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ULTIMA™

# THE TECHNOCRAT WAR



BOOK I OF III  
MACHINATIONS

AUSTEN ANDREWS



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## Master Gregorio cursed . . .

. . . in a clattering language Raveka could not place. He snaked his gnarled hands into the air. Rivers of serpentine light gushed from his palms, streaming into the sky and punching holes in the dirty, low-lying clouds. Flashes cascaded within. Then the clouds ruptured and rained thunderbolts as if they were hailstones. Thousands of blinding talons gnashed the brittle earth. Flames and explosions sparkled across the Technocrat formations.

Amid the brutal lightning storm, the flying warships began to rise. Despite their mass and towering height they ascended with an ease that was almost tranquil, like smoke lifting into a calm sky. Their spidery metal workings crawled inside. Furnaces glowed like monstrous eyes. The airships turned toward the cliff upon which Gregorio stood. The sorcerer resembled a terrible, fiery demon, commanding light and thunder from the clouds and the earth.

On the nearest of the floating vessels, Raveka spotted soldiers preparing catapults and pneumatic trebuchets. The heavy ammunition twinkled like spark stone. She decided the time had come to leave Gregorio to his fate.

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### BOOK I OF III MACHINATIONS

AUSTEN ANDREWS



POCKET BOOKS

New York London Toronto Sydney Singapore

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For Alex and Elizabeth,  
Who surrendered daddy and husband to a dream  
for a few months,  
And for Aaron,  
Godfather to my son and my own guardian devil.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would be remiss not to point out the extraordinary people who created the world in which I am privileged to write. For the Ultima project at Electronic Arts, the entire development team—notably Producer Starr Long, Lead Designer Damion Schubert and Creative Director Andy Hoyos—fashioned a breathtaking land of dreams and adventures. Chief creator among them is Aaron de Orive, the Minister of Fiction, who composes worlds like many-movement symphonies.

And of course we owe everything to the Lost King himself, Richard Garriott, who flapped his wings in Texas and sent hurricanes around the world.



## Prologue

The voice from the dark had a metallic resonance, as if spoken through a musical instrument.

"Sartorius," it said, "great wheels are beginning to turn. Can you feel them?"

"No, Your Eminence," answered a mortal.

"They spin about my dreams. Sartorius, tell me about these barbarians across the desert."

"They are clans of Juka, Your Eminence, who escaped from our lands after the Cataclysm."

"They are our enemies?"

"They build their settlements on the slopes of our mountains. Fighting is inevitable."

"Then begin your calculations for war."

"I have begun, Your Eminence."

"Splendid. War shall be a good test of our designs. I remember the Cataclysm, Sartorius. Did you know I was there when it happened?"

"Yes, I know, Your Eminence."

"It was the end of all Chaos."

"As you say, Your Eminence."

# Prologue

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## CHAPTER

# 1

## The Black Duel

**T**he knight Montenegro stood atop a seaside cliff under an ashen, twilight sky. He was a tall, steel figure in his immaculate plate armor. His black curls streamed like a banner in the ocean wind. A longsword stretched naked from his grip. With hungry eyes he studied the distant waves, as if the twin moons wrote messages upon them. The ocean heaved at the foot of the bluff, its voice a deep, wordless hush. It beat against the cliffside like the wings of a caged bird.

The sea's horizon flickered with lanterns. Three ships approached, silent and patient, from a direction where no men dwelled.

Montenegro twitched the sword at his side, a fang of reflected moonlight in the encroaching night. Behind him crouched a darkening landscape wrinkled with hilltops and trees. Firelight blinked in faraway villages.

He spoke with anxious reserve. "How much time do we have?"

"Admiral Duarte estimates three or four hours before they reach the shore." The man beside the knight was smaller and

several years younger. His scholar's robes danced in the brisk ocean wind. He wore a large satchel across his shoulder and a meticulous beard on his chin.

Montenegro pinched his own, clean-shaven jaw. "Tell the admiral to let them land. My garrison will greet them. I'll stake my tent here tonight." He jabbed his blade into the grass.

"They may not be hostile. The admiral doesn't want bloodshed, cousin."

