

The Last Hope – By Charisa Hagel

(Image created through AI)



Awake the dawn, for out of the ashes the prophecy shall be fulfilled.

One of noble blood and heart shall rise and defeat the evil in the land.

And great shall be the fall of the dragon, and gone forever the curse of Apalandoe.

A dragon has plagued the people for a thousand years in the Empire of Rowan. Those who rise up, he murders and feasts off their flesh. Their kings and princes are slain. For years he has hunted the children of royals, slaughtering them to ensure his reign. With every year the people's hope wanes. Who will rise up to fight the evil and deliver the people now?

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"Adal?"

A young woman quickly rose from the far corner of the room. Abandoning the wooden chair, she rushed to the covered bed. Her armor clanked as she approached and knelt. "Here I am, father." Adal spoke softly, watching her father's withered face.

His eyes rested on her, and the faintest of smiles lifted his mouth. His white hair was damp. Sweat dripped from his forehead and followed the aging lines on his face.

Removing her rough leather gloves, she retrieved a cloth from the bedside table, dipped it in the bowl of water, and gently wiped his brow and cheeks. "Would you like me to bring you

something to drink?" Her voice was quiet and gentle. The battle with the neighboring kingdom had left her father, the General, wounded. And now, his infection had grown worse. When he gave no answer, she began to rise.

"Wait!" He reached out and took her hand. His own trembled.

Kneeling down again, she took her other hand and placed it atop his. Her eyes stayed transfixed to his face. His whole body shook when a coughing fit ruptured from him. Her dark blue eyes, filled with tears as she watched the man she admired and loved struggle before her. "Save your energy. Please," she begged.

His eyes opened, and he looked into the eyes of his beloved daughter. Slowly, he raised his other hand to capture her face. The gentle strokes of her father unleashed her threatening tears, and they trailed down her cheeks.

"Have I told you today, I love you?" his hoarse voice cracked.

"Yes, father," she replied, her own quivering.

A wavering smile lifted his chapped, peeling lips. "I do not have much time left on this earth, Adal."

She shook her head. "No, please."

He continued, "Know that whatever happens, I love you, and I am proud of the woman you have become." Seeing a servant by the door her father nodded to him. "Lamuel," he coughed, "bring me the chest."

Adal looked back at the servant as he bowed and left the room.

"There is something I should have done before now, but I had thought to live longer and spare you the trial and burden," her father said. Shifting his weight, he slowly pushed himself up. Leaning against the head of the bed, his breathing came hard.

Longing to comfort her father, Adal reached for an old, woolen blanket.

"I must tell you the truth," he coughed out, "of who you are."

She stopped and stared at him in confusion.

At that moment, Lamuel returned carrying a large brass chest engraved with a battle scene. He set it on the floor beside the bed.

"Open it," the General commanded him.

Lamuel obeyed. From within the chest, he pulled out a sword wrapped in a white cloth. The etching on the handle was a sun shining over a warrior on his knees. As Lamuel unwrapped the blade, the words appeared "Take heart, I have overcome the world."

Looking to his daughter, the General began, "When I was a lad, my father told me what I am about to tell you." Taking a shaky breath, he said, "Years ago, when the dragon slew a hundred royals, those who were left, went into hiding. Keeping ourselves concealed, we preserved the bloodline of our fathers. We lived secretly with the hope that one day one of us would free our people." Glancing at the sword, he addressed his daughter, "The burden of our people now falls to you."

She reached out and touched the sword. "This is your sword?"

He nodded once. "It belonged to those who came before me, and now it is yours. With this sword you will deliver Rowan from the mouth of the dragon."

"I don't understand." Puzzled, Adal looked at her father.

He coughed but continued, "You are of the royal bloodline, Adal. I am lawfully the King of the Seventh Kingdom, and you are the princess. The other kingdoms have forgotten their promises to fight for Rowan and instead fight each other. Therefore, you are Rowan's last hope. I had kept the secret hoping to save you from this," his voice quivered, "but alas I am unable." Tears filled his eyes. "Forgive me."

Adal, kneeling beside his bed, stretched her arms across the covers as she reached for his hands. "There is nothing to forgive." Laying her head on his lap, she mumbled into the covers. "What must I do?"

He gently placed his hand atop her head and stroked her soft chestnut brown hair. "Lamuel will teach you what you must do." Tears rolling from his eyes, he prayed, "May the God of our Father's keep you safe."

The words were still hanging in the air when the king shuddered and the coughing returned. Within seconds his body convulsed. Slipping from his upright position, he shriveled under the covers. Trying to gain control, he gasped for air, but as his lungs expanded, the pain increased. Turning his head to the side, he shut his eyes tightly. "Almighty, Father," his voice trembled as he barely spoke, "I am ready."

