

VOYAGER 15

SNEAK PEEK

THE SLAVE OF SONDELLE

BOOK 1: ELEVEN KINGDOMS

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CHAPTER 1

He stopped digging.

The only sound he heard was his own laboured breathing; his panting breath disturbed the dirt in front of his face. The darkness was total — he could not see his own hands, or the blood he knew was welling from his torn nails and scraped knuckles. He lifted his head slightly, bumping on the top of the tunnel.

There it was again — that sound. With an effort, he controlled his breathing, trying to listen for whatever it was he'd heard twice now. His heart thumped in his chest, but he managed to quieten its frantic pace with a calming exercise he'd learned. In the silence, he listened again.

Dripping. Was it water? A moment's fear swept over him. Where was he? Had he gone too far? Was there a river or a lake nearby? His fingers gripped the dirt, feeling the moistness. Had he been wrong to assume the moisture was his blood? In the dark, with the earth all around him, he felt the panic start to take hold. He became aware of the tiny hole he was in, how far beneath the surface he was, how far away from his dank — but safe — cell. Fear shifted to unreason, unreason moved towards panic, and panic looked at terror.

It took a great effort, but he wrested control of his mind and body back from an abyss of terror. Down there he saw his own death awaiting him.

Not today, my friend, he told death. Not now. No matter what might lie ahead of him, he knew what lay behind was worse were he to return now, so he continued scraping at the damp earth in front of his face.

He did not know how long he had been digging this tunnel. At least ever since he had been able, however long that may be. He had no idea how old he was. Even the concept of age was hazy for him. He knew he was younger than his master, but that just stood to reason.

Pain suddenly shot up his arm. He pulled his hand back and touched the tips of his fingers: he'd hit something sharp in the ground and cut open three fingers on his right hand. He could feel blood running down into his palm.

With a muttered curse upon all makers of metal objects, he carefully used his uninjured hand to explore what had been buried so far underground, awaiting his questing fingers all this time.

With slow movements, he brushed the dirt away to reveal a blade. It wasn't a simple dagger: nor a poignard. The blade was curved for one thing, and edged for another. Curious now, he uncovered more of the weapon. After brushing all the dirt away, he grasped the centre of the weapon and pulled it free. In the total dark of his tunnel, it emanated a faint glow, showing its three blades clearly. A Warrior's Claw. Not only was the ancient weapon a traditional harbinger of good fortune to any who found one, but this one seemed enchanted.

He would have liked to examine the throwing knife more closely, but time and space prevented him. Instead, he started to dig again, ignoring the pain in his injured hand, pushing the Warrior's Claw ahead of him as he squirmed along his wormhole. The air was thick with his own exhalations, and he was already starting to feel lightheaded, but he had a little time left before he would have to push himself backwards all the way to his cell. A few more handfuls and he would be done for another day.

The moment his hand broke through into open space would forever remain in his memory. He'd done this a few times before, hitting small air pockets underground, but this time, he felt the distinct movement of air on his exposed fingers. With a surge of energy, he worked at the ground in front of his face, scrabbling and shoving. Within moments, he had created a hole as wide as his shoulders through which he could hear water trickling and feel a distinct waft of cool air.

He squirmed forwards, freeing first his arms, then his head to look around. Of course, he saw nothing in the darkness. It was then that a disturbing thought occurred to him — how far above a level surface was he? For a moment, he had an image of his head and shoulders sticking out of a hole halfway up a cliff. He almost laughed out loud.

He considered calling out to listen for echoes, but the fear of alerting any subterranean denizens put paid to the thought. Instead, he grabbed a handful of dirt from the wall and dropped it. He heard it hit ground almost immediately.

Relieved, he wriggled his way out of his tunnel and allowed himself to fall to the ground. Sand and small rocks slithered down the wall after him. He remained motionless until his little landslide had finished and silence once again reigned. Nothing. He heard nothing but the distant trickle of water. He saw nothing.

Now what? he wondered. In the dark he hefted the Warrior's Claw, taking comfort from its weight and faint glow. Water, he decided. Head to the water.