"Duarte is a bureaucrat. Let him find me a reason to be merciful, if he can. But I've fought too many orcs and trolls in this region to be anything but wary. If these are enemies of New Britannia, I'm going to treat them so."

The younger man inhaled salt-quick air. "We don't know that they're enemies. Let them land in peace. Remember, our grandfather's shrine serves the Virtue of Compassion. We should respect that, especially in the face of danger."

"I won't risk defeat for the sake of a foreigner's blood. Grandfather would have done likewise. Tonight I serve Valor, not Compassion." Gently he licked the sea spray from his lips and peered at the distant ships. "I'm a few months from becoming a general, Damario. You tutor me well in the arts, but I'll handle the military decisions, if you don't mind. Besides, Virtue deserves to be ruthless, don't you agree? Victory is a necessary evil."

No answer would suffice, so Damario did not reply.

When the first mysterious boat landed on the pebbled beach, the soldiers under Montenegro's command were hidden along the rocky coast. They watched in the gloom while armored figures pulled the long-keeled vessel onto dry land.

The other two boats lurked beyond the shoals, well away from the cliff-heavy shore. Darkness concealed the nature of the invaders. They might have been humans. They might have been anything.

Observing from the precipice, Montenegro gazed with the intensity of a hunting bird. "About thirty warriors, wouldn't you say? Plated armor. Strange design. Their weapons look like broadswords and poleaxes. Do you still think our visitors are harmless, cousin?"

Damario tried to squint past the glare of the intruders' torches. "They're definitely not Meer. I've never heard of orcs or goblins sailing in boats. Could they be Blackthorn's lost people?"

"It's not impossible. Though the seers say that Blackthorn's followers build ships out of metal, not wood. And that humans live among wingless gargoyles there. These men all look to be the same stock." His shadowed face tightened. "What are they doing now?"

The strangers gathered in a wide circle on the beach. Each held a small torch. One in the center began to chant. The others echoed the song's cadence.

Montenegro frowned. "Is it magic?"

"It could be, though not like any I've ever seen."

"Let's not wait to find out. I can't afford for them to set up any defenses. Cast your diversion and see what we can learn."

From his satchel Damario pulled a handful of leather pouches. As he called out a stanza of mystic words, the pouches flashed brightly from within. Smoke oozed from their puckered mouths. Damario finished the spell and flung his hands toward the sky in a complex, violent gesture. The air bristled, though it did not stir.

Something blinked in the heavens. A tiny light grew brighter and closer, as if a star dislodged and fell toward earth. The intruders on the beach ceased their chant and pointed.

The meteor blazed out of the sky and smashed into the water several yards from the grounded boat. A fountain of steam and seawater leapt above the whitecaps. The ocean groaned. Steel rang across the craggy beach as the strangers drew blades from their scabbards. Foamy breakers rasped around their feet.

Then the rocks disgorged a flood of soldiers. Montenegro's men rushed forward at Damario's signal in numbers three times their enemy's. They charged as a shield wall bristling with spears. The intruders formed their own defensive line and when the two sides clashed, the percussion of weapons resounded across the cathedral cliffs overlooking the stony beach.

From above Montenegro studied the battle. He spoke as much to himself as to his cousin. "Their tactics are excellent! Man-to-man they overmatch us. I think we can manage this group, but we'll need more troops before the other boats land." He pointed at Damario. "Ride to Vesper and fetch me as many spellcasters as you can rouse. We may need them."

"They'll think it's an invasion. If word gets out it'll cause a panic."

"That's not my concern. If these people aren't human, we may have to wipe them out. If they are human they're the best fighters I've ever seen, which is considerably worse news. Either way I need magic to guarantee a victory."

The wizard narrowed his eyes. "They made no hostile moves. You should have parleyed, not ambushed them."



"Don't presume my motives! I told my men to capture one of them. If they're human, we'll let them live." The knight plucked his steel helmet from the grass beside him. "Now get on your horse and ride hard, Damario! I'm going down to get some answers. With luck the hounds have cornered me a fox."