"No," Adal's cries reached his ears, and he opened his eyes once more.

"I'm not ready," she pleaded, her eyes frantically searching his. "Please, please do not leave me."

He closed his eyes again, and tried to take a breath. "Do not...be...afraid." The words were barely audible, "I...love...you." He squeezed her hand. The pressure remained only for a brief moment. His chest rose and fell once more as his spirit left him.

"No! No!" Adal covered her face with her hands. "No!" She turned from the bed and crumbled to the floor. Chocking sobs shook her body and burst through the silent room. The tears that had slowly ran, now came in floods as Adal wept for her father, the King of the Seventh Kingdom.

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The heat intensified as Adal stood in the den of the dragon. Her shield blocked the beast's fire as it gushed at her. A thunderous crack ruptured the ground beneath her, causing her to leap to the side or be swallowed up by the mountain. Dashing to the ledge, she sheathed her sword to her belt and climbed atop an outcropping of rocks.

"You can never defeat me," the dragon's hissing voice taunted her. He brought his face down and snapped his teeth at her. Pulling her sword, Adal swung and struck the dragon as his mouth came near, slicing into a nostril.

Rage cut the air as the dragon recoiled. Quickly, the princess slid behind a large boulder. But down came the powerful weapon of his boney, scaled tail crashing behind and beside her, shaking the cavern walls, and causing the rocks above to fall.

Adal lifted her shield a second too late as a fist-sized stone struck her. A throbbing bruise formed on her shoulder. Her heartbeat pounded like thunder in her chest as more stones fell and the earth continued to shake.

Another wave of heat coursed over her as the dragon spit fire from his mouth.

The smoke from the flames burned her eyes and threatened to consume her lungs. The fire itself scorched her face. Closing her eyes tightly, she fought against the pain.

"You cannot win!" he bellowed, "You are not strong enough to defeat me!"

She refused to listen to the dragon's taunts. She had come to free her people. She was their last hope. Despite her blistered hands, she held the sword of her forefathers firmly, and she remembered the words Lamuel had taught her, "*With this sword we pierce the lies of the enemy and the heart of evil.*"

Again, the dragon's tail came down and smashed the rocks beside her. Taking a deep breath, she opened her eyes and ran out from behind the boulder straight for his tail. She had one opportunity, and she could not waste it. Her shoes were those of a warrior and fixed with

spikes on the soles. Latching on to the tail, she slowly began to climb. With each step, the small spikes dug into the dragon's scales.

Shrieking, the dragon swung his tail and beat his wings.

Losing her balance, Adal thrust her sword deep into the dragon's left flank.

He rolled and thrashed, jerking in every direction.

Suddenly, her sword came loose, and Adal flew off his back. She hit the ground hard, and pain shot through her body. "Ahhhh!" she cried out. Tears soaked her face as she took in her surroundings. Her shield was nowhere to be seen. Her helmet had fallen off and was lost, but her sword lay not five feet from her. Groaning, she turned on her side toward her weapon. Every fiber in her body protested. Her arms quivered. Blood trickled down her brow, and she retched.

"Pathetic!" mocked the dragon.

She looked up. Her whole body trembled.

His glowing red eyes peered down on her. As a predator to his prey, he walked towards her, blood dripped down his flank from the wound she had inflicted. His snarl revealed dagger sharp teeth. Pulling back his head, he blew fire in a circle around her. Rocks melted from the walls surrounding them, and flames engulfed the floor. The mountain itself burned; death and evil stared her in the face.

Placing one arm in front of the other, she slowly dragged her body forward, crawling to retrieve her blade. The breastplate she wore did not spare her the pains of battle. Adal's arms and legs screamed as she scrapped along the rough earth. She felt every jagged and sharp point of the rocks as they cut her flesh. But with every inch her resolve grew. "Let me stand firm till the end, O Lord," she prayed, "Strengthen me, just this once, so I may end the reign of this evil."

Reaching out she grasped the golden handle of her sword. With shaking limbs, she lifted herself to her knees. Her breath came hard as she bent in half, struggling to gain her bearings. Dark bloody strands of her brown hair fell around her face. Tears stung her eyes as her chest constricted inside her.

The dragon's disgust laced his laugh as it echoed within the walls of the cavern. "Why do you even try?"

His venomousness smote her ears, but she knew he meant to strike her soul.

"I have won, little princess." His head dropped low as he leered at his victim. "There is no hope."

