

## *The Escape*



ricilla fought the urge to grind her teeth. It certainly wouldn't bring this Tory and the survivors through the tunnels any faster. She knew the reason for her nervousness—they were in the mountains, less than a mile and a half from Mathison and the surrounding army of Vikors. From the lofty vantage point she had seen Marthong's desperate defense and final charge, though the details were hard to make out even with her spyglass, and she didn't dare use sorcery for clarity as it might give their position away.

A scout running into camp disrupted her thoughts. She looked up as the Satyr youth raced up to her tent and saluted. Impatiently, she returned the gesture and waited for him to speak. Words tumbled rapidly from his mouth in his excitement. Pricilla blinked as she sorted through what he said, and frowned. The news wasn't good.

"Milady! I saw several bands of Vikors head into the mountains, going every which way. They appear to be searching for something, but that's not what is important. A large group is coming this way. Some thousands at least."

Pricilla chewed on the words thoughtfully as she dismissed the Satyr back to his squad. The thousands would put a limit on the amount of time she had to wait for the survivors of Mathison. A group that size could destroy her force easily, and if it didn't, assuming she won, then the Vikors would certainly be alerted to her presence and send a much larger assault against her soldiers. She refused to let her people be slaughtered for no reason, but neither did she want to disappoint her king.

She studied the terrain around them closely, thinking fast. The small trail that had brought them through the mountains twisted sharply behind her as it entered the narrow canyon forged by the meeting of two mountains. The canyon stretched nearly a hundred yards back and would be perfect for holding a large force at bay, but the instructions on the message from Marthong indicated that the exit from the tunnel was *past* the canyon, but not far. So, she couldn't use the canyon, but the exit was in a sort of natural amphitheater, walled behind and beside by granite. Great rocks encircled in front of them, as if dropped by some giant wandering by. They were convenient, as they hid her small force from the Vikors sight, as they would hide the looming battle.

In truth, there was no better place for a fight. There was still room enough for her band to maneuver, a narrow escape that could be held by a few against many, and additional height for her archers on the stone cliffs behind, though it would take time for them to get into position.

Now was not the time to be hesitant, Pricilla decided. She was fairly certain that the refugees would be coming here, and if they emerged into the Vikor host it would be all over. Images of mothers and their children being cut down or dragged away in chains hardened her resolve.

"Cobbleson!" she barked to her messenger boy, a gangly youth of thirteen years. He hurried over from the group of soldiers that were squatting around a game of dice. She'd have to have a talk with him about gambling, before the wolves fleeced the defenseless lamb, but it wasn't important to do so right now.

"Find General Archer and bring him to me immediately. We have plans to make."

"Yes milady!" he saluted sharply and raced off, darting around a block of archers marching quickly towards the front of the lines, testing the strings of their bows as they readied to repel the Vikors. Pricilla sped to their commander and gave him instructions, directing the deployment of the archers into the mountains and onto the rocks above where they would be safe. She told the captain of the pikes, a grizzled dwarf named Blarrin, to have his men stretch across the distance closest to the trail, as it would give them the shortest distance to cover. Mathew, the captain of her swordsmen, she ordered to stand just behind the pike and cover their heads with their shields, just in case the Vikors had any archers amongst their number.

Long before she was finished, General Archer hurried up, having gotten her summons. She ignored him for a few minutes as she finished giving her instructions to her captains, sending them running back to their posts.

"I take it we're going to stand and fight." General Archer rumbled as the last captain hurried off.

"Yes." Pricilla grunted. "This ground is as good as any I've seen for battle, and the rocks will hide us from the rest of the army's sight. If we're fast, we should be able to destroy them before they get back out of sight."

"Not a bad plan." Archer rumbled, stroking the black stubble that dotted his chin. "However, I wonder if it could not be...better."

"What are you thinking of?" Pricilla asked.

