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Jon didn't know why he held a sword in his hand to fend off the Wild Ones; he knew only that he was one of many who for centuries had become—

Guardians Of The Tower

by

Randall Garrett

THAT MORNING, the sun rose bright and clear over the Tower. Jon woke, clambered to his feet, and rolled his sleeping-blanket. Within five minutes, he was fully awake and ready to protect the Tower against its enemies.

He took his station and stared out over the sea. Far in the distance, he could make out the bomb-blackened city; off to the left was the spot of green that indicated the village of the Free People. Somewhere beyond were the lands of the Wild Ones — the ones Jon was here to defend the tower against.

“All well to the East!” he cried, when his turn came. The other Guardsmen, stationed in a circle around the Tower, called off their observations in turn.

The morning passed slowly. A

little before noon, the man at the top of the Tower cried, “Enemy boat approaching! Prepare to defend the Tower!”

Jon's mouth tightened, and he squinted toward the dot of light on the sea that was the boat of the Wild Ones. Slowly, he drew his sword, whisked it through the air a few times, loosened his wrist. It was the first time in over a month that he had been called upon to do battle in the name of the Tower.

From within the Tower, the auxiliary guard-force came running out and took battle-stations. They stood ready, waiting for the Wild Ones to come.

* * *

No one knew what the Tower was. It had been there as long as any of the Free People could remember, and probably had been there forever. It was sacred to



them, and for that reason was under constant attack by their enemies from the Wild Places.

At twenty-three, Jon had been a Tower guard for nearly three years, had taken part in almost twenty defenses. The Wild Ones had practically captured the Tower twice, but each time the guardians had driven them off.

Now, they were back for another try. Jon waited tensely as they drew near.

Time passed slowly. Five minutes, ten, while the enemy attacking-party approached. The lookout at the top of the Tower sang out periodically, keeping the guards below informed of the boat's progress.

Finally: "They're here! Prepare to defend the Tower!"

The great sailing-ship pulled up on the shore, and men began to pour forth — ten, twenty, thirty men. It was a good-sized army. And Jon gasped when he saw who led them.

He was a giant, topping seven feet by several inches. His sword glittered in the sunlight as he slashed it savagely through the air, and his hair was a coarse, matted mane. He growled some barbaric command and the Wild Ones charged onward. The ring of defenders tightened and stood firm, waiting for the attack.

Swords rang. Jon found himself opposing a brawny youth with fierce, widely-set eyes and a good sword-hand. He parried a two-handed chop that could have cut him in half, and smashed back with a quick lunge that drew blood.

"Dog!" The Wild One flicked blood from the flesh wound and drove forward. Jon parried again, drove in, crashed his sword off the other's hilt. His hand numbed, the Wild One dropped his sword. Without hesitating, Jon cut the unarmed man down and turned to seek his next opponent.

He glanced over and saw Len, the Tower Captain, in tight combat with a gigantic Wild One. The

giant was driving Len back toward the sea with sweeping swings of his huge broadsword.

Jon turned and started to go to Len's assistance when another barbarian interposed himself. Jon whirled and leaped forward for the battle, just as he saw Len fall to the giant's sword.

"Give back! Give back!" someone yelled. "They're beating us!"

They're not beating me, Jon thought fiercely, as he laid open his opponent's arm with a savage slash and followed immediately with a quick swipe that ripped open the Wild One's throat.

Breathing hard, now, Jon turned to look for his next opponent. He had but one thought: the Tower must be defended. The Tower was sacred to the Free People; the Tower must be defended.

HE FOUND HIMSELF embroiled in another duel quickly enough. The barbarians seemed to be all over the place, cutting and slashing with their wild, untrained manner. A quick glance around told Jon that the Tower guards were being driven back; half a dozen of his childhood friends lay slain near him, and a river of blood trickled slowly through the grass.

The barbarians were falling too — but their giant leader was in-

domitable, was wreaking death right and left in the ranks of the Guardians.

Jon killed his opponent and looked around. The thick of the battle was on the other side of the Tower, he saw. It was now nearly noon, and the sun blazed brightly off the Tower's metal sides.

When he reached the other side of the Tower, he was surprised to see that barely half a dozen guards remained alive. Half a dozen, out of nearly forty.

He plunged into the fray with furious energy, cutting down three Wild Ones before they realized he was there. That narrowed the odds considerably.

Only three of the Free People remained — and four of the Wild Ones. It had been a bloody, fierce battle, with heavy loss of life on both sides.

Jon's sword plunged into a barbarian's throat, and in that instant the giant's weapon cut the life from the man at Jon's side. Two against three, now.

"Now!" Jon yelled and drove down against one of the remaining Wild Ones. His slash ripped open the man's leg, but before Jon could apply the finishing touch one of the other barbarians killed his man and lunged at Jon, who parried and dropped the man with a swift chop.

The realization hit him suddenly: *I'm all alone.*

And the gigantic Wild One was moving slowly toward him to finish off the last of the Tower guards.

Jon set his lips grimly. So the Tower would fall, after all, to the barbarians? *Not lightly*, he thought, and waited for the giant's advance.

The sword the giant swung was nearly four feet long. It cut a sizzling swath through the air as he approached.

Jon moved back, up against the comforting bulk of the Tower itself, and prepared to defend the Tower to the death. The giant charged.

Jon parried his wild blow, felt the stinging shock ripple up his arm as their swords clanged together. He initiated an assault of his own, but the Wild One laughed derisively and parried as if he were fighting a child.

"Ho, Free One! The Tower is ours!"

"Not yet," Jon said. "Not while I live!"

"How long will that be?" the giant asked. "Another minute perhaps?"

His sword spun through the air in a shining arc. Jon parried desperately, but the force of the blow was too great for him and his sword went flying out of his numbed hands. He stood there, helpless,

while the giant raised his sword for the final blow.

And suddenly six inches of bright steel protruded from the giant's chest. A red fountain of blood bubbled forth. The giant stared in amazement for a second, then began to topple like a felled oak.

Astonished, Jon looked up and saw the Wild One he had wounded standing there, holding a bloody sword.

"You . . . killed him!" Jon said uncomprehendingly. "Why?"

The Wild One shook his head uncertainly. "I don't know," he said. "I — I suddenly realized he had to die."

Exhausted, Jon leaned against the Tower to support himself, and shook his head. "Why did you save me? The Tower was yours. Why?"

"I think I understand," the Wild One said slowly. He threw his sword to the ground. "It is something I have long thought of. We fight you because we hate you —

because we envy your free life. You have something to fight for, in this Tower. I — I want to join you. I want to join the Free People!"

Jon smiled. "You're welcome to come to our village with me," he said. "We believe in freedom — the way the Old Ones did."

"And the Tower? What is its meaning?"

Jon shrugged. "That we do not know, but we defend it because we think it is sacred to us — to freedom. An old legend, perhaps." He clapped the other on the back. "Come, friend. Let's signal the mainland that the battle is over and the Tower still in free hands."

He glanced up at the massive Tower, at the huge statue of the woman with her hand outraised, stretching a torch out over the harbor. "I suppose we'll never know what the Tower really was, to the Ancients. But to us — to us, it's a symbol of liberty."

THE END