

Dying to Live

By Darrell Ferguson

Chapter 2 The Helper

The same moment Adam realized something was out there, they sprang on him. Snarling, growling wolves from every direction. He met the first one with a blow to its nose, sending it backward. But the next was upon him in an instant, and he was on the ground. The terrible, sharp teeth tearing into his flesh, powerful jaws like vices clamping down on him. It seemed there wasn't an inch of his body not being torn open.

Adam fought for his life, but the wolves were relentless, and there were too many of them. "I can't fight any longer," Adam groaned to himself, and gave up the struggle.

That same moment, the jaws released. A loud commotion followed, and a cloud of dust. Snarls and barks, yelps, and even what sounded like cracking bones ended with the wolves retreating into the tall grass.

"You have to watch out for the wolves. They hate the cottage, and they hate even more anyone who seeks the cottage."

The voice reminded Adam of the snake, but when he turned, he saw, not a snake, but a dog. What a beautiful dog! It was a Kangal. It had a solid, pale tan coat, and black fur around its face that looked like a mask. Adam had always wanted a Kangal. His grandfather had one, and Adam loved that dog. He remembered the stories his grandpa told about his years as a shepherd in Turkey, and how it had protected the flock from wolves, jackals, and even bears. He told him that the Kangal is the only dog breed in the world that can kill a wolf. But the dog was so

gentle with Adam, he couldn't imagine that dog hurting anything.

"Thank you for saving me. I thought I was going to die,"

"You are already dead," replied the Kangal. "And if you truly die, only then can you live."

The dog sounded just like the snake, but made even less sense.

"What does that mean? If I'm dead, how could I die? And what does it mean to truly die?"

"I could tell you the answer, but you would not be able to understand it now. Only in the cottage can you understand. Do you want to go to the cottage?"

"Do I *want* to go?" Adam could not answer the question because he knew that wanting, in this place, is also only half real.

"I don't know if I want to, I just feel that I must. I feel as though what I want doesn't matter."

"It is true," said the Kangal, "that your desires don't matter now. So you must follow duty. But your highest duty is to have desires that matter more than duty."

"Duty or desire," said Adam, "I must go to the cottage. But the journey is so difficult. Twice I was at the point of death, and would have died if I hadn't been rescued. And each time, by an animal. First by the ugliest and most loathsome. And now by the most beautiful."

"You have not been rescued at all," said the dog. "Twice you have been helped, but by one in the same helper."

"My first helper was a snake," Adam rejoined, "you are a dog."

"I am neither a dog nor a snake. I took those forms because those were the forms you needed. I told you, I become whatever form is needed in order that I may save some."

“If you have the ability to be in the form of such a beautiful and wonderful creature, why did you first appear in such hideous the form as a snake?”

“I appeared as a snake because you needed a snake. Dogs are useful for fighting off wolves but useless when you're at the top of the tree.”

“So then why not take the form of a bird?” Adam offered.

“I dare not ever take that form. The Great Wind has taken that form in the past. I would never take a form that might cause people to think I am the Great Wind.”

“If you are neither dog nor snake, what are you?”

Adam's question was met with silence as his enigmatic helper turned and walked slowly towards the camp. Adam followed, but quickly realized that he was following, not a dog, but a man.

“You have changed forms again,” Adam observed.

“This is my natural form. The other forms were for your benefit.”

Adam was intrigued. “I would like to change forms. How do you do it?”

“I simply choose to do it.”

“If it's that easy, why can't I do it?” Adam asked.

“I did not say it was easy. Indeed, it is difficult ... and painful. The farther the form is from my natural form, the more painful is the transition.”

“What is the most painful form you've ever taken?”

The man answered emphatically: “Without question, the snake. I hate snakes.”

“Well, that makes me even more grateful, Adam replied. “Thank you for subjecting yourself to pain in order to rescue me.”

“Again - you have not yet been rescued,” the man insisted. “I have helped you in order that you may be truly rescued. You are facing a far greater danger than a fall from

a tree or an attack from wolves. I have been sent to help you that you might be rescued from the Great Threat.

“What is the great threat?” Adam asked. “And how is one rescued from it?”

“Only in the cottage can you understand the threat, and only in the cottage can you desire the rescue enough to be rescued. The only help I can provide is to show you the way to the cottage.”

Adam didn’t understand much of what this man said, but he was glad to be with him. What Adam did understand, had the ring of truth. The helper’s words infused life into Adam. And the man’s willingness to undergo suffering for Adam’s benefit made Adam feel not only protected, but *valued*.

“What is your name?” Adam asked.

“My new name is Ranon, but on this side of the river some people still call me by my old name – Tristan. I will not answer to that name. I am Ranon. Tristan was the name I had before my first journey through the cottage, and I will never answer to that name again.

“Will I be given a new name when I go to the cottage?” Adam asked.

“No,” Ranon replied, “not if you merely go to the cottage, but if you pass through it, you will be given a new name.”

Adam hesitated. “But what if I don’t want a new name? I like my name.”

“Of course you like the name you’ve always had, because you’re still the person you’ve always been. But when you become a new person, your old name will no longer fit and you will grow to hate your old name.”

Adam was silent. He had no desire to lose his identity. But on the other hand, much of the time he was dissatisfied with his identity. Sometimes he hated it. Still, the idea of becoming a different person altogether was disconcerting.

"I don't want to lose my identity," Adam said.

"You wouldn't lose your identity," Ranon assured him, "you would gain it. You would become, not a different person, but a new person. Right now, your true identity is corrupted. When it is renewed, it will be what you were created to be. All of us who have gone through the cottage hate our old names, but love the newness we have been given."

"So there are others?" Adam asked.

"Oh yes, many. I can't wait for you to meet some of them - especially Jamila and Layth - and Blandon. An involuntary smile took over Ranon's face at the mention of his friend. "You'll love Blandon."

Adam had so long been alone, he was eager to meet anyone else no matter who they were.

"Where are they? When can I meet them?"

"They usually don't come on this side of the river. We'll have to cross over. But if we get an early start in the morning we should make it to the river by nightfall.

As the soft rays of the morning sunrise coaxed Adam's eyelids open, he rose from his grass bed with a renewed excitement about pressing forward. He stood, stretched and, in the distance, saw a figure approaching from the direction of the river. He assumed it was Ranon, but as the figure came closer, he could see it was not.

Nor was it a single figure. Adam counted six, no eight, walking towards him. Could these be Ranon's friends? Whoever they were, Adam was eager to meet them and jogged out in their direction. As he closed the distance between them, Adam was astonished at their size. He wasn't sure if he would call them giants, but they were the biggest human beings Adam had ever seen.