

## Excerpt

### *Jo's Journey*

#### Lords of Kassis book 3

By S. E. Smith

Manota ran through the dark gardens focusing on the signature in the contact lens that he was wearing in his left eye. His heart beat frantically as he sprinted across the lawn; fear a bitter and unfamiliar taste in his mouth. A shadow moved to his left coming out from behind a tall hedge. He didn't think twice, his arm sliced out in a deadly arc. He turned his body to miss the blow of the laser sword as it swept across where his body had been just seconds before. The sword ripped a path across his shirt, drawing a thin line of blood. His own sword went much deeper as he completed his turn and shoved it through the male's left side.

"NO!" He roared out as the lens in his eye dissolved, cutting his connection to the signature he had been tracking. "Jo...." He whispered in anguish.

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Manota jerked awake, breathing heavily as the last of the dream released him from its brutal grip. He sat up in the middle of his bed, drawing in deep breaths to calm his racing heart. Running his hands through his short, sweat-dampened hair, he cursed when he noticed that they were shaking as he dropped them in his lap.

“That damn female is going to be the death of me,” he muttered under his breath.

He threw the tangled, black silk covers to the side and slid out of the huge bed, walking over to the balcony doors of his room. Motioning for them to open, Manota stepped out into the chilly early morning air. The stars still glittered in the sky. The second moon was low on the horizon, telling him that dawn would soon be upon them. The first moon had already set on the far side of the planet.

Manota leaned forward, bracing his hands on the smooth stone wall of the balcony. His eyes moved over the large center garden separating the four Royal Houses of Kassis. There was no evidence of the battle that had raged through the Houses and gardens less than a week before, at least none visible to the eye. The battle raging inside him was a totally different story.

Ever since he laid eyes on the human female who had helped rescue his brothers from certain death, he had been fighting a war within his own body and mind. His body demanded he claim what was his while his mind fought with just trying to understand the blasted female who was twisting him into knots. The feelings of uncertainty and overwhelming desire were strange to him. He was used to taking what he wanted – and he wanted the human female with an intensity that was about to drive him crazy. He had never failed in battle, never been denied, but this female continued to turn away from him with a

stubbornness that defied anything he had ever met before.

He let his eyes sweep over the gardens once more before he turned to prepare for the morning. He tensed as he sensed something was out of the normal. His eyes scanned again, narrowing as he picked up a slight movement in the still darkness. He muttered a curse, wondering if by some chance the royal forces had missed one of the traitors that had attacked his family during the dinner a week ago. Surely there was no way anyone could have remained undetected for so long? Unless, ...

“I’ll kill the bastard,” Manota silently swore as he returned to his room and grabbed the sheath containing the sharp blade he kept next to the bed. “Javonna must not have been the only traitor Tai Tek had hidden among the Houses.”

Dark rage fired in his gut as he returned to the balcony. The figure was moving stealthily closer to the East House. Manota ruled the Second of Kassis with an iron fist. His personal guards had been officers under him during the war with the Tearnats. It was not until the Alliance had been formed and Gril Tal Mod had taken over as leader of the Tearnats that the war ended. The huge Tearnat’s son, Trolis, along with other traitors to Kassis, had still fought to divide the Alliance and bring an end to the peace. Tai Tek, a traitorous former Kassisan council member, had struck an agreement with the Tearnat rebel in exchange for the assassination of the members of the royal house.

Trolis had captured the shuttle returning his older brother Torak, his younger brother, Jazin, ten of their warriors and *Krail* Taurus, the Chancellor of the Alliance, to his brother's warship. The Tearnat rebel leader had killed the Chancellor before imprisoning his brothers and the other men with the intention of killing them.

What no one had anticipated was the unexpected help that arrived in the form of three beautiful female warriors from another world. Those females were able to subsequently paralyze the Tearnat warship until he and Gril Tal Mod arrived with reinforcements. There had been a fierce but short fight due to the fact most of the warriors were trapped on the different levels of the warship.

Manota later learned the Tearnat warship had made an unexpected stop on an unknown planet called Earth where several of the warriors had taken a shuttle down to explore the possibility of additional resources for their fight. They had returned with two prisoners and one stowaway that turned out to be much more dangerous than they realized.

Manota's mind drifted to the three unusual, but beautiful warriors. Jo Strauss, her younger sister, Star, and their friend, River Knight – the Prophesized Warriors who would unite the Houses of Kassis and defeat those trying to destroy it according to his father. Manota moved through the shadows as he thought of the women he would give his life to protect. He moved around the corner of the balcony

keeping the dark figure in his peripheral vision. He didn't want to take a chance of the bastard escaping.

He slowed as he neared the end of the balcony. His eyes swept up and down trying to gauge where the figure planned to enter. His eyes narrowed on the vines covering the sides of the East House. They were thick enough to climb.

He slid the blade into the sheath he had slung over his shoulder. Moving the strap of the sheath until it crossed his bare chest; he jumped up onto the edge of the railing and gripped a handful of the vines in his hand. The figure had started climbing one of the pillars. They could only reach the roof of the East House from it. They would need to either climb down the vines or go through the access door on the roof.

