him with a nod that I would return.

*Have I broken a code? I don't think so...there's nothing
improper in flirting with a young man!*

Mother took my arm, and we went towards the house.
Self-conscious, I lifted my hand to the knot of curls
pinned and flowing over the top of my head as I passed
the ornate mirror.

Nothing wrong with my appearance.

Mother hurried me on to a quiet corner in the main
hall. The cool air inside Lord Chelmsford's
Pietermaritzburg residence fanned my flushed face. I
welcomed the chance to step inside.

*White, white, white trimmed with gold, outside and
inside, everything white...is white my Lord's favourite
colour, as well as a matter of reflecting the heat?*

Mother stopped and whirled me around to face her.

"Mother? Is something wrong?"

I knew after I had spoken that something at least
interesting had happened. Mother's eyes gleamed with
exultation.

"The Count of Alsdorf has been talking to your father,
Margaretta! He is asking about you!"

"Mother!"

I clutched her arm in excitement. "You mean, he may want to marry me?"

Mother's hand gripped mine. "Who knows?"

I felt the eagerness that shone from her face. I closed my eyes and tipped my head back.

"Just think, Mother," I said, dreamily, "I may be the first white African bride of Natal."

Mother shrugged a little.

"Perhaps. If that is what is important to you. For me, getting you to reign mistress over some respectable estate with money at your fingertips is more important! Heaven knows it's near impossible to marry into money nowadays. Parents are so careful about who their children choose to wed!"

She paused for a moment.

"Be careful, Margareta. Don't fall too readily for him - but don't discourage him."

She smiled at me, then turned to leave. I stood, watching her go. For one brief moment, the calculation behind it sickened me.

What does he want? A mistress for his home, a pretty face, a woman skilled in society's ways. Me? I need money, so I encourage him. Thank Heaven he is at least a respectable age!

Yes...thirty-one. Count Eric von Alsdorf was thirty-one years old, and a guest of my Lord Chelmsford. Anyone would think that we were in the parlours of London rather than at a military base. Lord Chelmsford had done a remarkable job of reconstructing the heart of Britain out here in the capital of Natal, one of the farther corners of Her Majesty's Empire. Guests came and went; ladies were always on hand to amuse the gentlemen, whether aristocracy or officers. Very often, the two were one.

"Miss Margaretta?"

The deep, cultured tones struck in on my thoughts. I started and flushed, embarrassed at being caught staring at nothing.

"I beg your pardon, sir."

I glanced up at his face. The young English officer stood offering his arm.

What would the Count of Alsdorf think of you walking with a strange gentleman?

Oh, for pity's sake, Margaretta! He doesn't own you!

Yet.

And never will!

Wives must obey their husbands.

I swatted back the annoying little voice and accepted his arm.

"I thank you, sir."

He nodded and escorted me outside, back into the blazing heat. An involuntary sigh escaped me. He glanced at me.

"Are you well, Miss Margarett?"

"I...yes, I'm fine, thank you. Just the heat can get so oppressive. Not like the pleasant summers of Sweden, or even the damp coolness of Britain."

"Shall I take you back indoors?"

Most polite.

"No..." I paused, marking the back of Count Eric's blond head in front of me. "Yes, sir. I would like that."

Now why did I say that?

You don't want to ruin your chances with Count Eric while continuing to flirt, maybe?

He took me into the parlour and seated me on a rigid low chair.

"Is that all right, Miss Margarett?"

He bent, solicitous, towards me. I glanced up from my folded hands and gave him a sweet smile.

"Yes, thank you, sir."

"Margarett - may I call you Margarett?"

I raised my eyebrows, a little surprised. "Yes, you may."

"Good." He smiled back. "Margarett it is, then. And you may call me Ashley."

"Ashley," I repeated. It sounded strange on my tongue.

"Ashley."

He smiled again, with a little graveness and yet softness in it.

"Ashley Longford," he informed me.

"Ah," I said, rather flat.

"And you are Margaretta Witt, the prettiest girl here -" he prompted.

I flushed and met his teasing look.

"What do you want to know?" I smiled, a hint of mischief in my voice. "I'm seventeen, an only child, Swedish, educated in England."

"Ah!" he gave a short nod. "I thought your accent was purer than that found among most Swedes - no offence intended!"

"None taken," I shrugged.

"Anything else?" his eyes were laughing.

"My parents are Otto and Elsa Witt, the Swedish missionaries. Our mission station is based at Rorke's Drift. We're here to preach the Gospel to the Zulus."

An incredulous expression swept his face before he could hide it. I went on the defensive.

"Don't the Zulus need to know about Christianity, too?"

"Yes, yes, of course." He sat for a moment in silence, and then said thoughtfully, "Although, Margaretta, I'd

say they needed to know Christ more than about Christianity."

I blushed deep red now.

"Yes, that's what I meant."

His hand toyed with his sword.

"So - why are you here?"

The question was direct. No society gentleman would go beyond the realms of nicety, but I began to like this strange young officer.

"I'm here because my parents were invited, and brought me along," I answered primly.

"I see," he flashed me a sudden glance. "You were forced to come? Screaming and kicking? You obeyed like a lamb? Not searching for an advantageous marriage, by any chance?"

Annoyed, I tugged on the frill of my close-fitting sleeve.

"What right have you to ask me this?"

He smiled again. "At last you come out of your shell. Good."

I shifted on my seat and made no comment.

He looked down at his strong fingers, playing with his sword.

"Miss Margareta..."

He appeared to have forgotten his wish of a first-name basis. He turned to me again, eyes darkened with foreboding.

"There is good reason to suspect a war will be soon upon our hands with the Zulus."

My eyes widened, and an involuntary gasp escaped me. He jumped down from his perch on the arm of the chair.

"Why in the world your parents chose to bring you here at this time, I have no idea."

"Why..." my voice felt choked. I pulled at my collar to ease the tightness of my throat. "We have no quarrel with the Zulus! Why are you telling me this?"

"Why?" He smiled then, offering his arm. "I don't really know. Perhaps because I can read in your face that there is more to you than a shallow, social butterfly, and when your world comes tumbling about you, though I pray it will not, it will be less of a shock to you."

"It is not a comfort to me now!" I flared, and yanked my arm out of his.

"Margaretta," he touched my cheek with his finger. I stood, motionless. "Don't change. Don't let those socialites out there change you into less of a woman than you have a right to be. You have an intellect to be used other than in the pursuit of the next conquest."

A sharp intake of breath broke the intensity. Ashley Longford dropped his hand. We turned to face Mother. Her face dark with suspicion, her eyes bright with anger, she moved between us.

"Margaretta, I want a word with you. Second Lieutenant Longford, I believe that my Lord Chelmsford is searching for you. If you're not careful, it'll be with a warrant!"

2nd Lt. Longford ran off. Mother manoeuvred me back into the parlour.

"What do you think you're playing at?" she hissed. "We finally get a good match with decent money for you, and you go around flirting with this officer behind his back! If he finds out, you're back where you were - an old-maid spinster, out here in the wilds of Africa, with no chance of a match. Now take care, my girl, or I'll have that officer removed for his pains!"

"Mother, I -"

She stormed out. I sighed, gathered my skirts and rustled after her.

Chapter Two

Britain at War

I followed Mother back to where Father sat, talking, in the midst of a group of gentlemen. I dipped a graceful curtsy as they rose to acknowledge me, before taking a seat on the outer edge of the group.

"I still cannot believe that Cetshwayo means war!" Father insisted, his voice rising. "The harvest is the most important thing to both sides. What would we stand to gain, apart from more land? He certainly won't get anything from it!"

Count Eric stretched, yawned and began to explain as one would to a child.

"To Cetshwayo, Reverend Witt, driving the white man from the land of Africa would earn him renown among the tribes. He will gain respect, fear - and the land that we already possess. To us, this means opportunity to gain a stronger foothold for Her Majesty's Empire in Africa, a chance to bring civilisation to the black man. What else could Cetshwayo possibly intend apart from war, keeping a standing army at his Kraal?"

Anger rose in me at his tone.

Don't patronise my father! He knows twice the amount that you ever will!

I waited to make sure no one else spoke.

"What is a Kraal, please?"

Count Eric answered, glancing over at me in surprise.

"A Kraal is a sort of capital, Miss Margaretta, but you don't really need to worry your pretty head about such things."

He smiled at me.

Do you think I have no brain to be interested in these events? I fumed inwardly, but managed a gracious nod.

"Thank you, my lord."

Mother cleared her throat, setting down her teacup with a loud clink. I knew the message she sent me in silence without even looking.

Keep out of the men's business! If they want to talk politics, don't bother to interfere! It's not a woman's sphere. Keep out. Don't put your suitor off by too much intellect.

And why shouldn't I bother? I counter argued within myself. 2nd Lt. Longford's words came back to my mind.

"Don't change into less of a woman than you have a right to be. You have an intellect to be used other than in the pursuit of the next conquest."

Didn't the Lord make me with a brain for some purpose? Ashley is right. I wasn't made to simply chase up the next prospective suitor.

"What do you think of the culture that Sir Bartle Frere and my Lord Chelmsford have managed to bring to Africa?"

Mother directed her comment to the silent gentlemen, sounding strained. Count Eric answered again.

"'Tis marvellous to see, Mrs. Witt. Who would think that Africa had developed enough in charm to be able to hold a garden party, attended by lovely British ladies, gallant officers and humble guests like myself?"

Mother gave a lilting laugh.

"Ah, Count, you are hardly as low as you make yourself to be."

"True," he threw himself back in his chair, a wine glass in his hand. "But nonetheless, I am a mere foreign nobleman, a tagalong to this great British Empire that is ruling the world."

"We have joined ourselves to Britain, too," Mother smiled. "One in faith, one in heart. Our goal is the same as that of the Empire - to bring light to the dark, culture to the uncivilised."

I saw the annoyed glance she threw at Father; could imagine the comments that would fly later.

Why did you leave me to carry the conversation? Aren't you interested in getting our daughter a good husband? Money? Rank?

And Father would stand there, not defending, not accusing, but with ancient Scripture flowing from his lips.

*What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world,
and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in
exchange for his soul?*

*Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth,
where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in
and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in
heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where
thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure
is, there your heart will be also.*

Battles like this were regular, and I heard those
Scriptures often. Now, as I thought through them again, I
could see what Father meant.

*There is more to life than marriage, than money. Isn't
it to serve God that we exist? And here I am, flirting -
not even for love, but for money.*

The mercenary nature that I saw in both Mother and
myself worried and sickened me.

Money is needful to survive.

I wonder how Elijah managed?

I flushed at the unbidden thought. The prophet had
certainly had no money to buy food or drink at the brook
Cherith! I studied the Count's face as he took another
sip of wine, seeing the unnatural flush, the empty, bored
expression, the roving eye, with clarity for the first

time. A sudden revulsion swept over me. I looked away with disgust as his gaze locked onto mine.

Colonel Durnford leaned forward with a deep sigh. He spoke in careful English, an attempt to cover an Irish brogue which slipped out now and then.

"Going back to what you said, sir Count, the painful part is the realisation that soon the gallant officers may lie dead on the battlefield, the culture be burned by ransacking Zulu hordes, and the humble guests running at top speed for the nearest boat."

I noticed that he spared the description of what would happen to the ladies. Count Eric's face turned a deeper hue of red.

"Are you suggesting, Colonel, that should Britain go to war, I would turn coward and run for safety?"

The Colonel's lip curled, but he answered with caution.

"You do not have a military commission or a duty here, sir Count. What call would you have to stay?"

"That of pride in the Empire, sir! And to defend the helpless women that the military men are too far away to protect."

The Colonel's lips tightened.

"To be quite honest with you, sir, if the choice were mine, not one of the women or guests would be here on a military base. If the British Empire would seek to extend

her power, she had best be sending civilisation in after the peace is established, and not before!"

"We seek to show the Zulu that what makes the British Empire is civilisation," Count Eric countered.

Colonel Durnford stared at him.

"Believe what you like, Count, but if God had not blessed this nation, we would not be standing here today. God makes the British Empire. If we honour Him, we stand."

"And if we are defeated?" he sneered.

The Colonel's Irish brogue thickened, revealing his agitation.

"I would na blame the Almighty for the cowards' livers! We fight for a cause, an' we stick to it!"

A smoother, softer voice broke in. I craned my head to see who spoke, but could not. He appeared to belong to a group of civilians on the other side of the group.

"And what if the cause is wrong, Colonel? Would the Lord stand on our side then?"

The Colonel paused.

"I am not a doctorate in theology, and doubtless Reverend Witt, here, or our own army chaplain George Smith would know better than I, but I say that no, the Lord would not be with us as an army. I believe, however, from the bottom of my heart, that the Lord will be with

every soldier who calls on Him, and unless the cause is obviously wrong, not just wrong from policy, then the duty of a soldier is to obey his Queen and officers."

A small group of men in redcoats joined the group. Among their interested faces, I saw Ashley Longford's.

"That, Colonel," drawled the same smooth voice, "would raise the question of, is it right to fight at all?"

Father at last came out of his silence.

"The command is 'Thou shalt not murder,' not the 'Thou shalt not kill' which the pacifists lay hold on. It is a soldier's duty to protect his country and home from those who would harm it."

"In that case, I suppose you are defending the Zulus' right if they decide to attack us." The voice sounded amused now.

Father answered thoughtfully.

"No, because this land is British territory. If we should cross into Zululand, we are only attempting to stop the brutal killings and massacres which Cetshwayo, his brothers and father have imposed upon the people for years. We are trying to bring light to them."

"And isn't that forcing them to follow British law?"

"God's law is good for Briton and Zulu alike."

"The 'Thou shalt not kill'. So we go in, killing, to teach them not to kill."

I did not like the way that this man made my father seem absurd, and yet I could see truth in his statements.

"As the soldiers go in, they fight to defend their lives if the Zulus attack them. They fight to bring protection and freedom to the Zulu people, who are killed without thought at the whim of a dictator. There is a difference between murder and killing."

"And yet you appear to support Cetshwayo?"

"I would not support a needless war. And I cannot see the need for this one yet. The ultimatum, the thirteen demands which Sir Bartle Frere sent to the Zulu King, with all due respect, was unnecessary and extreme."

I heard Mother's soft gasp.

"To answer one of them; to demand him to disband his army when our army is present next door is to force him to place trust in us - trust which we have abused before and may abuse again."

"Otto -"

"Cetshwayo needs to be shown what trust is before we can expect him to return it," Father continued, heedless of Mother. "And for another, Christian missionaries should be willing to go there at the risk of their lives, if necessary, for the Lord's work. Cetshwayo should not have to allow them - his heart will not be changed by force."

"He has banished missionaries from his country, Father!" I burst out, ignoring Mother's frantic signals. "He has given his soldiers muskets and expanded his army! Such a man is not worthy of trust! We must attack him before he destroys us!"

Father looked at me with some surprise.

"Fear is inherent in all people, Margareta. Perfect love casts out fear. When we can surrender our lives to Christ's perfect love so that we are not afraid of death, then we can learn to trust others."

I flushed under his rebuke.

"If you will excuse me, ladies and gentlemen," a man in the uniform of a lieutenant interrupted. "Sir Bartle Frere, my Lord Chelmsford and several other officers are on the balcony, if you would kindly come. Sir Bartle has an announcement to make."

"Miss Margareta?"

I looked up. The voice was 2nd Lt. Longford's, but the arm proffered me was given by Count Eric von Alsdorf. Ashley's smile dimmed. I hesitated for a moment before taking Count Eric's arm. He held me tight as we moved into the crowd gathered below the balcony. I felt uncomfortable, and searched for 2nd Lt. Longford with eagerness, to offer an apology with a look, but I could not see him.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Sir Bartle's voice rang out over the gathered group. "I believe I ought to inform you that I am obliged to issue a notification declaring a state of war between Her Majesty's Government and the Zulu King, Cetshwayo, due to his non-compliance with the ultimatum issued for redress with matters concerning British sovereignty."

The Count stood as if turned to stone. The sun felt so hot, the world was spinning...I swayed and reached out to prevent myself falling. An arm in a rough red sleeve caught me.

"Careful, Miss Margareta."

"Thank you," I whispered through dry lips. He supported me until my vision cleared.

"Let her go," Count Eric stood next to me. "I'm her escort, sir. Let her go, I say!"

2nd Lt. Longford glanced at him with scorn and said not a word. I sucked in a deep breath and stood back. He released me with care.

"Miss Witt?" the Count offered his arm. I turned from him.

"You didn't even offer to help me then when I nearly fell. The officer did."

I moved away on Ashley's arm without a further word. Glancing back, I saw his vengeful expression, and

shuddered. We walked in silence for a few minutes, the declaration of war heavy on both our minds.

