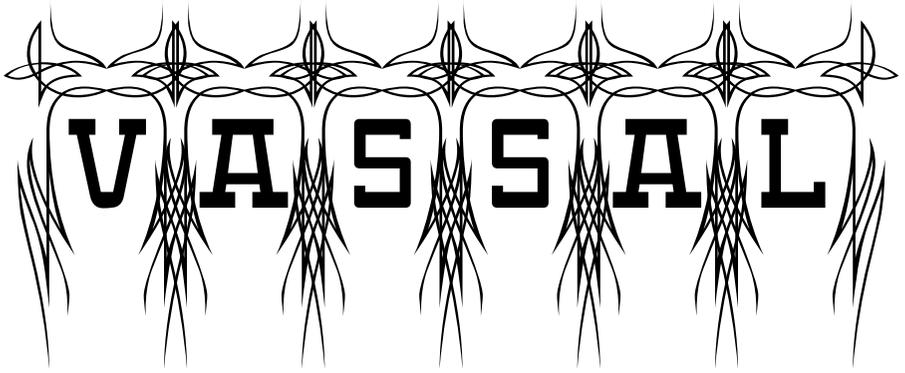


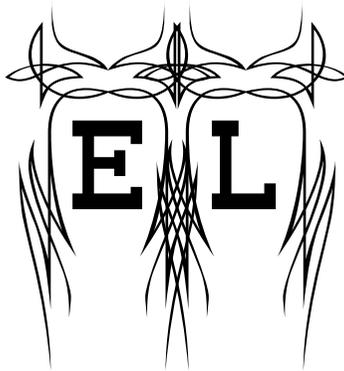
**Vassal
of AFI**

Gloria Oliver



VASSAL

OF



EL

GLORIA OLIVER

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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CHAPTER 1

RED, EVERYTHING WAS RED. IT OOZED AND DRIPPED AND covered everything. It pressed down over him, stifling him. Moans rang all around. There were shrieks of pain and then silence. Suddenly there were hands, dozens of them, grabbing, pinching, lifting him...



With a gasp, Torren sat up in the tree-deepened darkness. He studied the forest around him, the feeling of those hands still with him as his breath rushed wildly in and out. A few burning embers in the small pit of his fire twinkled back at him, showing him he was alone.

His pack and boots still leaned against the large maple closest to him. His sword was in its scabbard at his side, as he'd left it, within easy reach. His breathing slowed, these facts, one-by-one, calming him. The perspiration on his sun-weathered face and arms turned cold and made him shiver. The last tendrils of the dream left him.

Wiping his face and close-cropped platinum hair, he flicked his blanket aside and climbed to his bare feet. Chiding himself as he took yet another look around to make sure he was alone, he hobbled over to his pack to change his sodden shirt.

The dreams—the memories—hadn't troubled him in more than a year. He'd actually started to hope they were gone for good. They were an annoyance, and a horrid reminder of things he'd rather forget. Not, it seemed, that he ever could.

He wasn't sure if it was because he'd not suffered the

dream in a long time; but this time it had felt sharper, more immediate than ever before. He thrust the thought aside, not wanting to look at it too closely.

Pulling his sodden shirt over his head, he shuddered as the night breeze touched his skin. Setting the garment out to dry over a low branch, he quickly retrieved another out of his pack and slipped it on. He sat down on his damp blankets with a grimace, not sure he could sleep again, and glanced up through the overhanging branches of the maple at the sky.

Two of the three moons were still visible. He sighed, figuring he still had about six hours left before dawn. Tomorrow, if he were lucky, he would run across a farm or other travelers on the road and possibly hear more about the happenings up toward the northern border.

A range of mountains stood on the boundary between the empire and Galt. For generations, it had helped maintain an uneasy peace between the two, the trouble of moving massive armies over the few passes carved through them, and the likelihood of ambush while doing so, too risky to make it worthwhile.

Recently, though, it seemed matters had changed. Whispers of war were in the air. Forces were supposedly gathering near the border. Weapon sales had increased. If half of what he'd heard so far was true, there was a good chance he'd be able to offer his services in the area as a bodyguard or mercenary and perhaps get a better-than-average wage.

Torren frowned as a slow shadow crossed the smaller of the two moons. He stared at it, the long mass cutting across the bright surface as it drifted through the sky—one of the floating cities of El. The moonlight gleamed off some of its tall spires, making them appear like jewels. The protective field over the island shimmered like stardust.

The aerial cities of El—home to His people, the Chosen. A culture apart, living on their islands and high reaches where no mere mortals tread. A fantasy paradise, if you believed what half of those living on the ground adhered to, though in truth no Lander had ever been within the floating cities.

The empire still spent inordinate amounts of money trying to figure out how to tap the magic that kept the islands aloft and shielded them from the weather. Others tried to worship El instead, since he had supposedly created the islands for his people as gifts before being closed out of the world like the other gods by the First Mother. Neither method had yet to bear any fruit.

