



# Watchers

Guardians of Freelandia



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Kent Larson



*Watchers: Guardians of Freelandia*

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## A Note To Parents

**T**he story of Freelandia is totally fictional and is in no way intended to bear any close resemblance to current or historical countries, people or events. That being said, the author invites you to imagine what it might be like to live in a country wholly founded upon Christian concepts, and which has stayed largely true to God throughout its history even while the world around it did not. Imagine a place under God's direct blessing and protection for hundreds of years, where the leadership all loved and served a God who in turn loved them and remained actively involved in their lives and in the direction of the country itself. And there is more.

They have a portion of God Himself dwelling within them: the presence of the Holy Spirit to actively guide, direct, enlighten and empower their daily lives. Imagine this country living true to God and endowed with miraculous spiritual gifts. Holy Spirit power is commonplace: expected, relied upon and rejoiced over. The Bible is taken as the literal Word of God whose full truth is taken as a natural fact. And all of creation points to – and joins in worship of – its Creator.

The story contains moral and ethical dilemmas the main characters must face and learn from. Two main themes are intertwined throughout the story. One is around the spiritual power of worship and music. The Bible tells us particularly in Revelation that heaven is filled with music and song. The largest book of the Bible is a hymnal.

God created us to worship Him, and He created in us a wonderful ability to express this with dance, music, singing and so many other forms of expression. It is hard-wired into us. Yet many have this short-circuited and have instead used these forms of expression in anything but godly ways. Scripture also shows that God has used music as a powerful offensive weapon for His people (recall the walls of Jericho falling after the trumpet blasts and shouts, and of the other instances where Israel's "marching band" led the way into battle). And if we were created for worship, what about the rest of creation?

Another theme involves scientific curiosity and inventiveness. The inventions of Leonardo DaVinci and a veritable explosion of mechanical and scientific creativity ushered in the Industrial Revolution. The story combines that era of concentrated engineering progress with Holy Spirit guidance and inspiration. This second theme ties into the first: science is no more than us finally figuring out tiny aspects of God's creation that have been there since He spoke matter and energy into existence. It should in all ways lead to praise and worship of the beauty of our Maker.

Finally, the story puts to paper various plots and vignettes I had rattling around in my imagination for many years. With encouragement from my family, I finally put fingers to keyboard and tried to capture many of those ideas into an integrated whole. The intended audience had always been my own family, and at the time of writing specifically for my middle school aged girls. However, I found my older sons and wife also becoming absorbed by the adventure and hanging on every chapter as it was written. Later, as the story grew into book length and then into multiple books, it was shared with a few other families for their enjoyment.

Many an evening was spent in the family room reading aloud the next installment, with everyone intently listening. There is something to be said about reading out loud a story to your family, where you can add inflection and watch the play of emotions on their faces as various events in the story unfold. It is especially valuable to take time

to discuss both the good and the bad characterized throughout the storyline.

At our house, laughter was commonplace and many chapter endings evoked pleas of “Dad . . . don’t stop there and leave us hanging! Please write more . . . right now!” The story is meant as entertainment, but also as a reminder of God’s power and love, of various events and texts from the Bible, and of how we should keep in awe, wonderment and awareness of the Holy Spirit within us. It is therefore intended to build up and edify Christian readers, and perhaps to rouse the curiosity of “pre-believers” into wondering just who our God is, and if such lives as are described are truly possible.

You are invited to join in on an adventure. If you enjoy it, great! If you begin to wonder what such a Godly place might be like, even better. If you catch a spark of what living with the Holy Spirit’s power might be like, if it makes you give glory to our wonderful loving God in any way, then all of the efforts to write it and get it into your hands were well worthwhile. A tree is known by its fruit. May this story be known for any blessings it brings.



An undertaking of writing a story that grows into a three volume trilogy is not a small undertaking. I wish to thank my family for their patience both in releasing my time to write and edit and for waiting . . . just think what it is like if you have to wait for the next chapter to even be written! I also want to thank the small group at my local church who weekly encouraged me to keep going.

As the books took shape, one person in particular had the vision to see them published. More than that, he also had the means to make the vision a reality. A special thanks to Bruce Malone and the Search For The Truth Ministries. Without a brother coming along and leading me through the ropes – and honestly doing a lot of the work himself – publishing may never have occurred. Thanks also

to his wife Robin for the many encouraging words and help, and daughter-in-law Beth who assisted greatly with editing. Thanks also for the many others who took the time to read and comment on the beta-versions and encourage me.



To God be the glory for the things He has done! Praise to Emmanuel, the God-who-is-with-us, or, in my favorite translation: God-in-us ... God-in-me!

Kent Larson

2013

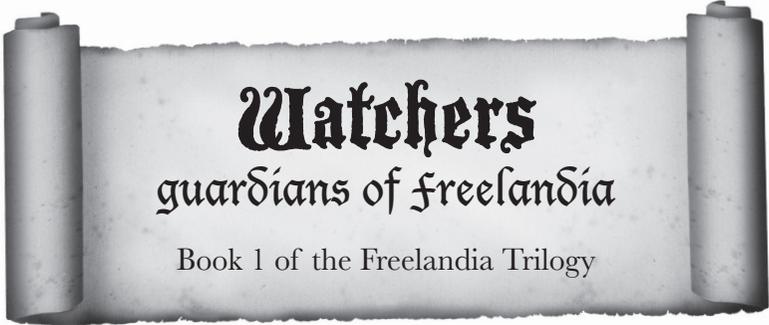
**The Freelandia Trilogy:**

Book 1 — *Watchers: Guardians of Freelandia*

Book 2 — *Worshippers: Hope of Freelandia*

Book 3 — *Warriors: Darkness over Freelandia*



A horizontal scroll with a light gray background and dark gray borders on the left and right sides, suggesting it is unrolled. The text is centered on the scroll.

# Watchers

guardians of freelandia

Book 1 of the Freelandia Trilogy





She was going to be late. It was all due to that strange recurrent nightmarish vision that seemed to spring unbidden into her mind when she was singing in her most special place. But she had no time to ponder that now.