He turned to the right, to the sound of water. He held the Warrior's Claw in his left hand, ready to use it, while running the damaged fingers of his right hand lightly along the wall. It was not a natural surface, still bearing signs of having been worked in the past. Likewise, the floor beneath his bare feet had at one stage in the past been level and smooth. Like the wall, it was rock, and it had also suffered from the intervening time. On impulse, he stopped, tucked the Warrior's Claw into his belt and reached out his left hand. It met with nothing, so he took two steps sideways. Still nothing. He took another and his left hand met a wall. It was just like the wall on the right.

A passage, he reasoned. Somehow, that made him happier. There was something about being in a large cavern that made him nervous. Comfortable that he was in a passage, and a sensibly sized passage at that, he continued walking with his right hand lightly touching the wall.

At ten paces, his hand found an opening. Three paces further on, his hand found the wall again — a doorway leading into a room or another passage. He went on. At eleven paces he found another opening; six past that, another.

A maze? Catacombs? He decided to remember his steps, just in case. It quickly became apparent that he had made a wise decision as the passage snaked around past several openings, turning sharply at times. At a number of these sharp turns he sensed an opening to his left, but he never removed his right hand from the wall.

He recalled a lesson his master had given him once about travelling in the dark: Rely on your senses. If your eyes are unreliable, trust the others. He knew he could feel air currents on his skin, sense the smell of different areas, feel minute changes in temperature — all of which told him things just as reliably as his eyes, so he knew he had missed passages and junctions, but ever in front of him was the increasing sound of trickling of water.

Fresh water, he decided from what he could smell, and cold. Icy cold. And where there was flowing water, there was the chance of an exit from this dark place.

Beneath his feet, the ground changed texture. Whereas it was evident the ground he first set foot on in this underground maze had been carved and worked in the past, here it was smoother, as if cleared of the normal debris of small rocks and dirt. His toes felt the hint of some sort of paving covering the ground. His senses, already alert, became intensely focused as he considered what this latest discovery might mean — inhabitants.

The idea that he might not be alone down here sent a shiver through him, for whatever lived in a place like this would not be human. Humans required light — even during the brightest of nights — when both Yatil and her smaller sister moon Grada were in the sky, men carried torches to light their way.

No, men did not live here, not where they could not even see their own hands in front of their eyes. But that left the question as to what did. Certainly no normal animals like one would meet when travelling from city to city. Or so he imagined, for he had never left this city. Indeed this was the furthest he had ever travelled from his cell. But the books he had read and the stories he had heard suggested no normal animals would inhabit a place like this.

On impulse, he crouched and ran his hand over the floor. He was right: this area was paved with large blocks of stone. His fingers found a join between two pavers. It was narrow and straight — quality workmanship. He rubbed the grit between his fingers, feeling the pain as the tiny fragments settled into his damaged skin, while pondering what he should do next. The faint glow from his Warrior's Claw served only to heighten the darkness around him while the trickle of water reminded him of the silence.

'Am I alone here?' he asked aloud. His words fell into the silence, devoured by black indifference. Waiting for a response, the beating of his own heart was the only indication of life. With a shrug, he continued on towards the sound of the water.

He ignored the numerous openings on either side of his passage. The temperature was slowly dropping, as he suspected it might, the closer he came to the dripping water. As he advanced, he was able to discern more about the sound ahead — not only was there water dripping, it was dripping into water. Deep water. Still water. Not a river then, he reasoned, a pool or lake.

A part of him was disappointed at this, as a river would flow, possibly back to the surface and freedom. He did not know much about freedom except he had never experienced it. His master had allowed him to read a great deal, indeed he had encouraged his slave's reading, and the idea of freedom was a common one. It sounded intoxicating — not that he had any idea what it felt like to be intoxicated either.

A smell alerted him. He stopped moving and slipped the Warrior's Claw inside his jerkin. His skin tingled with alertness as he desperately sought out clues with every sense. There it was again — a smell. Silently, he drew as much air as he could into his nose. Animal, he decided.