He was sure the other empires of the world were probably doing much the same. Though the Shirak Empire had little contact with those across the wide oceans, the Chosen did. Somehow, he doubted those other countries' feelings about them could be too far from those felt here. As far apart as the continents lay, and as treacherous as the waters were, gaining the secret of the islands or their flying ships would be a boon to whomever could replicate them. Then the Chosen would not be the only ones linking the world with commerce.

With a snort, he lay back down and turned from the sight. First the dream and now this—would he never be free of them? He had no need of those places, nor of their inhabitants. Yet, though he'd turned away from the drifting islands, he could still feel the pull of a Chosen city as it traveled across the sky, almost as if it were calling to him. He closed his eyes, trying his best to shut the feeling out, with little success. The island's presence, the fact he'd had the dream again and knowing he was close to the area where—

Torren stiffened, dropping his train of thought as a faint rustling came from somewhere behind him. He sat up and turned, automatically reaching for his scabbard. He'd half-risen, partially drawing his blade, when someone burst from the darkness and plowed into him in a tangle of arms and legs.

He fell back and, using the momentum, grabbed the intruder and flipped him to the ground, pinning him under his weight. He was slightly taken aback as he looked down at the face of his attacker in the dim light and saw a frightened girl.

“What do you think you're doing?” he demanded gruffly.

Wide eyes stared at him unseeing as she struggled in vain to get out from under him. Her breath came in harsh

gasps, her arms and face were scratched and bleeding from running through the brush.

He kept her pinned, wondering what someone like her was doing out here at this time of night. He assumed she came from a nearby farm. Unfortunately, the fire had burned too low to see anything clearly aside from her gender.

Slowly, the girl's struggles subsided; she focused on him for the first time. Tears welled in her large eyes as they locked with his.

"Help me. Please, help me."

He released her, sitting beside her in an attempt to keep her calm. "Are you being chased?"

She sat up, a shudder running through her as she wrapped her arms around herself. She nodded. "I lost them, I think. But..."

Picking up his sword and scabbard, he strapped them on as he stood, staring in the direction she'd come from. If she was being followed, her pursuers couldn't be far behind. There were no sounds heralding their arrival yet, but he knew he'd still have to work quickly if he were to be prepared. Anyone about at this time of night couldn't be up to much good.

"Grab the blankets and go stand by that tree." He pointed over to the maple his pack was leaning against. Turning away, he put on his boots and then, with his foot, quickly pushed dirt over the fire pit. With a faint hiss and rising smell of ashes, the embers were buried, what little light they'd been emitting gone. He then shoved leaves over the newly covered hole and waved at the air around him to dispel any of the remaining smoke.

Still keeping an ear tuned to the muted night sounds around him, he hurried back to the large tree where the girl stood waiting for him. Cloaked in shadow, she was huddled against the massive trunk, holding the blankets she'd retrieved like a shield against her chest.

"Come on," he told her, "time to climb up."

The girl, who barely reached to his shoulder, only stared blankly at him.

Torren frowned. "We need to climb this tree. You don't want to be found, right?"

She shook her head rapidly from side to side yet made no move to do as he'd asked. Trying hard not to let his irritation show on his face, he yanked his damp shirt off the tree limb and shoved it into his pack. Turning to look at her again, he slung the pack onto his shoulders. She hadn't moved, still staring at him intently with her large eyes. He sighed silently—he'd have to do this the hard way.

He grabbed her by her small waist, eliciting a surprised gasp. He ignored it, lifting her. She gasped again and let go of the blankets, raining them down like leaves on his head.

Trying not to become even more annoyed than he was already, he spoke to her again. "Grab a limb and climb up. Do it now!"

Feeling her finally obeying, he let go of her, pulled the blankets off his head and settled them on his shoulder. After a moment, he climbed after her. The scent of the tree's bark was strong.

"Keep going. You need to get up into the thickest part of the canopy."

Without a word, the girl scurried into the higher branches without much trouble. The leaves barely rustled as she passed.

"That's far enough." He was forced to reach out and grab her by the ankle, since it looked as if she would keep going until she reached the top of the tree and beyond. "Sit there."

Timidly, she drifted back down and nestled where he pointed. Three limbs jutted out from a thick central branch, making a seat Torren hoped she'd have a hard time falling out of.

Making sure she was secure and looked to be staying put, he found a place for himself.

"Here, cover yourself with this. It'll make you harder to see." He handed over one of the blankets, though he already had trouble making her out amidst the foliage. The girl quickly wrapped herself in it, her teeth chattering softly.

Shaking his head as he watched her, he took the second blanket and wrapped up in it. When he was done, he ig-

nored her, instead concentrating his senses on the wooded landscape below. If the girl was being chased, her pursuers were late. With luck, she'd lost them in the brush, but it was best to make sure.

After several long minutes, the crickets, which had grown silent at her abrupt arrival and later started up again, went suddenly silent once more. A curse echoed through the small clearing.