"Are you worried?" he broke the quiet first.

I nodded. "Yes. Are you?"

"Not worried, as such. I will follow where duty's path takes me."

"Duty!" I exclaimed. "You soldiers all think that there's some kind of glory in this. Is that what you enjoy - the hero's welcome at the end? The writing of your name in history?"

I pulled my arm from his and ran into the crowd, choking back the blur in front of my eyes.

"Margaretta!"

I ran on.

Chapter Three

The Match for Money

The rhythmic thump of thousands of feet and the war cry of the Zulu echoed shatteringly in my ears. The thin line of red coated British soldiers raised their rifles and the crack of gunshots echoed against the hillside. A small group of Zulus dropped, but it made no impact on the rest who advanced, running. The British re-loaded, but the Zulus were upon them, stabbing with their assegais. Ashley's face came sharply into focus. I cried out and ran towards him, no longer a spectator, straining to outrun the Zulu approaching him, but he was beyond my grasp. Ashley smiled at me, his grave, peaceful smile. The Zulu raised his assegai.

"No!" I screamed, clawing at the empty air with my hands.

I sat upright, gasping for air.

"No!" I repeated. "Don't kill him! It's not his fault he's in this war!"

I rubbed a hand across my eyes as the darkness pressed down on me.

Dreaming again, Margaretta.

I groaned. This must be the hundredth time in the last few days I had awoken to a nightmare of one of those I knew being slain by the Zulus. But - was it a dream? The pounding of marching feet grew louder.

"Not the Zulus!" I gasped, half aloud, and the next moment felt a little ashamed of my overreaction.

Swinging my legs over the side of the bed, I reached for my cotton wrapper. Tying it loosely around me, I drew back the heavy draperies with one hand and stepped through the double doors onto the balcony. Drums beat out a martial rhythm beneath me, as morning light broke over Natal's capital. Soldiers formed up in military columns as trumpets added a strident blare to the voice of the drums.

Thump, thump, thump-thump-thump. Thump, thump, thump-thump-thump.

I wanted to scream at them to be silent, to stop, to cease the call to arms for hundreds of Britain's young men, some of whom might never come back. A presence at my side made me turn. Father moved to the edge of the balcony, still clothed in last night's evening attire.

"So many, so young," he murmured. "And for a war that might never have been."

"Why do men do this thing, Father? Why are we at war?"

I gazed down at the brown-stained helmets.

"This war, Margaretta, was created by men who wanted to make an impact on history, who wanted to control, to rule. It is to do with power, not to do with right. If Cetshwayo was attacking us, was invading our boundaries, I would whole-heartedly agree with this offensive. This declaration hasn't even been approved by Her Majesty's Government. Sir Bartle is acting entirely on his own initiative, and I believe him to be wrong."

He heaved a deep sigh and turned to me.

"These men number about sixteen thousand, regular British soldiers and the Natal Native Contingent. Do you know how many Zulus Cetshwayo has in his army?"

His gaze locked onto mine. Numb, I shook my head. His eyes held some ominous foreknowledge, a shadow of dread.

"They're estimated at forty thousand, Margaretta."

I staggered, catching myself by gripping the balcony rail.

"Forty thousand against our sixteen thousand. And a war that we should not be fighting."

I closed my eyes.

Defeat. We cannot lose!

We? I thought you were against this!

Yes, I am. I'm against all war! This is going to be a massacre!

I ran my tongue over dry lips.

"What about...Gideon and the Midianites, Father?"

"A righteous cause, Margarettta. A battle against tyranny. And the Lord was on his side."

Father left as silently as he had come. I moved to the edge of the balcony and looked down on the soldiers. Laughing and shouting, they called to one another as they formed up. Groups of mounted cavalry galloped down the street. I felt sick.

"Miss Margarettta?"

I jumped.

"Second Lieutenant Longford! What are you - how did you..."

He shrugged off my protests.

"I am to call my troop up any minute. I wanted to say goodbye."

Hardly knowing what I did, I gave him my hand. He raised it to his lips.

"Margarettta..." he started, and then stopped.

"Yes, Mr. Longford?"

"It's nothing."

I didn't press him. We stood looking out on the scene.

"Mr. Longford, what is going on?"

He understood my question.

"Sir Bartle Frere has put the campaign under my Lord Chelmsford's command."

I jerked around and stared at him in disbelief.

"But...but he has hardly any experience of warfare!"

His lips pressed together, but he didn't comment.

"We are to invade in three columns from Lower Tugela, Utrecht and Rorke's Drift respectively, heading for the Zulu capital. That is all I know."

"And - where are you?"

"I will be in the centre column - the one advancing from Rorke's Drift."

"Our mission station," I murmured.

"Soon to be a battlefield, perhaps," Ashley remarked.

I looked up, startled.

"Rorke's Drift is this side of the Buffalo River, Mr. Longford!"

"Do you really think that the Zulus won't retaliate, Miss Margaretta?"

I was silent. The sharp, thin note of the bugle's final summons stirred the man beside me.

"I must go."

"I would say, God speed, but my conviction that war is wrong would not allow me."

He looked up at me with a quick, grave smile as he bent over my hand.

"But for me personally, would you give me God speed?"

I blushed.

"God speed, Mr Longford."

He smiled again and left me.

Will I ever see him again?

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Dances and parties trailed upon each other's heels as those left behind in Pietermaritzburg attempted to pass the time while waiting for the return of the troops.

"Miss Margaretta?" the young man before me used the more familiar name. I drew myself up.

"I do not recall being any more than introduced to you, sir."

He bowed an apology.

"Miss Witt, then. Would you favour me with the next dance?"

"I am sorry. I'm afraid my card is full."

I turned away to retrieve a drink from the small table nearby.

"Can I get you anything, Miss Margaretta?"

Count Eric hovered near my elbow again. I let out my breath in desperation.

Go away!

I forced a sweet smile to my lips.

"No, thank you. I'm quite alright."

"Don't forget," he leaned in close, "the next dance is ours."

I leaned backwards a little. I could smell the wine on his breath.

"But for now it is not, sir."

He grinned and nodded, moving away a few steps. Another man spoke to him, distracting his attention long enough for me to move to my father's side. I slipped my arm in his, putting my head on his shoulder. Glancing up, I saw his eyes were fixed on the Count.

"Father?"

"Daughter..." he paused, laying his hand on my own that clung to his arm like a vice. "Do you...like this Count?"

A strange question; fathers dictate where their daughters marry. But then Father has always cared for me more than most men do for their daughters.

"I marry where you will me to, Father," I said, my voice low.

He tipped my chin up and looked deep into my eyes.

"Margaretta, I will never force you."

I looked over at the Count and shuddered.

"What nonsense are you putting in the child's head now?"

Neither of us had noticed Mother coming up behind. I groaned inwardly.

"She will follow our wishes, Otto. All good daughters do so. Girls are too silly to know where their own hearts lie. The Count is a decent man with money and land to his name. This is a match we cannot pass by!"

Father levelled his gaze on her.

"I have the final say in matters like this. For the most part, Elsa, I let you decide. But this time...our daughter's happiness cannot be compromised - nor sold."

Mother wavered. "I'm only trying to give Margareta the things we never had, Otto. Money, security..."

"Yes, I know." He smiled at her, softening the rebuke. "But I would rather die than see her unhappy and rich, when she could be happy and poor. And I, for one, do not trust Eric von Alsdorf."

"Pooh!" Mother exclaimed, nettled. "He's only sowing his wild oats. All young men do the same."

"No Christian young man should!" Father said, stern. "The fruit of the Spirit is self-control."

Mother quieted, as she always did when Scripture was used to back Father's position up, but I could see she was not convinced.

"Miss Margareta?"

The voice jolted me to my senses. I stared up at the Count's proud smile as he offered his hand.

"Our dance," he prompted.

Well aware of the honour you are conferring on me, my lord?

I lifted my chin, determined to match his haughtiness in every way. Accepting his hand with a stately nod, I walked with him to the grassy dance floor. As I moved into his arms for the waltz, revulsion filled me at being so close to him. A wave of longing swept over me for 2nd Lt. Longford's protecting presence. I kept my eyes averted as we danced together. The Count's name filled my card for each dance, and he claimed every one. In between dances, he downed glasses of wine, and soon I saw that he passed intoxication level. As he swept me onto the floor for the last dance, his feet were by no means steady, and at times I was certain that his death grip on me alone kept him from sliding to the floor.

"Sir Count," I attempted to free myself. He looked at me with blurred eyes.

"Wha's'at?"

My voice sharpened.

"Count von Alsdorf, you are in no fit state to be standing, never mind dancing. May I suggest that we postpone this until the next party?"

"Too proud to dance with me?" he sneered. "The humble little missionary's daughter without a penny to your name. They want you to marry me, don't they?"

I shot him a glance of fury.

"My lord -"

He cut me off.

"Aye, they do. And while you're a pretty thing to keep me interested while I'm here, it's a woman with more fortune in her pocket that I'm after. You can only keep my feet on the floor. I need someone that can keep my estate afloat."

"Sir, this is hardly the place -"

He interrupted my indignant response again.

"I don't suppose you'd consider the post of mistress, though? I could have the money and the looks, then. You'd be paid well, of course. And all parties would be satisfied. Your mother and you with the money, me with the wife's fortune and the mistress's beauty."

He leered down at me. I sucked in my breath. He pulled me closer. The resounding slap caused several couples near us to look around, but I couldn't care less. He released me, shock splashing across his face.

"How dare you!" I spat out. "I am a Christian, and a woman. How dare you treat me like...like...?"

I couldn't get the word past my trembling lips.

"Count von Alsdorf," Father's arm came around my waist in time to stop me falling. "You may be drunk, but you can hear. Remember this. Don't you dare take one step near my daughter after tonight, or else in spite of my clerical collar, I shall teach you such a lesson as you will not forget in a hurry."

Father spoke calmly, but there was that in his face which made me glad I was not the Count von Alsdorf.

"Come, Margaretta."

He led me away, not releasing me until we were in the sanctuary of our own rooms, where I burst into bitter tears. For once, Mother held her tongue and soothed me without reproaches. Father spoke to her once as he held me close, eyes hard as flint.

"I am heading for the mission station tomorrow. Margaretta is coming with me."

After a moment of silence, Mother nodded.

Chapter Four

Mission Station

I had refused to hug Mother goodbye, clambering into the carriage without even accepting Father's offer of help.

It was her fault that got me involved with Count Eric in the first place! She encouraged me to flirt with him for his money!

After stopping overnight at Keate's Drift, we continued on the way to Rorke's Drift. I did not look back as we travelled along the dusty road further and further away from everything I knew. Well, yesterday's track had been a road. Today, we travelled on little more than a packed-down, foot-beaten path. I stared straight ahead as we jolted along in silence. The scrubby bushes that dotted the hilly landscape did little to colour the vast grassland, and the sparse trees provided no leafy shelter from the boiling sun overhead. I pulled the huge brim lower on my forehead, then pushed it up to wipe my damp brow. Tilting my head, I peeked up at the sky.

Just gone midday, I think.

Father broke the silence as he pulled on the reins, jerking the surrey to a stop.

"We'll reach Rorke's Drift by sunset," he commented, pulling out a small package from under the seat.

"Dinner," he answered my unspoken question. We clambered down and, thanking the Lord for each mouthful, ate dinner in a tiny bit of shadow created by the position of the surrey. I flicked the crumbs off my skirt and glanced over at Father. His head nodded forwards, and I smiled a little to myself.

"Father?" I laid my hand on his arm. He jerked awake.

"Wha - what's happening? Are you all right?"

He listened, intent. I smiled again.

"Everything's well, Father. I want to drive the surrey for a while."

Father eyed me doubtfully.

"Are you sure? It's not a lady's job."

I laughed outright now.

"We're in Africa, Father, in the midst of dust, bushes and wild men. They taught me to drive in England. I can cope with a horse and carriage."

For a moment, I thought he would argue, but then he nodded, the weary lines on his face giving the reason for his agreement.

"Very well then, but only for a little time."

He assisted me into the surrey before climbing up himself. I slapped the horses gently with the reins. They started off at a trot. It surprised me how well they responded to my touch. A year or more had passed since I touched a rein. A few miles down the road, I glanced over at Father. His head tipped backwards, his hat askew as he slept. I smiled a little and turned my attention back to the road.

Father delivered me from Count Eric von Alsdorf; the least I can do is make certain he has a decent sleep in return.

The path snaked out long and far ahead. To my far right lay the garrison at Helpmekaar. In the distance, I could see the mountain of Isandlwana, with its odd, long, leaning peak stretching upwards to the cloudless sky. Sweden's cool beauty, Britain's blossoming, green countryside: Africa had a wild loveliness of its own. I drifted into memories of days in both countries, trying to forget the most recent events in my life.

Such a short time ago, and yet it seems forever. Will I ever return home? It cannot be long, now. This war will soon be over, and life will be normal again.

Without warning, I thought of Ashley, and my cheeks burned. The sun's glare brought me back to reality. I jerked my head up to check its position.

Around four p.m.! How could I have been so careless!

I smacked the reins on the backs of the horses.

"Get-up," I commanded in a low voice.

We must reach the mission by dark. There is Isandlwana - we can't be far away!

Father yawned, stretched and sat up. He rubbed his eyes and glanced over. Memory flashed in his eyes as he saw me driving.

"We won't get there in time!" he exclaimed.

I raised my eyebrows, surprised, but then I hadn't driven this way before. Father looked around with an air of unease. A sudden chill struck me.

"Father? What's wrong?"

"I don't know, Margaretta."

Worry etched itself in his face. My own ears sharpened to the noise around me, instead of my thoughts. Or rather, the lack of noise. Where were the puffs of wind? The call of the wild birds? The rattle of the surrey echoed over the still landscape. I put the horses to a gallop.

The white tents surrounding the church and house gleamed a welcome, lit by the setting sun, as we came in sight of the mission station. Dark-skinned natives moved freely around the steam-blowing cooking pots. Bright red flashes here and there showed that the soldiers still maintained it as active a command post as a hospital could be. Three red-coated soldiers stood at the entrance into the camp; one raised his hand in greeting. We trotted up, and I pulled the horses to a stop in front of them. One of the men stepped forward; I recognised him from a previous meeting at one of my Lord Chelmsford's parties.

"May I assist you, Miss Witt?"

I gave him my hand as he helped me down over the wheel.

"Thank you. Lieutenant Bromhead, isn't it?"

He bowed.

"Gonville Bromhead, at your service. These two men are Major Henry Spalding, commander of this post, and John Chard, Lieutenant, Royal Engineers."

Each bowed at the introduction.

"Reverend Witt, let my servant tend to your horses."

"Thank you," Father clambered stiffly down. As they engaged in conversation with him, I took an opportunity to study the men. Major Spalding stood a little shorter in height than his companions, but what he lacked in stature, he made up for in authority. His voice rang with the power that had raised him to his rank. John Chard reminded me of Ashley Longford, after a fashion. Pleasant faced, with an open expression, he didn't talk much. When he did speak, his comments were well-chosen. My observations were confirmed at supper in the Major's tent.

"How are things going with the advance into Zululand?"

Father speared a piece of meat with his fork.

"It appears to be going quite well," Major Spalding dabbed at his mouth with a napkin before continuing. "As of yet, there has been only a slight skirmish. Number Three Column, the spearhead of the invasion, crossed the Buffalo River on the 11th of January. On the 12th, Lord

Chelmsford decided to attack Sihayo's Kraal; you know, the chap who started some of this in the first place. There was a little resistance, and two of our men were killed."

"How many of theirs?" Father looked up.

Major Spalding shrugged.

"Around thirty or so. There have been hardly any sightings of the Zulus since. According to a rider from the Column, the soldiers reached the base of Isandlwana on the 20th - yesterday - and set up camp."

Father frowned.

"Strange they haven't retaliated as yet."

"Perhaps they have been overcome by the sight of the British Army," Major Spalding replied with a grim smile.

"I don't believe so," John Chard said thoughtfully. "Cetshwayo is too clever a man to throw his army straight at our heads. He'll be waiting until we're off guard and at our ease, and then he'll attack."

He turned to Major Spalding, a frown crossing his brow.

"Of course, the camp at Isandlwana is in defensive position, isn't it?"

The Major continued eating, his face masked with unconcern.

"According to the rider, no. Lord Chelmsford supposes the Zulus to have insufficient weaponry and skill compared to our troops."

Chard's eyes widened.

"The fool! Just because we have rifles and they have spears doesn't mean a thing! They can run for miles and not tire, and there are thousands of them!"

