

DELETED SCENE #1

FIRST BATTLE FROM CHRIS'S POV

(The scene at the end of Chapter 13, in which Allara's men rescue Chris and the captured Cherazii from the Koraudians, was originally written from Chris's POV.)

SEVERAL HOURS LATER, a rider trotted up from the rear to confer with Mactalde and Rotoss. Chris squinted against the deep gold of the evening sun as the newcomer spoke in a low tone: "Riders coming. Looks like the Guard."

With a growl, Rotoss swiveled around to see for himself. "That's the last thing we need. If the Guard gets to us now, before we can cross the border and consolidate our troops, this will all have been for nothing."

Mactalde said nothing. His eyes narrowed, and his jaw worked back and forth. He looked like he was charting battle lines already. Gone were the twinkling eyes and laughing mouth. Suddenly, he was all business. He looked like a warrior. More than that, he looked like a man who knew how to fight and knew how to win.

Chris followed his gaze. About midafternoon, they had cleared the forest into a grassy plain that stretched before them, unbroken until it reached a faraway line of trees that probably marked a river. Now, the setting sun struck the sway of the grass and transformed it into a tapestry of silver. A few birds—sunshine yellow with curling tail feathers as long their wingspan—drifted across the sky. They whistled back forth in two-noted cries, the first deep like a cello, the second high and questioning.

Chris scanned the plain for the approaching riders, but came up

empty. He took a deep breath. The grass here released a sweet, subtle fragrance that disappeared with too deep a breath. He exhaled, took a shorter breath, and let his chin fall to his chest. What did Guardsmen out here mean to him? Rescue—or further trouble?

Word of the approaching riders whispered through the prisoner column and came back as murmured questions in the Cherazii's own language.

“Quiet! All of you!” Rotoss shouted. He looked at Mactalde for direction. He'd surrendered his command without so much as a second thought, as if Mactalde had been absent for only a few days instead of twenty years. Was that the kind of loyalty this man inspired?

“Let's move out. Double time.” Mactalde pushed his horse into a trot, and Rotoss passed the order back.

Chris dragged his aching body into a jog and looked at Orias. “Is this some of your people to the rescue?”

Orias shook his head, his face tense. “Cherazii aren't recruited into the Guard. We hire on as scouts and arms instructors occasionally, but not often. Not anymore. These troops belong to King Tireus.”

Chris glanced at Pitch and Raz clinging to Orias's jerkin. They had inched themselves up far enough to hook their toes in his belt and take some of the stress off their arm sockets. “Maybe it's a Riever army.”

Raz sniffed. “God protect us.”

“If relations between you and the government are that bad, why would the Guard come this far to rescue Cherazii?” Chris asked.

A muscle in Orias's jaw clinched. “They're here either because they got word of Koraudian soldiers on their side of the border. Or—because the Searcher's found you.” He looked at Chris. “Either way, there's probably a fight coming. Keep your head down and stay close. Mind what I said before about letting your body do the thinking.”

Chris's heart beat faster, adrenaline already pumping through his limbs. For the hundredth time this afternoon, he reflexively strained against the leather thong binding his wrists, but only succeeded in digging the leather a little deeper into his skin. Whether his body knew what it was doing or not was beside the point if he couldn't get his hands free.

A soldier shouted, a strained note in his voice: “Here they come!”

A gunshot hammered through the air, followed by a scream. Chris twisted around to see one of the rear guards hit the ground, blood flooding his chest. Less than a hundred feet from the column, two dozen riders swarmed out of a gully, rising as if from nowhere. Gunfire spattered between the armies. Koraudians began to fall.

“Move!” someone shouted.

A salvo hammered into the Koraudians’ back ranks, felling horses and soldiers alike. The guards shouted and herded the prisoners forward. A Cherazim stumbled into Chris’s back, and he lengthened his stride, ready to run. Ahead, the smooth plain was broken by a spine of trees—the Mistgloom River, according to Orias. If he could run that far without getting himself shot, he could maybe slip into the trees and find something sharp enough to free his hands.

Orias, seeming to read his thoughts, rammed into him. His eyes bored into Chris’s, their glare unblinking, almost crazed. “Stay here! If they get us to the river, they’ll kill us.” He shrugged Pitch and Raz into the grass and crouched. “Our only chance is to fight.”

Mactalde looked at Rotoss. “Tell the rearguard to hold the Laelers off as long as possible. We’ll have to kill the prisoners.” He glanced back at Chris and, with half a smile, touched his forehead in a little salute.

“Captain!” Rotoss shouted at Tubby. “Marksmen, to the rear! Kill the prisoners!”

“Aye, sir!” Tubby reined his horse around and drew his pistol from his side. It whirred and clicked, the blue light behind the cylinder flickering, as he cocked it and leveled it at Chris’s head. “Kill the prisoners! Protect Lord Mactalde!”

