

# Lords of freedom

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Chapters 1 & 2 Excerpt

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## Chapter 1 – Secret Canyon

After searching for days he finally found the circle of rocks he had seen in the dream that marked the entrance to the secret canyon. His way was blocked by thick brush and large rocks and hiking into the canyon was difficult and dull. Then there was a turn to the left and the cliffs were no longer gray. Those on the right side were mostly red and those on the left were white with dark speckles. At first the canyon was parched and dry, but he came to a spot where a stream from above ran into a small rocky hole in the ground and disappeared. From there on up he hiked by the stream until he found a pleasant place to rest on a boulder near a small bubbling waterfall.

He breathed in the smell and beauty of the plants, trees, and stream. With cupped hands he drank from the creek and delighted in the feel of cold water coursing down his throat. The dream that brought him there flashed through his mind. He seldom had dreams that he could remember and those he did recall seemed to be insignificant. The vivid dream of the hidden canyon with the spring and the stone door was one of the most compelling things he had ever experienced. He was determined to know if the things he had seen actually existed.

In the dream, he'd flown on the back of a sea green dragon over a swatch of barren land that he had previously avoided. The dragon continued to fly over a hidden canyon. Banking upwards on powerful wings, the dragon crested the top of a cliff and landed. From there he had been able to see for miles in all directions, even glimpsing the towers of Merker. This, of course was impossible (as though a sea green dragon wasn't) since the city of Merker was leagues away, beyond the distant mountain range to the west.

In the dream though, he raised a looking glass to his eye, able then to see and hear the city itself, the streets, the carts and horses and the people. He'd seen that Duke Grudo had imposed grievous taxes and stringent regulations on the people, which left the honest, common folk in fearful despair. "Merker needs a champion," the dragon said, and smoke puffed into the air from its nostrils.

Juel made no reply, hoping silently that the creature wasn't hinting at him fulfilling such a role.

The fateful day when tax collectors had stormed father's shop came to mind claiming that since he was delinquent, they were authorized by the duke to confiscate the amount due, plus penalties, from his equipment and inventory. Ravi resisted, claiming he'd paid the tax due and demanding a court hearing.

Things got out of hand though, as one of the guards was an old rival of his father's, a man who'd competed for his mother's hand and never set aside his resentment at her rejection. The rival guard seized on his position, along with the situation at hand to exact revenge at last, even though Juel's mother had died several

years back. When the guards started carrying out his tools, Ravi grabbed a sword and stood in their way. While one guard restrained Juel with a knife to his throat, two others rushed Ravi with swords swinging. His skill exceeded theirs and he cut them down. Then Ravi was run through with a spear from behind by a guard who had been waiting outside.

With his mother dead, no siblings, uncles or aunts, the full burden of Ravi's death fell to Juel, sixteen years old at the time. He was helped by Sergio and Loris, his best friend's parents. Their son and his friend Cheston had been forced into the king's army and was at that time marching from the capital city, Cavalon, to crush an uprising in the city of Sagal. Since Cheston's room was empty, they offered to let him stay there but he declined, electing to stand his ground and stay in the rooms he and his father had shared, above the shop. After burial arrangements were handled, Sergio helped Juel put the shop back in running order, even purchasing what was needed to continue the business.

It wasn't long before the tax collectors came calling again, this time demanding a exorbitant merchant fee, recently ordered by the duke, for all businesses dealing in weapons of any sort. If he did not pay the fee the business would be confiscated by the duke. He didn't have the money to pay the fee and knew that resistance would land him in shackles, or dead.

About that time word came that Cheston had perished in a battle at Sagal. Sergio and Loris were devastated, and Sergio set out at once to claim his son's remains, to give him a proper burial.

Juel knew the guards would soon return to his shop. In the face of insurmountable odds on the heels of horrific loss, he packed what he could and fled the city, into the vast wilderness to the east...

In his dream, the dragon took flight again, and swooping low, the beast sailed into a narrow canyon with one wall of reddish stone and the other white speckled stone. Passing over a large thorny bramble, the dragon landed near a waterfall and sparkling pool, depositing him near the base of white cliff.

"Your destiny lies through there." The dragon's voice echoed through the canyon; then on thundering wings it took flight and soared out of view.