"Not according to Chelmsford," Major Spalding remarked dryly. "There's only a couple of hundred that are serious on war, he says."

He looked up and met Chard's horror-filled gaze with grim understanding. Chard sighed, reseating himself.

"With your permission, Major, I wish to ride out to Isandlwana tomorrow morning to see the orders and find out what I am to do."

"And not attempt to talk sense into Chelmsford?" Major Spalding eyed him with a doubtful look.

Chard gave a brittle laugh.

"As if his Lordship would listen to me! I'm not of the aristocracy, remember. He'd treat me like an ignorant lackey."

He rose and went to the door of the tent, looking into the distance across the river. The Major flung his napkin on the table and rose; Lt. Bromhead, Father and I followed suit. We moved outside of the tent, following

Chard's gaze. The mountain of Isandlwana, ten miles distant, loomed black and forbidding against the sun streaked sky as it set in evening glory. The white tents of Colonel Durnford's force across the river gleamed dully against the dark landscape.

I drew in a deep breath.

"Africa is so beautiful!"

"And dangerous, Miss Margareta," Chard dropped the tent flap behind us. "What are you doing here at a time like this?"

Father intervened.

"Lieutenant Chard, there are wolves in tribal skins that would assegai or forcibly marry a white woman. There are wolves in white man's clothes that would neither kill nor marry her."

Chard stood silent for a moment as the words sunk in, then he gave a brief nod.

"Aye, that there are. So will you be staying long?"

He scanned the hillside once again. The simple question struck fear into me again.

Why? Why does it bother me? It's not the tone he's using.

My eyes rose instinctively to the landscape before me. As the sun appeared from behind a cloud for the last time

before it set, the dull red glow shone on the ground in puddles of scarlet. The river ran crimson.

Blood!

Chapter Five

The Ruins of Cetshwayo

January 22nd, 1879

I woke to the pounding of hooves. Hurrying to the doorway of the tent, I peeked through a gap in the white flap. One wagon, accompanied by a lone horseman, rumbled across the pont bridge and up towards our camp.

With hasty movements, I pulled on a dress out of the small bag which I carried with me, twitching at the creases with my fingers. I shook the dust from my hair; with one hand, I swept it back and up into a tight bun. Experience taught me how to place the pins so that only a few were needed to hold it. Something in the pace of the horseman made me uncomfortable.

Almost like...he has something to tell - but he has to wait.

I undid the tent flap, raising my arm to shield my eyes against the sharp sunlight that hit me in the face.

The horse and wagon were much nearer. I saw Father at a little distance, and stumbled over the rough ground towards him. He turned at the sound of my approach, a smile lighting his face.

"Good morning, Margaretta."

"Good morning, Father."

We both turned towards the oncoming rider.

"Good morning, Mr. Witt; Miss Margaretta."

I jumped. Father wheeled round.

"Oh!"

I bit my lip as the exclamation escaped me and dipped a curtsy in recognition. Major Spalding gave me a quick nod.

"I hope you had a comfortable sleep in my tent, Miss Margaretta."

"Yes, indeed I did. Thank you...Major..."

He had already turned away. I shrugged, a little irritated. Lt. Bromhead smiled at me. I flushed, embarrassed that he had seen my annoyance, and smiled back.

"That's Chard," Major Spalding said. "Just returned from Isandlwana."

I glanced up at the sun, a slight gasp escaping me.

"It's only 10 o'clock, Major!"

Father frowned a little. The Major chuckled.

"The army is up at daybreak, Miss Margaretta. He's been to Isandlwana and back while you've been sleeping."

I blushed. The wagon came to a stop. Chard reined in his horse, wheeled and rode up the incline towards us. Stopping short, he swung down off the saddle and saluted before meeting us. Major Spalding saluted back, and then handed him a piece of paper. Chard glanced over it, folded it and tucked it in his pocket.

"Very good, sir. The guard is already at the ponts, I see. I met Col. Durnford on my way back."

I glanced at him. He kept his tone level, but a frown creased his brow.

"Yes...Captain Rainforth's force has not yet arrived," Spalding commented. "What's wrong, Chard?"

"When I was at Isandlwana, an NCO lent me his field glasses as I wanted to check the area. I double checked with my own as well..."

"Well?" Spalding's voice was sharp.

"I could see large numbers of the enemy moving on the hills in the distance; to my left as I looked at them. I thought that they might be moving in between Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift, so I hurried back in case of an attack on the ponts, informing Colonel Durnford of what I had seen on the way."

"Good job, Lieutenant. Anything else?"

"Yes." Chard paused for a moment, before forging on. "I don't intend to be seen as trying to undermine your command, sir, but if I may offer my opinion..."

At Spalding's short nod, he continued.

"If the Zulus decide to attack the ponts, it will be impossible to hold it with only seven men. We should withdraw from the bridge and take up defensive positions over here."

Major Spalding considered for a moment, and then shook his head.

"No, not yet. The Zulus will be more interested in our force at Isandlwana than at this tiny mission station. I'm going to ride straight over to Helpmakaar, see what's keeping Rainforth, and try to bring him down at once."

Chard hesitated, but then nodded.

"Very good, sir."

He mounted the horse with ease, wheeling it back round to face the river.

"Oh, Lieutenant -"

Chard turned.

"Yes, sir?"

"Which of you is senior, you or Bromhead?"

The two men glanced at each other. Bromhead looked blank; Chard shrugged.

"I don't know."

"Hold there a moment. May I go into the tent, Miss Margaretta?"

I started, taken aback.

"Oh...yes, yes, of course, Major."

The Major nodded and hurried over to his tent. Both Lieutenants looked serious; Chard's jaw was set, and a faint frown creased Bromhead's brow. Spalding came back, pulling his helmet into position.

"According to the army list, I see you are senior, so you will be in charge. Of course, nothing will happen, and I shall be back again this evening, early."

Bromhead looked faintly relieved. Chard nodded, his features tense, and gave a quick salute.

"Yes, sir."

He rode off towards his small tent by the river. Major Spalding turned to Lt. Bromhead.

"I'm going to Helpmakaar for Captain Rainforth and his troop. Keep on the alert."

"Yes, sir."

I glanced at Bromhead as Spalding hurried away, calling for his horse to be saddled.

"Are you relieved? I mean, that Chard has command, not you?" I asked, curious.

"Margaretta!" Father exclaimed, shocked. "Don't be impudent to the officer."

I blushed, a little humiliated at the rebuke.

"I'm sorry. Don't feel you have to answer, please."

"It's fine," Bromhead smiled at me. "Yes, I am. It can be a very difficult task to maintain a camp in working order. I have done it before, and the responsibility weighs heavy if you're alone. Chard has to make the decisions, but I can support him, as I am equal in rank. It should work out; like the Major said, nothing will happen apart from the usual, and he will be back tonight."

Bidding us good morning, he strode off in the direction of his camp.

"Otto Witt!" a tall man with a bushy beard called out as he hurried over to us. Father wheeled around, eyes wide.

"George Smith! Can it be possible?"

Both men were laughing, clasping each other's hands. I frowned in confusion. Father turned to me, face alight with pleasure.

"Margaretta! You have heard me talk about my days at theological school. You remember George Smith? The one who was always out for the fun."

"Ha!" laughed the other man. "I seem to recall you took your own fair share in the mischief, Otto. But who is

this young lady? Will you not introduce us? There's a good fellow!"

I smiled, a little uncertain, and dipped a curtsy in response to his bow.

"Margaretta, this is my old friend, George Smith. George, my daughter, Margaretta Witt."

"Your daughter, eh? Time flies!"

Father chuckled.

"So what have you been doing with yourself?"

"We-e-ell," Mr. Smith drew out his words. I could see the twinkle in his eye, and came to the conclusion that he had not changed much. "I am vicar of Estcourt, Natal, and at present acting Army Chaplain."

Father arched his eyebrow.

"And?"

"And...I was about to take a walk up that hill to see what there is to be seen in the direction of Isandlwana. Someone claimed to have heard cannon fire, and I volunteered to go and check it out. Would you care to join me?"

Father hesitated.

"What about Margaretta?"

"I dare say the young lady will be fine without our company for a while, unless she cares to come with us!"

Mr. Smith's smile twinkled out at me.

Father turned to me.

"Do you want to accompany us, or will you be all right here until I come back?"

I glanced up at the blazing sunshine and looked down at my dusty white dress.

I've only packed one more...and it's already hot.

"I'll wait here until you return, if you don't mind. I'll be perfectly safe."

The chaplain moved away as Father rested his hand on my shoulder.

"I have more confidence in leaving you here under the protection of these British soldiers than I ever had in leaving you with the Count."

I winced, but after a moment, smiled up.

"And I have more confidence in these war-loving redcoats than in that chattering coward."

Father squeezed my shoulder with a chuckle and strode off after the uniformed figure of Chaplain George Smith. I watched them go. They still looked like the two theological students, Mr. Smith treating my father like a younger brother. I could see how much Father enjoyed his company, and with a slight smile, I turned back to the tent. With Major Spalding gone, I could stay in it for a while. I ignored the small quake within me at the thought

of being left alone with a horde of blood-seeking, war-loving soldiers.

I'll go and have something to eat, and then take a walk down to the river, I think.

On arrival in the tent, I hunted around in our small case, but couldn't find anything. Dismayed, I sat back on my heels.

Perhaps I can beg something off the army stores...

My pride rebelled at the thought.

At least I can get a drink from the river!

With eager steps, I hurried out of the tent. The hot African sunshine beat down on me. I wondered how Father and Mr. Smith were enjoying their walk. I hurried down the foot-beaten path towards the river. The river flowed a fair distance from the mission, but it lay close enough to be walked. As I neared the glistening water, I noticed Chard's two white tents pitched not far from the edge. I glanced in at one tent as I passed; Chard sat at a small, rough table, his profile outlined. By appearances, he was writing a letter home. I dropped my eyes and went to the water's edge. The liquid gurgled around me as I cupped my hands to catch a few drops. At length, I forgot lady-like manners in my longing to get a full drink, and I stretched out on the ground, dipping my face in the stream. Laughing, I clambered to my feet, the hot sun

already beginning to dry my face. With a last look at the beauty of it, I started to climb up the slope for the walk back to the mission station-turned-encampment.

"Gallopers from the Column!"

The cry jerked me around. I ran to the edge of the rippling water. The afternoon carried the same balmy breeze as before, but something had changed. A tight feeling closed around my throat. I touched my neck, feeling my pulse, and kept my hand there. Running feet came up behind me. Chard roughly ripped his field glasses out of their case, and raised them to his eyes.

We waited in silence for the riders, who came up at a gallop. One of the men cast a startled glance at me. Without even bothering to tip his hat, he blurted, "What are you doing here at a time like this? Get out of this station!"

Chard stepped forward. The man turned towards him.

"Are you an officer?"

"Yes. Lieutenant Chard, Royal Engineers."

"Lieutenant Adendorff, Lonsdale's Regiment, Natal Native Contingent. I've come from Isandlwana."

Shock and horror were written across his face. He moved a few feet away with Chard, but I followed. He lowered his voice only a little.

"The camp has been overrun by the Zulus, and the army is destroyed. Hardly anyone has survived; we were chased by a howling mob of them as we escaped! Lord Chelmsford went riding off this morning to scout after a party of Zulus. They must've come on him first, and then come after us! The army is destroyed, I tell you. Cetshwayo has won the war. We are defeated!"

His voice betrayed that he was close to tears. The strain must have been tremendous, and I pitied him.

Imagine trying to get out of a pack of Zulus alive, with so many dying around you! It must have been frightful.

The dry little voice responded as always.

Don't worry about imagining it; you may well experience it yourself.

I gave a frightened smile within myself.

I'm a lady. I'll never have to run from the Zulus! All of these men here would die by the British code of honour rather than see me slain by them.

Chard stood still, shock and disbelief vying for expression on his face.

"You must be mistaken. I was at Isandlwana myself this morning!"

"I've just come from there with Lieutenant Vane and this Second Lieutenant. We left it in smoking ruins. The

field is covered with blood, and the Zulus are thirsting for more. We are ruined. We will all be killed!"

He buried his face in his hands. Chard appeared not to share my sympathy.

"Pull yourself together, man! This is no time for tears. The army may, perhaps, be slain, but this command post here holds the entrance into Natal. We shall not be defeated again. Think of those that will be slaughtered if we cannot hold the Zulu here!"

Adendorff raised his head from his hands, staring at Chard in blank amazement.

"There were 1,300 men who died at Isandlwana this morning. The entire detachment that was camping across from this river yesterday has been massacred. This command has about 100 men fit for service, and far more sick and wounded - and you want to hold the Zulus here?"

Chard stared back at him.

"Lieutenant Adendorff, I understand you have nearly lost your life, and that you have seen scenes enough to turn a strong man's stomach. But you are not thinking clearly."

"Not thinking clearly? And you are? I tell you, you are underestimating the Zulus! They were chasing us, running after us like demons - they will be here next!"

He shuddered and turned away.

"Think for a moment, Lieutenant." Chard's voice rang with conviction. "We can either flee, leaving the whole of Natal open to attack, or we can stay here and fight to the bitter end."

Fury boiled up within me.

"Listen to the Lieutenant!" I burst out. "It's all the same again! Fighting on to win your names a place in history. This isn't a noble self-sacrifice. It will be a massacre! You're going to sit down and wait for the Zulus to come on you and slay you, just so you can claim to have done your duty and be remembered with honour and glory?"

Chard's eyes blazed as he turned on me.

"Your mother is back in Pietermaritzburg, isn't she?"

I nodded, unable to speak.

"If we desert this command post, we expose the whole of Natal to invasion and the same brutal killings that those soldiers experienced at Isandlwana this morning. I, for one, would rather die than expose innocent, unarmed civilians to such a horror. Second, with the Zulus advancing and only few wagons and barely any horses, how far do you think we could get without being overtaken? And we won't be caught sitting!"

I turned to the horse nearest me, caressing its shiny black mane as tears prickled under my eyelids. In a daze,

I heard Chard give orders for securing the ponts and to saddle his horse. Running feet behind us made me whirl around. A sweating soldier pelted up to Chard with a quick salute.

"Sir!"

Chapter Six

A Soldier's Duty

Chard swung around.

"What is it?" he said, tone sharp.

"Message from Lieutenant Bromhead, sir, with his company by the store. He asks if you would come up at once."

The soldier was puffing a little after his run. Chard gave a decisive nod, shouting to another soldier at a short distance away.

"Private! Bring my horse here at once!"

He wheeled around to the officers.

"If you would accompany me."

More of an order than a statement; they nodded. Chard mounted his horse and slipped into the saddle with one fluid motion. He stood in his stirrups, raising his voice.

"Inspan the wagon and put all the stores that you can fit into it. Sergeant!"

He came running.

"Sir!"

"Take six men and go to the high ground just there behind the pont. No, behind the rocks. Stay there until I return or send for you. Follow me, gentlemen."

With a cloud of whirling dust, they rode away, leaving me staring after them, stunned by the suddenness of it all.

"Miss Margaretta?"

I started. I hadn't taken much notice of the third man with Lieutenant Adendorff.

That voice - it can't be!

I turned around in one slow movement.

"Ashley!"

He patted my shoulder awkwardly as I began to cry.

"It's all so fast...Ashley - Mr. Longford - what are you doing here?"

He offered me a handkerchief which I took and mopped up my tears and nose.

"I came from Isandlwana."

I glanced up into his troubled eyes.

Haunted.

"Is it - is it true?"

He gave a slow nod.

"Yes, it's true."

I stamped my foot.

"But it can't be! The entire column - Chelmsford and all?"

"Chelmsford rode out early this morning after a rumoured sighting of a large group of Zulus - although smaller than we had expected. It was a ruse - the main body of the Zulus was just over the hill. Colonel Durnford arrived, and we saw his troop galloping off towards the north-east...and then they returned,

retreating, but fighting every step of the way. The Zulus hardly stopped at him, but came running towards us. We were just that one, thin, wavering line..."

He bit his lip, then continued.

"It wasn't long before they overran us. I was still firing from behind an overturned wagon when Lieutenant Adendorff galloped past with Lieutenant Vane. Another horse, riderless, followed them. Adendorff shouted to me to abandon my position, take the horse and follow them. The Zulus were nearly upon us by the time I'd caught and mounted the horse, but Adendorff and Vane kept the close ones at bay by pistol shots. We came out of there with them close at our heels. They can run hard and almost as fast as a horse...I've never been that close to death in all the wars I've been in. The assegais whistled over our heads several times."

Strong man though he was, I saw him give a little shudder and he shielded his eyes with his hand. I put my own hand on his arm.

