

Otter Risenhart, a young Sherond of the Tol Mountains, discovers a realm of magic and purposes that run much deeper than the simple world he was brought up to believe in.

Greatest Warrior in the World Book 1: The Pelgoth

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Book 1: The Pelgoth

Gordon Good

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Chapter 1

Toler Risenhart glanced down at the slight, promising bulge protruding from his wife Airina's abdomen. As yet, his hand had detected no movement beneath, though she insisted it had been ongoing for some time. There would be plenty of opportunity to make contact with his developing child over the approaching winter, he supposed. Especially once spring arrived.

The Sherond Veran surveyed the Melcom trees lining both sides of the mountain road they were riding down. These tall, stately trees robed most of the lower, outer slopes of his high mountain home, the Tol Mountains. Their clusters of small, green leaves now exhibited autumn's vivid markings and rustled in a cooler breeze than in past weeks.

As intriguing a sight as Melcoms might be to someone from the nearly treeless Tolan plateau, he eyed them for a different reason. His father Tulo had voiced this reason before Toler and Airina had joined the late-summer Sherond hunting parties: "Is it wise to take a Verain with child into the lands of our enemies?"

Perhaps a summer's war leave had made his warrior's instincts lax in dismissing his father's concern. His wife's current state had accommodated the seldom-granted leave. Now that they approached Lamor, their enemies' land, he found himself surveying the forest with increasing uneasiness. The growth about its feet provided ample cover for enemies, both natural and Veran.

He studied his great Shera mount, Telthar, momentarily. The massive mountain sheep, his horns fully curved in maturity, demonstrated no alarm from the breeze his nostrils worked. Few natural predators would've attempted an assault on a Sherond assemblage of this size that was as prepared for battle as they were for hunting and harvesting. As for Veran threats, Toler could not feel as certain.

Resources were scarce on the high, barren Tol, the alpine environment affording no growing season or abundant wildlife for food. Such scarcity necessitated these treks into the more richly endowed lowlands twice each year, once in early spring and again in this autumn season. The Sherond would hunt Lamor's abundant breeds and gather its abundant growth. The greater portion was

acquired in autumn for the longer winter interval and from the richer summer season.

Sheras were the only domesticated wildlife of significant number on the Tol. The Sheronds' love for them as the mounts of their warfare with the Lamdar of Lamor made them loathe to use them for food. While thorough use was made of the beasts of Lamor, the Sherond kept nothing from their war mounts except their horns when killed in battle.

Their masters, said to be battle-hardened by these partings, would mount those horns on each side of a helmet, to be born back into battle in tribute and memory. This practice had originated the name given them by the Lamdar—"Sherond" meaning "Ram Helm" in the Lamorian tongue. Attired on this ride as he was in helmeted battle-readiness, Toler was always aware of the mounted horns of his first Shera, Trobenthar, on the periphery of his vision.

His careful scan of their surroundings returned irresistibly to his lovely wife. While it was not the first time she had bloomed with pregnant summer, the twelve years since their firstborn son Otter's birth had raised doubts she would ever flower like this again. He engraved her glory in memory now, should this be the last time.

Out of her own wide-ranging observations, she caught his gaze. She returned another of her coy, sidelong smiles that had first caused the child she carried. While they had awaited Otter years before, she had been barely more than a girl, and he hardly more than a boy. Now she was the queen of all his imagining.

She interrupted that imagining with a good-natured challenge, "Are you looking at me, Master Breeder Risenhart, or the stock I carry?"

Toler Risenhart, while an accomplished warrior of the Sherond Ramforce, was better known across the Tol as the master of the Sheronds' most renowned Shera-breeding ranch. Far to the south of where he and Airina now rode, the Risenhart ranch sprawled across the South Rolling Turfs. Tulo and Otter had been left to oversee it. Once the couple arrived back ahead of winter's deep snows, Toler would commence the winter Shera sales to Ram Helms coming from all over the Tol to acquire mounts.

Of the many accomplishments of Risenhart breeding down through the decades, the greatest had been the bringing forth of the mighty Thar breed, the mainstay of both the Ramforce and the Ramswift that comprised the Sherond army. Like all members of the noted breed, Telthar's origins could be marked in his name.

Toler smiled with relish and quipped, "I can assure you, Tess Risenhart, it is entirely from looking at you that matters are what they are."

Her eyes widened with mock alarm at his provocative response. She glanced forward and behind as if to determine whether those riding near them had heard it, but he knew she wouldn't have cared if they had. Apparently satisfied, she nodded slowly, looking ahead and pretending now to ignore him. "Let's hope you think the same in a few weeks."

"I have no doubt that I will," he assured her.