A hurricane of stars reeled through the night sky. Silently the first ghosts of black rain clouds whispered across the celestial tantrum. At the pale fringes of the ocean below, the battle resolved into a tense quiet. Montenegro's soldiers forced the intruders down the shoreline, separating them from their boat. The strangers seized a defensive position amid a jumble of man-high boulders. A standoff unfolded. Weapons relaxed somewhat, though moonlit eyes glared keenly.

Among the spray-drenched rocks closer to the boat, the cliffs pulled away from the water's edge to form a tall, narrow canyon. A heavy shadow choked the space, which rumbled the ocean's sadness. A dozen of Montenegro's soldiers crowded the canyon's entrance. Crackling torches strobed coppery light over the rock walls.

Trapped in the gloom was one of the mysterious intruders. The warrior aimed a long spear at his captors. His stance was something between a kneel and a squat, coiled up like a serpent with eyes glinting fury in the firelight. His steely armor gleamed silver and red. Under an open helmet his face was hidden in a whirl of flickering shadows.

The point of his spear dripped blood.

Montenegro pushed through the crowd of soldiers. His plate mail flashed in the glow of the moons, contrasting the

muddy chain mail worn by his men. He lifted his helmet's visor and peered into the darkness. To an officer beside him he murmured, "Did you injure it?"

"We think so, Captain. It's bleeding."

"Well done. Let's have a look." He whisked the longsword from his hip sheath and stepped into the canyon.

The officer grabbed the knight's arm. "Sir! Don't go in there alone!"

Montenegro snorted. "Why not? Does it spit fire and poison?"

"It moves like a cyclone, sir."

"Indeed?" The knight gazed at the crouching stranger, hooded by cliff-high shadows. "Then I'll uncork a little fair weather, Sergeant."

"Yes, sir." The soldier stepped back and stilled the others with an outstretched arm.

Montenegro moved cautiously into the blackness. The intruder crouched near the apex of the canyon. His posture suggested particular lines of attack. The knight adjusted his guard. When no more than a few yards separated him from his captive, Montenegro hardened his gaze. "Whatever you are, I've beaten you. Surrender to me."

The stranger's breath stuttered. Montenegro was unsure if it was an expression of fear or disgust.

"If you understand my words, put down that weapon. I won't give you a third chance."

Around the stranger shadows darted. Montenegro leapt to the side. The man lunged, twirling his spear in a frenzied attack. With quick strokes the knight blocked a succession of furious jabs, then stepped back and regained his footing. The stranger was atop him a half beat earlier than Montenegro

expected. He parried a second cycle of lightning thrusts. This time he threw a few ripostes of his own. They slashed empty air. He pulled back a few paces more. His opponent did not press.

When a pause swelled between them, Montenegro considered asking his men for a shield. But they kept away, as he had trained them to do. He nibbled his lip and gauged his opponent.

The stranger emerged from the cloak of darkness. In shape he was as tall as the knight and broader of chest and shoulder. By the frantic torchlight Montenegro made out a grotesque face. Its mouth was wide and stern, its eyes set high and deep, its skin a color somewhere between amber and jade. It had a wide, featureless space where a human would have a nose.

The knight grimaced. He was facing a creature that resembled a wingless member of the gargoyle race.

Behind him the sergeant began to move closer. "Captain—"

Montenegro shook his head. "He's dangerous, but he's no ettin or troll. I've taken his measure now. Nothing on two legs has yet taken mine."

The strange being bent its lips into a snarl. "Then meet a son of Clan Varang," it said in voice that sounded like a young man's. The audience of soldiers hushed with surprise.

Montenegro pursed his lips. "So you do speak. How do you know our language?"

"Humans and Juka speak the same tongue! Are you so ignorant of the world?"

"Perhaps so. We erased the gargoyles from these shores decades ago. Have you a name, Juka?"

"I am Sigmhat, son of Bahrok, the Warlord of Garron, chieftain of Clan Varang. Whom do I face, human?"

"Sir Gabriel Montenegro of Cove, Commander of the Knights of the Silver Serpent and defender of New Britannia. And I'm happy to accept surrender from a man with such an impressive-sounding lineage."

"Surrender?!" The stranger jerked forward a half step.

Montenegro aimed his blade. "Have a care with that spear, devil. I might imagine you're a threat."

