

Prologue – Scenes From The Past

Outside Gettysburg, Pennsylvania

April 1849

His head hurt. His back hurt. Everything hurt. He couldn't see through the mask of blood drying on his face, but he could still hear. Hear Ellen tearfully beseeching any saint who would listen. Hear Rob using words he wasn't supposed to know. And he could hear Aunt Jo weeping as that devil half-carried, half-dragged her to his wagon. A too-loud slap and her crying stopped abruptly. Then the wagon rumbled into the distance.

He tried to move, but his body wouldn't obey. So he lay there in sticky blindness and repeated his brother's curses under his breath until Ellen and Rob came down off the porch and helped him inside.

Within a fortnight the news trickled back from Baltimore: Aunt Jo was dead. The baby had come too soon and the doctor couldn't save either of them. But Travis knew better. Her drunken beast of a husband had killed his beloved aunt, as certain as if he had shot her.

That night Travis snuck downstairs and out into the moonlight, his da's dress sword clasped tightly to his chest. He would have preferred to use Great-grandfather's huge claymore, but it was mounted far too high for a boy of eight to reach, not without making enough noise to rouse the house.

He stopped behind the stable, carefully drew the sword from its sheath, and looked at it doubtfully. What now? His books always spoke of knights swearing oaths on their swords, but never of what the proper words might be. He'd have to make something up. He could do that. Imagination was not something Travis was short of.

He sat down in the dirt, cross-legged, and lay the sword across his knees. He stared at the moon-silvered steel for a few minutes, then placed his hands on the hilt, just as the stories said to do.

Closing his eyes he said, "I, Travis Samuel Black, swear upon my father's sword and upon my honor always to act when a lady needs help."

Not fancy, but to the point. He hesitated—what about blood? He'd better be careful cutting himself, or else Mum would ask questions. But he figured if he was going to take an oath, he ought to do it properly. Taking a deep breath, he ran a finger lightly along the edge of the blade, squeezed a few drops onto the dusty ground, then hurriedly stuck the finger in his mouth.

Somehow he managed to sheathe the sword and get it back in the house without getting blood everywhere. Once back in bed he lay there staring into the darkness, thinking. His finger felt on fire, and the still-healing wound on his forehead burned too.

He tried to be manly and ignore the pain by focusing on his promise. When he was grown up, he would never again be helpless like he had been that day. Never. And he'd make certain that no woman had bruises and scars or those awful, empty eyes like Aunt Jo. Not so long as he could do anything about it.

“I swear it,” he whispered fiercely into the silent room.

Near Brandy Station, Virginia

October 1856

It was a gray October day before she was strong enough to slip from the house and drift down to the gravesite. A cold day, the pungent scent of crushed sweetgum leaves, a leaden sky. It suited her mood perfectly. Dry brown grass already covered the settling piles of dirt. Someone had planted golden-eyed asters, a jarring purple amid the browns and grays and blacks.

Star stood silent, a black-cloaked wraith with wind-whipped hair. She felt nothing. Not the cold, nor the scars across her back and shoulders, nor the pain of a shattered heart. Only numbness.

The crackle of leaves, someone behind her. Then a hand on her arm and a hated voice.

“Estella?” Jake hesitated, and in an unusually kind tone said, “Star, I’m so sorry. Is there anything I can do?”

You can go to the devil, she thought.

Her cousin recoiled as if struck, and Star realized she’d spoken the thought aloud. But she was past feeling, past caring. She barely registered the curse flung at her as Jake stalked away.

She was still standing there in the chill of dusk, unmoving, when Will came out looking for her.

“You shouldn’t be out here in this weather, *cariad*,” he chided gently.

“I’m building walls,” was her illogical response.

“Walls?”

Walls around my heart. High walls. Strong walls.

1. Chance Meeting

June 26, 1862

Outskirts of Richmond, VA

It was the dryad who warned Travis that there were Confederate soldiers already on his side of the Chickhominy. She had been trying—unsuccessfully—to pry several Minie balls from the trunk of her gnarled black oak. Though startled at his ability to see her, she willingly accepted his offer of assistance.

“How is it that you still see clearly?” she wondered, wincing as he dug out another lump of

lead.

He peered closer at the bark, then frowned thoughtfully. “Mum says it’s our Irish blood.” Satisfied with his work, he said, “There you go, ma’am. I think that’s the last of them.”

