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TERRY GOODKIND



THE THIRD KINGDOM

A RICHARD AND KAHLAN NOVEL

TERRY GOODKIND

THE
THIRD
KINGDOM



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CONTENTS

Title Page
Copyright Notice

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20

Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Chapter 34
Chapter 35
Chapter 36
Chapter 37
Chapter 38
Chapter 39
Chapter 40
Chapter 41
Chapter 42
Chapter 43
Chapter 44
Chapter 45
Chapter 46
Chapter 47
Chapter 48

Chapter 49
Chapter 50
Chapter 51
Chapter 52
Chapter 53
Chapter 54
Chapter 55
Chapter 56
Chapter 57
Chapter 58
Chapter 59
Chapter 60
Chapter 61
Chapter 62
Chapter 63
Chapter 64
Chapter 65
Chapter 66
Chapter 67
Chapter 68
Chapter 69
Chapter 70
Chapter 71
Chapter 72
Chapter 73
Chapter 74
Chapter 75
Chapter 76

Chapter 77

Chapter 78

Chapter 79

Chapter 80

Chapter 81

Chapter 82

Chapter 83

Chapter 84

Chapter 85

Chapter 86

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CHAPTER

1

“We should eat them now, before they die and go bad,” a gruff voice said.

Richard was only distantly aware of the low buzz of voices. Still only half conscious, he wasn't able to figure out who was talking, much less make sense of what they were talking about, but he was aware enough to be disturbed by their predatory tone.

“I think we should trade them,” a second man said as he tightened the knot in the rope he had looped around Richard's ankles.

“Trade them?” the first asked in a heated voice. “Look at the bloody blankets they were wrapped in and the blood all over the floor of the wagon. They'd likely die before we could ever trade them, and then they'd go to waste. Besides, how could we carry them both? The horses for their soldiers and the wagon are all gone, along with anything else of value.”

The second man let out an unhappy sigh. “Then we should eat the big one before anyone else shows up. We could carry the smaller one easier and then trade her.”

“Or save her and eat her later.”

“We'd be better off trading her. When else would we ever get a chance like this to get as much as she would fetch?”

As the two men argued, Richard tried to reach out to the side to touch Kahlan lying close up against him, but he couldn't. He realized that his wrists were bound tightly together with a coarse rope. He instead pushed at her with

his elbow. She didn't respond.

Richard knew that he needed to do something, but he also knew that he would first need to summon not just his senses, but his strength, or he would have no chance. He felt worse than weak. He felt feverish with an inner sickness that had not only drained his strength but left his mind in a numb fog.

He lifted his head a little and squinted in the dim light, trying to see, trying to get his bearings, but he couldn't really make out much of anything. When his head pushed up against something, he realized that he and Kahlan were covered with a stiff tarp. Out under the bottom edge he could see a pair of vague, dark silhouettes at the end of the wagon beyond his feet. One man stepped closer and lifted the bottom of the tarp while the other looped a rope around Kahlan's ankles and tied it tight, the way they had done with Richard.

Through that opening Richard could see that it was night. The full moon was up, but its light had a muted quality to it that told him the sky was overcast. A slow drizzle drifted through the still air. Beyond the two figures a murky wall of spruce trees rose up out of sight.

Kahlan didn't move when Richard pushed his elbow a little more forcefully against her ribs. Her hands, like his, lay nested at her belt line. His worry about what might be wrong with her had him struggling to gather his senses. He could see that she was at least breathing, although each slow breath was shallow.

As he gradually regained consciousness, Richard realized that besides feeling weak with fever of some sort, he hurt all over from hundreds of small wounds. Some of them still oozed blood. He could see that Kahlan was covered with the same kinds of cuts and puncture wounds. Her clothes were soaked in blood.

But it was not only the blood on the two of them that worried him. Damp air rolling in under the tarp carried an even heavier smell of blood from out beyond the men. There had been people with them, people who had come to help them. His level of alarm rose past his ability to gather his strength.

Richard could feel the lingering effects of being healed, and he recognized the shadowy touch of the woman who had been healing him, but since he still ached from cuts and bruises, he knew that while the healing had been started,

it hadn't gone beyond that start, much less been completed.

He wondered why.

On his other side, the side away from Kahlan, he heard something dragged across the floor of the wagon.

"Look at this," the man with the gruff voice said as he pulled it out. For the first time, Richard could see the size of the man's muscled arms as he reached in and lifted the object he had dragged closer.

The other man let out a low whistle. "How could they have missed that? For that matter, how could they have missed these two?"

The bigger man glanced around. "Messy as everything looks, it must have been the Shun-tuk."

The other's voice lowered with sudden concern. "Shun-tuk? You really think so?"

"From what I know of their ways, I'd say it was them."

"What would the Shun-tuk be doing out here?"

The big man leaned toward his companion. "Same as us. Hunting for those with souls."

"This far from their homeland? That seems unlikely."

"With the barrier wall now breached, what better place to hunt for people with souls? The Shun-tuk would go anywhere, do anything, to find such people. Same as us." He lifted an arm around in a quick gesture. "We came out to hunt these new lands, didn't we? So would the Shun-tuk."

"But they have a vast domain. Are you sure they would venture out?"

"Their domain may be vast and they may be powerful, but the thing they want most they don't have. With the barrier wall breached they can hunt for it, now, the same as us, the same as others."

The other man's gaze darted about. "Even so, their domain is distant. Do you really think it could be them? This far out from their homeland?"

"I've never encountered the Shun-tuk myself, and I hope not to." The big man raked his thick fingers back through his wet, stringy hair as he scanned the dark line of trees. "But I've heard that they hunt other half people just for the practice until they can find those with souls."

"This looks like their way. They usually hunt at night. With prey out in the open like this, they strike fast and hard with overwhelming numbers. Before