"Just this. If we have most of the troops in hiding, leaving only a few hundred about to create the illusion of a rescue force that found itself hopelessly outnumbered and preparing to retreat, then the Vikors might not even bother sending back a messenger but rush our lines, expecting victory. Our archers on the rocks above and the hill behind us can strike when their forces have engaged ours, and the swordmen strike from the sides and behind the Vikors, surrounding them and giving them no out."

Pricilla chewed on the thought for only a moment before nodding. "That is a sound plan. Yet I wonder if we would have time enough to pull it off. The scouts weren't all that far ahead of us."

"True, but the Vikors are sea bandits, unused to fighting in the mountains. They will be slowed by the rocky terrain. We will have plenty of time and to spare in laying our forces against them." Archer spoke confidently, his eyes carried the gleam of anticipation. Pricilla felt like shaking her head. The fool was actually looking forward to this fight.

"I disagree. The Vikor homeland is rumored to be a land of mountains and snow, bare rock sticking up out of the Northern Seas. They will have plenty of experience in fighting, and moving, through mountains."

Archer shrugged. "That may be the case," he admitted. "However, we can't afford to let the host know we are here. Luring them all in is the only way we can be sure that they won't send messengers back to their commanders."

Pricilla nodded slowly. "I've already sent the archers back to find positions on the cliffs above. We could send some of the swordsmen back up the trail and against those boulders and remain out of sight until called for." She pointed towards a grouping of stones larger than a house that lay against the far side of the bowl, as if dropped from the heights above.

"A sound plan." Archer agreed hurriedly, checking the sun. "We will have to move fast, for exactly the reasons you stated before. The scouts weren't that far ahead, but perhaps they were far *enough*."

The orders were immediately issued, and Pricilla found herself with nothing to do but wait for them to be carried out. This was the part about generaling she hated the most. Everyone around her had something to do, but she could not help. If she tried there would be a dozen hands ready to take the job away from her, she knew. It could be maddening at times. Forcing her hands to remain steady, she strode to the front of her army and stood, trying to project the aura of patience and confidence to her men. Occasionally, she heard a small cheer behind her as they took heart. Pricilla wanted to snap at them. How was one woman standing about like a gossiping washer-woman supposed to be brave? But she throttled the impulse.

*The men have to see that I am unafraid of what is coming. That I am going to get them through the day and be able to accomplish our mission. It sure would be nice, she reflected, if I really did have all the answers on how to do that.*

The last scouts she had sent out rushed back from the trail ahead. As they passed into the ranks, one of them broke away and ran to her. The small centaur girl was blowing hard as she slid to a stop close to her. Pricilla recognized her as Sela, a recent recruit. How had she managed to get on the scouting detail?

"The...the Vikors are...*huh*...right behind us." The girl panted heavily, flanks heaving even through her light armor. "I don't think they saw us, but they were marching fast up the wash. It won't be long, maybe a half-hour at the most, before they are here."

"Well done, Sela. Remain here for a moment." Pricilla patted her flank politely. "And rest. I'll have messages for you to carry now."

"Yes milady." Sela nodded thankfully. She quickly tucked flyaway strands of her blond hair back under her helmet.

Pricilla turned back to the ranks of men behind her. The faces that looked at her ran from confident, to determined, to scared, to grim. Many snuck glanced behind them at the inviting mouth of the canyon, clearly wondering why they weren't making a stand on the far side of the canyon, where it would be much easier to kill the Vikors.

"Soldiers of Calso!" she barked, making some jump. Heads turned towards her as General Archer came up beside her. Pricilla barely noticed. She had to temper the men, harden them for the fight ahead. The words came from her heart, and came out harder than flint.

"Ahead of us lies our enemy. One who's numbers are as countless as the blade of grass in the plain. They have taken and burned the home of our closest friends and ally. They seek to complete their conquest by taking the weak and helpless back to their ships in chains. They will enslave and torture our

friends purely for their own amusement. But they will NOT!" she roared. She leaned forward to give extra weight to words, the energy in her such that she began pacing, eyes sweeping the ranks daring any to dispute her.