The roof entrance was heavily secured, but Manota wasn't about to take a chance. He cursed the fact that they had depended on the security system he had in place that marked unknown visitors. If the person was already authorized, then they would not show up as a threat.

Manota quickly made his way to the roof, rolling over the edge and onto one knee. His eyes scanned the pillars. He watched as the figure bent and attached a hook to the thin lines holding the pillars in place. A moment later, the figure swung off the pillar, gliding to the next one. Manota watched as the figure moved closer until he was at the last one. He stooped down and ran to the entrance leading down into the lower levels. He stood up once he was back in the shadows and waited.

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He didn't have long to wait. He watched through narrowed eyes as the figure reached out and grabbed the edge of the wall surrounding the roof. The intruder was dressed from head to toe in black. The figure jumped off the small wall before bending over and unlatching the sliding handgrip he had used on the wire.

Pulling a bag from his back, Manota's eyes followed as the intruder slipped the device into his bag before standing and pulling a short rod similar to what the guards carried from his waist. Gripping the rod in one hand and the bag in the other, the figure sprinted toward the entrance where Manota was waiting. A dark smile curled Manota's lips as he stepped out of the shadows, slowly drawing his sword from the sheath as the figure skidded to a startled stop.

"Now, it is time to die," Manota said coldly. "But not before you tell me who sent you!" He growled as he swung his sword.

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The figure dropped the bag he was holding and rolled to the side, pulling the short rod up in front of him. With a flick of his wrist, the rod extended several centimeters. The intruder twirled it around before bringing it up in front of him.

Manota attacked with cold calculation, not wanting the fight to end too soon. His blood was still flooded with the adrenaline from his dream, his

frustration at Tai Tek's escape, and his sexual frustrations.

*No, this one will be begging for death before I am ready to grant it,* he thought as he lashed out again.

The figure countered his blows time after time. Manota's eyes narrowed as he realized that this opponent was extremely skilled in hand-to-hand combat. The intruder was using many of the counterattacks that his guards used. There was also something very familiar with the way he moved, dodging or repelling blows that should have stopped him. In fact, the intruder was using moves and counterattacks that he had personally trained his elite guards in during the war. The thought that one of his men could be the traitor enraged him as he had handpicked each one.

He felt his muscles clench as the staff connected first with his stomach, then across his back, pushing him forward. He swirled, shifting his sword as he watched the figure slowly circle around trying to get closer to the door.

"I don't think so," Manota growled, striking out with a quick thrust.

The figure turned as the blade came at him, elbowing Manota in the mouth before bending in a graceful arc and pushing him away again. Manota snarled as he tasted blood where his lip split from the blow.

His eyes flamed with rage at the soft snort that escaped the dark figure as the male moved again trying to get by him. Manota moved in closer, circling

around. He struck out again, only this time when the staff came up to deflect it, he blocked the blow with his other arm. He gritted his teeth against the pain of the blow and swiped his sword across the stomach of the intruder. A loud, painfilled hiss echoed in the early morning air. A part of Manota noted the sky was beginning to grow lighter. Soon, the dark figure in front of him would not have anywhere to hide.

*It was time to end this,* Manota thought as the figure fell backwards.

“Where is Tai Tek hiding?” Manota demanded as he took a menacing step toward the figure that was holding the long staff defensively in front of him. “What were you doing? Who were you meeting?”

The figure backed up toward the edge of the roof. The sun’s rays cast his face in shadows as it rose behind him. As soon as the intruder felt the back of the low wall against his legs, he flung the staff at Manota’s head, placed one hand on the low wall and rolled over the side.

Manota cursed loudly as he jerked his head to the side so he wouldn’t be hit by the flying rod. He darted forward, looking over the edge as the figure moved with ease down the side of the vine-covered wall. He caught a glimpse as the figure disappeared over the balcony that led to his rooms.

“Shit!” He growled out harshly as he sheathed his sword.

He rested his hand on the side of the low wall, tossing his leg over. He looked down and froze. His

eyes glued to the perfect blood-covered outline of a hand which shone clearly in the early morning light.

His eyes darted to the long staff lying on the roof. Pulling his leg back over, he walked numbly over to where it rested. He knelt down and carefully picked up the staff even as his stomach began to roll with a dark dread. Fresh blood dampened the long, narrow staff as well, showing evidence his blade had struck more than once. Fury built inside him as he grasped the decorative staff and rose to his feet. His eyes scanned the rooftop in the early morning light picking up the numerous small drops of blood dotting the surface.

Twirling as fear built alongside the anger, he sprinted to the entrance to the roof. The door crashed backwards as he ripped it open. Taking the stairs three at a time, he wove his way down to the lower levels. He startled the guard on patrol who turned to confront him as he burst through the inner door.

“Call for the healer!” He ordered harshly as he ran past the man.

“Where should I tell him to meet you, my lord?” The guard asked as he hurried to catch up as they raced through the corridors.

“Lady Jo’s room,” Manota snarled out as he quickly out paced the guard.

If he thought he had felt fear a week ago, it was nothing compared to what he was feeling right now.