Even as he came to his conclusion fear stirred, for no harmless animal would stalk these eternally black corridors. He slowly turned around, taking care to lift and replace his feet with every movement so as to prevent any scraping that would give away his location. By listening to the difference in the sound of the water as he turned he was able to complete a full rotation and be confident he'd end up facing the same way. A whispered curse nearly escaped his lips as he realised the creature, whatever it was, was between him and the water.

He waited, listening. Over the sound of the water, he slowly came to discern breathing — low, slow breathing. He counted the breathing against the beating of his heart. He cursed again as he came to understand that the creature was not asleep. This thing was awake and waiting — probably for him.

The fact that he could hear and smell it suggested that it was large, so he was unlikely to survive a direct fight in the darkness, even armed with a Warrior's Claw. Stealth and intelligence were his best allies; speed and cunning his weapons.

He needed to pick a battlefield that suited him, not his adversary. What did he know about his enemy? It was large, did not need light and was cunning enough to wait in ambush. This meant it had already selected its own ground, so he had to lure it to somewhere it did not want to be. Luring it meant allowing it to know it had been detected

— it would wait if it believed itself to be hidden.

How big was it? How fast was it? What did it attack with? He knew a lot about many subterranean predators, so any information he could gather would help him determine what he was facing.

The creature shifted. Scales rasped against stone, claws scraped. A waft of rancid air drifted along the passage. He tensed. Claws, scales, that smell — it could only be a xath lizard. Uncounted days of learning clicked into place in his mind to form a single strategy: run.

With no thought to stealth, he turned and sprinted back the way he had come. As the openings slipped past him, he kept track of them, enabling him to keep his mental map clear. He counted his running paces, knowing that later he could convert them back into walking paces and retrace his steps once more — if he survived.

The xath lizard hissed its annoyance at its prey escaping and set off in pursuit, its heavy claws scraping the stone floor and its long, powerful tail sweeping the ground clear behind it.

He reached the place where he had first entered the maze and scrambled up the wall to drag himself back into his tunnel. He had squirmed all the way in just as the xath lizard swept past. It sensed that its meal was not ahead and skidded to a halt. The rush of air that flowed into the hole filled his nostrils with the foetid stench of the predator.

Cunning and speed needed to be married with almost foolhardy courage if he was to survive this. He surged out of his hole, launching himself into the air directly above what he hoped was the back of the xath lizard. As he fell, he tore the Warrior's Claw out from under his jerkin.

He landed on the scaly hide of the xath and immediately slammed the three-bladed knife down into the flesh beneath him.

The double shock of the man's impact and the blades sent the lizard into a frenzy of rage. It snapped its head back, but the width of the passage stopped it from getting a free swing, causing it instead to smash its head into the wall. A hiss of anger and frustration filled the air.

He dragged his weapon out and thrust it back again. The razor-sharp blade sliced through tough hide and thick fluid oozed out.

The xath lizard hissed with renewed fury. It switched its attack from trying to bite him to trying to squash him against the wall. The heavy body bucked and writhed as the lizard sought to smear its attacker against the rocks, but what it had in power and mass, it lacked in speed. Every time it moved to dislodge the maddeningly painful passenger, the blade sliced open another spot in its hide.

Before it could change tactics, it was oozing ichor from almost a dozen wounds, each one seemingly deeper and more painful than the last. The thing it had hunted was becoming more than a delayed meal, more than an annoyance. It was moving inexorably towards being a real threat. Somewhere deep in its mind, the xath lizard started to feel fear, and fear made it desperate. It stopped trying to dislodge its attacker, preferring instead to take it back to where it felt safe — the water.

It sprang forwards with breathtaking speed.

The man was nearly thrown off by the sudden movement, but he managed to drive the blade of the Warrior's Claw deep into the lizard's flesh like a handle and hold on as the massive reptile sped through the tunnels. He lost track of where he was as the xath swept through the unyielding blackness.

Abruptly, he sensed a change. They were no longer in a passage; they were in a vast chamber. Then they were airborne. Not falling — flying.

Even before he recognised the implausibility of flight, they landed with a bone-rattling jolt on the surface of the water. The lizard started to sink — it was using the water to remove him. It could hold its breath far longer than the man could and would easily turn on him as he swam away, devouring him with a single snap of its jaws.