"What they will find is only death at the hands of the soldiers of Calso. For we will not abandon our friends to their fate. WE will not run in the face adversity! And should we win this day, then we will have struck fear into the hearts of the Vikor horde. For today a handful stood against the thousands and HELD! Today, we are here to bring back the mothers and children of Mirthonia, but tomorrow?" She felt a smile blossom on her face, not a gentle smile, but rather the smile one could see on the muzzle of the wolf as it drew closer to a lamed deer.

"Tomorrow the Vikors will face the united forces of our land, with Calso at their head!" Cheers of approval sounded, hushed by General Archer's movement of his hand. He was casting worried glances behind him. Pricilla shook her head. It was far too late to worry about the Vikors! They would see their small group and fall into the trap or they would not. It was past time to care about such things now. She continued;

"They will remember us, and how we defeated them. And they will taste defeat again on that day, for they will realize that their numbers mean nothing against us!" She turned back towards the stone pillars behind her, where the first Vikors were coming around and shouting in surprise and could it be...fear?

Placing her helmet firmly on her head, she drew in a breath. "Remember your families, remember the families that are counting on us! And remember today lads. For we will have victory!"

The sound from her people wasn't so much a cheer as a solid wave of approval that filled the amphitheater and halted the Vikors advance. They seemed puzzled at first, as more and more of them came around the boulders. It was evident they hadn't expected any resistance, and the tiny army that was drawn up in front of them was something that shouldn't be there.

Slowly, so slowly it seemed, the Vikors assembled across the small field from them. The number of men was daunting, and Pricilla wondered if their mad plan would even work. She had barely a thousand pike and sword behind her, another thousand waiting in ambush, and two thousand elvish and centaurian archers in the mountains behind. The force against her was at least twice that. Privately, Pricilla was amazed that this number of beings could be jammed into a place so small, but apparently could be done, and she focused on the task at hand.

Beside her she could hear the flag of Calso rippling in the wind. It sent a surge of pride through her to see the noble golden eagle flying on the field of blue that was the king's personal sigil. The flag was being held by none other than Sela. Ahead, she could see the Vikors readying to charge.

Drawing her sword slowly, she held it in front of her. Horns blew around her army, signaling the order to hold ground. Pikes were positioned, and shields planted firmly. Pricilla felt exposed in front of her army, but she waited to see what the enemy would do before she retreated behind the army.

A small group detached from the Vikors, striking out across the field at an almost leisurely pace. Above them flew a small white flag of parley beside the black banner with a red dragon that was the flag

of the vikor. Pricilla stepped forward, striding to meet them with Archer beside her and Sela behind, carrying the flag of Calso.

As they approached one another, Pricilla took the opportunity to study the group and especially the huge man in the middle. He was taller than Archer, perhaps even taller than Thorson himself! His arms were thick and sinewy, his thighs seemed bigger than her head. A length of greasy black hair was shoved up underneath his helmet, which was open faced, except for a nose guard that ran down the center. The rest of him was clad in simple chain-link armor interspersed with some heavy plate, especially around his shoulders and chest-plate.

When they met, Pricilla found to her annoyance that she had to crane her head to see him, a fact that did not go unnoticed.

"What is this?" the giant chuckled. "Did they send me a mouse to fight?"

*Mouse, indeed.* Pricilla's eyes tightened. Already she disliked this sea-going troll. Striving to maintain an even voice, she retorted. "I am Pricilla Goldensword, sworn servant to Thorson, King of Calso. We've come to ensure the safety of Mirthonia."

The giant threw his head back and laughed, a great big-belly laugh that rang around the clearing. "I hate to inform you of this, milady Goldensword, but you have come far too late for that. We have killed King Marthong and rounded up his people like sheep."

"Not yet, you haven't." Pricilla responded. "Or else you would not be here."