Maria scuttled along the well traveled dirt road, trying to avoid the mud and wagon wheel pot holes and the debris left by the horses. That was easy enough just by the smell. At times she had to slow, picking her way more carefully, slowing her even further. She only stumbled twice before making it to the path that led to the backyard of Sam the baker. It was not much of a path, but it was quite familiar to her. In a moment her questing hands touched the broken down fence, and she found she was already at the gap where a board had blown off in a windstorm a few months ago. It made a convenient access point, and Maria only had to stoop slightly to make it through. She heard the noises of several little children playing and from here could begin to smell the wonderful aroma of freshly baked bread.

Maria hurried for the small pathway that meandered through the garden, catching the pungent smells of various herbs and growing vegetables. She was almost to the house when a carelessly abandoned toy caught her foot and she nearly lost her balance. Gyrating her arms frantically to remain vertical, she spun before regaining solid footing, and for a moment she was disoriented.

“Over here, clumsy!” came the squeaky voice of a child a few years younger than Maria. She turned toward the small boy and gingerly stepped over to him in hopes of avoiding any further mishaps. “You look a mess!” Todd said as he gave her a once-over look. “Why do I always have to be the one to clean you up?” he grumbled. He turned and shambled through the back door and returned a moment later with a wet hand towel that was only marginally clean itself. He proceeded to roughly wipe at the various dirt stains on Maria’s face and arms. “You have another tear in that shabby old dress.”

Maria thought that Todd was being unusually cross today but didn’t dare say anything. She endured his harsh rubbing with the wet cloth patiently, knowing she had little recourse. He finished with a wipe to her arm that nearly pushed her off balance. “There. Your hair is filthy and you stink. Why do you keep coming here?” The words stung worse than the coarse rubbing.

Todd turned and ran headlong into his mother who was just coming through the door. “Todd, shame on you! That is not the way God wants us to treat those less fortunate than us. You apologize this instant!”

Todd mumbled out a barely discernible “I’m sorry” as he scurried back into the house.

“He doesn’t mean it, Maria; he is just having a grumpy morning.” Gracie, the baker’s wife, came close to Maria. “Here, let me brush your hair.” She worked on the worst of the snarls with the old brush she had tucked into her apron pocket an hour ago for just this purpose, though there was only so much she could do with hair that was rarely washed and only sporadically combed or brushed.

“You are a bit late today, or otherwise I might just pull out the tub and give you a full bath!” That had happened once, and Maria was not so sure she wanted to endure it again. The littlest children had all gathered around to “help” and tease, and afterwards Maria felt like she was disappointing Gracie when she returned with the dust and dirt that inevitably wound up all over her. But that was not the

worst part, not by far. Maria flinched as she remembered. The Greely boys had found her later that day, all clean and even nice smelling of the lavender soap Gracie had so kindly proffered for washing her hair. Those three brothers had pelted her with handfuls of dirt and even made her stumble so that she had sprawled onto the rough road that horses and carts left perpetually rutted. It was as though, by attempting to make her life miserable, they thought it would elevate their own shortcomings.

Maria shuddered at the remembrance and Gracie took it as a sign that the young girl wanted to get going. “Well, I guess that will have to do. You would have such pretty hair, if it only was cleaned up and brushed out. You are growing up, Maria. Soon you will need to find a real place to stay, and a real job. Maybe take on a position as a scrub maid at the hotel, or a cleaner at a store, or a . . .” Gracie let the sentence die out. Who, after all, would hire Maria? “Well, maybe at the church there is some kind of more permanent work you could do?”

“Maybe. Thank you – you and Sam are always so kind to me.” Maria smiled and gave Gracie a genuine hug.

Gracie paused a moment and then hugged back. “I wish . . . I wish we could do more, Maria.”

Maria shrugged and, still smiling, turned to go out the gate that led from the backyard out to where the bakery had a storefront facing the main road. “You already do a lot – and I am very thankful. God has taken care of me so far, and I know He will keep taking care of me.

I suppose it is time for you to feed your crew, and time for me to earn my lunch! God bless!”



Maria made her way to the front of Sam's store and wiped away a few tears. Gracie and Sam were indeed generous, but she knew she would have to find a more permanent job. But who would take her? She stopped for a moment and composed herself, remembering how

thankful she was that God always had been her provider and strong protector.

And she was certain that God would always provide for her ... well, at least she felt that way most of the time. It was harder to hold on to that faith when the Greely brothers were after her, or when she had that ... that horrible vision. It had several versions, but all seemed to come to the same point. It was as though she could see herself out in front of a procession of others, seemingly compelled to go forward. Maria could not escape to the right or to the left, for the pathway seemed hedged in the brightest white light imaginable. She could only go forward. A short way ahead, just out of sight of those on the path, was an intense black maw of darkness that filled her with fear and dread. The darkness seethed with evil, with dark power rivulets coursing within and across its surface.

She tried to shout, to warn her dream-self of the imminent danger that seemed to come right at her. But the other Maria marched on.

Maria shook her head. The dream was so strange and terrifying. But it was only a dream.

If God wanted her to understand the dream, then He would just have to explain it to her, sometime, somehow. Fortified by that truth she chose to smile and think upon the good things God had given to her as she moved down the sidewalk toward the bakery store entrance.

With wonder and joy Maria savored the intense odors of fresh pastries and bread as she neared the doorway. She could hear the sounds of a good lunch crowd inside, where Sam would be bagging bread and serving sandwiches and soup. She ran her hand along the door frame as she solidified her bearings and leaned her short walking stick up against the wall. With a purposed smile she took a step inside, then immediately shuffled to the right a few feet to get out of the way for any paying customers, as Sam had requested. She waited several seconds until he noticed her.

“Maria, I am glad to see you – I was wondering if you were coming! Make your way over to your normal spot as slowly as you need to. It

is particularly busy today so watch your step.” She did not see Sam grimace over his word choice. “I will be over to you in a moment.”