Placing the tip of her sword to the ground, Adal used it to push herself up. Her whole body racked with pain. Refusing to give into her weakness, she set her feet apart, and gained the balance to stand. Looking boldly into the dragon's evil eyes, she lifted her head and straightened her shoulders. Sword in hand, she once again faced the dragon. "Today," she spoke defiantly, "justice has come! No longer shall the people of Rowan live in fear! The Almighty has brought deliverance!"

Roaring, the dragon screamed, "Nothing can save you!" With a deep breath, he arched his chest as veins of fire traveled up his throat.

With both of her hands Adal lifted the ancient golden sword above her head, angled the blade behind her back, and with the last of her strength, launched it at the heart of the dragon. As the sword left her fingers, Adal's body failed. Her knees buckled, and she collapsed.

A shattering shriek filled the air. The earth quaked and cracked like thunder. Fire poured from the deadly mouth as blood burst out of its evil heart. Pounding his wings, he fanned the flames of the mountain. As he tried to rise, he flung himself into the side of the cavern. The wall gave way, and the dragon fell through the opening.

His screech pierced the sky, and the murdering creature fell like lightening from the heavens. Landing a short distance down the mountain, the flailing body of the dragon convulsed and then moved no more. Sparks of fire consumed his wretched corpse leaving only charred ashes, thus ending his rule and the curse of Apalandoe forever.

Darkness claimed Adal's unconscious body. Smoke billowed past her, poisoning the air. Flames drew near, ready to lick up what remained on the cavern floor.

"Princess Adal!" Someone shouted, summoning her mind to reality.

Forcing her eyes to open, Adal blinked against the fumes. Smoke-filled tears stung her eyes, and she shut them again. The sound of soldiers and horses' hoofs beat against the ground. Within seconds, strong arms lifted her off the cursed rocks. She wanted to see her rescuer, but her swollen eyes refused to budge. She felt the heat of the flames turn cool as a gentle breeze wrapped around her. The air no longer smelt of charred putrid flesh, but of pines and wild flowers. Then the blessedness of a soft mist touched her face. Small raindrops kissed her cheeks, and she knew she had been delivered from the dragon's den.

Relieved, Adal blinked and, this time, her blue eyes opened.

Raphael, Lamuel's righthand man, stared down at her as he gently placed her on the cool grass. His eyes were full of concern, and his arm remained behind her for support. "Are you alright? Where do you hurt?"

Coughing, she chuckled, "Everywhere." Reaching out, she touched his arm and whispered, "Thank you."

Turning from her rescuer, she surveyed the valiant men and women before her. Her army of brave soldiers were all dressed for a war they could not have won.

Lamuel rushed forward and embraced her. "You're alive!"

She groaned; her bruises throbbed.

He pulled back, looking at her face. "Are you alright? We were terrified for you when you left, alone. We would have stood with you no matter what."

Smiling through her tears, Adal nodded her head. "I know," her voice came out raspy and dry.

Someone fetched her water. Lifting the drink to her cracked lips she gulped the cool liquid that calmed her throat. Quenching her thirst, she looked affectionately at those around her, "I would not have sacrificed your lives for a futile war." Turning to her trusted instructor, she said, "This was my fight."

Knowingly and with tight lips, he nodded. Addressing the nearest soldier, he commanded, "Get Princess Adal's horse. Victory has come. Let us return her Majesty home."

Doing as they were told, the soldiers prepared to depart.

As Raphael helped her mount, Adal lifted her face to the heavens. Her eyes fixed on the light of the sun just then dawning in the East. "I thank You, Almighty, God of my Father," she whispered. "For today, You have brought deliverance to my people, through my hand."

"My Lady," Lamuel approached her on his horse, smiling. "I think you may want this back."

She looked towards him and saw her sword in his hand. "How?" she breathed in awe.

"When Raphael and I were searching for you, one of the men found it pinned to the ground in a pile of ash"

Reverently, she took it from him and stared at it once more.

With a shout that startled her, Lamuel cried, "The sword of Adal, and the sword of the Lord!"

It was echoed by all the soldiers.

As they neared the village relief and victory brought forth cheers, tears, and proclamations. "Our hope was not in vain!" "The Dragon is dead!" "Princess Adal has killed the dragon!" "The Almighty has brought peace to the land!"

The cries and shouts of the people filled Adal's ears and heart.

"The sword of Adal and the sword of the Lord have brought deliverance!" Lamuel declared, "No longer shall the evil prevail in the land, for out of the ashes came a deliverer. Rejoice, O rising dawn! Rejoice O daughter of the Seventh Kingdom! One of noble blood, the last hope of Rowan, has today fulfilled the prophesy. Gone forever is the curse of Apalandoe!"