Her blushing under his adoring gaze betrayed her aloof pretense. Shortly she broke, chuckled sweetly, and smiled that bashful smile she did when he had once more disarmed her. Then she was the girl again who years before had so captivately demonstrated she had eyes and thoughts and love only for him. She affirmed the same now by reflecting, "I will never understand how you always say what I could never live without hearing."

He, for his part, would never understand how he had been so singularly chosen to be lavished with her ecstatic love. She edged her smaller Eldenthlar nearer to Telthar, extended Toler her hand and they rode side by side, basking in the sun of their anticipation.

After awhile of riding silently, Airina said, "I miss my Otter, Toler."

"I too, my lamb," nodded Toler.

"We've never had such a summer of being together," she reflected. "It doesn't seem right he is not still with us." It had taken three weeks of riding from the Risenhart ranch where they had left Otter to reach the region they were in, just below the Sherond defense fortress of Acklom.

Airina had never accompanied a hunting party, though all the Sherond, male and female, were required to do so at some point. She and Toler had judged the time best, if not ideal, for her contribution,

before a small child again preoccupied her coming years. Whether or not Airina had joined him, Toler's participation in this late-summer expedition had been a condition of his war leave. Coming together had sat well with their reluctance to relinquish that cherished summer, even though they would have been re-united by winter.

She sighed without conviction, "I suppose I should become accustomed to it."

At twelve years of age, Otter would soon commence his war training. The Veran child who had never been far from her would be spending good portions of his days at school in nearby Tarentum. The promise of a new little one somehow did not ease this realization. She knew the schooling was only the beginning of the Sherond diminishment of her from Otter's life.

Toler, reading his wife's disquiet when others would miss it, assured her, "What he will learn soon will equip him well for whatever the future holds, dearest." She glanced over to him, understanding the coded message about things they could only discuss in secret and about which they were in agreement. She shrugged and nodded.

Airina was about to speak when the couple just ahead of them distracted her. She and Toler had enjoyed becoming acquainted on the prior day's ride with Fourth Star Rider Aldwyn Farak and his wife Meleena, from the much nearer northern town of Orom. Probably as a consequence of proximity, they had already ridden with numerous hunting parties over the years. All their journeys had passed without incident.

Their experience had been reassuring to Airina, becoming more apprehensive the further into unknown territory and threats they rode. Also reassuring was Toler's explanation that they would still be well behind the true battle lines, protected by all the vast numbers of the Ramforce and the Ramswift not yet returned from the summer campaigns. Only small bands of marauding Lamdar might by stealth infrequently creep past those vigilant lines, and then be driven off by the parties they raided. What Toler was unaware of, though, was that these raids had increased in recent years.

At first, Airina thought Tar Farak was engaged in some antic to amuse Meleena, much of their interaction that morning adorned by her

light-hearted laughter. He dropped clumsily from his Shera, Bealon, of the chief Selmond breed of the Risenhart ranch's main northern competitor, the Bludmen ranch. Similar involuntary dismounts were often performed by those first endeavouring to master the challenging Sherond riding style of gripping and directing only with the legs, so that arms could be free to wield swords and shields.

Meleena instantly dispelled any perception of humour with a terrified shriek, "Aldwyn!"

Aldwyn Farak did not rise or respond. Toler glanced down, his seasoned warrior's eye immediately discerning death and its messenger, an arrow embedded in the unfortunate Fourth Star's throat. In the same movement, he drew both his swords, thrust the shields on each arm as best he could before Telthar's unprotected head, and prodded the ram between Airina and the estimated position of the hidden archer.

The Sherond had never adopted archery into their warfare, despising it as cowardly, but had been forced to devise something to counter its cowardly use by their enemies. Out of this necessity, the Ramswift had been conceived. They were a specially strategized fighting force, configured and armoured for speed and exploits on the open field, rather than the Ramforce's heavy fighting. The formations of the Outlying Pursuit Ramswift pursued Lamor's typically roving bands of archers, employing as an alternative to arrows something called a maron, or short sword. These were smithed, through the varying weights of combined metals, to fly long distances from the fingers of Ramswift warriors, though not as far as arrows.

While the Ramswift had originally been an answer for archers, its great mobility and wheeling formations also assisted the Ramforce in fragmenting Lamdar fighting formations. From this additional strength, the second branch of the Ramswift, the Peripheral Pursuit Ramswift, had been formed to provide closer-in, more direct battle support. The advanced skills required for the Ramswift meant no warriors below a Fourth Star Rider could ride among their ranks.

Peripheral Pursuit Ramswift had been sent to accompany the hunting party for what confronted Toler now. He did not intend to

engage the archer, ill-equipped Ramforce soldier that he was. Rather he held the position until the arrival from further up or down the line of Ramswift alerted by Meleena's shriek.