Maria heard Sam slide a tray down onto a nearby table and converse politely with its occupants. She slid along the outer wall and then cautiously began to weave and wind through the tables to the spot on the far side of the room that Sam had allotted for her. She bumped along, excusing herself as she inadvertently touched a few patrons. Most ignored her completely. A few snarled out impatient warnings. A couple of regulars greeted her more graciously and those were rewarded by a genuine and disarming smile.

She finally made it to the back and was taken by surprise to find that “her” table was occupied. The bakery must indeed be packed today, Maria thought. She mistakenly bumped forcefully into someone who was sitting in the chair she always used. “Oh, excuse me!” she stammered.

“What is this, can’t an old man have his lunch in peace? What do you want?” growled a man’s voice.

“I’m .... I’m so sorry sir, please forgive me!” Maria hurriedly moved sideways to put some space between her and this stranger whom she did not recognize. She moved so fast that she bumped into the second chair at the table. Something fell to the floor with a loud wooden clatter, and she heard it roll away from her.

“Now look what you’ve done!”

“I’ll find it ... sir.” Maria got down onto her hands and knees to feel around for the object. The man grunted his disapproval as she searched in vain.

“Can’t you see it is over there?” the man pointed.

Just at that moment, Sam came bustling up and retrieved the object.

“Here you are sir, no harm done,” he said soothingly. “Maria did not mean to cause you any problems.”

Sam helped Maria to her feet and guided her to an open spot along the wall a few feet away. She was nearly crying and she trembled, but took a deep long breath to regain her composure.

“Here ... you can stand here. Just try not to bother the customers!” Sam said softly but with a tinge of impatience himself – he was the only one running the shop and did not have time to make amends for Maria. Sam turned to the disgruntled patron.

“Sir, please accept my apologies. Can I get you something else, maybe something ‘on the house’ to make up for your trouble?”

The old man grunted a slightly mollified “no” and his chair creaked as he sat back in it.

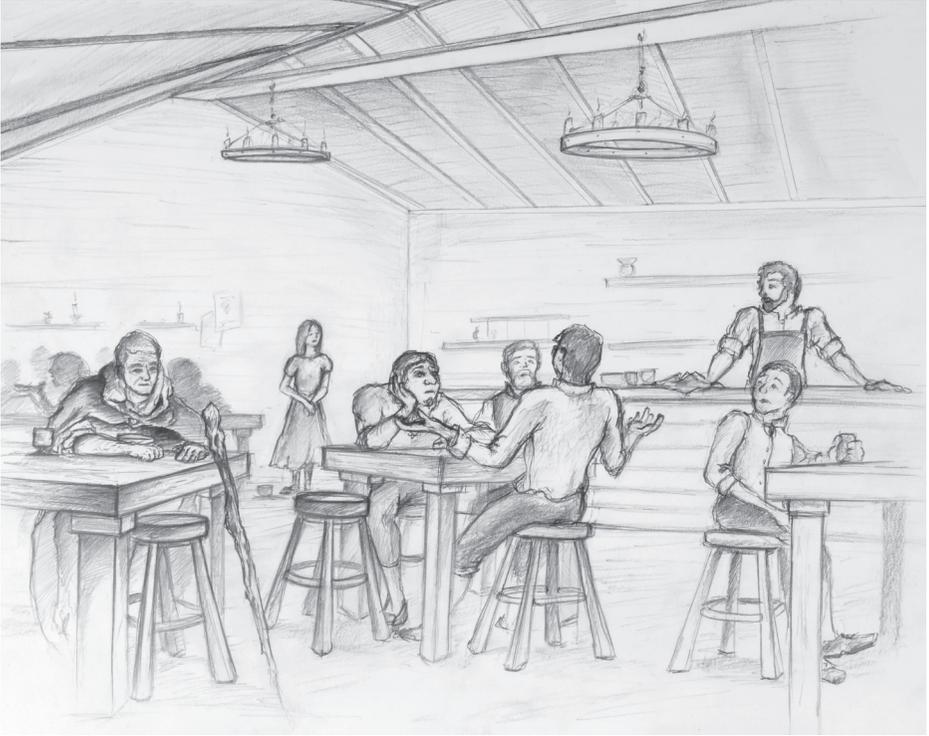
Sam turned again to Maria and placed a small bowl near her feet.

“Do you have any seed money? No? Well, here is a little; you can pay me back later.” Sam dropped a few small coins into the bowl where they made a pleasing tinkling sound. She smiled and whispered thanks, nervously wiping her hands down her tattered dress to try to reduce her trembling.

Sam cleared his throat loudly enough to be just be heard over the noise of the eating and conversation. “Gentle-folk, today is Wednesday, and every Wednesday at lunchtime we have a guest to provide us with a wee bit of entertainment. You regulars know how well Maria here can sing. For our new guests, I hope you will enjoy. For the occasion I created some special frosted cakes and the tea is ready. Come see me at the counter if you want any – but I expect they will go fast!”

He turned and said “Maria” in a gentle directive voice and headed back to the counter at the front of the store.

Maria blushed slightly at the special attention, knowing that nearly everyone in the store would now be looking at her, and then began to sing a popular folk song. She had no accompaniment, and it started off haltingly until she settled down into the song. Everyone there had heard it many times before, so many times that one would have expected the chatter to continue unabated. However, within a few lines of verse, the lunch crowd din had largely silenced. Several stopped with food or drink part way lifted to their mouths, while others just stared as this little wisp of dirty and bedraggled girl sang out with a voice incredibly pure and sweet with an impact that seemed to reach beyond one’s ears.



The old man near her harrumphed under his breath at first – his day had already been going poorly and he had just wanted a quiet and peaceful lunch – and then he too was caught and silenced. His gruff demeanor faded, and a wry smile flirted on the corners of his mouth, alternating with the practiced scowl when he realized his facade was slipping.

He had never heard such a voice. The tune was simple and the words did not have much depth, but regardless – it was mesmerizing.