"It's all over now, Ashley. You're safe with us. You've done your duty - now come back to Pietermaritzburg with Father and me."

He jerked upright.

"My duty? You still don't understand; do you, Margaretta?"

"No!" I blurted. "I don't! You joined the British Army to fight. You fought in a battle that shouldn't have been, you were defeated, you're back on British territory, and I defy anyone in her Majesty's Government to say you haven't done your share of duty!"

He didn't speak for a moment; when he did, his voice was soft, as though he forced it to be so.

"My duty is not some temporary thing to be thrown aside when I consider that I've done enough, Margaretta. My duty is my loyalty to my country - to fight for her to the very last of my breath. I would not be loyal to myself, to the honour I pledged to Britain, if I did not stay now. This is not the duty laid down in the regulations - this is honour at stake. This is true loyalty - true love for our country. I won't give in, Margaretta."

I spoke bitterly.

"The entire welfare of the British Empire does not rest on you, Second Lieutenant Longford."

"No," he agreed, still in that same soft voice. "No, it does not. But Margaretta - consider what would happen if all soldiers took that perspective. 'I've done enough; it's time to save my own skin.' No! Honour demands more. Love demands more. God demands more."

My temper flared again.

"God? God says, 'Thou shalt not kill.' How can He approve of all this senseless killing, and your overly burdened sense of duty?"

Ashley flushed, speaking with hesitation.

"God also put us under the authority of the government. He expects us to obey them where it does not conflict with His commands - and nowhere does He command us not to take up arms. Sometimes God uses wars of bringing a country to its knees and opening their eyes to their need of him. I can't say whether this war is right or wrong, Margaretta. Cetshwayo is a dictator, yes; he did increase his army, but then ours was next door. I joined the army - I was under orders to advance and attack, so I did. I obeyed the orders I was given by the representative of my government."

He straightened up, taking a firm stance, and tossed his head, his eyes bright.

"This, however, where we are standing, is British ground. The Zulus who are coming this way have no right to attack our territory - and for the honour of my Queen and country, and because of my honour as a soldier and a man, I will stay here and fight. And - die, if I must. We protect British land, we protect innocent civilians, and we defend ourselves. This time, I am certain. And I will not retreat!"

I stayed silent for a moment.

"I still don't agree with you, Mr. Longford, but I understand what you're saying."

I gave a tentative smile. He smiled back with a look of relief.

"Really? Then that's good enough."

"And if I may add...I admire you for it."

I shot him a mischievous grin, before moving away.

"Margaretta -"

He caught my arm. I stopped.

"Yes?"

"It's not just me. It's most of those here who will stay by choice."

Suddenly an admiration for those who would choose death for others over life for themselves rushed through me.

To defend others, for high principles...this isn't just loyalty. It's over and above the call of duty.

With a strange shyness about expressing myself, I pointed at his horse.

"You need to go to the camp."

He frowned.

"What about you?"

I shrugged.

"Oh, I'll walk back. Won't take me long."

Ashley glanced back at the dark, brooding shape of Isandlwana looming against the bright sky. He shook his head.

"That won't do. Who knows how long it will take them to get here?"

Before I knew what happened, he had lifted me into the saddle, mounted behind me and we were riding towards the camp. I leaned back and closed my eyes.

~-----~

"Whoa."

The low command awoke me, and the sudden jolt as the horse stopped nearly sent me flying off it. Ashley steadied me with one hand as he swung off the horse.

"I've - been asleep," I said, feeling foolish as he helped me down.

"Aye, that you have."

He made no comment. An angry flush rose to my cheeks.

I'm sure he's thinking, 'I've been fighting a battle and barely escaped with my life, and all you've been doing is walking round a camp.'

In my sleepy state, frustration was easy. I whirled.

"All right, I'm sorry! But I couldn't help it."

I sensed the unfairness of the accusation in my voice even as I spoke it, but it only made me feel more

annoyed. Ashley raised his eyebrows as he tied the horse to the post.

"I wasn't blaming you, Margaretta."

"No, but you were thinking it!"

He used a soft, low voice; the kind of tone to gentle an animal with.

"Thinking what?"

My anger began to subside.

"Never mind," I muttered, turning away from him.

Looking at the camp, I could see changes had already begun to take place. Two wagons lay on their sides, connected by a chain of mealie bags that lay in winding heaps across the compound. As I hurried behind a pile of them, I saw red-coated soldiers barricading the church and the house, and loopholes being made. Ignoring my soft gasp of protest, Ashley took my arm and hurried me over to a group of officers conferring near the house.

"Sir!" he saluted. "Second Lieutenant Longford, 1st Battalion, 24th Regiment of Foot, reporting for duty. I've come from Isandlwana."

Chard turned.

"Yes. You're the Second Lieutenant who came with Lieutenant Adendorff."

Ashley gave a brief nod. Chard glanced at me, and remembrance filled his eyes.

"Where's your father? You need to get off this post at once, young lady."

I tilted my head in defiance.

"Why can't I stay? You'll need someone to look after the injured!"

"That's what the surgeon and the orderlies are for," Chard answered in a dry voice. "We don't have women on battlefields."

"I want to stay!" I flared.

"Miss Margaretta, I'm afraid you don't understand."

"Yes, I do! You're staying here to protect British land and civilians. It won't be safe, but I want to stay and help."

Glancing down at me, Chard's expression changed. He hesitated, and then put his hand on my shoulder to steer me away a little from the group.

"You escaped from a white man who wanted to treat you worse than a slave. I've no idea what the Zulus do to white women, but I know what they do to white men - killing all survivors, disembowelling them so that their spirits escape, and other horrendous mutilations. Isn't that enough for you to see why you can't stay?"

"Because of your honour and sense of duty, you won't let me stay. Am I not allowed to serve, too?"

He gave a slight smile.

"You are a woman. Part of my duty lies in protecting civilians - and women. You are going."

"You can't make me!"

He looked at me, and my gaze dropped.

"Yes, I can. So will every other man on this place; every man that has the right to bear that name."

I glared at him. He shrugged and turned away.

"Lieutenant Bromhead? Could you repeat to Second Lieutenant Longford the essence of the note we were just discussing?"

"Of course, Lieutenant. We received it from the 3rd Column, written by Captain Allan Gardner. It states that the enemy were advancing in force against our post, which we were to strengthen and hold at all costs."

At all costs. Even life itself.

Chapter Seven

Leaving Rorke's Drift

"Very good," 2nd Lt. Longford said, his voice crisp.

"Who are the men working on the walls?"

Chard looked at Bromhead, who pointed out a group.

"That's the Native Contingent with their officer, Captain Stephenson, and these are some of our own men."

Ashley Longford hesitated.

"And you are..."

"Oh, I beg your pardon," Bromhead stepped forward, face flushed. "I am Lieutenant Bromhead; this is Lieutenant Chard, officer in command. And this man is Acting Assistant Commissary James Dalton."

2nd Lt. Longford touched his helmet in acknowledgement.

Two men galloped up behind us. We whirled around. One dismounted, touching his hat. Their horses were panting, sides heaving with effort from a long ride. The man's features were etched with tension.

"Sir! My companion and I belong to the Mounted Infantry, from Isandlwana. We crossed the river at Sothondoses Drift -"

He stopped short, looking from one face to another.

"You know?"

"Yes," Chard answered, his face grave.

A flash of surprise crossed the man's face, but he mastered it.

"Reporting for duty, sir."

"Very good. Mr. Bromhead, could you put these two fellows to work? We need every pair of hands we can get."

"Yes..." Bromhead answered, thoughtful. "Mr. Chard, with your permission, these can take the note to Helpmakaar informing the officer in command of what has happened."

Chard nodded.

Spare their men from doing it, and gets these out of the way of further action, I thought, my admiration for the men heightened.

"Before we go any further, are we determined on making a stand here?" Chard looked each man in the eye.

Bromhead gave a quick nod.

"I thought of withdrawal at first after the news of the defeat, but you're right; we're needed to stand and fight here, even without the order. You know I'd obey orders,

anyway, Mr. Chard, but it is easier to obey when one's heart is behind them."

"Mr. Adendorff?" Chard's gaze moved from man to man.

Adendorff drew himself up, eyes snapping with intensity.

"The Zulus have slain the army, and possibly lost us the war. They may have beaten me once, but I never face defeat twice in one day!"

"Commissary Dalton?"

Dalton stood, thoughtful, before speaking.

"If we retreat, we leave Natal open to the Zulus, and will not only lose Zululand, but lose South Africa - perhaps the Empire - by displaying cowardice in the invincible army. With carts full of our wounded and sick, we will be slowed down, and in open country, the Zulus, who are superior in numbers, will soon overwhelm our pitiful force. I say, that with God's grace and strength, we make our stand here. Perhaps we will lose our lives to the Zulu assegai, but better lose our lives fighting for our Queen and country than live in dishonourable retreat to the detriment of the Empire!"

"Second Lieutenant Longford?"

"The Zulus cross into Natal over my dead body," Ashley said, his voice soft.

I shuddered. John Chard looked around with a grim smile.

"That's the spirit. To action, then, lads."

Bromhead stepped forward.

"May I suggest that we see to the defences?"

Chard nodded.

"Aye; then I must go and sort out the men at the river."

He turned sharply to me, remembering me once again.

"Miss Margareta, you will stay with us until your father comes back, and then you will both leave this post."

For once, I experienced what it must be like for a soldier under orders. In spite of the fact I was a woman, Chard's attitude was no different to me than if I were a soldier.

I won't go...I will stay somehow.

My face must have betrayed me, for Chard studied me and then faced Ashley.

"Second Lieutenant, you will see that Miss Witt does not leave us until her father returns."

He came to attention.

"Yes, sir."

"Very good." With one more firm glance at me, Chard moved away. "Then let us go around the defences."

We trailed along, Chard in front with Bromhead and Commissary Dalton next to him, Adendorff a little to the right, eyes turned to the brooding form of Isandlwana in the distance. Ashley and I came last, me on his arm.

"I won't go," I muttered, glaring at Chard's stiff, red-coated back.

"I'm sorry, Margaretta," Ashley answered, kind but firm. "You must. It's our duty, not yours."

"I love Britain too!" I flared at him, jerking my arm away.

"No one doubts that," he said, steady. "But it's not your duty to protect her. It's ours to protect you. And you're going."

Bitter tears filled my eyes.

There's no point in appealing to his sympathy. He and Lieutenant Chard are as immoveable as...as..

I cast about in my mind for a suitable comparison.

Isandlwana! I decided, glaring at the dark mountain's outline. Even with the afternoon sun beating down on us, it still appeared shadowed and foreboding. I shuddered at the thought of the carnage it looked down on.

"Margaretta, I'm sorry.."

"No, you're not!" I pulled away from him and ran back. The ground blurred before me.

I won't leave them to fight! I won't leave - him.

I stopped, flushing. Ashley caught up, catching hold of my arm.

"You can't stay, Margaretta, and that's it. So please don't try and get me in trouble with Lieutenant Chard."

"I'm sorry..."

I paused as an unbelievable thought rushed over me.

It might work!

It will work - it must.

"I don't feel well," I said, putting my hand to my head. Peering at him from under my lashes, Ashley looked worried, as I hoped he would.

"Sit down and stay here."

He gently pushed me to a sitting position on the ground. I leaned my arm on my knees.

"Second Lieutenant Longford!"

I heard Chard's voice from a distance. It came closer.

"What's going on, Mr. Longford?"

More than a hint of irritation lay in his tone; he sounded downright annoyed.

"Miss Witt feels ill, sir."

I heard Chard clear his throat; as he dropped to his knee beside me, I felt the vibration through the ground. I dared not look at him.

"What's wrong, Miss Margaretta?"

"I feel...dizzy," I said, attempting to make my voice sound faint.

"Stand back a little, gentlemen," he ordered. He spoke again in a soft voice.

"Miss Witt, if this is a plan to get out from under surveillance, then I'm afraid it will not work."

He raised his voice.

"Mr. Longford? Take Miss Witt to the hospital. I'm sure that Surgeon Reynolds will allow her to sit down for a few moments. Order one of the soldiers to watch her, and then return to us. I'm sure it will be a more pleasant duty than those they usually have."

I flushed again, but made no protest as Ashley helped me to my feet and led me away.

Nearer than I had hoped for.

Surgeon Reynolds, an older man with a thoughtful face, agreed at once when Ashley informed him of Chard's command.

"Yes, that's quite all right. Sit here, if you please, Miss Witt. You'll soon feel better out of that sun. Second Lieutenant, are you staying? No? That's all right then. I'll keep an eye on her myself. The young lady will be herself again soon, no need to worry."

Ashley smiled his slow, grave smile.

"I'm sure you'll be well looked after, Margaretta."

He hesitated a moment, looking down on me.

"I'll...I'll be back later."

He left. I leant my head against the cool stone wall of our former house and closed my eyes. With the absence of the sun beating down on my hatless head, my mind felt much clearer. Opening my eyes a few moments later, I stared at Surgeon Reynolds' back.

I wonder if...

In slow motion, I rose, and began edging towards the door on silent feet. Surgeon Reynolds turned around.

"And where do you think you're going, young lady?"

I gave an inward groan.

"I feel so much better, thanks to your care," I tried to sound bright. "I was wondering if I could go over and have a look around the store? It was our chapel."

I allowed a hint of sadness to creep into my voice.

Surgeon Reynolds gave a rough chuckle.

"And you want to pray from a stores building? Miss Witt, take my word for it. You will be safer here."

"I want to plead before God for the coming battle. Besides, I would like to see the stores. I've never seen army stores before. Please, sir. I give you my word I will return here afterwards!"

Surgeon Reynolds studied my face.

"Aye, very well. Yateley!"

A middle aged soldier dozing in the corner jerked upright.

"Yes, sir?"

"Take Miss Witt across to Stores, but do not leave her alone."

He walked away, muttering.

"At least that gets you out of the way, my fine fellow. You never do anything but sleep, anyhow. Why they put you in here..."

Yateley scratched the growth of beard on his chin and stared at me.

"What you be wanting to go over yander for?"

I had never heard an accent like his before, so it took me a while to work out what he said.

"Oh...I just would like to see an Army Store. I never have before."

"Och, there's nothing excitin' to be seen. Stay here, there's a good gal."

I shrugged a little and turned towards the door.

"Very well; if you don't wish to go with me, that's fine."

Makes it even easier for me.

He stared at me, and glanced back at the door through which Surgeon Reynolds had gone.

"Naw, I'd better had. Or he'll be bookin' me for sentry duty back home. C'mon then, girlie. But don't take too long, now."

Relieved to see him rising to his feet, I headed out of the entrance. The sun shone down with intense heat. I shielded my eyes against the brilliant glare and hurried over to our former chapel. The door stood open, revealing a flurry of activity. Soldiers scurried here and there, as evidenced by the flashes of red moving in the dim interior. A heap of uniform lay scrambled together in one corner. A few pews stacked against the wall provided shelves on which to store the food. Several soldiers dragged more pews beneath the windows.

"What are they doing?" I gasped.

They stopped and turned to stare at me.

"What are YOU doing here, more like, Miss!" one of them exclaimed.

I ignored him, brushing past them into the centre of the building.

"Hey, Yateley! What's the gal doin' here?" a rough looking soldier called out.

Yateley shrugged, looking uncomfortable.

"I don't know! Surgeon Reynolds told me to bring her over."

"Must've been getting under foot, hey?"

He shrugged again.

"Now don't go getting in the way 'ere, Miss. We've got a lot to do."

"What are you doing?" I asked again, staring at the change in the little church.

A few more soldiers widened cracks in the wall to fit rifles through.

"We're making loopholes, see," a young, fair soldier said, brushing back a rebellious lock of hair from his forehead. "Have to have a whole row of 'em to stop the Zulus. Those chaps are goin' to stand on the pews and fire out of the windows."

"Do you really think you can stop them?" I asked, a sarcastic edge to my tone.

He stared at me with defiance in his eyes.

"We'll give them what for, Miss, even if they don't stop. At least it'll give those back there time to get out."

He jerked his thumb over his shoulder towards the rest of Natal. I backed away as he carried on widening the gap in the wall.

They have turned this house of prayer into a den of thieves!

Thieves? That's taking it a little far, Margaretta.

*No, it's not! Whoever said that soldiers were honest?
They're only bloodthirsty adventurers, anyway!*

*You're accusing Ashley Longford, John Chard, Gonville
Bromhead...*

I flushed and lowered my head.

'I came not to bring peace, but a sword...'

An old Scripture came back to my memory, one that I
learned while a child.

*He trains my hands for battle, so that my arms can bend
a bow of bronze.*

I flushed, uncertain, and watched them continue to
prepare.

