

## The Silver Realm: A Light in the Darkness

I used to think I was a great warrior and was so very proud of the history of my warriors. I am a member of the Order of the Silver Star and over the years won every personal battle I fought. I moved up in the ranks easily and few were even able to provide me a challenge. I won many accolades over the year and was even an undefeated general at one point – then I went to Hrunt.

The Hrunt system was under attack by the Tourab Empire and they pleaded with all the surrounding systems to send help as surely we would be next in the Empire's expansion. Our system answered the call for many reasons. As a general of the Order, I was chosen to lead a group of 35,000 troops sent from the Gloster Federation.

We arrived on the battlefield with a string of victories going back to the days of my great grandfather. The glories of years past drove us to victories in the first days and brought hope to a devastated planet. We took the battle field and soon mastered the ground driving the Empire back. None could stand against us and I personally battled their best without difficulty. Then we met up with the evil one they called the Emperor's Hammer and our world changed.

I was inducted into the Order of the Silver Star as a young soldier who was barely out of school. After my third war, I was given the Amulet of Freedom which I wear at all times. The Amulet is a high honor and contains the essence of truth. It was only this that saved me on my first encounter the Hammer. I had led the charge up one of the lonely hills in the battle zone in a total rout of the Empire's soldiers. They had no chance against our superior skills with weapons and our advanced fighting techniques. When I reached the top of the hill he was standing there alone. He smiled an evil grin that made my skin crawl and we slowed our pace to a walk. As we approached, he raised his sword to the sky and lightning came down and struck the weapon in his hand. His whole body glowed as the lightning flashed and a dark gray outline formed in the air around him. He brought the blade down as the lightning abated and moved toward us.

He was on my right side and one of my lieutenants felt the force of his attack first. When the blade came down it struck the lieutenant's sword and an explosion shook the ground and a wave of destruction flowed out from the sword. Hundreds fell in that first blow and most of my troops stopped in their tracks to see what I would do. I moved directly toward him.

It was clear to me that he was surprised. He did not expect that anyone would come after him once he unleashed the lightning in his sword; however, this was not my first encounter with an entity that had supernatural powers. My sword was given to me by the Last Knight of the Silver Star and when he dies I am destined to become the Last Knight if I survive that long. I believed that my sword would take the day and walked up to the Hammer with no fear in my heart.

The Hammer hesitated and that allowed me to get into a comfortable position. We moved around assessing each other as adversaries do when there is a level of respect. Then he attacked. His sword swung around as he spun in a circle after a feint to draw me off guard. It did not work as I anticipated that move from one such as him. When the sword came around, I was ready with a stroke of my own and the swords hit with a tremendous force.

The resulting explosion would have killed most men and a concussion wave swept across the battlefield leaving much destruction in its wake. After the blow, I still stood in front of the Hammer with my sword held high and the Silver Star's Amulet of Freedom glowing as a beacon in the night. The Hammer was stunned that I was still standing. As he looked around, I dropped quickly to the ground to try and catch him off guard as I spun and then swept around with my sword. The Hammer did not have time to get his blade in a defensive position and my sword struck his legs with all the force I could muster. The blade went through his legs

gleaming with silver as the blood flew across the ground. I watched him fall to the ground as I prepared my killing blow.

Just as I was about to finish him off, the ground around me evaporated and we both fell into a fresh crater tumbling into separate piles at the bottom. I stood slowly while surveying the newly formed terrain around me. The Hammer struggled to sit up and you could see the agony on his face as the pain from the loss of his lower legs struck him. For the first time, he understood what it meant to face an equal. I moved to finish my job when, suddenly, on the edge of the crater, I saw a figure appear. The figure was in a dark robe that was almost black yet escaped the totality of that color with unusual light gray patterns that swept across it in a lively yet disturbing way.

The figure lifted off the ground and floated down in front of me just to the side of the Hammer and I recognized him. The emperor asked, "How did you survive that blow?"

I did not answer and directed my stance in his direction.

He looked at my amulet and reach out to touch it. I swung my blade to cut off his hand and somehow it missed. He laughed and touched my amulet. There was a bright light and he screamed in agony as he was thrown back onto the ground next to the Hammer.

The emperor arose and said, "You are not a Hrunt! What are you doing here? We did not attack your system."

I answered, "The Hrunt asked for help and we answered."

"You fool. This is not your battle."

I replied, "Regardless, we are here and we are helping."

The emperor gave me a disgusted look as he said, "You will wish you never came if you do not leave now. I will give you a safe passage out of this system if you leave today. If you do not, you will wish that you had not been borne."

I leapt forward with my sword swinging and struck the emperor on the upper arm. The blow did not penetrate deeply but it did throw him to the side on top of the Hammer. I followed with a spin and a jump to avoid any of their sword action, which I did, and brought my blade down with all the force I could muster on the two of them. The blade went through the emperor's arm and pierced the Hammer's side.

The emperor screamed in agony, slapped his remaining hand against his belt buckle, and vanished. The Hammer, realizing that his master had left, did the same thing and disappeared also. I foolishly thought that I had won the day. After I crawled out of the crater, I looked around and realized how many of our troops had died in the engagement. There were no cheers of victory as the two evil ones escaped with their lives and we knew they would return.