Despite his considerable self control, he could not help but smile. He whispered a silent praise to God for such talent awarded to what was likely a poor scullery girl, for ears to hear the beauty found in the most unusual places, and for directing him to this particular place for his simple lunch.

The first song ended and for several seconds there were few noises in the shop; then first one and then several patrons began clapping,

and the bakery filled again with its normal lunch crowd sounds. Maria smiled. She could sense the people genuinely enjoyed her song, and perhaps they would be extra generous today. She sure hoped so, for she had a special purpose for the proceeds.

Maria readied herself for another song, licking her lips to moisten them, and controlling her breathing. She was just taking a deep breath to start when a burly fellow at the table just in front of her loudly scraped back his chair, sneered sourly in her direction, and spoke to his companions in a voice easily loud enough to be overheard.

“You’d think the baker would at least make the riff raff bathe before letting them in. And I came here to eat, not to be squeaked at by a mouse of a girl!” He laughed harshly at his own joke and his table companions snickered. “If I have to put up with any more of that prattling noise, I’ll surely ...”

Tears began to well up, and Maria took a short step further away at the expectation of an imminent cuffing – she had had a few rough customer responses in the past before Sam could intervene on her behalf. Even as she was thinking that through, she heard a whooshing sound cut through the air in front of her.

The big man blinked and found himself staring at the end of a walking staff that had whistled through the air and come to a sudden halt only a fraction of an inch away from his nose.

His words floundered, and for a moment he was totally taken aback. Then his brow furrowed, his face became red with anger and he began to rise from his chair as his eyes traced the staff back to the arm that held it. He was about to curse the old man and punctuate his words with some rough action when he noticed the heavily scarred forearm. As his gaze progressed up the arm and shoulder and over to the seated man’s head he stopped short at what he thought he saw. Narrowing his eyes, he tried to peer more closely at the man’s face, and in his peripheral vision he noticed some faded markings on the cowl of the man’s outer coat. With an abrupt, shocked look the inconsiderate diner clamped down on the hard words that were about to spill out and sat heavily back down on his chair.

“Oh, sorry ... I did not mean to offend,” he lamely offered.

The old man sighed – the response told him his admittedly superficial cover had already been seen through – and the scowl came back on his facial features full-force.

“You surely did a superb job of it,” he muttered in his gruff voice. “Now sit down and shut up. Let the girl sing in peace.”

The staff returned to his side in a smooth arc.

“Go ahead Maria,” he said in a softer and gentler voice.

She had lost much of her composure, and struggled to regain it. Without consciously choosing, she began a song that had always worked well in the past to strengthen her and please the crowds. The words of *Freelandia*, the national anthem of their country, began to spill out and flow across the room. Again the crowd quieted.

The song spoke of the beauties of the country with its soaring mountain peaks to the north to its majestic natural harbor. As Maria proceeded, her voice grew in volume and power and even the hardened detractors at the nearby table ceased their conversation.

Not a patron moved; even Sam had stopped slicing the loaf of bread before him in respectful stillness. The old man was dumbstruck. He had never heard – or felt – anything like this, though he had heard the anthem sung hundreds of times before, and by some of the best local and international singers the Academy of Music offered. Who was this wisp with the voice of an angel?

He mused over this as he slowly ate his lunch, enjoying several more folk songs and simple ditties that made up the routine Maria had chosen for today's repertoire.

Maria finished with a light-hearted and cheerful tune. As the last note faded, she smiled at her audience but then could not help but slump against the wall at her back. She had sung with all her heart and it drained a considerable amount of energy out of her – not that she had much space in her lean frame for any real reserves to start with.

A good many of the patrons came by and dropped a coin or two into her bowl, and she thanked each one graciously – it sounded like quite

a good day's haul. The church bell rang in the distance, alerting all that lunchtime was over, and nearly all of the customers hurried out to get back to their workplaces and homes. After all but the old man had paid for their meals, Sam came over and picked up the bowl, emptying its contents into a small leather pouch and handing it to Maria. She smiled at him as she hefted the little bag and then tilted her head to one side with a questioning look flitting across her small face.

With a laugh, Sam answered her question even before she could ask it. "Yes, Maria, go ahead."

Maria scurried over to the tables, and led by her nose she began to pick up any scraps of food left behind, which she wolfed down.

"So Maria, you had a good take today – what will you do with it?" Sam busily cleaned up the tables behind Maria, and she paused a moment between bites.

"It's Timmy's birthday – he is one of the little orphan boys at the church. We don't know if it's truly his birthday, but I declared that it was, and I want to get him something special!"

"Maria, you should go and buy another dress from the second hand shop down the road. You have outgrown what you have, and it is getting quite tattered. While you are at it, you need another pair of shoes – yours have several holes already, and they will only get worse."

"Oh, I can make due for awhile longer. God – and you – have been taking good care of me. Timmy has had nothing ever since he came to the orphanage. I want to make him happy, at least once. Maybe next week I can get a different dress."

Sam smiled down on her in a fatherly way. He wished he could bring this gentle and kind soul into his household, but God had already blessed him with many children, and with the bakery he was just making it by to keep them fed and clothed.

"Ok, Maria, but let me get something for you, and something for Timmy too." Sam walked over to the counter and Maria could hear him using his knife on a loaf. She next heard the sound of paper crinkling and Sam pushed a bag into her hand. "It is not much, but

consider this as a gift for Timmy – but make sure you get a slice too ... promise?”

“Oh Sam, you are so special! God bless you.”

“He does that each and every day, Maria. And I get a double dose on the days you sing.”

“Oh Sam, you are sweet!”

“No Maria, you are sweet. I'm more just ... flour-y! No really, I get half again more lunch business on the days you sing. In fact, I was wondering if you would consider singing twice a week? Maybe both Wednesday and again on Saturday – that is my slowest day for lunches. It would bring in more business for both of us. What do you think?”

Maria smiled brightly and nodded. “I'll have to ask if I can do some of my chores at the church later on that day, but I think it would be all right. That would be marvelous, Sam; of course I would help you even if there was nothing more in it for me.”