*I still don't think they're right, but they certainly
have the courage of their convictions. I think even these
soldiers would have chosen to stay if they hadn't been
ordered to.*

"Say, Miss, if you're going to stay around for a while,
you can give us a hand moving these uniforms. Put them in
that corner over there - we need this one 'cause of the
window."

I nodded and moved over to the heap of clothes.
Stooping, I gathered a bundle in my arms and staggered
upright. With great difficulty, I peered over the top. I
stumbled forwards, lowering my head - and ploughed into a
soldier who had just entered.

"Whoa! What's goin' on here?" he asked, catching me by the arm.

Silence fell.

"The lady was sent over here to get her out of Surgeon Reynolds' way, so we figured it wouldn't hurt none if she helped us move the uniforms," my fair-haired acquaintance of earlier managed to falter forth.

"Um," grunted the man. Turning me a little, he said, "You were heading off course, Miss. Put 'em down over there and get on out of 'ere. Smithie, you ought 'a know better than to make a girl do the work."

"We're making loopholes, Sarge!" the blond lad answered, defensive.

So he's Smithie.

I tuned them out as I dropped my bundle in the corner and stared down at the clothes. I glanced up at the men and back down again.

None of them are watching.

I fingered a grey Army shirt, and then, with a quick decision, whipped a medium sized one out of the pile. I picked out a white undershirt, almost like a vest, and found a pair of small, dark blue Army trousers. I dropped them on top of each other, wrapping them tightly together, and then looked up at the men. The sergeant appeared to be winding up his lecture. Rummaging through

the stack of clothes, panic seized me as I realised that I couldn't find any of the tunics that marked the men as British soldiers. Near the bottom of the heap, I discovered an old one. The sleeves were a little frayed, several buttons hung on grimly to their thread, and the red appeared to be a little faded, but it would pass. I stuffed the other clothes, tightly wrapped, inside and folded it over them.

Helmet...what can I do about a helmet?

The enormity of what I was trying to do hit me. How would I sneak a bundle of uniform past a group of men who watched my every move?

I must have a helmet!

I edged towards the door. CRACK! The sound of a rifle shot outside froze me to the floor, and sent the men running to the windows.

This is your chance!

I shook loose the bond of fright that nailed my feet to the floor. With trembling fingers, I stooped and picked up a piece of white leather, shaking it loose from the tangle on the floor, and, folding it into as small a heap as possible, added it to the top of my bundle. These were white braces and the belt, attached; essential uniform for any private. Helmets piled on top of each another stood by the door; grabbing hold of the top one, I jerked

it loose, sending several toppling to the floor. Without waiting, I slipped out the door and leaned against the wall next to the entrance, feeling frightened. When, in any military history, had a girl been able to take an entire uniform out of Army stores without being noticed? I didn't know if it had even been attempted. I heard the rough voices inside.

"Cor! I thought the fightin' had begun then!"

"Me too! I was sweatin' for a while."

"Where's the gal gone? Oh great, look what she's gone and done - knocked the helmets over. Women's al'ays good at makin' messes."

Ducking below the windows, I sorted swiftly through my bundle. I bundled the belt and braces as tight together as I could, and stuffed them into the upturned helmet. The bundle of clothes I hesitated with. Glancing around, I saw that although many red-coats were running here and there, no one paid me any attention. Cautiously, I folded them into the ample material of my skirt and held it there, grasping the helmet with my other hand. I could always explain it away somehow. Setting my gaze on Major Spalding's white tent, I headed towards it. I could feel the gazes of the soldiers as I passed; I imagined them burning through to the uniform.

"Hey, Sarge! Look what we've found 'ere - a lady tryin' to sneak away with a uniform!"

Whenever I dared to raise my eyes, though, not one soldier even glanced at me. At last, I stumbled into the tent and dropped the flap behind me. I couldn't believe that no one had discovered me. The hardest task lay behind me. I put the helmet on the bed with trembling fingers and released the uniform, which scattered across it. My fingers ached from the tenseness with which I'd gripped it. I lifted the grey shirt and studied it. The creases were atrocious, but it would do.

It must do.

I had accomplished the most risky feat I'd ever tried in my life. I could not do it again. I dared not think of Mother.

"Miss?"

The voice outside the tent made me jump.

"What're you callin' 'er for?" another voice answered. "She's not in 'ere. Let's just drop the tent an' get it over with!"

"Yes, but look - the tent flap's lowered."

I stilled my trembling voice enough to call out, "Give me a moment and I'll be right with you."

"See?" the first voice commented again. "Now what trouble we'd have been in if I'd listened to you!"

I smiled a little, still shaky, and opened my carpet bag.

Can I get it all in?

I stuffed the tunic in first, followed by the grey shirt and red tunic. I glanced at the helmet and hesitated. The odd round shape in my bag would certainly be noticed - but what else could I do? I managed to pack it in on top of the clothes. With difficulty, I did it up. It strained at the seams, but all of the items were hidden. I stepped to the tent flap and undid the top half.

"Can I help you?"

An older man with a bushy brown-turning-grey beard nodded his head, touching his helmet in acknowledgement.

"Lieutenant Chard's orders, Miss. We're to drop all tents so they don't provide cover for the enemy."

"I...see," I nodded. "I have my things packed away. Just let me remove them, and it's all yours."

As I stepped outside the tent, a younger soldier accompanying him reached out eagerly.

"Here, let me help you, Miss!"

I panicked.

"No, no, thank you! I'm - quite all right."

I offered what I hoped was a reassuring smile to cover my nervous reaction, and moved away as they began to move Major Spalding's few belongings out of the tent.

"Margaretta!"

I spun around.

Chapter Eight

Private Tom Castlewood

Father and Reverend Smith slowed down their mad run as Father shouted my name again. I hurried towards them.

"What is it, Father? What's wrong?"

"Do you know where Lieutenant Chard is? We must see Lieutenant Chard!" he half-shouted at me, shaking my arm.

My eyes widened as I stared at him. Rev. Smith jogged to a stop, panting.

"All right, Otto. No need to scare the poor girl."

I moved my gaze from Father to him and back again.

"What's going on?" I demanded.

"Just take us to John Chard, Margareta," Rev. Smith said.

"I have no idea where he is," I said, defensive, but beginning to move along with them.

"Where did you last see him?" Mr. Smith sounded less agitated than Father. I calmed down a little.

"He went to look around the defences with Lieutenant Bromhead, and Lieutenant Adendorff and Second Lieutenant Longford who came from Isandlwana."

"Thank God they're preparing! What did Adendorff have to say?" Father asked, not decreasing his step.

"Well, I heard from Second Lieutenant Longford, not Lieutenant Adendorff. He said that Chelmsford split the column to go and hunt down the Zulus, that the Zulus set on the camp and massacred the entire column, and that very few escaped. They wanted us to evacuate this post immediately, but Lieutenant Chard, along with Bromhead and Commissary Dalton, said that would be to leave Natal open to the Zulus."

We neared the outer line of mealie bags as I spoke, and straight ahead of us stood Chard, with Adendorff, Bromhead and 2nd Lt. Longford by his side. Another man, a stranger, sat on a horse before him; from their gestures, they appeared to be arguing. My presupposition was reinforced as the man angrily clapped his spurs to the horse's side and galloped away...over the plain...leaving Rorke's Drift...

"Where's he going?" Father panted out, coming up to the office.

Chard's eyes sparkled with an angry gleam.

"Another fugitive from Isandlwana, only now they're trying to persuade us to give up. This one I caught talking to the men; I told him he was inciting to mutiny. He said we were insane for staying, and then rode off."

Bromhead spoke up.

"Chard...I don't think they know about Isandlwana."

"Yes, we do," Rev. Smith said. "Miss Witt filled us with a few scanty details. But we'd have known anyway." He turned to Lieutenant Chard. "We have something to report, sir."

"Then go ahead," Chard said, his tone sharp. Glancing at him, I could see that his features were taut with tension.

Is it possible? Can he be - afraid?

"Mr Witt and I took a walk to the top of the hill over there -"

"The natives know it as Shiyane; we call it the Oscarberg," Father interrupted.

Chard waved his hand in an impatient gesture. "Carry on."

Rev. Smith did not hesitate.

"Looking towards Isandlwana, we saw a glow rising from the camp, in spite of accounting for the heat haze. We took that as an indication there was a battle raging. A little later, as we watched, we saw a mass of men moving in this direction. We saw them cross the river in three bodies up by Sothondoses Drift. They were doing a couple of strange things; they looked like they were taking

snuff at one point. After a while, they began to advance in this direction."

"Why the -" Chard paused and rephrased his sentence. "Why didn't you come down with this news before?"

"We thought they were our Native Contingent. There were two mounted men leading them, and until they were close enough for us to see their black faces, we didn't realise that they were the enemy! We ran back as fast as we could. Thank God you're prepared!"

Chard's lips pressed into a thin line.

"Preparing, perhaps, but not prepared. How far away are they?"

Reverend Smith cleared his throat, looking nervous, and glanced at Father.

"We estimate them to be little more than five minutes, and that was when we started running."

Chard blinked. I saw him swallow. Then he spoke.

"Very good. Mr. Witt, you and your daughter are leaving this post immediately. Mr. Smith, you can choose whether to go or stay. Mr. Witt, could you take one of our officers with you? He is seriously ill and will be of no service in the coming battle."

Father nodded.

"I'll stay," said Reverend Smith, just as brief.

A flicker of a smile chased over Chard's face, but it didn't stay.

"Colour Sergeant Bourne!" he shouted.

A short man in his early twenties came running.

"Sir!" He snapped to attention.

"Stand to."

"Yes, sir." With a salute, he about-faced and marched off.

A few minutes later, I heard him bawl out the order, and the bugle start to sound.

"Margaretta, I'll go and fetch the surrey and horses; wait here, I'll be right back," Father said, and moved away.

I stared, dumb-struck, at his retreating back, and then glanced around. The barricades, started such a short time ago, were near completion. The soldiers, working hard and fast to save lives, had raised a wall of defence against the coming invaders- how many lives yet remained to be seen.

Suddenly, I realised what I must do. Still clutching my carpet bag, I hurried over to a sheltered area behind the mealie-bag-barricade. Crouching down, beneath the cover of my long dress and the thick red army tunic, I managed to struggle into the dark blue trousers and white undershirt. Pulling the grey Army shirt over the top, I

buttoned it up, stopping short and shrinking back against the four foot barricade as voices passed on the other side. With trembling fingers, I pulled out the pins in my hair, sending the red-brown mass in waves over my shoulders. If anyone saw me now... I bundled it back together in a tight knot on top of my head, pushing the pins in hard. I shook my head with care. The bun held. I fitted the brown-dyed pith helmet over the top. It was a little big, but fitted all the better with my hair underneath. Rising from my crouch to a kneeling position, I slipped my arms into the big red tunic and fastened it up. The loose buttons hung on a sturdy thread, and I breathed a prayer that they would continue to hold until after the battle. I struggled with the braces and belt, but at length managed to work out how to put them on. I folded up my dress and packed it back into the carpet bag; looking around, I decided it could serve duty as part of the barricades. I poked my fingers into a gap between two mealie bags, wiggling them further apart. Stuffing the carpet bag in the gap proved more difficult, but at last I sat back, pleased with my work. That someone would notice it was highly unlikely with all the excitement. I dug my fingers into the ground, and rubbed the soil over my face.

At least that should make me less recognisable!

"Margaretta! Margaretta!"

Father shouted my name, his voice getting nearer.

Now is the time to test it.

"Please let it work," I whispered, before rising to my feet. Father stood, his back to me, looking around.

"Margaretta!"

I cleared my throat. Father spun round.

"Have you seen my daughter, Private?"

With an effort, I lowered my voice several notches.

"Yes, sir, but not recently."

Father moved away. Chard approached him.

"Mr. Witt, there is no time for this. You must get off this post immediately."

"But my daughter!"

"Your daughter will be safe here. When she is found, I swear that we will all give our lives before they lay a hand on her. Your duty is to see to your wife's safety, and to remove the officer from this station."

Father appeared to have aged in the last few minutes. His shoulders sagged.

"You promise this?"

"On my honour as a soldier and as a man. Now for the love of all you hold dear, get off this post!"

Father nodded.

"Very well, then. I will leave Margaretta in your hands
- and God's."

Chard placed a hand on his shoulder, moving him towards the surrey. Two men were already helping the officer aboard. I looked down to hide the blurring of my own eyes.

My feet!

In my haste to get hold of a uniform, I had forgotten footwear. I bit my lip, scarlet with mortification.

How COULD you have been so stupid!

I stooped down, praying that no one would come in, and tugged the dainty shoes off my feet. I tore off the stockings about half way up the leg. There was no way I could remove them. I heard the whip crack over the horses' backs, and I knew that Father left part of his heart behind with me.

I'm sorry, I whispered. But it didn't change my mind.

Barefoot, I headed over to stores to see what could be done about getting a pair of boots.

"What're you doin' in 'ere? I've got a duty to shoot anyone that tries to get a hold of this 'ere rum after prior warnin'."

The savage voice startled me, as did the gun which pointed solidly at my chest.

"Oh, I don't want the rum. I...I need some boots," I said, blurting it out without thinking.

"What --- do you think you're doin' gettin' boots at a time loike this?"

I ducked involuntarily at his coarse language.

You asked for this, Margaretta...

"I've...come a distance to help fight here, and I lost my sh-boots."

I blushed as I spoke, knowing what he would take me to be.

"Oh, I see. From Isandlwana, are you? Don't s'pose those --- Zulus 'lowed ya ta run fast enough in 'em."

"Yes, ah - quite," I managed.

I'm sorry, Lord! I never intended it as a lie!

Father often told me about the wonderful blessing that Christians had of talking to the Lord about minor details, but I had always associated God with church, and prayer to be kept strictly within those limits. Now I suddenly realised what a fool I had been.

Lord - forgive me! I don't deserve it, but please, somehow help me through this battle. Help us all.

"What's ya name, then, son?"

"Castlewood; Private Tom Castlewood," I said, flushing as I spoke.

"There's a pile o' boots over there," he said, pointing to the corner where I had taken the uniform to earlier.

"See what ya can git. Don't worry none if they're too big. Ya sound rather ejicated," he continued, eyeing me closely. "Don't 'spect you've been in the Army that long, eh?"

"Ah - no, I haven't."

"Did ya drop your bundook on the way an' all?"

I straightened up, a pair of boots in my hand.

"Did I drop my what?"

"Yer bundook, son! Yer rifle!"

"Oh...yes, yes I did."

"Cor, you really ain't been in the army long if you don't know the troop slang!"

He gave me a disapproving stare. I ignored him and tried on the boots. They were a little large, but they would do.

"Thank you for your help. Where can I get a rifle?"

He pointed in silence to several that lay stacked in a heap against the wall.

"D'ya know how ta load it? Come 'ere and let me show ya," he continued with a patronising mockery in his voice. Without a word, I moved over to him as he swung up a rifle with ease.

"Now open the hatch like this, and pop your ammo in here - you got ammo?"

I shook my head, mute. He rolled his eyes.

"Here," he shoved a handful into my hot palm. "Put 'em in your bag. Now, slide it into the chamber, like so, lock it like this - and there y'have it."

"I...see," I said, my voice quiet.

Do you know what you've done, Margareta? You're going to have to kill, now - or you'll be dead.

Shots echoed. He paused. The sound of many galloping hooves thundering past outside a few moments later sent us bolting out of the door. I couldn't believe my eyes. Wave after wave of horses galloped away...across the plain... leaving those at Rorke's Drift to fight alone...

Chard ran forward as one of the horses slowed, seizing the bridle.

Brave man. He could've killed himself!

Would've saved a death by Zulu spears.

"What --- do you think you're doing, Lieutenant? Get back here! Your orders were to fall back to this post and assist in the defence when you could no longer hold out and delay the Zulu!"

"Let go!" the man jerked his horse loose from Chard's grip. "My men won't obey orders anymore - they're heading off to Helpmakaar. They're scared stiff to fight that

lot! We were the last to retreat from Isandlwana. We can't stand any more. The Zulus are about one minute away! Hordes of 'em!"

He backed up the horse a few steps and then galloped away. Another trooper rode by, hollering over his shoulder, "Here they come! Black as hell and thick as grass."

My throat closed up. I tried to swallow, but couldn't.

"Who - who are they?" I managed to squeeze past the dryness in my throat.

"Natal Native Horse. There was about a hundred of 'em, come from Isandlwana under Lieutenant Henderson. Lieutenant Chard deployed 'em on the Oscarberg to delay the Zulu advance."

"So they're really coming," I whispered.