The giant scowled. "You are correct." He admitted freely. Pricilla felt a stir of surprise; she hadn't expected him to admit what he was doing so early. She probed a little further.

"It must be quite a group that escaped to have made you bring so many followers up here with you, or else the men of Mirthonia have proven their worth against you."

"That they did." The giant agreed easily, his broad smile relaxing his face and making him seem almost...handsome. "I never thought I'd live to see such hardy folk resist us outside our own realm! T'was an astonishing achievement, one I'd thought I'd never live to see. They won much honor this day." He suddenly scowled in anger. "It's not right of the Great Chief to send us after the wimmin' and children so soon, especially after giving his word to King Marthong like that!" he shook his head, and then started when he realized he had spoken aloud. His face suddenly closed to her and he watched with an unreadable expression as Pricilla digested this priceless bit of news. So, the Great Chief's decisions weren't fully supported, were they? She tried to gamble.

"It isn't right." She agreed. "But perhaps there is a way to *make* it right and him a man of his word."

"Oh? And how would you have us do that, little mouse?" the grin was back in full force and she resisted the urge to smack him soundly.

"Our mission here is to escort the refugees back through the mountain." She spoke candidly. She could see the news took the giant aback by his raised eyebrow, and felt Archer's disapproval beside her,

but pressed on. "Such a large force as yourself, in unfamiliar terrain like these mountains, could find itself slowed by hundreds of petty annoyances. Light injuries, shocking cold, odd wildlife, and narrow passes that don't allow carts through easily could all slow a force like you with no problems.

The giant thought about her words, and Pricilla held her breath, waiting to see how he would respond. At last, he shook his head and spoke regretfully.

"As tempting as it would be, and believe me it is, I cannot."

"Why not?" Archer asked. He fondled the hilt of his sword.

"Because the High Chief demanded for me to go and catch the refugees at all speed, as he bade everyone. It appears that I chose my direction aright, as I have found you here. I will gain much honor and a higher voice in the Councils."

Pricilla frowned, "Councils? But I thought you had a High Chief. Other than a small handful of advisors, what council does he have?"

The barbarian chuckled again, making Pricilla feel very foolish for asking. "The Vikor High Chief is High Chief. His decisions are final, but he must listen to the people he leads as well. At Councils, is every Vikor's voice heard, to the last man, on every issue. From farm land allotment to plans of war. In this way, every warrior can know his place and even offer a suggestion for improvement." He explained.

"I see." Pricilla said politely, though in truth she didn't see at all. How did the Chief maintain his leadership and control over his people if his plans and decisions were constantly being second-guessed? But the main points the vikor told her came through.

"You won't back down on this?" she asked calmly.

"Afraid not, little mouse." The giant said almost sadly. "I promise you this much, if your force draws enough honor, I will allow it to retire from the field and pursue my real goal."

"Then so be it." Pricilla growled. Those "little mouse" cracks were starting to get on her nerves. And this giant was in for a real surprise if he expected to take her force out so easily!

Stiffly, she turned on her heel and strode back to her lines, not even bothering with the usual pleasantries for leaving. Behind her she heard Sela's hooves drumming to catch up and Archer's quick pace behind. She didn't speak until she was behind the shield wall.

"That man is in for a surprise, if he thinks he can just walk over us." She said calmly to Archer as she took her place at the rear of the lines. From her vantage point she could see most of the oncoming battle.

"Quite right." Archer said delicately, "though I think it could have gone much better. Unfortunately, that's water out of the bag right now. He's going to attack very soon I th-" the sound of horns blaring interrupted him.

“On second thought, he’s going to attack now.” Archer said unhappily as the sound of thousands of throats screaming their anger came to them.

Pricilla strained her neck to look through the forest of pikes and swords in front of her. She could see the vikors charging across the field, the Red Dragon in front, the footsoldiers waving axes and spears. They were going to hit them across her entire front. The ground shook from the impact of so many boots. The flag was straight and true as her people dug firmly in the ground.