Hesitantly Juel moved forward, toward his destiny, as the dragon claimed, wondering what that meant. Three symbols seemed to appear on the cliff wall—symbols he had seen before in the writings of his mentor, Solomon.

Juel had wakened then, sitting up quickly in the predawn light, heart hammering in his chest. Looking out the cabin window, he'd decided to test the dream.

After resuming his hike up the canyon the terrain became even more rugged. Breathing heavily, Juel hurried up the incline. The sun was blazing, and pausing to assess his progress, he drew a hand across his sweaty brow. He was making good time and stopped to drink deeply from his water pouch. He'd had a sense of being watched but had let it fade to back of his mind. As he continued hiking the feeling of being watched returned so he paused near a grove of trees, shifted the pack on his back and slowly looked around. The canyon was by no measure quiet: birds and squirrels chirped and chattered in the trees above, water gurgled in the nearby brook while now and then the bushes rustled, disturbed by the passage of some small animal.

He'd been living in these woods for four years now, and had his stalker been human he'd have long since exposed him ... unless, of course, it was Solomon. His old mentor though was long gone, perhaps even dead. Juel hadn't seen him for many moons, since the old guru departed into the sunset one evening, claiming he'd been called on a quest. He'd sent Juel on several quests through the years, but who had commissioned Solomon and how had said summons occurred, when no one had visited the cabin they shared ... ever?

Juel gave his head a quick shake; this was no time for idle pondering. It was an animal tailing him, possibly a large one with teeth and claws. While moving on, making his way through a grove of hardwood trees, he was amazed when an enormous creature bounded out in front of him and sat down. It was a huge black cat, regarding him with keen curiosity.

"So you're my stalker; that's just great," he muttered.

Looking around for a means of escape, he saw there were no trees large enough to climb, yet even if there were, a cat like this one could surely climb right after him. He shuddered, imagining her claws fastening into the flesh of his back and tearing from a tree. The big cat began to lightly pant, its eyes never leaving his.

There had been no animals in the dream, but right there in front of him was a great black cat, its massive head chest high to him, with amber eyes brimming with...intelligence? He gulped in fear and awe as the cat yawned lazily, revealing rows of sharp gleaming teeth. When the cat flexed a paw, he noted long razor claws and gulped again. He might be dead the next few seconds.

Wanting to get away, but knowing he could not outrun the beast, he maintained eye contact and carefully took a few steps back. The cat made a rumbling growl. He stopped and stood still and the growl ceased. Instead of charging, the cat continued to gaze at him. Stifling panic, he slowly stepped behind a tree. Relieved that the cat did not move or growl, his mind raced to find a way to survive.

Climbing the tree would not save him and the nearby cliff was too steep to ascend. He always carried a hand ax, long knife, and a short knife, but he knew that close range weapons were a weak option against such a great beast. He thought about starting a fire but there was not enough dry grass or dead wood nearby. However, the branches on the tree sparked an idea. He grabbed his ax and began cutting and trimming a branch a few spans longer than he was tall. Fearing that the activity might cause the cat to attack he worked as quietly and quickly as he could. The cat slowly walked past him down the canyon and sat down again. The creature seemed to be more curious than agitated. Using a length of cord from his pack he firmly lashed his long knife to end of the branch completing a formidable spear.

With the cat below him he could not retreat back down the canyon. Even with the spear, he knew there was little chance of defeating the great cat. He decided to attempt escaping up the canyon and started slowly moving that way clutching his newly made weapon. The cat did not growl or move at first. After he took about ten steps the cat stood and slowly started to follow. He stopped and the cat stopped. He started and stopped several times and so did the cat. It calmly followed him but never came closer. Soon he was hiking at a good pace with the cat always maintaining a safe distance. He began to hope that the great cat might not be interested in eating him.

At a narrow gap in the canyon, he heard a loud, chilling rattle. Coiled up in front of him, blocking the way, was a huge black snake with yellow markings. Its bulging body was stacked in thick, twisting coils. It had a large triangular head which waved in the air as its tail rattled furiously. He was trapped between the snake and the cat, but the cat did not close in.