He didn't come back with the sarcasm I expected, but dropped a huge hand on my shoulder.

"Yes, lad. They're here. Now cut along back to the barricades."

I hurried out the door.

What on earth...!

Groups of black men were leaping over the wall. My hand instantly clutched the rifle slung over my shoulder.

But these are in...white men's clothes! And heading the opposite direction!

Then I saw several white men jumping over the barricades too, and I recognised the group as Captain Stevenson's Natal Native Contingent. I ran forward a few steps.

"Where are you going?" I hollered, more in sheer despair than in hope of stopping them. Shots cracked overhead. Looking up, I saw one man on the roof taking aim at the deserters. Several more gun muzzles flamed out from the post. I heard a thud as I reached the barricade and peered out. One of the deserters met his reward.

"Sir!"

The voice echoed across the command post like it was a parade ground. Chard turned to look up at the hospital roof.

"You have something to report, Private?"

"There are four to six thousand Zulus heading this way, sir!"

A voice bellowed out from a window beneath him.

"Is that all?"

And over half of the men have just left. God, help us!

Chapter Nine

Usuthu!

Nervous chuckles came from around the defensive line. I found a space between two burly soldiers and squeezed in.

"We've fixed bayonets," one of them whispered to me.

"Where've you been?"

Without replying, I slid the bayonet out of its sheath and attempted to attach it. By some miracle, it slid on and appeared to hold. Closing my eyes, I breathed a prayer that it would still hold when my life depended on it. When I looked up, we saw them. A dark line, unwavering, unfurled out across the horizon. In silence, both sides gazed at each other for a few moments. Then the most eerie cry I have ever heard sounded from them. Throwing their assegais into the ground, they took their short spears and began to beat on their cowhide shields. It caused a nerve-racking effect. It was like - one enormous, rhythmic drum pulsating across the plain. I could feel the arm of the big man next to me, and knew I was not the only one trembling.

Some of those men or women coming towards you will have to die by your hand, Margaretta. Or else - you will die.

I shuddered.

God forgive me! How did I know what I was letting myself in for? Honour - courage - loyalty - death by an assegai?

"Load!"

Relieved by the order to do something, I remembered the soldier's advice and followed it. A tiny wave of relief

washed over me as the click sounded the bullet into place.

The warriors before us began to chant in their own tongue. I knew a little Zulu, but I could not identify the words - probably because I had never been on the opposite side of a battle to them before. Then, beating on their shields, they began to advance, slowly, still chanting. I wanted to back away, to run for the hospital. For one wild moment, I wanted to run to Chard, or Bromhead, or even - Ashley, confess everything, and throw myself on their protection.

No! I stiffened. I chose this. I won't back out now. They need everyone they have that can man a gun.

"Usuthu!"

The word sounded clear to my ears, even as the man on my other side muttered irritably, "Can't understand a word they're sayin'."

I shifted a little. "That's the Zulu war cry. The name of the Zulu royal house. Cetshwayo's royal line."

He turned to stare at me.

"How'd you learn so much, boy?"

I didn't answer. They were loping towards us, now, chanting again.

I heard Bromhead's voice, steady, clear and loud.

"North ramparts, stand fast. South ramparts, at 100 yards, volley fire! Present -"

With the word "present," we slumped forward onto the mealie bags and took aim. Glancing out the corner of my eye, I saw the soldier next to me was peering down the sight of the gun. I flushed.

Forgot to do that.

At the repeat of "Usuthu," they started running. Leaping rocks, ignoring the long grass around their legs. I swallowed - hard. I knew enough about guns to be aware of the kickback.

"Fire!"

Petrified, I pulled back on the trigger. The gun fired. I saw my target fall - and then I saw a line of Zulus fall from the other rifles which had simultaneously cracked with mine. They stopped running, threw their assegais into the ground again, and with a shout of defiance, recommenced drumming on their shields.

"Reload!"

Two seconds later - "Fire!"

As each warrior fell, another moved forward to take his place. I forgot everything, except for the mechanical motion of reloading and firing - reloading and firing - reloading and firing - and attempting to make each shot tell on the enemy. After a few minutes, they began to

advance again, picking up speed as they ran. We continued to fire. The gaps appearing in their ranks were encouraging, but they didn't slow until about 50 yards away. The crossfire from the hospital and store over our heads, along with our line of fire, proved deadly.

We're holding them!

For one brief moment, I dared allow myself a gleam of hope. Then they swung left, towards the front of the hospital, and paused in their attack. Silence fell for a few tense minutes.

"How long have we got?" I heard a voice behind me, and turned to glance at Chard, going around the perimeter, who spoke to Adendorff. Adendorff shrugged.

"Five, ten minutes? Who knows? They're getting reinforcements behind them before they attack us again. They're attacking the way they did at Isandlwana. They call it the horns of the bull formation. They'll advance, and you go to meet the advance or the 'head.' Then they spread out to encircle you, and you're drawn in on the loins of the bull. You're dead."

"Well, I don't plan on moving out from here," Chard answered.

"As long as you don't, we may be able to hold them," Adendorff said.

I noticed his clenched jaw, and knew that he didn't think we stood a chance.

"All right!" Chard raised his voice for us all to hear. "I want another barricade formed with biscuit boxes, stretching northwards from the northwest corner of the storehouse to the north mealie bag barricade. It's already been started. From now on, whenever we aren't fighting, I want several men from each section to be building this wall. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," they answered. I ducked my head down a little, and muttered, "Yes, sir."

I don't know army procedure! Not my fault.

My thoughts went back to the first man I had shot. A shiver crept up my back at the thought. I dared not think that I had been responsible for sending into eternity someone's immortal soul.

CRACK! The sound of a distant rifle jolted me back to my senses, even more as the man next to me jerked and swore as he began to slide to his knees.

"Sir? - Private? Are you all right?" I bent over him, and another shot whistled over head.

"What's going on?" I exclaimed, turning to face the direction the bullets came from. On the distant hillside, puffs of grey smoke could be seen, marking the place from which the shots were fired. The private began to crawl

towards the hospital. Two orderlies came running to help him. I wheeled to face Chard.

"What's going on - sir?"

He looked angry.

"How should I know? Adendorff! What's happening?"

The Dutch Lieutenant pointed up at the hillside. "Looks like the commander's put some men up on the Shiyane - the Oscarberg. The rifles, I'd say, came off the trading that Jim Rorke and others did with the Zulus. Thank Heaven that they aren't more efficient with a gun."

"And that they don't have our Martini-Henrys," Chard added, grim. "Lads! Aim at those chaps on the hill - fire at the puffs of smoke."

"There they go!" someone hollered.

The Zulus were crawling through the undergrowth around to the other side; to the north ramparts.

"We haven't enough men at the north wall!" I heard Bromhead's voice, anxious. No longer were they trying to withhold information from the men. We were all in this together now.

"Can't you take men from the south?" Adendorff pleaded.

"How will we hold that if we do? What if they attack us both sides at once?"

"They shouldn't do..." Adendorff said, slow. "The commander wouldn't be able to use his riflemen on the hillside then, in case he hits one of his own men."

Chard paused, and then spoke to Bromhead.

"Take men from the south and reinforce the north wall, but keep your best riflemen on the south to shoot at the Zulu guns."

Bromhead hesitated.

"Yes - sir."

At a low crouch, he ran across to our wall and moved along the line, calling out some soldiers and leaving others. I held my breath as he reached me.

Will he recognise me?

A frown crossed his face.

"You're not one of my company. Who are you?" He paused and shook his head. "It doesn't matter. You any good with a rifle?"

"Not...really, sir," I faltered.

"All right. Go over to the north wall."

I nodded; clutching my rifle, I half ran, half stumbled to the north wall. The Zulus were running as one dark mass towards us.

"North ramparts, at one hundred yards, volley fire!
Present -"

I took aim again, peering down the sight, focusing on one advancing figure, biting my lip.

Don't think; just fire...will the order never come?

"Fire!"

I squeezed the trigger. I didn't notice if he dropped; they were still running.

They're really coming. They - are going to kill us.

For some reason, shock and fear struggled with blind obedience to orders.

"Reload; independent fire at will!"

Irregular poppings came from the rifles next to me. I took aim on another man, running forward, sharp assegai at the ready. I gulped, fired, and reloaded, fired and reloaded - and then they were upon us. As I attempted to load another cartridge, I looked up and saw a Zulu running at me, bloodlust blazing in his eyes. In a desperate frenzy, I lunged at him with my bayonet, but he dodged. I blocked a thrust from his assegai by hitting it up in the air with my rifle, then, swinging the rifle round, I smashed his face with the butt of the gun. He collapsed. I felt my knees weaken, but didn't stop to think. Reloading, I glanced at the Zulus attacking my comrades, noticed one about to throw his assegai and fired, bringing him down. Another Zulu leapt at the barricade before me and raised his assegai. Without a

second thought, I lunged at him. Careless of protection, his shield covered his side rather than his front. I stabbed him in the stomach with my bayonet, feeling it enter the soft flesh and stepped back as he dropped. I glanced down at the blood on the end of my bayonet, feeling sick. Then I saw the soldier next to me. He lay on his back, eyes open and blank with fear. An assegai stuck out at an angle from his stomach. Blood formed in a pool around it. He was dead. I swallowed the bile that rose in my throat, realising that our barricades were not impenetrable. Reloading and firing again, I shot two more Zulus attempting to leap the barricade and then, as we repulsed the attack and they retreated a little, whirled to take a quick look around the compound. Chard stood at a little distance from me, field glasses at his eyes, studying the hordes of Zulus stretching to the distance. And there, running towards him, came a Zulu, assegai in hand. Did he know the importance of Chard to our stand? How much we needed him to rally us? With a desperate cry to warn him, I ran forwards, pushing myself forwards with every nerve in my body, dropping my rifle as I ran, intent only on reaching the scene before we lost the one man who stood for everything that we fought for.

“Chard!” I screamed again, no longer caring about disguising my voice.

He turned, then, and saw me. But then I was there, blocking the Zulu's way to him. The Zulu stopped short, hatred burning from his gaze, hatred both for my red coat and for me personally, for spoiling him of his prey. And as he raised his assegai, I realised what a fool I had been for dropping my rifle as I ran. Chard moved from behind me, making a dash for the rifle. It lay on the ground a few feet away. The Zulu lunged. I ducked - and felt the assegai enter my shoulder. I screamed and fell, hitting the ground with a thud. The pain that coursed along my body from the awkward fall was nothing compared to the searing, white-hot burning in my shoulder. A rifle fired overhead, and something warm and heavy fell across my legs. Opening my eyes, I saw Chard rolling the Zulu's body off me. He crouched next to me.

"Are you all right?"

I groaned, clenching my teeth, and pointed vaguely at my shoulder.

"Can you stand?"

I nodded, biting my lip, and struggled to a sitting position. The ground and soldiers around me swam in front of my eyes. I blinked hard.

I will not faint.

You just DARE, Margaretta!

He put his arm around my waist and hauled us both to our feet. I caught my breath on a ragged gasp. Looking down, I saw the left side of my tunic soaked with a crimson that was darker than its natural red.

"Let's get you to Surgeon Reynolds."

He caught me as I swayed, helping me across the courtyard, ignoring the bullets that still crossed over the courtyard, whistling around our heads, from the riflemen on the hillside. I tried to focus on my feet, on each step, but the searing pain in my shoulder overrode all else. I bit down hard on my lip.

"Nearly there," Chard encouraged me.

I managed a weak nod.

As we entered the dim, cool interior of the hospital, I felt my senses revive a little. Chard lifted a stool with his foot, kicking it upright, and then lowered me onto it. I tried to mutter a thank you, but he waved it aside.

"You saved my life."

"It was nothing," I muttered, my voice sounding far away to my own ears.

"No, it wasn't. Your left arm is disabled. Do you think you can still fire a gun?"

I didn't care if I never saw a gun again, but I didn't say so. I gave a short nod.

"I can if there's something to stop the blood flow," I gestured at my shoulder.

"We have no chloroform," Surgeon Reynolds bustled up to me. "Come on, boy, it's your turn next."

I hesitated.

"Come on! We have no time to waste."

Chard intervened.

"One moment, Surgeon. That lad over there needs some help," he pointed at a soldier slumped against the wall, clutching his arm. Surgeon Reynolds hurried over. I raised questioning eyes to Chard's face. He spoke.

"When you've been seen to, I want you to go and help defend the hospital."

"I'll be all right, honestly, sir. I can come back to the barricades. You need every man you have."

A slight smile flashed across his face, and then vanished.

"When you volunteered to become a soldier, you volunteered to obey orders. That's an order."

I opened my mouth to argue, but he continued.

"You may have saved my life, and I'm very grateful to you. I'm not denying you the right to fight for your life, since you chose it, or the right to help us defend this post, but I would never have allowed you on the front line if I had known - Miss Witt."

"What - why - how did you..." I gasped.

He smiled a little again, and reached forward, removing my helmet. I grabbed for it, and he released it, allowing me to put it back on.

"It wasn't too hard to work out. A woman's scream, the bag I found in the wall...and your hair proves it."

"I..." I didn't know what to say.

"Let me just say this." He crouched down before me and looked me in the eyes. "I think you were very wrong and very silly to make the decision that you did. But obviously, God knew that we needed you, for I would have lost my life if you had not put your own in danger. But now that I do know, I will place you as much out of danger as possible. You're ordered to the hospital, Private - what was your name again?"

"Castlewood," I muttered, staring at the floor.

"Very well, Private...Castlewood. Do your best."

Then he was gone, and Surgeon Reynolds stood before me.

"Let's get you seen to."

Chapter Ten

Hospital Flames

Surgeon Reynolds shook his head in disbelief.

"I always said women had courage, and that they should be allowed to be more than fashion pieces, but this is going too far, Miss Witt!"

"Private Castlewood," I corrected.

He raised an eyebrow; disapproval radiated from his voice.

"And I can't believe that Lieutenant Chard allows you to continue fighting. Ah well. I suppose that since you're here, we need every hand on a gun. Are you sure

you wouldn't prefer to stay with me and tend the wounded?"

I gave a half smile as I rose from the seat.

"Surgeon, even you are taking rounds of ammunition to the defenders between casualties. You said rightly the first time. Every hand that can hold a rifle is needed."

He pointed to my limp hand in answer. Although I could wiggle the fingers a little, the assegai had pierced the flesh above my shoulder blade, damaged several nerves - according to Surgeon Reynolds - and possibly chipped the bone. In short, my left arm was useless for the time being. Shrugging my right shoulder, I tried to slip the grey Army shirt back on. Surgeon Reynolds came to my assistance.

"My right hand can still fire, though, sir. Even if I am slower, I can load with my right hand and fire with it, supporting the rifle on my left."

I rearranged the torn collar of the once-white undershirt. To get to the wound while allowing me to still wear the vest, Surgeon Reynolds had torn it open at the neck and peeled it down just far enough to tend to the gash and check the blood flow. Using the left sleeve of the grey shirt, he tried to create a sling around my neck, but I objected.

"I won't be able to fire my gun so well if one of my arms is tied up."

With his disapproving frown still in place, he helped me put on the red tunic and fasten the braces and belt. I caught my breath as the weight of the brace settled on my shoulder, but said nothing. Taking up the rifle which Chard had left with me, I moved into the hospital. The defenders in the room I entered stood at the loopholes made in the wall and knelt on the top bunks of the closely packed beds to fire out of the windows. One or two glanced around as I entered, but most continued to reload and fire without looking up. I cleared my throat.

"Where do you want me?" I asked.

A young private jumped down from his perch on one of the bed.

"That's it! I can't take any more of this - it's too close - I can't stand it."

Slinging his rifle over his shoulder, he shoved his way past me, eyes wild, and headed out the room towards the veranda. Several men looked around at the disturbance.

"Poor Cole. Can't stand close spaces," one of the men explained, catching my eye.

"I...see," I answered. "I'll take his place."

I lifted my rifle onto the bed and planted my foot on the lower bunk, swinging myself up onto the second.

"I'm Private Hook, in charge of this room, so you'll be takin' your orders from me, all right, son?"

A thud and a loud cry sounded from behind us. He flinched and closed his eyes for a brief moment.

"I don't think Cole made it. Are you active or walking wounded?"

"My left arm is disabled, but I can still fire a gun."

"Very good. You see out there?" He gestured out the window.

I peered out and gasped. Hordes of Zulus surrounded the side of the hospital, throwing assegais at the windows in the hope of killing the defenders to gain an entrance.

"We're part of the barricade, you see," Hook said with a grim smile. "Only with the help of the Lord will we make it out of here alive."

"Amen to that!" I said, fervent.

"Glad to see you trust in the Lord for your salvation, too, son."