The angry Juka growled and hurtled at him. Montenegro bashed the spear aside and jabbed his blade under the plates of his enemy's shoulder armor. The being called Sigmhat snarled, pirouetted violently and somehow smashed his boot against the knight's steel helmet. Montenegro felt himself tumble. He rolled on his shoulder and came up in a crouch, to spot the Juka's speartip lancing directly at his face. Too late he recognized the feint; his longsword moved to parry and Sigmhat jammed the spear into the knight's plate mail gauntlet.

A flash of pain burst inside Montenegro's palm. His sword fell loose. The spear drove his impaled hand against the rock wall and nailed it there amid a blossom of sparks. He was pinned. The knight snatched up his fallen sword with his off hand and thrust it at Sigmhat, who parried with a short sword Montenegro had not seen unsheathed.

The soldiers surged into the canyon. Montenegro howled at them, "Stand down!" and they did. He locked blazing eyes with Sigmhat.

The Juka sneered at him. "You are an arrogant race," spat the warrior, "and a savage one. You do not deserve my surrender."

Montenegro flinched his blade. Sigmhat moved to block and the knight pulled his weapon back. Then he left his guard open. Sigmhat chopped with his short sword. Montenegro ducked. The short sword crashed against his pinned arm. The knight hissed when a bone snapped; yet with his off hand he finished his calculated move, slashing at his opponent's neck.

The longsword hacked through Sigmhat's gorget and peeled open his throat. The Juka lurched to one side and then flopped onto his back, his spine arched in torment. Montenegro hefted his blade, tested its balance and flung it at the fallen man. It stuck deep under the stranger's jaw.

Sigmhat rolled onto his belly and pawed without strength at the blood-drenched blade. After squirming for many seconds, he stopped moving.

The sergeant rushed forward and plucked the spear from the rock. Montenegro's arm flopped loosely to his side. He barked at the pain.

A soldier shouted, "Bring a healer!" and somebody hurried away to do so.

Montenegro leaned against the officer. Blood painted his chin from a bitten lip. He gathered a wet breath and said, "Sergeant, I've got spellcasters and militia coming from Vesper. When they get here, we're going to dispose of these Jukas. They're too dangerous to let go. We've got enough inhumans stalking the forests already."

"I hope they get here soon, sir, before those other boats clear the shoals. These creatures are fierce."

Montenegro wiped his jaw. "Let them land! We're defending our home. Stand true, Sergeant. Valor and Sacrifice will see to our victory."

The soldier nodded. His dirty chain mail jingled. "As you say, Captain."

After midnight Montenegro presided over a scene of furious clamor. A raging ocean storm had hurtled from the sea and now clawed at the rocky shoreline. Curtains of rain scoured the jagged rocks in a squall as grey and hard as Montenegro's eyes. His arm healed by a spell, the knight fought in the thick of the battle. The reinforcements from Vesper had arrived and joined his soldiers on the beach. Half a dozen sorcerers had come along as well, at Damario's insistence, and with their flashing spells they lit up the cliffs and the dark, skittish waves. Unnatural sounds jabbed through the din. Fire and magic lightning blinked and blazed.

A second Jukan boat had reached the land. When charged in the shallows by Montenegro's forces, the gargoyle-like warriors overturned their vessel and used it as mobile fortification to advance onto the beach. The melee was brutal. By strength of numbers, however, the Britannian soldiers kept the more skilled Juka in place. The crew of the second boat were unable to rescue their fellows trapped farther up the shore. Instead they captured a narrow point between the cliffs and the water, pinching the human troops into separated halves.

Though their position was solid, the Juka could not prevent the Britannian sorcerers from setting their boat ablaze. Despite the hammering storm, the craft vanished in a gyrating inferno. Still the battle rampaged with a stuttering demeanor, sometimes clinging to a heavy lull, sometimes lost in clashing steel and murky silhouettes and wet streaks



highlighted in the violent glare. Blood darkened the sea's frothy edge.