She ran a hand down the trunk and smiled as her slim body began disappearing back into the tree. “Yes. My thanks, bluecoat.”

“A pleasure, ma’am.”

Her nut-brown face faded from view. Travis turned to remount Meg, not at all surprised at the shortness of their conversation. The few Elder Folk he had met previously had not been the most talkative of creatures either.

Then a pair of leaf-green eyes blinked from the trunk. “You should not continue down this road—there are many of the gray men ahead.” She paused, as if listening. “Hundreds more are crossing the river even now. Blue riders and the men with deer tails have already retreated towards the city.”

Oh blast, he thought, one foot in the stirrup. *She’s talking about the Fourth and the Bucktails. If they’re back in Mechanicsville, that means we’re cut off.*

A slim arm pointed back the way he’d come. “There are more of your kind that way, down the road that enters at the grove of beeches, near to what you would call the Totopotomoy.” The eyes opened wider, looking puzzled. “There is something else, but I can’t place it....” Her voice faded as she vanished completely.

Travis looked at Meg and shook his head. “That’s not exactly what I wanted to hear,” he said, hauling himself into the saddle.

The big bay just snorted. They backtracked about half a mile, to where a little farm lane wound its way through a thick stand of beech and oak. Pausing at the entrance, Travis pulled out a crumpled roll of paper and scowled at it.

“Small wonder we missed it—looks more like a mistake than a road on this blasted map,” he grumbled. From further down the road he could hear loud cries, like a flock of crows. “Wonder what has the birds so riled.”

He drew his Colt and listened intently. It wasn’t birds. Something else, the dryad had said. There was the high-pitched bugling of an angry horse, and loud cursing, and shrill cries.... *The devil...! That’s a girl!* Before he quite realized what he was doing, he had spurred Meg towards the sound. Only as they flew around a corner and into a tiny clearing did he consider that he might be outnumbered.

He was, and he didn’t care. An entire company of Rebs could have been there and he wouldn’t have cared. Two men in tattered gray and butternut were fighting to control a bucking, bugling horse. A third held a girl tight, laughing as she screamed and thrashed about in his grip.

“Enough of your squawking, little lady,” the Reb said, muffling her cries with his hand. Immediately he yanked the hand away with a curse. The girl spat something out.

“Bitch!” he growled, backhanding her. She dropped like a rag doll into the dirt.

“You filthy bastard.” Travis could not quite believe what he had just seen.

The other man looked up, startled, then gave him a gap-toothed grin. "Well I be. Lookee who's come to join the fun." Ignoring the gun pointed at him, he took a step toward the lone Yankee. "You wouldn't be wantin' to draw attention to yourself by using that, now would you?"

"Now that you mention it, I really don't give a damn," Travis answered and shot the man, watching with little satisfaction as he tumbled back into the dirt.

The dead man's companions turned at the sound. The horse took advantage of their momentary distraction and pulled free. One man went down in a kicking, squealing, snapping whirlwind of raging horse. The other darted behind a tree and took a shot at Travis.

I've no time for games, was his angry thought. He stood up in his stirrups and gestured furiously, forming threads of Air into a rope that dropped snugly about the man's neck. The Reb gasped, clawing uselessly at his throat. Travis jerked his hand back; he felt rather than heard the neck snap, and shuddered in disgust. It wasn't the first time he'd killed a man that way, but to use his Talent in such a manner still turned his stomach.

The glen was suddenly silent. "So much for avoiding trouble," Travis muttered as he swung down from Meg's back and knelt in the dirt beside the girl. He hesitated, then gingerly turned her over. She whimpered, a tiny, helpless sound that went straight through him and banished what little regret he'd had for his actions.

He cursed silently when he saw numerous mottled bruises in various stages of fading and the shiny, too-tight scarring of a massive burn on the one thin shoulder peeking out from a torn sleeve.

A genuine damsel in distress. He swallowed hard.

"Who are you?" he asked softly, pushing a tangled mass of dark hair from her face.

The jangle of a harness made him twist around, reaching for his gun. The horse, the prettiest gray mare he'd ever seen, stood there, wild-eyed and bloody-mouthed.

She bared her teeth at him. "Touch her again, Yankee, and I will kill you too."

Travis managed a slight smile. "Protective, aren't you? Don't worry, I'm not going to hurt her." *I haven't the faintest idea what I am going to do with her, but I would never hurt her.*

The mare backed away, ears laid flat. "You understood me?"