“Good then. Let me consider the best schedule and talk it over with Gracie. Now it is time to clean up the lunch mess!” Sam turned away and was soon busily clearing more tables and carrying the dishes, glasses and utensils back to the kitchen area where one of his older daughters would clean them up for the next set of customers.

Maria moved to another table ahead of where Sam was picking up. There was a faint far away noise outside, one Sam did not even hear. Maria stiffened abruptly and under her breath let out a quiet yet concerned “Oh no! They are too early today!”

She ceased her table scavenging and whisked toward the door with her bag, the small leather purse disappearing through a small slit in the side of her dress where a pocket may have once been but where now a small cloth sack could be just observed awkwardly tied to a cord around her waist.

“Uh, I have to be going!” she stammered. Then she was flying out the door and moving down the sidewalk with her feet sliding forward, never overly far above the planks.

The old man stood and with surprising agility moved rapidly through the maze of tables and chairs toward the door with his walking staff in hand. He did not understand what had apparently frightened the little girl so considerably – frightened her enough to leave the partial sandwich which lay on one of the last tables. He sniffed and wrinkled his nose in distaste ... mustard and pastrami, not his favorite either, but he doubted Maria would have passed it by so readily.

No, something had seriously alarmed her. He nearly bumped into a few chairs that had been inconsiderately left pulled out from tables and made his way to stand at the door.

Sam looked up, hoping he did not have to remind this odd customer to pay his bill before leaving. The old man just stood still, head cocked slightly to one side, listening intently.



**O**ut on the sidewalk, Maria shuffled along as fast as she dared, not wanting to take the chance on a spill that could cause her to lose some of the valuable coins she had tucked away, or drop the bread or in any way call extra attention to herself. She was heading for a fork in the village road, where a few blocks down on the left the old run down church stood. She had already covered a surprising distance with her odd shuffling gait. If they had not spotted her ... if she could just make it in time ...

“Hey Maria, what’s the hurry? Did you trick a good many of those sucker townsies out of their coins today at the bakery? Did they feel sorry for the poor orphan Maria?” The voices of the Greely boys carried down the road as they closed in on her in a loping run.

“Hey, what do you have there?” One of the boys had snuck down and around a back alley and now jumped out in front of Maria, blocking her path. “Let’s see what you have there in the bag, Maria. I’m sure you planned on sharing with us!” That was Jarl, the oldest and meanest of the three. He stepped in closer, blocking any hope she had of escaping.

“Leave me alone, Jarl!” Maria dodged to the side, and though she knew it was pointless, she tried anyway to get past Jake, whom she had heard come up on her right side while Brak jogged up quickly to close the loop around her.

“Hmm, what do we have here?” Jake snatched the bag right out of Maria’s protective grip.

“Give it back!” Maria jabbed out with her walking stick she had retrieved as she had left the bakery, and Jake did not dodge aside quite fast enough.

“Ouch! Oh, you’re gonna pay for that one good.” Maria slashed out again but this time Jake slipped away. “Mmm, I smell freshly baked bread – imagine that!” He fumbled with the bag and his hand dove in to retrieve the contents. “Mmm, it tastes good too” he said around a mouthful.

“Stop! That’s for Timmy!”

Jarl laughed harshly. “That little lamely runt? He won’t miss it. Now, let’s see how much money you made.” He grabbed at Maria, but she dodged away from his grasp. That evoked another laugh, this time with a cruel promise implied.

The boys arranged themselves around her more closely, grabbing and shoving, circling around while they shoved and spun her until she was thoroughly disoriented and confused. Maria struck out this way and that with her the small tree branch staff, but the boys were practiced at this and her swings never scored any hits.

Brak kicked out from behind and tripped her, and Maria tumbled heavily down into the dusty road. She tried to get to her feet again, but a foot shoved her back down and she cried out. Defeated, Maria cowered outwardly while inwardly crying out to God. The walking stick was ripped from her as rough hands tugged and tore until they had found and retrieved the money pouch.

“Ha, looks like you have plenty to ‘share’ with us Maria!” Jarl held the bag up in triumph. “But you shouldn’t ‘av poked Jake or fought with us. You obviously need to be taught another lesson in manners. Hold her, fellas.”

Maria felt hands grab her arms and legs and she whimpered but did not scream. She knew enough from past experiences not to scream. If one of them punched her face she might not be able to sing for a week until the swelling went down.



She tried to turn away as best she could and steeled herself for the inevitable kicks or punches she knew were coming next. She heard Jarl come close. He used to just take her money, but lately he had been getting more violent. She heard the movement of his arm rearing back but then heard a muffled sound of running feet coming near. It was in fact the quietest running sound she recalled ever hearing.

Instead of the strike she expected, she heard Jarl grunt out in pain and fall heavily backwards. The hands gripping her arms unexpectedly loosed and what followed was a confusion of sounds.

She heard Brak yelp and then the sound of something heavy falling several yards away in a loud thud. Jake was next – he always seemed to be last at everything – and he too cried out in pain as his hands were torn from holding her ankles and by the sounds he must have gone airborne backwards.

Jarl stood to his feet and swung his meaty right fist at the mid-sized old man who had silently come and scattered them like twigs in a breeze. The blow sailed harmlessly through empty air where the man had just been and Jarl felt sudden pain in the soft flesh of his right underarm. That arm flopped down numb at his side.

A smarter person might have stopped, but Jarl was not well known for his quick thinking. He tried to swing his numb right arm, but it would not respond. So instead he charged forward, trying to simply bowl over the aged man with his greater size and bulk. Instead he was stopped abruptly in his tracks, running into what felt like an immovable steel fist positioned at stomach level. The air gushed out of him with a loud grunt. He dropped to the ground, writhing in pain.

By this time Brak and Jake had regained their footing and came running, and as best as Maria could determine, both left the ground again, this time at the same instant, and landed yards away. Neither immediately got back up.

Maria had become angry inside, but now as that anger faded the underlying fear welled up to fill the void and she began to sob. Gentle, strong hands lifted her up. She felt scarred wrists and calloused hands, and she smelled remnants of the bakery aroma on the man's cloak.