"Hey, you two! Cut talkin' religion and get shootin', or you'll be hitting the glory trail sooner than you want to!" one of the others interrupted roughly.

The rifle shots of the other men hadn't ceased. A cry of "Running out of ammo" brought Surgeon Reynolds running with several handfuls which he dropped behind the men on the bunks. I grabbed a fistful of cartridges for my pouch

and loaded the gun, peering down the sight...it was a familiar procedure by now. Time passed, marked only by the occasional cry of "Running out of ammo." We reloaded, fired, reloaded. The Zulus as yet were unable to gain an effective foothold due to the ferocity of our fire, but we knew it couldn't hold out. Darkness would come, and soon.

"Help!" a soldier below cried out.

I almost fell off the bunk.

"What's wrong?" I gasped.

"Quick - fire out the window - one of 'em's got a hold on my rifle."

"Use your bayonet!" Hook cried.

"I can't; he's got too much of a hold on it!"

I tilted my rifle vertically and fired downwards. A short, sharp cry and the relieved sigh of the soldier proved the success.

"Thanks, Private!" he called up.

"Welcome," I answered, reloading.

A shot pinged across the room. Hook leapt to the floor.

"What in the world..."

One of the soldiers lay slumped on the floor, and the muzzle of a gun poked the wrong way through the hole. Hook sidestepped the aim, grabbed the muzzle and shoved it backwards. The warrior uttered a sound of surprise,

and then a shot rang out as Hook fitted his own rifle in the loophole.

"The attacks are increasing. What's going on?"

A muffled voice shouted from the next room. Hook placed his ear against the wall. In the dimming light, I saw his face pale.

"I suppose he's doing the best he can to hold the command."

"Hookie! What's going on?" Several voices demanded. I stared at him.

"Our soldiers have retreated from the front wall to a second one they built."

"What does that mean?" I asked. I wished I hadn't as soon as I spoke.

"We're being abandoned - left open to the enemy." As he spoke, he opened the door and glanced towards the entrance. With a sudden jerk, he slammed the door.

"Drag one of those beds across! Quickly!"

Two men leapt off a bunk as he began to tug it across the door. I jumped off my own to help.

"They're stabbing at the door - breaking it down," Hook said.

Sounds of digging at the wall next to us made us start. One of the other soldiers and I stood on opposite sides of the scratching, bayonets at the ready. My stomach

turned at the thought of using them again, but I knew it was either them or us.

Somehow, I don't think Chard's plan of safety for me worked.

The irony brought a wry smile to my lips. The hole weakened, and then gave way. A man peered in.

"Don't kill me!" he cried.

He spoke in English. I was too tense to feel relieved. He shuffled back, and another man appeared. Leaning our muskets against the wall, we hauled him through, and then another man. At last, the first man who had broken through appeared. Stooping down, he peered through the hole and shuddered.

"They're assegaing them," he whispered hoarsely. "I tried...to get them out in time."

"You did your best," Hook said, kind but firm. "Now get over there and start hacking a hole with your pickaxe in that wall. We'll evacuate this building from room to room, get to the east window and make our way back to the defences. You two, hold there and stab or shoot anyone who tries to through. Do everything you can to hold them. I'll keep them at bay here."

He leaned his weight against the bunk which held the door. The depressing chant which the Zulus had not ceased since their attack sounded outside the door, but we

hadn't time to think of that; the task of holding the door belonged to Hook. A dark, fuzzy head poked through the opening as a Zulu crawled through, carrying his shield and assegai. I looked down and froze. I couldn't stab him. I just couldn't. The bare brown back invited the bayonet, but I could picture what would follow - and I couldn't. A blade flashed and the Zulu sagged. Blood poured out of a jagged stab in his back. I shuddered.

"Get him out of the way," the other private hissed angrily. "What's come over you, boy? Snap out of it!"

Stooping over the body, I overcame my repulsion and tugged on one of the floppy brown arms. No resistance; no muscular strength. He was dead. I gulped and averted my eyes as I hauled him across the floor. The body rolled over as I stopped, and my reluctant gaze fell on his face.

So young to die!

He did not even sport the beginnings of a beard. His skin was fresh and young. Sightless brown eyes rolled upwards. I laid my hand over his eyes, closing them.

"Come ON, boy!"

Different skin colour, different culture, different nationality. You were about my age. We could have been friends, you and I.

I bit my lip and stumbled back to my position. The private had already stabbed another and shoved the body to one side against the wall. Yet another head poked through, but this one came shield first, assegai preceding the warrior. He focused his attention on me, back to the wall, feinting thrusts with his assegai. Fear leapt up within me. When would he really thrust? I blocked each feint with my rifle; with nervousness, I swung it around so that the butt faced him. I lashed out, catching him on the shield. He thrust at me with the assegai. I sidestepped, but it threw me off balance and I landed on the floor. He thrust the assegai downwards. I closed my eyes - and then the shot came, followed by a body dropping on top of me.

I'm not dead.

"Get up, lad! Are you all right? I shot him as soon as I could get the other one off me. Two came through close together."

I wriggled from under the body as another came through. This time, we both bayoneted.

"How's it going over there?" Hook shouted, his voice strained with tension.

"Nearly through," the private answered, breathless, chopping at the wall.

Sweat trickled down my face into my eyes. The Zulus were relentless in their attempts at entry. We bayoneted or shot them nearly every minute. Hook kept firing through the door, but the return fire worried us. The private opposite me and I were sheltered by a bunk that stood out from the wall, but not so with the rest of the men.

"Hurry up, man! The door is nearly down!" Hook shouted.

I risked a glance over. We could see the Zulus through several huge gaps in the panel. Pockmarked with bullets, it couldn't hold out much longer.

"A few more minutes! I'm dragging the patients through. There's one private in the next room."

A crash sounded. Hook staggered backwards. The private with me leapt over the pile of bodies on the floor and took up his stand next to the bunk.

"Hookie! What's happened?"

"Bullet hit me in the helmet," Hook answered after a few moments. "I thought I was done for. I'll be all right"

I held my position by the door; with a mechanical accuracy, I bayoneted each man crawling through. Those that came through shield first, I shot.

"Get out, boy, get out!"

Hook's voice sunk into my consciousness, and my senses snapped awake again.

"What?" I said.

"Get out, boy! I'll cover you. The rest have got through."

I shoved the body of the last Zulu who crawled through up against the hole, and backed towards the broken wall. The door that Hook held gave way. He, too, began to back to the hole, firing and killing the two that broke in first. I fired another shot towards the first hole in the wall as the body of the man I had placed against it began to move. A muffled cry sounded as the bullet tore through the body to the man behind. I ducked through the hole; Hook came right behind me, turned and stood with bayonet at the ready over the hole. The private chopped with incessant blows at the wall.

"What's that smell?" one of the patients raised their heads to sniff. Apart from Hook, we all copied him.

"It's...smoke," I said, disbelieving.

The private that had stood opposite me to defend the hole in the last room cried out.

"No! The thatched roof is alight!"

"Those --- Zulus!" another man muttered a curse.

"No need to defile your mouth in the Valley of the Shadow, my friend," Hook remarked in a mild voice as he shot a Zulu through the back.

One private stood alone at a loophole, shooting at the Zulus storming the building. Rifle in hand, I hurried over to him.

"Is there anything I can do?"

"Not really," he answered, reloading his rifle without looking at me. "Unless you want to make another loophole and start shooting. How much ammo have you got?"

"Enough, I pray," I said.

"Amen to that," Hook agreed. "That's where bayonets come in."

Keeping back several cartridges for his own rifle, he split the others between the private at the loophole and me. A patient who could walk carried them over to us.

"Thank you," I said.

"Why're you thankin' me for helpin' you save my life?" he said, bayoneting another Zulu. I turned around. The tip of a rifle poked out from the hole. With a cry, I aimed and fired. A groan from the other room proved my accuracy.

"Now it's my turn to thank you for saving my life with the cartridge I gave you," Hook said, calm, waiting for the next warrior. My admiration for him increased. Not

only did he take command in a situation with no officers, he defended our lives to the last man and kept us sane by passing amusing comments in a calm voice.

"How much longer, Williams?" Hook asked, directing the question at the private hacking at the wall.

"Not much longer, I hope," he answered, but the doubt in his voice belied his words.

"You, boy; you don't need your bayonet, do you?"

"Me, sir? I mean, Private?" I asked, flinching at my mistake in rank. Hook didn't comment when he replied.

"Yes, you."

"No, Private."

"Then remove your bayonet and pass it to one of the patients. They can use it to help Williams carve out the wall," Hook said.

I followed his orders. A Zulu entered just then, clutching Hook's rifle with both of his hands. He tried to twist it loose, but in vain. The Zulu pushed him against the wall, struggling to raise his assegai. I tried to reload, but knew I wouldn't make it in time. Waters whirled around, jerked his rifle out of the loophole and shot the Zulu in the back, before shoving it back in the hole. He gave it a series of violent jerks back into position, and I guessed that a Zulu rifle muzzle had been making its way into our room. I bit my

lip and began the round of reloading, firing, reloading, firing..

"We're through!" Williams cried, triumphant.

"Thank God!" Hook answered, a reply that echoed in my own heart.

By now, smoke filled the room; eyes streamed with water, and violent coughing could be heard.

"How much longer..." Hook's voice broke off in a cough.

"Nearly through," Williams answered, breathless.

"Get out, boy," Hook said. I didn't argue but ran for the hole, ducking under and through, clamping my helmet down on my head with my hands. A few moments later, Hook appeared, backing through the hole, shooting his rifle, red in the face.

"Idiots," he muttered.

"What's wrong, Hookie?" Williams asked, his voice tense.

"Beckett and Waters won't come out. They're going to hide and make the best of it," Hook answered, taking up position by the new hole. Two privates stationed in the doorway intervened.

"Hookie, you help Williams get the patients out. We'll defend the hole."

"You can't; you're needed on the doorway. Williams will get them out fine," Hook snapped. I struggled to focus on him.

I can't see him clearly.

The thick smoke wasn't the only thing impeding my sight. Dusk had fallen, taking us unawares. Never had I heralded the approaching night with such terror. I swallowed hard.

"Hook," I used his surname with difficulty. "I defended the hole with the private back in the first room. I'll hold this hole - you help Williams."

He stared at me for one long moment, and then nodded.

"All right. Make sure you don't miss one, or it will be death for some of us."

I gave a jerky nod.

"Yes, Private."

He moved away. Apart from the Zulus' howl of "Usuthu," I could hear our breathing, the distant firing of rifles and the crackle of smoke alone.

It's so hard to distinguish one sound from another. How can I tell -?

I stiffened. A scrabbling sound came from the other side of the wall. I moved back, watching the hole closely. Something jerked the end of my rifle. I pulled back, and saw the whites of two eyes staring at me.

Like cats! Oh Lord Jesus, help me!

I tugged on the rifle, attempting to get it loose. The warrior on the end pushed it downwards; I exerted all my strength to keep it up, blocking the spear thrust and keeping him occupied. I gradually loosened my one hand from the rifle, trusting to the other to keep it up, and fumbled in my pouch for a cartridge. The Zulu and I appeared to be competing in a stare-down battle as well; I prayed that his eyes would not move from my face. With the slowest movement possible, I moved my hand up to the rifle and slid the cartridge in. He glanced down at the click; with one final heave, I jerked the rifle up and fired. He fell, blocking the hole. A moment later, his body slid to one side as another warrior forced their way in. I stabbed downwards - and realised my bayonet was not attached. I fired, and left him in the hole in an attempt to slow others trying to come through.

"593! Have you dressed Sergeant Maxfield yet?"

"No, 716. He's refusing to move, hitting out at me and all."

Private 716, or whatever his name was, grunted and thrust downwards with his rifle. A sharp gasp slipped out of the throat of another Zulu. As the legs of the last warrior I had shot began to move, I fired through the hole.

"What's your names?" I panted.

"Ours?" answered 593's voice from the darkness.

"Yes."

The darkness...I can hardly see the hole! How much longer?

A slight chuckle came from one of the privates.

"Jones."

"And the other one?" I asked.

"Jones."

"What - you're both Joneses?"

"Yes...I'm 593 William Jones and he's 716 Robert Jones."

"I suppose that makes it a little difficult," I said.

The attempted entries seemed to have slowed.

"Retreat! Retreat!" shouted Hook's voice.

"Get a hold of Maxfield, will you, 716?"

A struggle seemed to take place, but I could hardly see for the smoke and darkness.

"What's keeping you?" Hook called.

"Maxfield's fighting us!" 593 shouted back.

I backed up to the men. Two warriors came through the hole and the doorway together. I fired at the one by the hole. 716 swung round and lunged, parrying the thrust of the assegai, bayoneting him in the neck. Without a cry, the Zulu fell forwards.

"Leave him!" Hook cried. "Retreat!"

Sounds from next door proved that the Zulus were attempting to get in. We retreated backwards, guns at the ready. At last, we reached the window. As I looked up at the sky above, I realised with a numb relief that I had never expected to see it again.

"We're in a kind of no-man's-land here," Hook explained in a quick, hoarse whisper. "Our men had to retreat to the second barricade, but they've kept up such a sweeping fire over the abandoned area that every Zulu who leaps over gets no further. The Zulus have contented themselves with shooting over and throwing assegais, so keep your heads low. Corporal Allen and Private Hitch will guide you to the defences. Now, let's go."

Gleaming headdresses and white shields came towards us. All five of us fired, dropping the first few advancing warriors.

593 Jones climbed out of the window first, followed by Williams and Hook. I looked out, hesitated and glanced back inside.

Zulus behind, bullets ahead. Better die by friendly fire than enemy spears!

716 Jones handed me his Martini-Henry.

"I'll be back in a minute," he whispered, and ran back into the room.

"Where're you going, you fool?" I hissed. He disappeared in the smoke. I bit my lip.

"Come down, boy!" Hook whispered angrily.

I shrugged and let myself fall to the ground. Someone took my arm.

"Keep your head low."

We ran at a crouch across to the barricade and over it to the safety of our lines. I closed my eyes for a brief moment.

Thank God!

"Where's 716?" 593 called out.

"He went back inside," I answered.

"The idiot!" 593 cursed and tried to leap back over the barricade, but they held him back.

"Look!" I exclaimed, pointing at the window. A figure appeared, swinging himself out and down. Flames shone from several of the hospital windows now, highlighting the loopholes we had made. No guns poked from them now. I shivered at the thought of the dead bodies inside - and the live ones, too, for all I knew. As the man hit the ground, part of the roof caved in. The fire flared, lighting up the man's face. Begrimed as he was, and soiled as his clothes were, we recognised him for 716 Jones and cheered him as he ran, dodging Zulu fire, to our barricades and swung over.

"You fool, 716! What did you go back for?" 593 asked, furious.

716 breathed heavily.

"Sergeant Maxfield," he said.

We fell silent. His lone appearance brought home that yet another of our much-needed men had died.

"How?" Hook asked.

"They were...assegaing him...as I arrived," 716 bit his lip. I turned away. His grief was private, and I could not bear to see it.

One scar that will last a lifetime.

Chard came running up.

"Is Private Castlewood with you?" he asked Hook, anxious.

"Don't know any Private Castlewood," Hook looked surprised.

Chard groaned and ran a hand through his hair, looking at the flaming hospital.

"One young chap who helped us hold out, though...didn't recognise him from our company. He's over there."

He pointed at me. Chard hurried over.

"M - Private Castlewood! *Thank God*, you're safe! I had to call the retreat, or the entire barricade would've fallen. I did it for the sake of the others; I would've

died rather than leave you exposed to the mercy of those brutes."

I smiled a little.

"I'm here, Lieutenant, but by God's grace alone."

"Amen to that!"

The fire from the hospital lighted up the sky, showing us the first wall and the Zulus leaping over as clearly as if it were daylight. Rifles opened fire on the advancing figures. The question stayed in my mind.

Will we be here to see another dawn?

Chapter Eleven

When the Dawn Breaks

"Here they come again!" Bromhead shouted. The glare from the hospital enabled us to see the warriors coming in our direction. I clutched my rifle tighter.

After hearing a brief account of the defence of the hospital from Private Hook, Chard said that I had proved myself enough to take position where they needed me. I

ended up in Bromhead's bayonet platoon, which more than once had charged in time to save the soldiers fighting to keep the kraal. Much as I hated the weapon, it appeared to demoralise the Zulus even more than the lead spewing over our heads from the guns in the redoubt.

"Charge!" Bromhead cried, leading us forward at a run. I gulped, forcing my feet to keep pace with the rest. I fixed my gaze straight ahead on the Zulu coming towards me, thrust at him and turned to the next. We fought for a few moments, parrying bayonet with assegai, before he made a wrong move. I lunged, catching him in the stomach, and he fell.