Meg placed her considerable bulk between her rider and the other mare. "Lieutenant Black's not your usual two-legger. Might want to watch your step around him. And around me."

Travis ignored their comments. *We've got to get out of here*, he thought, scrambling to his feet. *Those Rebs crossing are sure to have sent scouts out, and I've made plenty enough noise.* If he could hear things at a distance using Air, others could too. And since the South had a much larger population of Talents in the field than his side did, it was unlikely that his actions had gone unnoticed.

He bent down and picked the girl up, surprised at how light she was for her height. Almost frail. He shook his head and fought down another burst of anger.

The girl's horse shifted closer, ears swiveling to and fro. "Someone's coming," she announced. "We should leave now."

"Too late," Travis returned. He could hear it too, the clanking, jingling, clattering sound of

cavalry on the move. Not close yet, but too near to retreat. He set the girl back down as if she were made of china, and planted himself in front of her, gun held ready. He took a deep breath, gathering the energy to work the air again and praying he wouldn't have to.

But the horsemen who appeared around the bend wore blue. Travis let out a sigh of relief and eased the hammer down carefully. *The cavalry has arrived*, he thought dryly.

"Captain Logan's not going to be happy with me," Travis informed Meg, looking down at the motionless form at his feet, at the bodies, then back up at the girl's blood-spattered horse, who stood there blowing hard, but quiet, having apparently decided he wasn't a threat to her mistress after all. "I wasn't supposed to call any attention to myself."

At that his captain hurried up, halting his paint in front of Travis. "What's going on, Black? Screaming, gunshots? Thought you'd run into trouble..." He stopped and stared, bemused.

"My apologies for raising such a ruckus, sir. It was not intentional, I assure you."

"Lieutenant," said the captain, shaking his head, green eyes bright with interest, "I can't wait to hear your report." He motioned for the column to halt and dismounted. "Who is she?"

"No idea." He gave a short explanation of how he'd found her. "Sir, we can't just leave her out here in the middle of nowhere." *I won't leave her here.*

Logan slapped his reins against his thigh rhythmically. "No, I don't suppose we can. Still, ... she could be a spy."

For once catching his tongue before he said exactly what he thought of that remark, Travis shrugged. "Well, sir, she certainly could be. But in her condition, she won't be running off to make a report anytime soon."

The captain laughed. "From the look on your face, Mr. Black, that's not quite what you wanted to say. But what did you find? Any sign of the enemy? Any sign of anyone?"

I hope he doesn't ask me where I got my information, Travis thought with a hint of amusement. "It looks like we've retreated back to Mechanicsville, and there are Rebs pouring over the bridge. At least a regiment, probably more, between us and our lines." He put his gun down and unrolled the map, tracing a smeared line. "This road we're on should take us far enough north to keep out of trouble." *Or more trouble, in my case.* "It looks like we can cross the Totopotomy here." He stabbed at the paper. "At least I think that's the Totopotomy. It might be the Pamunky, or the Matadequin, or the Rubicon for all I can tell."

"Blast. Damn mapmakers." The captain sighed heavily, staring at the crumpled paper. "Well—"

"Where am I?"

Travis whirled around. The girl was awake, sitting up, and pointing a gun at them. His gun. The one he'd just left beside her. *That was really, really stupid.*

"Easy now, girl," Captain Logan said, taking a step towards her. She stood up in a hurry, cocking the gun and holding it rather unsteadily. Meg made as if to move in, but Travis gave a quick shake of his head. *No, don't startle her.*

"Don't come any closer, Yankee. I'm not afraid to use this," she responded, voice and gun

shaking. "Now, who are you, and where am I?"

"We're part of the Fourth Pennsylvania Cavalry, miss." Travis kept his voice even, made no move towards her, and twisted the air before him slightly ... just in case her finger slipped on that trigger. "As for where we are, we're still trying to figure that out ourselves. I don't suppose you'd be willing to help us, would you?"

She ignored his attempt at humor. "So now I'm a Yankee prisoner?" She sounded defiant, but Travis thought he heard something closer to despair.

"No, miss, merely a guest," the captain said quietly.

With a tiny gasp, the girl crumpled. Travis was half-expecting this, and caught her as she fell, lowering her back into a sitting position.