If his warrior's instincts had grown lax, they caught fire now. He digested the ambush, understanding with apprehension that the fairly narrow stretch of road would make defense and engagement difficult. He sensed something else was amiss, though, that frustratingly eluded him.

"Toler?" Airina's voice trembled behind him. "Toler?!"

"Do not move, Airina!" he urged, not looking behind him. It was the last thing he had the chance to say as silver suddenly leapt from the bushes on both sides of the road.

"Toler!" Airina echoed Meleena's shriek as the tranquil morning erupted into a pandemonium of clashing swords, infuriated male shouts and more terrified female shrieks.

Toler became aghast at the numbers of silver-mailed Lamdar soldiers and archers pouring from the bushes, that belied his earlier assurances about small bands of raiders. He wondered how so many had eluded the detection of the Sheras, which usually became restive at their presence. As he began to pitch and dodge and swing in motions prompted more by practiced reflex than by thought, he realized with shock that their portion of the narrow Sherond line was being cut off from the larger party. With Farak down, there were only about four or five Sherond with their wives to engage probably three times that number in foes.

Two more similarly-sized Lamdar companies, in front and behind, began to drive back any attempted rescue from either the hunting party or the Ramswift along the narrow road, and instead created a quickly-widening gap. Amidst the swords' metallic complaining, Toler could now hear the deadly whirl of more loosed arrows. Still he could not discern that thing he had originally sensed was amiss.

What he did perceive to his shock was the formation, not just of an attack, but of a capture! He glanced back to see Airina, still mounted on Eldenthar, with silver clad soldiers already encircling her and reaching up toward her. He could not see her face. My poor love! My poor baby!

He hammered his swords down with a furious yell on those crowding in on him on foot. Surely not a pregnant Verain! he thought. Surely you would not torture a pregnant Verain! Tears that offered no comfort or assurances stung his eyes. There was one gleam of hope in this rapidly outnumbered hopelessness.

As he had done so many times, his legs gripped Telthar's torso with a tightness and pressure that made the two of them move as if they were one. Telthar responded to the familiar prodding with instantaneous Thar speed and power, such as no other Shera breed could muster. As the Sherond had trained their Sheras to do from the dawn of their war with Lamor, Telthar rose up on his hind legs and now added deadly horns to Toler's furious swords. The two crashed upon their encircling foes.

The Lamdar, knowing the attack all too well, dodged the plunge as best they could, but its Shera-borne speed was too swift for some. The requirements of stealth had prevented them from bringing the counter-balancing speed and size of their armoured horses. Toler trampled Telthar over two fallen Lamdar, then raised the massive Thar again, now twisting his next blow back toward Airina. He would plow a Lamdar furrow back to his beloved.

More Lamdar dove from his path or collapsed beneath massive Telthar's horns and hooves. His success might have stirred hope, but panicked terror choked it when he observed Airina. Already each of her arms were in the disabling grasps of Lamdar to either side of Eldenthar.

Sorrowful compassion swept over Toler. Airina had never been trained for battle. She had never been trained to react instantly. In such an ambush, there had not even been time to employ Eldenthar's formidable war training, as the mounted wives had been instructed to do should this evil hour occur.

He heard his father's words again, now as an accusation rather than a question: "Is it wise to take a Verain with child into the lands of our enemies?" Unless he could become her rescuer, he realized bitterly, he would be her true torturer and slayer. Forgive me, beloved! Forgive me, beloved! he sobbed within himself, once to his wife and once to his unborn child. Forgive me, Otter!

Strangely, those who grasped Airina did not seem confident in the control they exercised over her. Amidst all his flailing and charging ahead, Toler detected earnest, anxious discussion between them. The one to Airina's right pointed toward Aldwyn Farak's fallen form. As he pointed, he fell forward onto his face. Toler spotted an expertly placed arrow, inexplicably aimed at the Lamdar instead of a Sherond, that had found its way through his armour from behind.

The remaining Lamdar immediately shouted to someone to Toler's left, pointing down to his stricken Lamdar peer. Just as quickly, he glanced behind, appearing to search the forest for the unexpected projectile's sender.

Toler glanced to the left to see who the Lamdar had shouted to. A shuddering jolt nearly knocked him from Telthar! It immediately became an agonizing stab of pain through his throat. Everything became weak! Vision started swinging left and upward. Airina was screaming! He finally realized what was amiss just before plunging into darkness. The arrow extending outward from beneath his chin, like the one in Aldwyn Farak's throat, and like the one in the Lamdar soldier's back, was not a Lamdar arrow!

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