The shock of the bitter cold almost robbed him of his senses, but he retained enough to consider his options in the few moments before he died, either from the cold, the lizard or drowning. He had to prevent the xath from turning on him as he fled. That meant reducing its mobility. In his first attacks, he had moved to where he was close to the lizard's right forelimb. His strength ebbing away with every heartbeat, he wrenched out his Warrior's Claw and swept it down in a long, deep slash across what he hoped were the tendons that controlled its shoulder. That done, he let go and started to drive up towards the surface.

Below him, the xath began to turn, but the wounds he had dealt it meant it was slower and weaker.

He broke the surface with the lizard still beneath him. The air was cold and sharp, but his most pressing concern was the distance to the shore. He thrashed around, looking into the dark, trying to find some clue as to which way to swim. Blindly hoping, he struck out with long, powerful strokes.

Either he chose well, or the pool was small, for he reached a rock shore before the lizard managed to break the surface. He dragged himself out and ran away from the water's edge.

In his flight, he was unable to use any of the subtle skills he possessed and ran headlong into a rock wall. A brilliant coruscating light exploded behind his eyes as he fell, dazed, to the ground.

For a while he lay motionless, listening, while his head cleared. He had hit the wall hard but retained his consciousness. The only lingering effect was a gash in his forehead that still trickled blood down his face. When he was satisfied that all he could hear was the beating of his own heart and the steady dripping of water into water, he pushed himself up into a sitting position. The wall at his back was stone. It, like the rest of this strange area, bore the signs of having been worked, but also of having been abandoned for a long time.

Where's that xath lizard? he wondered. Blood was crusted on his face. With a low groan, he started to pick it off. The amount of blood gave him an indication of how long he had been dazed

— long enough for a xath lizard to have found and eaten him. He concluded the lizard was either dead or incapacitated somewhere. Either way, he was safe from it for the time being.

He heaved himself up onto unsteady feet. Nothing broke the blackness that surrounded him. With discipline ingrained by his training, he stilled his breathing. Although he knew it would make no difference, he closed his eyes and concentrated on every other sense.

He could feel only the cool air from across water, softly wafted towards him by the trickling flow. Nothing else stirred nearby. His ears told him the same and his nose found only the traces of blood from his fight with the xath lizard and the remnants of its rank scent. A slow smile formed on his lips. Nothing else would live close to one of those monsters anyway.

Even as he thought it, he realised it begged a very significant question — what was a predator of that size doing down here? What did it eat? Large predators needed plenty of food to survive; they

could not subsist on the hope of the occasional lost man. From the way the scent lingered, he decided it had been here for an extended time, and he recalled the feel of its flesh under his hands. It seemed in good condition, which meant it was well nourished and healthy. And that meant one of two things: either it found enough food, or it was being fed.

So far he had detected nothing alive besides the lizard.

A chill swept across him. Who, or what, would keep a xath lizard fed and healthy down here? And why? Suddenly, this pool of cool clear water seemed less inviting.

He reached his hand out behind him, seeking the wall. The solid rock was comforting and he followed the wall until he found an opening. With some relief, he made his way from the pond, walking a bit quicker than was strictly safe. Thus he missed the first inklings of something awry, and when the attack came, he was unprepared. The first he knew was the shock and agony of something sharp slashing across his chest.

He cried out and staggered back. A low chuckle, a disturbingly unhuman sound, emanated from ahead of him.

‘A bit slower than I expected,’ a voice said. It was sibilant and deep, redolent with malice.

The man heard a footstep as the creature took a pace towards him. In the hope of evading any attack, he took another pace back. His senses fed him information, but the agony of his wounds jumbled his mind so he could not yet make sense of what was attacking him.

‘You evaded my pet,’ the voice went on. ‘So you’re either very skilled or very lucky. Either one is dangerous in its own way.’

As the creature spoke, the man was able to calm his raging pain and focus a little. The beast, whatever it was, was no longer advancing on him. Its voice was coming from somewhere close to his own height, but the depth of tone and power in it suggested something larger than human.