"Miss, when was the last time you had some food?" he asked her, taking his gun and carefully returning it to its proper place.

She shuddered away from his supporting arm. "I ... I don't remember. A while." He looked up at the captain.

"Go ahead and get her something to eat. I sent Schuman ahead a ways, and he just got back."

"You just rest a bit, understand?" Travis said. She nodded, eyes shut tight against the tears he could see leaking from under her lashes. He rummaged through Meg's saddlebags for something—hopefully better than hardtack—and was pleased to discover he'd saved a hunk of bread from their last foraging party.

She didn't look up as he came near; only when he squatted down next to her and handed her the bread and his canteen did she open her eyes.

"Eat it slowly," he advised. "No need to go making yourself sick."

No response.

"By the way, I'm Travis Black." He paused expectantly.

"Starla Anderson," she said, head still down.

"Starla? What kind of a name is that?" Travis could have kicked himself for saying that out loud. Her head snapped up, big blue eyes hard with suppressed anger, jaw jutting out in a very unladylike fashion.

"It's my very own name, Yankee-boy," she spat. "You will call me Miss Anderson."

"Mister Black." Captain Logan was back, and he did not sound pleased, but Travis was still glad for the interruption.

"We're moving out. Schuman says the road was open as far as he could see, so we'll keep heading that way." The captain glanced over at the girl and grimaced. "I guess we'll have to keep her with us for the time being. Just stick to the rear."

"Yes, sir," Travis acknowledged, then turned to the girl. "Miss Anderson...?"

She got unsteadily to her feet, glaring at him when he offered a hand to help. Munching on

the last of the bread, she watched him check Meg's gear.

"Pardon me, lieutenant, but am I expected to walk?"

"Of course not," he answered, surprised. "I was going to take you double on Meg here, since you're really in no condition—"

"No!" Her refusal came out in a squeak. "I can ride by myself just fine. If you will just give me a horse...?"

Her reaction startled him, until he thought about it for a moment. No doubt she considered Yankees a short step above that son of bitch— His thought broke off. "Give you a horse? Wasn't that your horse with you? She was here just a minute ago."

Her whole bearing changed; she stood straighter, as if some load had been lifted off her thin shoulders.

"Iris is here? Oh, thank God. I thought they'd taken her," she added in an undertone. Placing two little fingers at the corners of her mouth, she gave a piercing, extremely unfeminine whistle. A glad whinny, and her horse appeared. Miss Anderson wrapped her arms about the mare's neck while the horse nuzzled her hair and let out soft whuffs of welcome.

"Sorry, Star," he heard the horse whisper. "Had to take care of some business. That deserter hadn't bathed in a long while."

The response was lost in the command to mount up.

"Time to go," Travis told them. It took her a couple of tries to pull herself into the saddle, but when he stepped forward to assist, she ignored him. Finally he swung himself easily onto Meg's back and led them to the end of the line of horsemen.

He had to admit that the girl was a good rider, despite her weakened condition. She was quiet, except from time to time she'd say something to her horse, who'd prick her ears up and reply, though too softly for Travis to hear. He could have eavesdropped easily enough, but didn't think it was worth the energy. Instead he silently admired the mare. A gray so pale as to be white, clean lines, and a marvelous floating gait. He'd never seen a horse move like that, and he considered himself something of an expert on horses. He decided to try one more time to speak with her rider, if only to learn more about the mare.

"You talk to your horse too?" he asked, friendly-like.

She stiffened before nodding reluctantly. "At least I know I can trust her."

"Why is she named Iris?"

"Iris was the messenger of the gods, and my Iris is just as sure-footed as she. Not that I would expect an uncivilized Yankee to have had that much of a classical education."

Travis drew back as if slapped. "*Fallaces sunt rerum species,*" he quoted angrily under his breath. "*The appearances of things are deceptive. Uncivilized indeed. What a little shrew,* he thought. Then, *I don't have to put up with this. To hell with my childish oaths.* He sighed heavily and settled deeper into the saddle. *Next time I will ask her horse directly. Perhaps I'll get a more civil answer from her.*

Captain Logan rode up and fell in beside Travis.

“I don’t like this, Black. Even this probably isn’t the safest place for her,” he observed, staring at the girl. She shifted away, putting Travis between herself and the lanky captain.

“What else would you like me to do with her, sir?”

“I know, I know. But still....”