Dozens of Koraudian pistols clattered from their holsters, the cocking mechanism clicking beneath dozens of Koraudian thumbs. Bellowing, Orias launched himself at Tubby’s horse. His shoulder caught the man in the ribs, his momentum hurtling him over the top of the horse, and toppling both the Koraudian and himself to the ground. They rolled over and over in the grass, Orias trying to use his advantage in weight, but hampered by his bound hands.

The Koraudian shoved him off and scrambled backward to gain his feet. He caught up his fallen sword and swiped blood from his

mouth, looking almost offended. “You stinking blue!”

Chris launched himself like a sprinter. Tubby never saw him coming. Slamming his good shoulder into the man’s stomach, Chris took him to the ground. The sword hurtled into the grass beyond, and Chris righted himself in time to smash his knee into Tubby’s throat. He might not be able to use a sword worth beans, but he did know a little something about fighting dirty.

Panting, Orias dropped to his knees beside Chris, his back to the Koraudian, and groped until he found the dagger at the man’s belt. “Hold him.” He hacked at his bonds, nicking his own wrists before finally severing the thong.

Tubby writhed, his eyes bulging beneath the pressure of Chris’s knee on his windpipe. Turning, Orias buried the blade in the man’s chest. Then he grabbed Chris’s sleeve and slashed open the thong that bound his wrists. “Get up.” He was already on his own feet, running back to where the Rievers were struggling to untangle themselves from their tether.

Chris hauled himself upright. Adrenaline buzzed through his body, shaking the pain and the exhaustion from his limbs. At the rear of the column, the Koraudians collided with the Guard, sword clanging against sword. The column was in chaos. The Cherazii screamed unintelligible battle cries and threw themselves at their captors. Even with their hands bound behind their backs, they fought with a mindless furor that crushed everything in their path.

A Koraudian spun his horse around, and his eye caught on Chris. With a shriek, he lowered his sword at Chris and charged.

Grabbing Tubby’s sword, Chris lofted it in both hands.

“Listen to your body,” he muttered. “Listen to your body!”

His body wasn’t listening. The sword swung up in front of his face, but not fast enough. The Koraudian bore down on him, his own sword lofted for the killing stroke.

Chris staggered one step to the right, and the sword clipped his shoulder.

“Bah!” Pitch screeched from behind. “For that, I’ll kill you!”

Then, without warning, the Koraudian’s body jerked back, his battle cry chopped short. The sword fell from his hand, and he tipped forward out of the saddle, his back a cavern of exploded flesh. The

riderless horse galloped past, and Chris dodged out of the way, his eyes rising to find the shooter who had rescued him. At the far end of the battle, a woman with a rifle stood in front of a black horse. The Searcher.

His heart sped up, his stance instinctively widening into a useless defensive posture.

Here it was, then. The fulfillment of his dream. That shot had been meant for him, and the next time she wouldn't miss. He flung himself to the ground and crawled for the cover of a fallen horse. But, when he looked up over the horse's belly, she hadn't raised the rifle from the crook of her arm.

Breathing hard, he stared back at her. She vaulted into her saddle without touching her stirrups, sheathed the rifle beneath her leg, and produced a thin, vicious-looking sword in its stead. At her side, a stoop-shouldered man on a gray horse shouted and waved one arm in command. The Guard regrouped and turned, almost as one, to face what was left of the prisoner column. The Searcher's face lifted, her gaze seeming to find Chris. She spoke, and her sword tilted to point in his direction.

Behind him, Orias finished cutting the Rievers free and rocketed to his feet. "Move!"

The Searcher's soldiers thundered into the midst of the column, felling the guards like overripe wheat. A fleeing Koraudian rode by, too intent on the enemy behind to see Orias running through the grass. Orias took two steps forward to meet the horse, grabbed the rider's arm without even reaching, and stabbed him out of the saddle with the captain's dagger.

He wrenched the horse to a halt and shoved the reins at Chris. "Get on. Ride straight to the rear. If you can get to the Searcher, that's as safe as you're likely to be on this field today."

Without waiting for Chris's acknowledgement, he ran to meet another fleeing Koraudian, dragged him from the saddle, and commandeered his horse. The soldier thudded to the ground beside the shredded body of the man the Searcher had shot.

Chris vaulted into his saddle and spun around. He leaned over his horse's neck, rough fingers of mane against his face, and spurred out of the trees. Before him, the plains stretched out in a swirl of

silver, all the way to row of green- and gold-clad Guardsman.

The air tore open next to his ear. Whipping his head around, he saw Mactalde's white charger. The horse pranced in the midst of the fleeing troops, but its rider held it in, chin almost touching its chest. His arm was extended, pistol pointed at Chris, his eyes intent. He wasn't laughing anymore. He was serious. If he and Chris ever met again, this is how serious it would be. His hand lowered. He started to reload.

Chris jerked back around and swung the horse's head from side to side, weaving. He heard the thump of a shot hitting flesh. His horse's left side fell away, and its breath rasped past its mouth. The animal managed to stagger on three legs for a few steps. Then its hind end collapsed, and the rest of its body reared up and toppled.