“There now, you are safe. Don't be afraid.” There was no gruffness in the voice now, only calm strength and genuine caring. No one had stood up for her like that in a long time, though Sam would put in their place customers that became too surly with her. It reminded Maria of her most cherished memories of climbing into her father's lap and being enclosed in a warm embrace where nothing bad could ever happen.

At that most comforting – and most painful – thought, all self composure left and she collapsed into the powerful arms and

sobbed again, clinging to the man who had become her rescuer. He uncomfortably put his arms around her and rocked slowly to her sobs. Maria buried her head into his shoulder, not caring that she did not even know who this person was, just that he had cared enough to save her when she could not save herself. The sobs and shudders died off – an orphan in that town would not last long if not tough, and the softer cries and tears lessened and then stopped within a few moments.

Maria pulled away and tried to straighten what remained of her tattered clothing. “Thank you, sir. I don’t know what I would have done, what would have happened to me ...” A whimper started, but she staved it off sharply and swallowed hard. “I don’t even know your name, but God bless you for helping me.”

The older man chuckled softly. “Gaeten,” he said. “You can call me Gaeten, Maria.”

Maria could hear the Greely boys stumbling to their feet and she held her breath for a moment wondering what they might try to do next. But then she heard them shuffling off as fast as they could. It sounded like one was being half dragged. Maria shuddered. Then she remembered what they had taken and began to cry again. “It was for Timmy” she blurted. Just then another heavy set of footsteps came running up, announcing Sam.

“What happened ... are you all right Maria? Those boys ... I will put a stop to them!” Sam was breathing hard from the run, yet Maria realized that she could barely even hear Gaeten’s breathing now, nor had she even when he had first suddenly arrived.

In a halting, quivering voice Maria answered. “No Sam, they would just hurt you, or get their gang to come and smash up your store! Let them alone; they won’t bother you.”

Sam scowled and was obviously not convinced. “I am ok, I can take care of myself pretty well, and God has always provided for me,” Maria stated bravely, taking a step backwards and trying to arrange her badly torn dress to cover the greatest part of her dignity.

Sam was not quite done working through his own protective fatherly emotions. “But Maria – this is terrible! We cannot let those ruffians loose to terrorize you at will! What if some day they really hurt you? What if ...”

Though she worried about that too sometimes, Maria had an undefeatable resolve that she clung to. “Sam, I have heard Brother Rob say many times that God is always in charge, and that He will work all things out for the best – for His best – for those that love Him and follow His ways. God is going to work this out also for the best. I don’t know what that will be, but just you watch and see.”

Once again Sam marveled at the precocious faith bundled into this special little package. He wondered if it took such seeming misfortune to nurture and grow such great trust in God. Maybe his life had been too easy, leaving his own faith weaker. Then again, maybe faith can also come from learning from the examples of others ... even little orphan girls. He clung to that thought, not wanting to contemplate the trade-offs of getting his own faith stretched by adversity.

Gaeten also was taken aback by the faithful statement he had just heard. There was much more to this child than might first come to mind. He turned toward the baker and asked, “Sam, can you please find the coin purse? I think it is over that way.” He pointed down the road a short distance.

Sam fetched the small pouch and put it into Maria’s hand. “I think all the money is here, but I’m afraid the bag with the bread has been trampled up pretty badly.”

“That’s ok. I ...I need to get to the church for lunch – we usually eat after the normal lunchtime bells.” Maria gave the baker a big hug, and Sam could feel the trembles she was bravely trying to hide. She turned toward Gaeten. “Thank you sir, you were surely a Godsend. I will ask God to bless you for helping me.” She turned and stumbled as she shuffled down the street toward the church a short distance away.

As she left, Gaeten turned toward Sam. “Can you please guide me back to the bakery?”

Sam picked up the man's staff which lay close by on the ground and put his forearm in a place where the man could hold onto him. Sam had not been close enough to see much of what had occurred, and Gaeten wanted to turn the baker's attention away from what might have happened on the street.

As they neared the bakery, Gaeten pulled out a large coin to pay for his lunch. "Sam, if you have some time, can you tell me more about Maria?"



Maria half ran, half stumbled up to the old church. She was shaken up a lot more than she would show to Sam or Mr. Gaeten. Now there was a puzzlement – who was this mysterious man who showed up just when she needed help the most and who had nearly silently subdued her three attackers? He didn't seem like any angel she recalled being told about, that was for sure. Nevertheless, he surely had been sent by God, and she humbly thanked Him for that provision.

Just before entering the back door, Maria tried to smooth her hair, only to find it full of dust and straw. She already knew her old shabby dress was now torn beyond repair. It had not been in great shape before, and now it was essentially useless. Well, she might have enough money saved up to get a second hand replacement. She felt the door latch and let herself in.

All of the other six orphans were present; no one ever wanted to miss a meal, however meager it might be. The kindly priest offered bowls of thin potato soup and a few bread crusts, and Maria knew he was sharing from what little he had – he would eat a share with them, holding nothing back for himself. Maria did not know of anyone so self-less, but sharing equally with a poor priest did not exactly fill any of their stomachs. Yet all were thankful.

After the blessing and eating, Maria asked to see Brother Rob privately. She fished out the small purse of money, though it felt

lighter than before, probably having lost some of its contents in the scuffle. “Here Brother Rob, this is for you. I hoped that there would be enough to get Timmy something for his birthday, but you should decide what we most need.”

“Why, thank you, Maria. You know you do not have to give this to me – you earned it and it is yours.” He pressed the small pouch back into her hands.

“No. I would have none of it without God’s blessing – and His protection. It is His – and yours.”

Brother Rob looked at her quizzically. “All right, Maria – I can hear your conviction and won’t even try to talk you out of it. Now you mentioned something for Timmy?”