He held his spear directly in front of the snake's head. The snake did not strike at the spear but moved its head from side to side continuing to focus on the man. He had encountered many snakes before but no big black ones that rattled. He decided to verify what he was up against. After making sure that the cat had not advanced he removed his sandal and attached it to the end of the spear. When he poked the sandal near the snake it struck immediately. He withdrew the sandal which had two new parallel bite punctures in the sole with venom dripping out of them. He was pleased that his test had worked and shown him the snake was poisonous and would strike at anything warm.

He was not intimidated because a spear was the perfect weapon for dealing with a snake. After wiping off the venom, he slipped the sandal back on, edging to the point where the snake was within reach of his spear while he remained beyond the range of a strike.

He swung the spear with a quick sideways slashing motion, striking the snake in the head with the blade of the attached knife. Immediately, the snake wrapped its body around its injured head, as he expected it would.

Glancing left to check on the cat, he saw it running forward, but it was not looking at him. He followed the cat's gaze and was shocked to see another snake coiling up dangerously close. As the cat approached, the snake struck at it. With lightning quick reflexes the cat jumped back. Trying to reach far enough to bite the retreating cat caused the snake to overextend and flop on the ground. Before it could coil for another strike the man pivoted and cut off its head with the spear. Then he turned back and easily finished off the first snake. The cat looked carefully at the two dead but still wriggling snakes.

The man with the spear and the cat with the claws looked into each other's eyes. Feelings of respect and trust blossomed. Juel smiled and lowered the spear. The cat sat down, and to his surprise, emitted a rumbling purr.

## Lords of Freedom

### Chapter 2 – Sun Stream

Juel used his short knife to skin the snakes, rolled up the skins, and put them in his pack planning to cure them later. After cleaning himself and his weapons in the stream, he continued up the canyon. The cat followed, to a place where the stream ran through a thorny bramble which seemed to fill the bottom of the canyon. Knowing from the dream that he had to keep going he used his long knife to hack a narrow trail through the thorns.

The going was slow and tedious, and soon his hands and arms were scratched and bleeding painfully. The sandals he wore were inadequate for a task like this, and despite the care he took he was soon limping as well. He paused a moment, looking back, tempted to retreat from the thicket, but the lure of following the stream and his

dream drove him on. At first the cat did not follow him into the thorns but as he made progress it carefully worked its way up so close behind him that it made him edgy. With renewed vigor, he hacked the next branch and the one after, on and on, until at last he stepped free of the tangle.

Not far away a stream of water ran out from near the bottom of the white cliff forming a crystal clear pool. It was thrilling to be in the spot he had seen so clearly in his dream, and he had a lingering impression that the spring was somehow sacred. There was no longer any doubt that the dream represented reality.

As he rested, enjoying the beauty before him, the cat bounded past and crouched at the pool lapping contentedly. Limping over, he knelt and filled cupped hands with cool water, drinking deeply and splashing it over his face and neck. Leaning over the pool, he gazed at his reflection, his sandy hair, his light brown eyes and tan, unblemished skin.

It was getting late in the day, and he realized he was hungry. It did not take him long to find some raspberries, tubers, and wild onions growing on the banks near the stream. Retrieving the tinder box from his pack, he used the flint and steel that he always carried to start a small fire and soon ate a satisfying meal.

As night fell, the canyon cooled and he enjoyed the crackling flame, his thoughts turned to the night he'd fled Merker. He'd gathered what he could and made his way through the city, a bulging bag in hand and an overstuffed pack on his back. On his way out of town some of the duke's guards spotted him. One of the guards recognized him as Ravi's son and ordered the others back to their post. Juel ran down an alley but it was blocked off. Then the guard moved toward him, drawing his sword and said, "I'll finish you off just like your father and whatever you have in those bags will be mine."

Juel realized that the guard was Ravi's old rival and one of his murderers. He dropped the bag and the pack, discreetly slipping the long knife and hatchet from his belt. He ducked a clumsy sword swing and realized that the guard was drunk. With a roar the guard lumbered forward raising his sword again. Remembering some of the moves his Dad had taught him, Juel deflected the sword with an inside out hatchet swing and jumped inside the sword's reach plunging his knife into the guard's neck just above the leather armor. Retrieving his pack and bag he quickly slipped into the night and out of the city.