Another lizard? But what lizards can speak?

The man reached inside his jerkin and gripped the Claw. Its weight and solidity gave him a moment of comfort. He had already faced a xath lizard and prevailed — how could this thing be any worse?

‘Ahh,’ sighed the thing, ‘you are assessing me. And you have my Claw. Skill, not luck then. Good.’

It pounced.

The man felt the shift in the air that preceded the creature’s dive towards him, giving the warning to move. He dodged just enough so that the blow was glancing, but it still made contact which sent the man spinning into the wall. The impact sent shockwaves through his already damaged chest and drove the air from his lungs.

The beast landed softly on two feet and turned around to face his opponent. In the dim glow from the Claw, the man could make out a hazy shape. It was humanoid, but massively bulky, with two enormous eyes that glinted in the faint light.

'That is my weapon,' the thing said. 'I want it back!'

The man gulped in air as he pushed himself upright. 'Come and get it,' he said.

'You might just live to regret those words,' came the sibilant reply.

The hairs on the back of his neck prickled. Never had he heard anything so malevolent, so dangerous. It was a voice of ancient evil. He edged to his left, starting to prepare an escape, for he sensed his death in those unblinking eyes.

'Oh, no, little man,' the voice went on. 'There is no escape there. Not now that you have challenged me.'

'That was no challenge,' the man said. He came to a decision and leaned forwards to place the Claw on the ground. 'It was an offer.'

With a pace that belied its bulk, the beast sprang. The man had no time to react as it crashed into his body. In the instant before the impact, he saw what looked like a taloned hand rest on the Claw.

The crushing blow drove him heavily into the rock wall behind him. Unspeakable pain shot through every part of his body and he heard bones cracking over his own agonised scream. A hand wrapped itself around his throat and lifted him up. More bones cracked as the huge hand tightened its grip. The man fought to breathe, but the hand was too tight. Bright lights exploded behind his eyes as consciousness started to fade. He felt himself being thrown and instinct took over, loosening his body for the landing and preparing to roll.

When he hit the ground, the pain nearly stole his consciousness away, but his training took control. Gasping for breath, he drove himself back up onto his feet to meet the next attack.

'Brave little man, very brave,' the beast said. 'And I salute you for your courage.' It crossed the intervening distance in a single bound and slashed the Warrior's Claw across the man's face. The razor-sharp blades sliced him to the bone from hairline to jawline, destroying one of his eyes and removing most of his nose in the process. He howled in pain and went down again, clutching the ruins of his face. Before he landed on his knees, the beast sent him spinning away with a brutal kick to the body. A taloned foot ripped him from rib cage to pelvis.

The man landed hard and lay still. Somehow he still lived; his breath bubbling through the blood that covered what was left of his face. His undamaged eye flickered open to look into the face of the thing that had nearly killed him with such contemptuous ease. It was a hideous parody of a human face and seemed to glow from within. Huge eyes flared with flames that danced deep.

'So, you live, little man?' it asked. With its breath came the stench of carrion, of ancient death. A hand rested briefly on the man's labouring chest, as if to ensure his death was not far away. 'Do you want to die?' the creature asked in a voice that sounded almost kind.

He stared up into the luminous eyes and summoned enough energy to shake his head.

'I thought as much,' the beast said with a deep growl. 'I offer you a choice: die here and now, or accept my blessing and live for the battle, to serve me in the fray.'

'Take my offering and live, or refuse me and die, the choice is yours.'

Even in the depths of his dying pain, the man heard a change in the beast's tone, as if it was reciting an age old mantra. His mind, so long a servant, so disciplined and strong, failed him and instinct overrode sense. He nodded.

'Accepted is your fealty,' the beast said. 'Now accept my blessing.' It placed its large, heavy hand once more on the man's chest and searing heat raged through his dying body. He felt he would burst into flame or melt under the savage pain. He cried out in the extremities of his despair and gave up. Blackness took him and he slid into insensibility.

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***The Slave of Sondelle* by Bevan McGuiness, published by Voyager, will be out in 2011**