“Well ...” she had given up on the thought of a making a gift for Timmy as she was not skilled enough to make anything nice. “I thought Timmy could use a pair of shoes. His sandals have worn through, and he is getting sores on his feet from walking. Maybe a newer pair would help him stand straighter too.” Timmy had a hunched over stance caused by a deformity he was born with, but Maria was always hopeful.

Abruptly, Brother Rob changed topics. “Maria, I see new bruises on your arms and legs ... where did they come from?”

“I ... ah ... I fell on my way here.” She had actually fallen – after being pushed.

“Is that all?”

“Does it need to be more than that?”

“Did anyone “help” you fall? Like maybe the Greely boys?”

“I ... I um ...” Her words failed, and Maria stood silent and trembling. She had once told the priest about an instance of being picked on, and he had made a point to talk to the culprits. The next day they had found her, and Maria had been repeatedly hit and told to never, ever tell on them again – or she would be very sorry she had.

Brother Rob meant well, but he could not handle the Greely boys. Plus their tiny hamlet had no Warden to uphold the law and peace. She quickly changed subjects.

“Is there enough now for Timmy’s shoes?”

Brother Rob eyed her suspiciously but let drop a topic Maria obviously did not want to speak about.

“Yes, I think so. And maybe a bit left over. I am thinking that we ought to pay a visit to the used clothing store down the road and see if they have anything that might fit Timmy ... and you. You are growing into a young woman, and it is getting rather ... inappropriate ... for you to be traipsing about in something with so many holes and tears. And you also could use some new sandals or shoes yourself.”

“Oh, I am sure we don’t have enough for that – and you need some extra for food too. I get enough to eat at the bakery; perhaps you can give my part to the others.”

“Oh Maria, you are gracious and giving and a blessing from God to us. I don’t know what we would do without you here.”



Meanwhile Gaeten and Sam re-entered the bakery. Gaeten feigned tiredness and dropped heavily into one of the nearest chairs. Sam looked at him hard. He had noticed the unusual collar markings – but did not know what they stood for. He also had noticed the scars – they were hard to miss.

“Ah, I don’t mean to sound rude, but I am curious – how did you get such scars – what labor did you apprentice under or work at?”

The older man shrugged noncommittally. “I’ve picked up work where I could. It isn’t easy to find work, being as I am.” Sam pursed his lips and gathered up two tankards of tea and some biscuits. The coin the old man had given him had already paid for the lunch meal and these, with some to spare.

“Now tell me about Maria.”

“Well, I can’t say I know everything, but I have talked both to her and to the priest at the church. It seems she arrived to Freelandia several years ago on a ship from Morgania. Her mother had died from some sickness that was spreading around the region ... sure glad we

haven't been ravaged like that here! After some time, her father left with Maria to come to Freelandia to escape the illness, with hopes of setting up a small animal healing shop. He left with all he owned. A few days after they departed the sickness came over him.

The ship did not have much of a healer; it seems the captain was counting on her father's animal care skills for any needs of the other passengers and crew. Within a week her father was dead. That left a young Maria at the hands of the ship's captain, who it sounds treated her like she was a nuisance. When they finally docked, the captain put her off the boat with the few clothes she had, and he confiscated all of her father's goods as fare for the journey, as her father had only paid part of the fee and planned on working off the rest along the way.

She found some shelter at the wharf church, but the priest there said she could not stay. He took her to an orphanage out in Westnave, not too far from here. They kept her for a few years, but the proprietors said they couldn't keep someone with her limitations. For the last three years she has been staying at the church here."

"How long has she been blind?" Gaeten asked in a flat, matter-of-fact voice.

"You noticed?"

"Yes. She shuffles a lot when she walks and bumps into many things."

"I suppose you might notice those things, wouldn't you? In answer to your question ... I don't know. Maria has never told me." Sam finished his biscuit. "Well, I must get more bread baking for the evening customers." He pushed back his chair and stood. "Please excuse me, let me get your change."

Gaeten waved him off. "Keep the change – count it as a fee for useful information." He got up with feigned stiffness and moved toward the door. "I must get moving along too, it is a hike for me to get back to my lodging."

"Do you need a hand? I could get one of my children to help."

"No, not needed – but thanks anyway." With that the old man walked out of the bakery and down the plank sidewalk, shuffling a bit himself as he went.

“But how did you stop those ruffians who were going after Maria?” Sam yelled out through the open door, but the old man just kept walking. Sam figured, wrongly, that he probably had not even heard him.



Gaeten headed toward the small lodge where the main thoroughfare passed by one end of the small town. He passed the smelly stables to his left and then walked fifty paces further and turned. Down a slightly sloped cobblestone path he came to steps – four steps up, a step forward, then three more steps up and he came to the door of the Inn of Seven Steps.

Gaeten quietly swung open the door and stood silently in the threshold. In the open room off to one side the apprentice he had taken along for this trip dozed in the sunshine near a large window. Gaeten knew it was his apprentice Quentin ... he recognized the snoring even before he had opened the door. Resting when one can made good sense, but this was too good of a training opportunity to pass up.

He crept up on the boy, moving as silently as a whiff of air. Quentin was a strapping lad of sixteen and had advanced quite far under Gaeten's tutelage. The steady, rhythmic snoring continued unabated. Time to change that. Gaeten lifted his walking staff. He had not made a sound since entering the Inn, at least nothing that anyone without highly acute hearing – like himself – should have been able to hear. The staff slashed downward at the boy's stomach in a blow that would give pain without injury and surely provide a rude end to his slumber.

Just as the blow was about to make contact, Quentin's body erupted sideways from his position on the window ledge, falling toward the floor as the staff clattered on the wooden boards above. Quentin rolled forward and used his shoulders as a pivot point to launch himself upward, kicking out at where the body that had swung the staff had to be.

But it wasn't. Quentin's kick met no resistance and he struggled to twist his body into a new position. If his attacker was not where he had expected, then Master Gaeten had to be ...he threw an arm in the direction he thought his master must be standing, and was pleased to connect with something made of flesh and blood. However, connecting and doing anything effectual were two different circumstances. His arm was momentarily caught in a vise that caused his gyrating body to pivot and fall backwards awkwardly. As he came to a stop Quentin looked up to a stiffened fist inches from his face. He rolled his eyes and laughed. "I almost had you!"