"Fall back!"

The bugle call for retreat sounded clear and sharp. We fell back in good order against the mealie bags. The Zulus came on.

"Company, fire!" Chard's voice rolled out over all the noise. We dropped to our knees and loaded our rifles. A row of rifles appeared over our heads from the inner defence wall, forming a second rank, and those already blazing from the redoubt completed a third.

"Volley by ranks; front rank, fire!" Bromhead knelt with us.

"Rear rank, fire!" Chard ordered.

"Third rank, fire!" Bromhead called out again.

The Zulus came on in waves; the orders were repeated over and over again. A thick haze of grey smoke, eerie in the glowing firelight, hung over the scene.

"Cease firing!"

For a moment, with the ceasing of the roar of gunshots, silence fell. Then I heard the moaning. It seemed to come from fairly close to us; as the flames from the hospital flared up again and the smoke began to clear, I saw why. Piles of bodies surrounded us, choking the ground. Some lay on top of each other. Wounded shuffling underneath corpses made it even more ghastly. I turned away and retched.

"We've been ordered to fall back into the compound area and leave the kraal to the Zulus," Bromhead raised his voice. Glancing at him, I saw that gunpowder blackened his face.

I wonder if mine is, too?

We shuffled back into the compound.

Where are Father and Mother? Have they left for Britain? Are they evacuating Natal, I wonder? Will we even survive this night?

"Usuthu!"

The Zulu war cry sent us all towards the barricades. The glow from the hospital served to light up the entire area, making it impossible for the Zulus to attack under

the cover of darkness. Even as I loaded my rifle yet again, I remembered Gideon and the Midianites.

With their torches...and the Israelites cried out, 'The sword of the Lord and of Gideon'...300 men. God helped them. Oh Lord, Thou art the same God still! Help us!

"At 100 yards, volley fire! Present - fire! Reload!"

Chard gave the orders. Bromhead had moved to take command of another corner. The commands were so familiar that I could have anticipated the order. But even I, military ignoramus that I was, knew better than that.

"We're running low on ammo!" a private near me shouted. "Those --- Zulus. When will they leave us alone?"

Two handfuls of ammunition were dropped on a box near me.

"Don't swear, boys; just shoot them!"

I nearly dropped my rifle in happy surprise. I recognised the voice as Chaplain Smith's! Remembering my disguise, I bit my lip and said nothing, but the happiness did not go away.

Father's friend! He's still alive!

I knew Bromhead from Pietermaritzburg parties and Chard I had met in Father's company, but somehow Rev. Smith seemed to personalise the past for me, with a hope of better days for the future.

A hand on my shoulder made me jump.

"Castlewood, you're wanted on the store veranda," Chard said, his voice low.

"Yes, sir," I nodded, scrambled to my feet and hurried off.

Surgeon Reynolds moved among several figures prostrate on the veranda floor. I stopped on the steps.

"You wanted me, sir?"

He looked at me and shook his head.

"No. He wants you."

I frowned and looked at the man he pointed to, slumped in the corner. Icy fear bit at me. I took the steps two at a time and hurried over to him, heedless of all else. I raised his head with one hand.

"Ashley!"

His lips moved. I knelt down next to him, loosening his tunic, removing his helmet.

"Surgeon! Can't you do something?"

Surgeon Reynolds came and stood next to me. In silence, he shook his head.

"He caught an assegai in the chest. There's not much anyone can do for him now."

"But - but there must be! Ashley!"

"Margaretta," he whispered. He tried to clear his throat, but he couldn't. Rousing himself, he attempted again.

"Margaretta...don't ever let anyone change you to be something you are not. Be the woman...God meant you to be... don't give in..."

"Ashley!" I cried, clutching at his shoulders.

"If it's any help to make you strong...I loved you..." he tried to smile, and raised a finger to touch my cheek. His head lolled to one side.

"Ashley!" I buried my face in my hands and wept. Surgeon Reynolds pulled me to my feet. I lifted my head and stared at him.

"You must get back to the ramparts. They need you," he said, forceful but gentle.

I rebelled.

"Let me weep for him!"

He grew stern.

"Too many of our soldiers have died already, Miss Witt. This is one more. Must we waste more young lives because you must mourn? You volunteered. Take your rifle and go!"

Don't give in...be strong...

I took one long look at Ashley's peaceful face, and stooped. I picked up the rifle, and without a backward glance, I moved to the steps leading down to the compound. A bullet whistled overhead from a Zulu gun.

"Good lass," I heard Surgeon Reynolds' voice as I started back to the ramparts. Something had changed in

me; I felt determined. Come what may, I would fight to the death against these savages.

As the night wore on, the attacks became more defiant feints than anything else. I could tell that it worried Chard. He became more tense and snappy over small annoyances or noises. I had felt tired before, but now sleep deserted me. My finger on the trigger, I stood ready and waiting for any more action. My shoulder felt bruised and battered, due to the buffeting it received from the gun's recoil, but I didn't care any more. The grief bottled up inside me overrode all else.

"Volley fire! Present - fire!"

The suddenness of the command surprised me, but I had been waiting for it. The Zulus ran towards us, but something in the impetus of their charge had changed. The cry sounded - fainter. Could they be tiring?

I loaded and shot over and over again. They were more wary of our bayonets, now, and avoided them as much as possible. As a consequence, very few reached the inside of the compound, and those inside the compound eliminated them after a few steps. I reloaded again, and noticed that I had time to reload. No Zulu appeared in front of me that I had to stab with the bayonet.

"Cease firing!"

The minutes ticked away...and they did not return. I did not dare to hope that they would leave us. The chilly night breeze swept over us, carrying silence on its wake. Someone shook me.

"Castlewood! Castlewood! Are you awake?"

I blinked, and then realised what I had done. Shame coloured my cheeks.

"I am now, sir."

"That's all right. I want a few good men to come with me over the wall."

That woke me.

"What?"

Is he crazy?

"I'm going to retrieve the water cart that was brought up from the drift. It was left near the hospital. The wall will provide covering fire. Do you want to come?"

"You're asking me to volunteer?"

"Yes," Chard said. "I am."

My lips twitched up into a faint smile.

"Then I volunteer."

"Good. What I want you to do is to keep an eye out for Zulus approaching us, and bayonet or shoot them. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

With Chard in the lead, two other privates and I leapt over the wall. Straight away, ragged shooting started from the Zulus behind the wall, replied to with volley fire from our own men. Keeping low, we ran over to the cart. Chard took control of bringing it back to the wall, and the two privates and I covered him, firing back at the flashes from the wall. One Zulu leapt over; I ran towards him, ignoring the shouts from my comrades. He hurled his assegai, and for the first time, I saw one turn to run. I raised my rifle and brought him down with one shot. Returning to the water cart, I found that they had passed a leather hose over the wall, and were filling containers of any sort full of water. The privates and I kept up a steady fire toward the Zulu lines. All of a sudden, a group of men armed with bayonets jumped over the wall and ran towards the Zulu lines.

"What on earth..." I whispered. One of the privates cursed. Chard said nothing.

"A bayonet charge! But what for? We cannot hold the ground!"

Chard glanced at me.

"For morale, Private. Tactics."

On re-entering the compound, soldiers milled around in great excitement.

"I swear I could hear horses!"

"There must be help on the way!"

"If we can hold on a few hours more..."

Chard broke in, his voice sharp.

"If you want to hold on a few hours more, I suggest you get back to your posts and help provide covering fire for the bayonet platoon."

Guilty faces proved the truth of his words.

"Yes, sir."

The bayonet platoon came over the wall. Their voices were cheery, showing how much good it had done for them. I had no hope that help would come, and yet...perhaps...we could hold out.

For the rest of the night, regular shooting came from both sides, and yet no more attacks occurred. We heard the occasional cries of "Usuthu" in the distance, but it seemed more to alarm than to announce an attack. I couldn't understand. Chard patrolled the defence line with untiring diligence, keeping us all awake. My eyes felt so gritty...when could we stop and sleep? Even the sleep of death would be preferable to this. The glow from the hospital began to fade.

The shooting - they've stopped shooting!

I glanced towards the horizon. The outline of the trees formed. Dawn began to break.

~-----~

I stepped with caution among the bodies of the dead, trying not to look at their faces, trying not to breathe deeply. The air stank of burning flesh from the hospital and the smell of blood... I shuddered. The damage caused by our rifles was unbelievable. Heads had split in two, bodies were torn where the bullet passed out of them...I swallowed and continued searching. The other members of the patrol walked a little ahead of me. One warrior had died clutching his rifle. I reached over and tugged at it.

Strange how the bullet doesn't appear to have marked him, and yet it does that to others.

Even stranger how the past springs into life in the present. He stood facing me, gun held in front of him. Startled, I dropped my armload of guns and grabbed for the bayonet in my sheath. He tried to pull the trigger, but I fell on him. We struggled on the ground. I knew what I must do, but I didn't want to do it. It would be so messy - and I hated mess. Seizing his wrists, I held him there for one moment, and then released him as I plunged the bayonet downwards and sprang away. I didn't look back as I picked up the guns and went back to the patrol.

"Let's return to camp. I think we have enough guns now," Corporal Allen said.

We moved through the field of dead. Black men covered the area in front of us, stretching back behind us. In the compound, red tunics lay everywhere. Some slept to regain strength. Some slept the sleep of death. I did not return to see Ashley. I would carry the memory in my heart of what he was.

"The patrols have come back, sir. Several were nearly killed by warriors feigning death."

"And the Zulus?" Chard asked. It struck me that he had aged overnight. Never had I seen anyone look so old.

"They're gone, sir. All of them."

Chard scanned the horizon with his eyes.

"All of them, Corporal?" He looked a little amused. "I did recall the patrols for a reason." He pointed southwest. A large body of Zulus were forming up on the hills to the southwest. Silence fell over us as we realised what it meant. I closed my eyes in a brief moment of despair.

*God, where are You now? This is the end of it all!
Annihilation!*

"Colour Sergeant, stand to."

Chard gave the order exactly as he did yesterday, in the same calm, cool voice.

*Can it be possible? Surely it is a nightmare. It will
all be over in a few minutes.*

But it wasn't. They were really there.

Chapter Twelve

For Duty, not Glory

"We are dead."

No one responded to the comment.

What is the point? It's all for nothing.

The bugle sounded loud and clear; slowly, like machines, we moved towards our posts.

Colour Sergeant Bourne moved around the barricade with Chard.

"Mark your targets before you fire; look to your front."

I loaded the cartridge into my rifle. I couldn't think anything, apart from that it had all been for nothing. Fighting to defend ourselves from annihilation, and what had it done for us? Nothing. The ammunition left was common knowledge. Enough for about 10 rounds per man.

Time passed, and more of the enemy gathered on the hill. Were they enjoying the sight of our torment, playing with us, like a cat with a mouse? Why were they waiting?

"Riders approaching!" someone shouted.

Chard ran to the redoubt to look through his field glasses, then turned away.

"They're black," he said, his voice dull.

"It...it can't be!" C. Sgt. Bourne said, aghast.

"What else is it? Here, you look." Chard passed him his field glasses. By now, most of us were watching the byplay.

"There are some redcoats among them," Bourne said, doubtful.

"How likely is it going to be? Make a signal and see if they respond," Chard turned away.

"Someone fetch me a white undershirt!" the Colour Sergeant demanded. On receiving it, he attached it to the end of his bayonet and waved it in the air, hesitant.

"Sir? Sir! They're signalling back! *Thank God!*"

"It could be a trap," Chard said, but his voice faltered with hope.

"They're galloping towards us - and LOOK, sir! The enemy are retreating! Thank God!"

The cheer that we gave on the approach of the cavalry rang in my ears.

Thank God! Oh, you of little faith! I chastised myself, but on attempting to get up another cheer, realised suddenly how tired I was.

"Here comes Lord Chelmsford and his staff!"

In spite of the contempt in which I held him, I had never been so glad to see anyone in my life as I was to see Chelmsford and his troop sweep into the battle scarred ruins of Rorke's Drift. He stopped his horse in the centre, looked around, and then turned to us, rising in his stirrups.

"I can never thank you enough for the brave stand that you have made here," he said. "Know that you have saved the honour of the British Army, and perhaps its Empire also. You have saved Natal from invasion, and by your heroic deeds, you have written yourselves in history."

Chard stepped forwards.

"With all due respect, my lord, we did it to save British honour and out of loyalty to Queen and country, not for a place in the history books. May men forget what we have done, unless they remember us united for the cause of the British Empire and from love for our country and Queen!"

I essayed to cheer him along with the rest of the company, but the ground swirled around me. Darkness fell as at last I submitted to nature's demand and closed my eyes.

~-----~

Faces above me moved around. I blinked, trying to focus.

"So you're the brave young lady who deceived almost every except our courageous Lieutenant into thinking you were a man."

Lord Chelmsford's smiling face wavered into my vision. I squinted up at him.

"Y-yes, my lord."

My voice sounded thick. I cleared my throat and attempted to sit up.

"Take it easy, now," Surgeon Reynolds put his hand on my shoulder.

With care, I struggled into a sitting posture. I shook my head, my mind clearing.

"You do realise that you can't get a medal for this or anything?" Chelmsford asked me. "It's a pity, for apparently you were one of the best defenders, but you're a woman, fighting under a false name."

I tried to order my thoughts.

"I didn't do this because I wanted an adventure, my lord. I didn't know what it was like, or to be honest, I probably would not have done it, but - I am glad. It has shown me...ideals and men about whose motives I had preconceived ideas. I fought because I admired them for

their sense of duty. Because I wanted to learn more about them. Because I wanted to be like them."

He smiled.

"A woman of honour. A good thing to be."

Never let anyone change you from the woman you were meant to be...

"I think there is someone here you would like to see," Chelmsford stepped aside. I looked up.

"*Father!*"

He stooped and gathered me in his arms, laying his cheek against my hair. In that moment, I knew he forgave me everything.

"I'll take you home," he whispered.

I nodded my head against his chest. Suddenly I sat upright.

"What happened? To the Zulu wounded, I mean."

With forgiveness came forgiving. I could forgive what they had done to Ashley, because he would have forgiven, because Father forgave me - because the Lord Jesus forgave.

"Oh, I don't think you need to worry about them," Chelmsford said, his tone light. "They got their reward. When my men arrived, they went with your company into the field and bayoneted the survivors."

I closed my eyes and buried my face in Father's chest.
A stream of tears flowed over my cheeks.

*That wasn't necessary; it wasn't right. They were
helpless, too, as we were at their mercy.*

And did they show mercy to your wounded?

Again I was in the hospital, hearing Private Williams' horrified whisper, "They're assegaing them!"

And then I stood at the foot of a cross, watching Roman soldiers gamble for the clothing of a humiliated prisoner crucified above them, and heard the divine love whisper, "Father, forgive!"

I remembered Father's words from the past.

"When we can surrender our lives to Christ's perfect love so that we are not afraid of death, then we can learn to trust others."

Then we can learn to love others, and show mercy to others, too. God forgive us! We are no better than they. We are all the same before you. We try to show them a different way that we only follow in theory, not in reality. Somehow, someday, Father, let me show them the better Way!

~-----~

"Whoa," Father pulled the horses to a stop in front of the house.

There, standing on the pavement, clutching the railing and watching us with eager, hungry eyes, stood Mother. I ran to her, clinging to the silk dress and inhaling the delicate perfume.

"Mother, I'm so sorry," I wept, staining the front of her gown with my tears. She tightened her arms about me.

"I'm sorry, too," she said.

We stood in silence for a few moments, lingering in the embrace, yet we both knew there was more to say.

"Mother...in spite of all of this, I am glad that I stayed. It's been...a growing time for me, Mother. Life isn't all about partying and flirting. That's flitting about sipping at the tips of an empty, social life. It's nothing but...but froth." I waved my hand. "There are things that make up the core of life, the essence. These don't spring from the superficial religiosity we all know. Mother, there on the battlefield I met God for the first time. He isn't a holy, far-off, sacred being. He was there for me. Without Him, I wouldn't be here now."

I shuddered and fell silent. I could not yet face what I had lost at Rorke's Drift, and I wanted to get through this conversation without weeping.

"Margaretta, I don't understand."

I felt the ache inside of me grow larger.

"If it's made a difference to you, I am glad. Perhaps you can tell me more, and explain it."

Linking arms with me, we strolled into the flower garden. I inhaled the perfume with a full heart.

*We take so much for granted - so much that is given.
God, teach those that saw Thee not at Rorke's Drift;
bring them to Thyself.*