Climbing out of the melee, Montenegro gauged his progress from atop a tall boulder. Torches and spells glittered around him. He indulged a smile. The number of New Britannians assured him success; nor did the Juka have magicians to counter his. But the conflict would be a long one. These Juka fought like several men packed into a single suit of armor. The knight recognized the potential for dozens of his soldiers to die, if he grew rash and attacked with too much force. So far the casualties had been surprisingly minimal. Time and patience would allow him to keep it that way. He ordered his lieutenants to act accordingly.

Then he found Damario and summoned him up a cliffside path. "Listen, it might take us till dawn to finish this. I'm going to get some rest. Go up to my tent and lay out a ring of alarm stones. Some of the local villagers are wandering too close and I don't want them to disturb me."

The young wizard brushed raindrops from his beard. "Villagers aren't the only ones creeping about. I caught a few Juka sneaking down the beach. How they got past our lines is beyond me."

"How did you deal with them?"

"From a distance! I hardened the sand around their ankles when a wave knocked them into the water. They drowned."

Montenegro nodded. "Well done. And all the more reason to set alarm stones around my tent."

"It's not like you to sleep in the middle of a battle, cousin."

"Forget sleeping. I brought a few books. I'm going to find out what these 'Juka' really are."

"Scholarship in the midst of war. You're a rare creature, Montenegro."

The knight shook his head. "I am unique. Now let's get under shelter. This rain is murdering the crest on my helm."

The storm thumped on the peaked roof of the tent. Montenegro felt as if he were resting inside a drum. Under the small, high pavilion he sat before a round table. His helmet lay in front of him. Damario sat nearby, taking inventory of his magical herbs.

Within a globe of feathery lamplight, Montenegro scanned a book bound in calico hide. The cover declared in raised letters *Master Willoughby's Protests Concerning the History of New Britannia*. Inside the script was ornate. On the present page it described the title, "Blackthorn's Kingdom."

"When the Cataclysm was unleashed," read Montenegro, "the world of Sosaria rent asunder. Enormous fragments of the continent of Britannia split apart and tumbled away into the Ether. Great cities were destroyed. Hundreds of thousands perished. Of course Britannia's greatest ruler, the Lost King, numbered among the missing. Common wisdom instructs us that it was the treacherous Lord Blackthorn who so ravaged the world for some foul, unknowable end.

"Yet common wisdom is wrong. Difficult though it may be to imagine, it has been spoken privately by survivors of the battle that Blackthorn laid siege to the fortress of Stonegate to *prevent* the Cataclysm, and that it was the Lost King himself who cast the spell that destroyed the world. Undoubtedly the truth is an ocean that lies between common wisdom and private accounts. Nevertheless, Lord

Blackthorn took possession of the blame and has been demonized because of it.

"After the Cataclysm consumed the fortress of Stonegate, the Knights of the Silver Serpent pursued Blackthorn when he fled with his followers. The cracked landscape held no safe haven for them. Finally they had no choice but to sail across the ocean, where they could not be further pursued. Seers confirm that Blackthorn and his people landed on an island and there met a race of wingless gargoyles. Green-skinned were the monsters, small-horned and powerful. They moved with the strength and speed of wild animals. Yet they received the humans with a superstitious awe.

"Apparently anxious to regain power, Blackthorn conquered them. Now he rules the island as a dark sorcerer-king. The seers maintain that the exiled lord has gone mad with grief and now lives in a fortress of steel, surrounded by gear-driven machines which serve him as faithfully as do the gargoyles and the expatriate Britanni-ans.

"Thankfully no New Britannian has made contact with that grim kingdom. Fortune has blessed us with the arrival from across the sea of the peaceful Meer, whose own landscape was ravaged by the Cataclysm; we shall not be so fortunate when Blackthorn's shadow again crosses our shores. Seers claim that his grief over the Cataclysm is surmounted only by his desire to reclaim power in the land of his birth."

Montenegro thumbed the corners of the tea-colored pages. His eyes drifted. Damario's and his grandfather, the famous Sir Lazaro of Cove, had perished in the Cataclysm at the battle of Stonegate. That was more than seventy years ago. Sufficient time had passed for Blackthorn and his followers to teach these wingless gargoyles a civilized lan-

guage. Nor could Sigmhat's culture and fighting skills have derived from the crass devil-men who had plagued the Britannian continent for centuries. Surely the knights of Blackthorn's Chaos Guard had instructed them. The riddle of the Juka seemed easily solved.