"Almost! Almost! And you were almost really sleeping! Next time slow your breathing more, and tone down that snore. It was too obviously an exaggerated fake. Your roll was barely acceptable, and while you managed to avoid my staff, that kick was terrible! If I had been more than just playing around ..." Gaeten's voice had his normal raspy gruffness, but Quentin knew that if he had really done poorly his master would be pronouncing extra exercises and work to give him added "incentive" to do better – and besides, he could see twinges of a smile peeking out of the affected frown.

"Now hurry up, get a carriage and inquire about directions," Gaeten said. I want to be at the region's Warden's yet this afternoon."



Quentin stood before a wide door and knocked for the fourth time. He was about to suggest they leave, even though Gaeten had mentioned he could hear someone inside, when a rotund middle aged man finally answered and opened the door.

"Who ... who are you?" Warden Harden scrutinized the older and younger man standing outside his doorway suspiciously as he addressed them.

Gaeten had washed up and had his clothing fluffed out and brushed. This was not, after all, an informal visit. He said nothing for

a moment, giving the portly Warden a moment to take in the sight and to notice the markings that indicated Gaeten's position and rank.

"Oh! Oh excuse me ... please ... please come in Grand Master," said the now astonished Harden.

Gaeten swept into the room imperiously with a distinct frown. He could smell the man's sweat, and that along with the heavy tread gave him a strong clue as to the man's girth. "So you are the Warden of this district? For how long have you been favored with that position?" The emphasis on the word "favored" was heavy and was not missed by Mr. Harden.

"I have dutifully held this position for fifteen years, covering the seven small towns and the many roads in District Seventeen."

Gaeten sniffed. "I've been spending a few days in your district. Tell me about Westhaven."

"Oh, well ... Westhaven is one of the smallest and poorest of the towns, hardly worth the notice of someone of your position."

"I have noticed quite a lot. Where are your Watchers? I have not run across a single one yet."

"Ah, Watchers, right ... my Watchers. Well, um ..."

"You do have a contingent of Watchers – or at least apprentices – set up for each town and patrols for the main roads?" Gaeten said that much more like a statement than a question.

"Well, you know, times are tough ... getting good Watchers is difficult in this district. The people are poor and every able bodied man is needed for the farms and shops."

"Are you telling me you have no Watchers? What about the stipend sent to your district each month by the Keep that is supposed to be exclusively for the salaries of Watchers and/or apprentices? Surely you send in requests for apprentice assignments?"

"Ah, well, you seem to have stopped by just ... just when I was in-between hirings." Warden Harden glanced about nervously and then better composed himself. "You realize of course that no one from the Watcher Compound at the Keep ever wants to come out here to work!"

The only Watchers that show any interest of working here are ready to retire, or have dropped out of active duty due to physical issues, or have left for other reasons. It is the same with apprentices. Often the best I have been able to do is hire locals as apprentices and train them myself.” Harden now smiled self-assuredly. “All my current Watchers are out on the ... the northern roads ... on a patrol!”

Gaeten sniffed again. “What about the gang of ruffians I have heard about around Westhaven? I personally had to stop a group robbing someone in broad daylight today!”

“Gang? I have not heard of any gang in Westhaven. I will check into it immediately! It must have just started up ... or probably just moved in from District Eighteen to the north. You would not believe what goes on over there. Why, just the other day I heard that ...”

Gaeten interrupted. “It appears that this District has been overdue for an inspection by the Master Warden. I think I shall bring it up to him when I see him this weekend.”

Quentin noticed that Warden Harden’s face paled while he quickly voiced a response.

“Oh, that is surely not needed! Why would the Master Warden want to come here? Certainly he has far more important duties than to spend time in this run-down, insignificant district. Now I’m sure that when my crack Watcher team gets back from the north road patrols they will straighten up Westhaven in no time at all. Tell you what, I will write up a full report on what they find and send it in to the Master Warden in, say, two or three weeks. How would that be?”

Gaeten was about to make a snide comment, but instead cleared his throat and proceeded along another tack. “Exactly how many Watchers and apprentices do you have?”

“Exactly? Well, that is hard to say, at the moment.” Harden realized how lame that sounded and hurried on. “I have five solid men and several younger boys ... er, young men ... in apprentice. In fact, several are even from that dump Westhaven! I am working on their proper training myself.”

“And what might their names be, these new recruits?”

“Uh ... that is ... one of my most senior Watchers takes care of such details.”

Gaeten had several more questions, though he doubted he was going to get answers for them that would be any more satisfactory.



By the time Gaeten returned to the lodge the sun had set and darkness was overtaking the last vestiges of daylight. The sounds changed, with the night frogs and insects making their own distinct melody in the still air. Quentin helped to steady the carriage while Gaeten exited and both moved up the steps and into the Inn. They had a quiet dinner in the Great Room and Gaeten could sense the brooding anger in his young protégé. “All right, out with it.”

Quentin knew not to try to hide his thoughts. “That Warden was ... was scandalous! Incompetent! Probably a thief himself! And a big, fat liar! How could you let that go?”

Gaeten smiled, but it was not a particularly pleasant sight. “Patience, my young apprentice. I think we can clean up this entire District, and certainly Westhaven, if we play this well. In the early morning I want you to take a horse and ride to the Master Warden. Tell him that I need a response team here by nightfall. There is likely going to be some trouble. Tell him about Warden Harden. Oh, and tell him I want Ethan. He will surely put up a fuss, but say that I distinctly said I wanted Ethan to come along. He will surely want to discuss this with me in person, which is fine. Be back before the next nightfall and meet me here.”

“You want to bring Ethan here? To Westhaven?”

Gaeten scowled darkly. “I will answer that to the Master Warden, not to the likes of you!”

Quentin swallowed hard, realizing he had overstepped the boundaries of his position. With little additional conversation they finished their meal and went to their room for the night.