“Still, I might be a spy and riding back here I can escape easier.” Travis twisted to face her. She laughed bitterly. “I heard your conversation. Don’t worry. As the lieutenant so kindly pointed out, I’m in no condition to be running off any time soon.”

Logan fixed her with a hard green stare. “Come, come, you wasp. You are too angry, my dear Kate,” was his cryptic comment. “Just keep a close eye on her,” he told Travis, moving forward once more.

Travis saluted, then scowled. *Great, now I have official responsibility for you, on top of my over-developed sense of chivalry.*

The girl turned to him. “What was that supposed to mean? Who’s Kate?”

He shot back at her, “Surely a highly-educated Southerner like yourself can recognize Shakespeare when you hear it. Or did you think we Northern barbarians had never read the Bard? He was quoting *Taming of the Shrew*, if I’m not mistaken.” *A play that might do you some good to read.* “But then again, since I’m only an uncivilized Yankee, I’m probably wrong about that too.” He nodded curtly, then held Meg back a couple of paces, allowing the girl to slip ahead of him. In disgust he asked, “Did it never occur to you that the captain might actually be concerned for your safety? We’re not exactly well-liked down here.”

They continued on without further conversation, the girl riding with shoulders slumped; Travis could hear the horse scolding her rider, but said nothing. *It’s none of my funeral.*

The road dipped sharply down as it approached the Totopotomoy. As the company entered the thick stands of oak and sweetgum that overshadowed the road, Captain Logan pointed across the thick brown river.

“Look. Friends.”

Travis could see blue coats behind an abatis of fallen trees and bridge planks. The dryad had been correct on that point too. Not that he had doubted her....

“*Buóchas le Dia,*” he said in a quiet voice. Thank God. It didn’t look like a large group, but any amount of Union troops was certainly better than being by themselves.

Captain Logan was already hailing the troops on the far side and motioning his men into the muddy water. It was fordable, to a point. They’d all be getting rather wet, and Travis didn’t really want to think on what, or who, might live in those dirty waters.

Then one of the men let out a shout and pointed back the way they had come.

There was a horseman on the ridgeline behind them, a single gray figure watching. The Confederate stood motionless, as if considering his next move, then waved a pistol and charged.

One of Oma Black’s favorite German oaths ran through Travis’ mind as there came the crack of rifles, first one volley, then another and another—infantry following the mounted Reb. And

then the roar of a field gun. A shell exploded nearby.

Infantry? Artillery? Who the hell's behind us? Travis thought. *The entire Reb army?* He urged Meg down into the water, feeling like he was forgetting something. He tried to think, but his mind felt ... foggy.

A shrill neigh behind him—the girl! He whirled Meg around with a muffled curse, shaking his head to clear it.

She held Iris in the shallows, the mare dancing nervously under the tight reins. The horse at least had the good sense to try to head for shelter. He could hear them arguing as he approached.

“Miss Anderson, come on. We’ve got to get out of here.”

Her mouth hardened. “I’m not going into that filthy water. Besides, I’m no Yankee. These are my people.”

Meg stomped over to the girl; Travis glared down into her belligerent face. “You little fool,” he said, biting off each word. “In case you haven’t noticed, your pretty blue dress looks an awful lot like my uniform. And those shells aren’t going to stop and inquire as to your loyalties before blowing your stubborn little head off.”

She glanced down at her mud-spattered dress in shock, then back at him, but still didn’t move.

He looked up—the Rebs were far too close and his troops on the opposite side finally opened fire. *So much for being a gentleman.* Reaching over, he hauled the girl out of her saddle, fully intending on carrying her to safety forcibly. The wail of a Minie ball, and a fierce burning through his arm. He dropped her into the dirty water with a grunt, blood dripping down into her hair. That got her moving. She grabbed Iris’ reins and splashed up the bank towards the sheltering treeline.

Meg reared and squealed as another round exploded nearby, shards peppering her with bloodspecks.

“Damnation!” Travis muttered through clenched teeth, trying to control the terrified horse with one hand. “Playing nursemaid is not what I signed up for!”

The girl hesitated, turning to stare at him. “Into the trees,” he shouted, starting towards her.

Another roar, thunder. A wave of fire across his side. Meg shuddered violently beneath him, and he was falling. There was a burst of color as he hit the bank, then a deep, cold darkness. From very far away he again heard screaming.