He tapped the page before him. "Damario, these Juka have to be Blackthorn's gargoyles. How else could they speak our language? We should keep one for questioning." He thumped shut the heavy tome and laid it on the table. "Let's get back down there. I want to catch another leader, if I can."

When he stood, his younger cousin remained in his chair. The knight heard Damario's sleeping breaths. With a chuckle he shook the wizard by the top of his head. Damario did not stir. Montenegro drew his hand back and saw his cousin's blood smeared on his palm.

With a snarl he threw a glance around the tent as he reached for his sword. He clasped air. His blade was gone. His stomach knotted. His dagger was likewise missing. In its place he found an unfamiliar scarf of black silk wrapped around the sheath.

Montenegro rushed out of the small tent. The pounding rain clanked against his plate mail. He saw no one nearby, though the darkness was as thick as a tapestry. On the ground some of Damario's alarm stones had vanished.

He pulled loose the black scarf and clenched it in his bare fist. The fabric began to soak up the rain.

"It is an invitation," rasped a voice from nowhere.

The knight crouched and looked quickly about. Only the hillside surrounded him, huddled under the stormy shroud of night. Yet Montenegro recognized the timbre of the

voice. It was much like that of Sigmhat, the Jukan warrior he had slain in the canyon, though these words were spoken by someone older, calmer, and almost certainly more dangerous.

Doubtless a crossbow was aimed at his skull now. He ground his teeth and stood up to his full height. "Then you Juka do have a wizard among you," he said into the blackness, "to slip past Damario's alarms and approach me invisible."

"If we could do what your wizards do, I would be on my boat sailing away, not standing here in the rain with you."

Montenegro tried to pinpoint the voice. It seemed to be coming from a particular cluster of shadows. He eyed the spot and murmured, "Then what are you doing here? What does this 'invitation' mean?" He held up the black scarf.

"You have been summoned to a Black Duel."

"Explain."

The voice changed positions. Now it emerged from a place the knight was certain concealed no intruder. "A Black Duel is a Jukan warrior's diplomacy, conducted in secret. A contest of honor. You and I have the power to stop this battle right now." For the first time Montenegro detected a feminine tone.

"You're challenging me, then? What do you propose, single combat? The victor's troops win the day? You must be joking."

"The Juka do not make light of warfare."

"You overlook the trivial fact that my side is winning. I've nothing to gain by accepting your challenge."

"You can beat us through numbers alone. That is obvious. But warfare is a barter with death—every victory has a price."

It is equally obvious that for each of us you kill, three of you will fall. That is a purchase you do not want to make. I offer you an alternative. Let us agree to a pact of honor and keep our soldiers' blood in their skins."

Montenegro scowled. "Forgive me if I'm dubious, Juka. You speak of honor, yet you wear the dark like an assassin's cloak."

"Darkness demands honor more than any other place. I am hidden for safety, not ambush. Believe me when I say that if I were an assassin, you would never have left your tent. And you might have a care, human, before pointing that word at another Jukan warrior. My blade is far more patient than my fellows'."

"Yes, I know about Jukan blades. I crossed mine with Sigmhat earlier this evening. He was your leader, wasn't he?"

"He was."

The knight crossed his arms. Raindrops played music on his mail. "If he was the best of you, I should mention that I killed him fairly."

"Which left me in charge. I understand your skill, human. Your pride is honestly earned, but right now it is only getting you more wet. Will you accept the Black Duel?"

Montenegro paused for a moment, then said, "What are the terms?"

"If I win, you will let us go. We shall collect our dead and sail away. I give you my word we shall not stop until we reach our home in Jukaran."

"And if you lose?"

"We shall surrender to you. You may slaughter us all then, if that is what you consider a victory."

"You must have tremendous influence over your people."



"They will surrender if I order it. I shall not tell them why. That is a condition of the Black Duel—the loser is bound to secrecy. The fact of the duel itself cannot be divulged."