“Stand strong!” she shouted encouragingly. “Set your pikes firm and see your enemy spitted on the end!”

The vikors were nearly there, only a dozen yards separated the two sides now. What was taking the archers so long! Surely they were well within range by now. Pricilla resisted the urge to look behind her. The pommel of her sword filled her hand, and she gripped it tight as she waited, counting under her breath.

The sharp whistle of arrows above her nearly made her gasp with relief. The timing couldn’t have been cut any closer! The first wave of vikors fell with fletched shafts in their eyes or throats. The ranks behind stumbled on their bodies but did not falter as they came on. A second volley sounded, and more vikors fell, but now they were upon the shield wall.

The two sides came upon each other with a crash of thunder and the screams of the hurt and mortally wounded. Pikes stabbed forward and the charge bogged down as vikors tried to cut the pikes in front of them as arrows fell from the heights and pierced their armor. Return shots came as some vikors planted their swords or spears and brought out great crossbows that lanced bolts into the cliff faces behind, or fired directly into the shieldwall. The distance to her archers was so great that most of the bolts fell harmlessly short, or bounced off the light armor of the elves and centaurs. The shield wall had it far worse however, as the wooden darts punched through shield and armor to bury themselves in the flesh underneath. Men went down screaming in agony, or fell completely silent. The ranks behind stepped up to fill the gaps, but the vikors were relentless as they pushed hard against the pikes.

“Give the signal!” Pricilla shouted. Horns winded, and from beyond she could see the rest of her men darting around the rocks and running towards them, swords glinting in the sun and adding their yells to the din. The Vikors were so focused on the pikemen in front of them that they did not even notice the swordsmen until they fell on the rear with the rabidity of starving wolves. vikors cursed and shouted in surprise as they faced this new foe, and Pricilla felt a moment of hope that the plan was working.

“The flank! The flank is collapsing!” someone shouted, and Pricilla felt her blood turn to ice. Looking left and right, she finally spotted what the idiot was shouting about. There was a definite bulge in the ranks of pike there, and the vikors sensed it. The bulge threatened to give way before the onslaught. Pricilla ran to the line as she freed her sword from its sheath. The line seemed to snap before her as the vikors surged through. With a shriek fit for an eagle, she pounced on the first vikor, her sword taking him in the middle and stabbing through his chain mail. It nearly pulled the blade from her hand as it caught on the links, but she wrenched it free and cut at the face of another man. He fell backwards with a curse, until she took him in the throat as he tried to rise back up. Bounding over his body, she took another out with a wild swing that nearly cut his head clean from his shoulders.

She turned a blow that could have eviscerated her and took the vikor in his eye. Snatching up a shield from a fallen Calso soldier, she held it in front of her as she beheld the next vikor. She blinked as she realized it was the giant, his face set with a fierce snarl of rage as he charged towards her. She dodged to the side as his great axe fell beside her into the ground, clods of grass and dirt flying from the impact. That one was close! She swung her sword, but the giant let it bounce off his armor as he took a wild swing at her side. She turned it with her shield and felt a jolt that numbed her arm and nearly made her drop her shield. The giant was so strong! Pricilla felt a real fear that she would lose this fight. That was something that she couldn't allow, she had to go on the offensive!

Chopping at his head savagely, she went on the attack! Moving through the one-handed sword forms as quickly as she could, she met his defensive swings with blows of her own. The giant's face was sweating and his breathing labored as he did everything he could to stem the constant onslaught. Pricilla felt a brief moment of hope fill her as she realized the vikor was giving ground.

As she stepped forward to deliver another punishing blow, her foot slipped on a blood-soaked stone and she fell heavily to the ground, a sharp pain in her ankle making her gasp. Her sword clattered to the ground just out of reach from her hand and she stared up into the eyes of the giant as he looked down at her from his lofty position.