Two years later, I stand on the ground that we recently "won" in battle and look at my remaining troops. Of the 35,000 that came to save the Hrunt, only about 500 are left. The Hrunt army is still 25,000 strong as they replace their losses regularly. The problem is the age of the new recruits. They are either very old or extremely young and my forces spend almost all of their waking time training or stopping a breach in our line. There are no smiles anywhere. We have withstood the best that the enemy sent and I have won every encounter with the Hammer, who is now not much more than an apparition. Still, we have lost many battles and the wins come further apart all the time. Yet, it is not the battles that we have lost that destroyed the spirit of my men. It is this battlefield that we cannot seem to get out of.

This place really smells bad and no one ever gets used to the odor. Over the years, on various planets, I have experienced other really foul smells and they all would seem to go away after I was around them for a while. That is not the case for this particular battlefield. It isn't just the decaying corpses, the burnt flesh, or the explosive residue that stays with us; it's more the atmosphere of despair that creeps into our souls and damages everything that makes us who we are, making the smell a live thing that attacks us at our core with our every breath.

The emperor never returned to the battlefield but his presence did. Ships would fly over and drop diseased corpses on our camps, into the streams and lakes we drink from, and on us during battles. Soldiers of the empire would light themselves on fire and run into our camps trying to set everything they could touch on fire. In the middle of the night, tortured animals would be set loose in our encampment. The list of dishonorable tactics deployed goes on and on.

My soldiers wanted to leave and go home, even though it would be the first defeat ever since the establishment of the Order of the Silver Star on our planet. So that afternoon, I decided to kneel and pray. As I knelt, I could hear the question roll through my mind in a soft voice, "Do you want to quit?" I could also hear, even louder, "You cannot win, go home before it is too late." The conflict in my mind was complex and I was torn. I prayed for guidance and another voice, a quiet, gentle female one I have never heard before asked, "What is the right thing to do?"

I know what is right. I must stay and try to win against this evil even if costs me my life. Without our help the Hrunts would have lost long ago and my oath to the Order of the Silver Star requires me to help the weak against all evil. This question galvanizes my thoughts and brings strength back to my convictions that I almost lost. I am ashamed that I even considered leaving. The people on this planet do not deserve to suffer like this without any assistance. I changed my prayer. Instead, I asked for a ray of hope for my troops and a light in the darkness for this planet. As usual, I did not receive an answer. When I finished my prayers, I came down from the hill and attempted to rally my troops once again.

I awoke in the morning to the sound of explosions with dread that another attack had started before we were ready. Today could be our last day. I decided that I would go out in style and quickly put on my dress armor. I walked out of my tent into confusion as everyone outside was looking up into the morning sky. A ship was descending under heavy attack from the Empire.

The ship was like no other ship I have ever seen. There was no defining shape as it seemed to morph as it came down. The color was silver with gold stripes on what became the bottom. The explosions that had destroyed almost all of our supply ships had no effect on this ship and it was not deterred in its course. The final shape as it landed was a square box with four feet on the bottom.

I ran to the front of the group forming around the ship with no fear as I remembered my prayer from the previous day. A ramp descended from the ship and anticipation rose as we all prayed as never before. After a few anxious moments, a woman walked down the ramp with confident strides and a commanding presence that quieted the crowd.

Her black boots rose above her knees and had a silver band around their tops. On the front of each boot, in the silver area near the top was the symbol of the Order of the Silver Star, an outline of an angel with a star in her outstretched right hand. Her pants were laced with the light armor of our Special Forces, except that hers had vertical silver force lines glowing from her boots to her belt. The belt was silver and had a buckle with the symbol of freedom from the amulet engraved on it. Everyone around me was kneeling and bowing down, leaving me the only one standing as is proper when greeting a dignitary.

She wore a breast plate that covered her body from the neck to the waist. The plate appeared to be metal but flexed with her movements and seemed to change shape so that there was no discomfort to the wearer.

She was wearing a long jacket made of a material I had never seen that ran from her neck to her ankles and was open in the front with a catch chain at the waist. Her helmet had a gold band that ran around her forehead and above it her head was covered with a black metal. The helmet came down and covered her ears and the back of her head and neck as it draped over her jacket. On her hands, she was wearing gauntlets that covered her jacket sleeves and ended just before reaching her elbow. The only part of her body showing was her face.

Her hair was in her helmet except for some that came out around her neck and flowed down over her breast plate. The hair was bright blue and so radiate that it seemed to glow. Her face was firm and delicate at the same time with deep hypnotic blue eyes. She had thin lips, a thin face, and clearly was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. Still, I could not miss the tremendous power that she exuded. When she came closer, I could see symbols engraved on her helmet's gold band. The symbols did not mean anything to me but I will remember them always: άγγελο

She stopped at the bottom of the ramp and asked, "Are you the General of Orinth?"

"I am known by that title on some planets."

"I am here to assist you."

I felt my heart leap in my breast as I realized a prayer answered. I did not know what to say, so I reported as I would to a superior. "Excellent. I could use another 15,000 troops, weapons, food, supplies, and the use of this ship."

She smiled and I felt my heart lift even more. Then she laughed and said, "I am afraid you misunderstand. I am here to assist you. You will have my services for three local days. Then, I am afraid, I must move on."

My hopes were dashed to the winds. Just when I thought things were turning around we were back to where the day started. I said, "Sorry. I thought..." I paused. I really didn't know what I thought.

The woman spoke as I tried to regain my thoughts. "What exactly did you pray for last night?"

I was stunned for moment and then said, "I asked for a ray of hope."

She smiled a very mischievous smile and said, "I guess that I am Ray." Then she laughed some more as the troops around us joined in. It was the happiest I had seen them in a long time.

**\*Look for the rest of the story coming soon at Amazon.com\***