As he sat watching the fire Juel next remembered the only man he had encountered in the wilderness. It happened when he was so tired and hungry that he did not know if he would survive. He had been climbing a rock formation trying to retrieve a wounded squirrel when he slipped and fell from a spot about twice as high as he was tall. The next thing he knew there was a man standing over him with a smile on his face. Not long later he was in a cabin under a blanket with a bandage around his head. There was a fire crackling in the nearby hearth, and through the window he saw that it was raining.

The man who had helped him entered the room, sipping from a steaming mug. He was old but moved gracefully with an agile step. His white hair was neatly cut, his chin cleanly shaved, and he had a trim, well-muscled physique, bringing to Juel's mind a retired knight. The man's green eyes twinkled, and he said in a deep, kindly voice, "My name is Solomon..."

Gratefully, Juel reflected on all the amazing things he had learned from the recluse scholar who had been his mentor and teacher during the last three years.

As he lay there pondering, he noticed the cat circle around and find a spot to lie down. He watched the cat's eyes scanning the darkness, its ears moving to take in the sounds of the forest as its tail twitched. The cat's alertness actually helped him to relax and his eyes wandered to the sky. Marveling at the brightness and beauty of the stars he eventually fell asleep.

He was jolted from slumber by a thundering sound and was just able to make out the silhouette of the cat bounding into the darkness. Vicious growls, snorts, and squeals filled the night. After grabbing his spear he quickly built up the fire. The flickering light revealed movement in the trees near the pool. He whirled from side to side keeping the fire at his back, expecting an attack at any moment.

Before long the sounds faded and it became deathly quiet. Then out of the silence the shady form of the cat came into view dragging a large boar. Realizing that the cat had just protected him from a herd of wild boar, he gazed at it with gratitude but what he saw stunned him. The cat's black pupils almost crowded the amber from its eyes, and blood covered its muzzle, dripping from its long white teeth. Looking into the face of death he thought he saw a satisfied smile. He watched the cat sit down and clean itself until all the blood was gone. He thought that being in the presence of an apex predator was not so bad if you are not the prey. With this imposing cat seemingly on his side, he felt comfortable going back to sleep.

Just before dawn he woke to the sound of cracking bones. Rising to one elbow he watched the cat lick the marrow out of a large boar bone that had already been stripped of meat. When the cat started cleaning its long retractable claws, he felt a wave of relief that it wasn't his dried blood she was licking. Satisfied with its claws at last, the cat sank its teeth into the remains of the boar, dragged it near him, dropped it, and backed away. Hoping he understood he moved closer and the cat sat down. Carefully he cut thin strips from the boar, used sticks to hold them over the fire, and enjoyed the taste and smell of fresh bacon.

When the cat went to the pool to get a drink he noticed that it had a slight limp. Moving carefully closer he observed three more things. First, the cat had almost invisible dark gray strips. Second, the cat was female. And third, there was a boar tusk embedded in her left front shoulder. When he got close she stopped lapping, looked at him, and then resumed drinking. Just a few paces from her he sat down, and so did she.

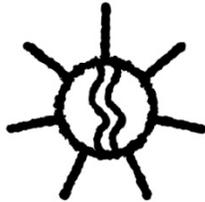
Looking into the cat's eyes, he started to talk to her. He told her how beautiful she was, mentioning her sleek back fur and her stunning amber eyes. As he spoke he started scooting closer to her. He told her what a great hunter she was and thanked her for saving his life and sharing the meat. When he was close enough, he slowly reached out and touched her injured shoulder, hoping that she would not bite his arm off.

Speaking soothingly he explained that he would remove the tusk if she approved. Knowing he was taking a risk but hoping she would allow him to relieve her pain he eased the tusk out using his small knife on one side and his fingers on the other. She held perfectly still, although she did flatten her ears against her head.

When the operation was complete he used water from the pool to clean out the wound. To his surprise the water in and around the wound turned white and started to bubble but did not seem to hurt her.

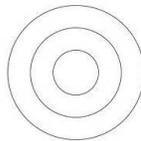
After rinsing two more times he could see that the wound was healed. Moments later a large and coarse tongue licked the side of his face. Tentatively scratching behind one of her ears he started to hum and then there was a friendly session of licking, scratching, humming, and deep rumbling purring that resonated in his chest.