His mouth moved, but Pricilla couldn't make out the words. There was a dull ringing in her ears, and pains shot through her entire body. *Oh*, she realized surreally. *I'm going to die now, aren't I?*

But the stroke she fully expected to end her life never came. Instead, his head turned behind him and his mouth was open in amazement. Mustering the courage to lift her head off the ground, she looked in the direction and felt like cursing in amazement.

Centaur dams in ever assortment of shapes and colors, from old grey mares to round fillies *clearly* carrying child, satyrs, humans, dwarves and even purs had run from behind the vikors, through the ranks of her mauled and bleeding human swordsmen, and struck the surprised vikors with demented fury. The shock of seeing unarmored and barely armed women and mothers, plus old and wounded men cursing and striking at them seemed to be too much for the vikors. Many of them broke and struggled to run back the way they had come. The forces of Calso, not about to let the women risk themselves further, leapt vengefully on the vikors, cutting them down where they fled.

Pricilla took all of it in as she lay on the ground, re-catching her breath. The giant above her moved, and realizing that he was about to get away, she lashed out with her foot, ensnaring his ankles and bringing him down in a startled heap. Rolling painfully to her feet, she grabbed her sword and pointed it down on at the giant, who was looking up at her with surprised eyes. *So green! How can they be so green?* She wondered, before she could stop herself. *Gah! Not right now! You might have to kill him!*

The thrill of victory coursed through her and she threw a cocky grin to her foe. The giant let his axe fall from limp fingers and he chuckled, his good humor returning almost immediately.

"Not bad, little mouse." He wheezed. She grunted sourly. What was with that nickname of his? You'd think beating him like this would make him stop already!

"Do you surrender, or do I run my blade through you?" She asked coldly. The grin was gone from her face, and she kept her face smooth and unruffled, as if the decision mattered little to her. The giant appeared to think it over.

He shrugged. "Well, I..."

"Kill him! His kind have slaughtered our husbands and sons! Kidnapped our daughters and driven our friends to slavery! Kill him!" a woman shouted in the crowd. Similar shouts could be heard, and both Pricilla and the giant tensed, realizing the crowd was very close to losing control. Pricilla's thoughts raced, as she tried to figure out a solution that would defuse the situation before things got ugly. Fortunately, that need was taken out of her hands.

"Silence! Hold your tongues, all of you!" came a rich, commanding alto. The crowd immediately quieted to a murmur, eyes darting to the back to see who had spoken. They parted neatly down the middle, letting a figure through.

She was dressed in simple silk dyed a vibrant purple and gold. A delicate silver crown, wrought with moonstones, adorned her brow while keeping her shiny brown hair, streaked with white, back behind her head. Her face seemed carved from ivory, only her large brown eyes betrayed the sorrow and intense pain she was feeling. In her arms she held a small purr girl who watched with wide frightened eyes and held a makeshift bandage tightly against a wounded foot. On her back was strapped a small centaur filly that seemed an exact replica of her mother.

"Your Majesty." Pricilla murmured, nodding her head. She didn't dare bow with the vikor still alive.

"Lady Goldensword." The Queen of Mirthonia nodded respectfully. "We are forever in your debt. However, I think it would be wise if we leave this place. Now."

"Yes, Milady." Pricilla nodded. The Queen was right. If they delayed any further it would give the Vikors a chance to catch up. She looked down at her captive.

"Last chance." She warned.

The man hesitated, looking around. Then he shrugged. "You have bested me in fair combat." He agreed. "My life is yours, Little Mouse."

"Alright. Let's go then. Now." Pricilla sheathed her sword and watched the Vikor easily regain his feet. He towered over her, and she hoped she hadn't made a mistake in trusting him.

"Archer, summon the troops. We are leaving." She barked.

"Yes, milady." Archer bowed.

"And have the dwarves prepare to level the canyon behind us. Let's not make it easier for the enemy to pursue, hmm?"

"Of course."

And the army began to move.