"Why would she have come this way?"

Torren stiffened at the sound of the annoyed voice, not having sensed the stranger's presence until then. He glanced over at the girl and saw her duck her head inside the blanket in fear.

"She's stupid? How should I know?" said a second voice, sounding even more annoyed than the first.

"She won't be running through all this for long, though, that's for sure." The first one snorted. "Never seen anyone run so fast."

"Fear's a great motivator." The second man paused. "I think she may have gone this way."

The two men drifted closer. More curses colored the night as they were forced to deal with the brush.

Torren silently removed his sword from its sheath, then the large knife hidden in his boot. He considered giving the girl the dagger in his pack but rejected the idea. She was more likely to hurt *herself* with it than them.

The two men shoved their way out of the bushes into the small clearing and stopped. He watched them, not able to make out much in the dark. One scrunched closer to the ground.

"Which way?" asked the other.

The first was silent for almost a full minute as he tried to study the ground around him. "It's too dark. The signs aren't clear."

"Dek is *not* going to want to hear this."

The first snorted. "You don't know how lucky we've been to be able to follow her this far."

The other grunted in reply, not at all happy. "What now?"

Torren tensed.

The first rose to his feet. "We go back. What else? If

Dek still wants to find her, we can try to pick up her trail in the morning.”

“So much for this being an easy job.” The two men started back the way they’d come.

Torren slowly let himself relax. The fact they’d been able to track her at all from the road at night meant they were good. If they’d brought a light with them they would have surely been able to tell where she’d gone, and he’d have had no choice but to fight them.

The girl was likely a farmer’s daughter—the closest town was a few days away—so why would people of such skill be after her?

He shook his head. It didn’t matter. What did was that they’d be back. Once they examined the area in daylight, they’d realize the girl had run across someone. This would change the rules of the game. Depending on why they wanted her, they might decide to take offense at the fact he’d helped her. The more distance he could put between himself and these men before they came back the better.

“It’s time to go.”

The covered lump that was his unexpected companion didn’t move. For a long moment, Torren considered just leaving her there. He knew he wouldn’t, but he considered it, all the same.

With an irritated sigh, he got off his perch and reached over to remove the blanket from her head. As he threw the corner of it off her, she jumped in her seat with a small squeal.

“If you don’t want them to find you, we have to go. Now.” He pointed to the ground; and after a moment, she scampered down away from him with wide eyes. Though she wasn’t what he’d call graceful, it looked as if she’d had experience climbing trees.

Following at a more sedate pace, he descended, going over their options. Traveling through the trees at night would be difficult, and he didn’t know of any convenient streams nearby they could use to hide their passage. If he wanted to get away, it seemed they had no choice but to use the road. There would be nothing there to trip over, and the packed surface should hide any traces of their passing. Even better, he would use the pursuers’ own trail

to get back to the road to make things even more difficult for them in the morning—that would work just fine.

Torren glanced over at where the girl stood waiting for him, still huddled in the blanket. “Stick close to me. We’re going to make our way back to the road.”

She stiffened, her face looking wan in the moonlight. “No...”

His brow went up. “Suit yourself. You can stay here if you want. But they’ll definitely find you in the morning.”

He shrugged when she said nothing and started on his way, not caring one way or the other. If she didn’t want his help, so be it. He hadn’t gone far before he heard her struggling to catch up.

In less than ten minutes, they were at the road. Though not one of the empire’s stone-paved highways, it was broad and followed a well-used route. Before stepping onto it, he glanced up and down to make sure the girl’s two pursuers were nowhere near. Spotting no one, he left the shelter of the trees and started north. The girl left the concealment of the trees a minute or so later and followed.

Shadows played in the moonlit darkness to either side; but Torren ignored them, keeping his senses primed for living threats. They traveled for more than an hour and saw nothing and no one. Figuring he’d gone far enough to distance them from his old camp, he stopped and waited for the girl. He watched as she came up and almost bumped into him, stooped as she worked at putting one foot in front of the other.

“We’re getting off,” he informed her.

The spot he’d chosen was bare of bushes or small plants, and the surface looked to be hard enough they wouldn’t leave much of a trail. Unless her pursuers had brought sniffers with them, which he doubted, they’d be hard-pressed to find where their quarry had abandoned the road.

“Step where I step.”

He stared hard at the ground, trying to choose their path carefully. He avoided plants or areas of soft earth, for a cracked branch or indentation would give them away to anyone with tracking skill.

When he felt they’d gone far enough away from the

road, he searched for a place to stop. Finding a likely spot, he gratefully let his pack fall from his shoulders.

“We’ll be staying here until morning. I suggest you get what sleep you can.” He stepped over to a nearby tree and sat down to keep watch for a while.

The girl didn’t move from where she’d stopped, just slouched down onto the ground, curled into a ball in the blanket and fell asleep. He shook his head then stared off into the night.

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