His early morning explorations soon revealed a picture etched into the red rock cliff across from the spring. It was a picture of what appeared to be a sun with a stream running vertically through it.



This rock picture reminded him that it was the very day of the vernal equinox, the spring day when the sun is at the exact center of its semiannual course back and forth along the horizon. On only one other day during the year, the autumnal equinox, would the sun rise at the exact spot it had that morning. Solomon had taught him much about the sun, moon, and stars during their time together, and this was the same symbol he'd seen on the red sandstone wall in his dream.

Backing away, he looked at the top of the red cliff and saw there was a small arch. Returning, he sat with his back below the sun stream picture. As he watched with anticipation, the shadow of the arch moved down the white cliff on the other side until it outlined a large thorn bush at the base of the white cliff before disappearing. In that moment he was sure that there was great intelligence behind the timing and substance of the dream. When he crossed over to the other side he found the faint lines of three concentric circles on the white cliff near the thorn bush. The cat was sitting a little way off, still as though carved from ebony, gazing up at the three circles. At that moment he remembered that Solomon had once drawn three similar circles on the ground and told him that it represented all truth circled together into the rings of eternity. Gazing at it, Juel felt a sense of peace wash over him.



His dream once again came to mind, and his heart began to pound. He knew there'd be an opening nearby, but he didn't see it. There was only a dense thicket of brambles, growing flush against the cliff.

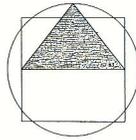
"It has to be here," he muttered to himself, turning in a slow circle and regarding the arch and two each symbol once again. Then using his edged tools, he began

carving a crawlspace between the thicket and the cliff, and soon uncovered a narrow cleft. He shoved the pack through and then edged after it, feet first. As he scuttled, he wondered if the great cat would follow.

Looking back he said, "Come with me."

A testy yowl sounded in reply. He sighed and continued himself; it wasn't as though he could drag her along, and maybe she was too big. Moments later though, he felt warm breath on his neck; she wasn't thrilled, but she was coming along.

There was a bit of a drop, and not expecting it, he almost tumbled but caught himself and carefully climbed down. The big cat sprang, body flexing, to land gracefully beside him. They were in a shallow cave, and as looked around, he saw a third symbol etched in the white stone.



This symbol was the last thing he saw in his dream. For a time he merely stood, tracing the etched lines with his finger. He placed the palm of his hand over the symbol, but nothing happened. He'd gone as far as he could, yet he knew his journey was not completed. He closed his eyes, seeking inspiration as Solomon had taught him. At first his thoughts were scattered, but breathing deeply he cleared his mind, imaging a vast desert of endless sand. Then, in his mind, a door appeared, the kind with a heavy metal knocker. His eyes snapped open.

Looking down, he saw a few stones and knelt to pick up one of the larger ones and made several raps in the center of the symbol. Then the wall began to shimmer, and he let the stone drop from his hand, drawing in a quick breath. The wall was now transparent; not only that, when he extended a tentative hand it passed easily through, yet nothing beyond was visible.

Drawing his hand back, Juel looked over at the cat. She blinked at him and lashed her tail then stretched herself forward, letting her whiskers test the unknown before them. When she drew back and looked up at him, unblinking now, he nodded. Then both strode forward, through the looming space, in an exercise of faith.

Excerpt from the end of Chapter 12

[Speaking to Xan] Thoth said, "O remember, remember, all that Ma'at has spoken. Now, we have one more gift for you. Last night in a hallowed ceremony we embedded in your staff a shimmering gemstone. In some cultures this stone is called Tiger Eye. As you can see, it has rich layers and waves of gold and brown which appear to be animated. We use this stone to represent all-seeing, all-knowing, divine eyes. Tiger eye stones are also symbolic of power, protection, prosperity, integrity, courage, balance, and truth.

“This Tiger Eye stone has been anointed, marked, and endowed as part of the rod of power which you will wield as a scepter of truth and freedom. When you are holding this staff, it will feel warm when truth is expressed and cold when there is deceit. To fulfill your mission as a Royal Guardian you will need to know who you can trust, for trust is the foundation of freedom.”

Note: The Lords of Freedom book consisting of 33 chapters has been completed and is currently in the prepublication editing process. More info at : [lordsoffreedom.com](http://lordsoffreedom.com)

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