The knight squeezed the silk scarf in his hand. Water wrung out in a glittering cascade. "I accept your challenge. But I make pacts with faces and names, not voices in the night."

A figure appeared behind him. He whirled around to see a tall, thin Jukan woman standing in a beam of light from the tent. She wore the peculiar scarlet armor of her kind. In that instant Montenegro was convinced she was a sorceress, since nothing else could explain how she materialized in such a wide-open spot. Her strange face, as he judged it, was that of an old woman. His own longsword and dagger jutted from the ground before her.

"No tricks," growled the knight. "Cast a spell and our bargain is finished. I'll kill you and your people."

"I shall confine my tricks to flesh and steel. Would that I could call down stars from the sky, like your wizards. This duel would be quick and I would never have need of a lantern again." She bowed at the waist. "I am Thulann of Garron, Master of the Way. I greet you with respect and honor."

"I am Sir Gabriel Montenegro of Cove." His brow creased. "But you must be twice my age. This can't be right, old woman."

"Sigmhat was our leader, but not the best of our warriors. I am that. Do not fret over my age, Montenegro. I am confident you will demonstrate skills far beyond your youth."

The knight let out a short laugh, though it was not driven by mirth.

Inside the tent Montenegro checked on Damario. The

wizard was knocked unconscious but otherwise uninjured. The knight donned his helmet and gauntlets, then walked outside and retrieved his weapons from the Juka named Thulann.

They found a wrinkle in the hillside where they would not be interrupted. The knight lodged a single torch inside a fissure in the rocks. It hissed and flared in the mellowing storm. At their boots flowed a web of small, insistent streamlets. The downpour rumbled around them.

"One question," said Montenegro, "before we begin. Whom do you serve? Sigmhat's father?"

"Hardly, though Bahrok would have it otherwise. I serve Turlogan, Shirron of the Clans, firstborn to the heroes Kumar and Narah."

"Then you know nothing of the human called Blackthorn?"

Thulann curled her lips into something like a sneer. "I know only enough to suggest that you insult yourself by calling him human. Some of my people follow him, but he is a monster and an enemy of Jukaran."

Montenegro smiled. "That's more than I knew before. We'll speak again after this is finished."

"There will be no time. Prepare yourself." The old Juka unsheathed a single-edged, curved sword, of such quality and balance that Montenegro would not have insulted it with a term like cutlass or broadsword. Here was more evidence of Blackthorn's influence, perhaps, for a gargoyle to employ such a fine weapon. For a moment he studied the blade, then he snapped down his helmet's visor. His own longsword he whisked into the open air. The two warriors exchanged a nod and took guard positions.

As they began to circle, the knight recalled his battle with

Sigmhat. This old woman could not possess Sigmhat's quickness but her fighting style would probably be similar. Montenegro crafted an offensive strategy to keep her off-balance.

He tossed out a few feints. A metallic ring jabbed through the din of the rain. His gauntlet was abruptly empty; his longsword impaled the grass several feet away. She had disarmed him. With astonishment he took a step back. Thulann relaxed her stance and pointed at his weapon with her own.

He retrieved it, watching his opponent the entire time. He had been wrong. She was faster than Sigmhat. He decided to press his attack strategy and trust defense to his superior armor. Lunging forward he carved a sequence of cuts around her. Each one smashed against the Juka's flashing sword. Then the steel clangs ceased and his gauntlet was empty again. With a loud snarl he searched for his blade in the splashing rivulets of rainwater.

The old Juka watched patiently. "That will not be enough to make you surrender, will it?"

Montenegro plucked his sword from a puddle and shook the wetness from it. Facing her he yelled, "Don't mock me, old woman! Speak with your blade."

"It was not intended as an insult. I apologize. I shall refrain from disarming you."

He thrust at her. She sidestepped the attack and banged several fierce blows against his helmet. His head reeled but he slashed back, advancing to take an uphill position. His plate mail clanked with the jarring percussion of her strikes. His longsword sang its own chorus in turn. Only after many seconds did he realize that none of his blows had slipped

beyond her parries, while his own body was aching from the impacts of her blade. Then she threw a lightning kick to his leg that halted his advance. His thigh bone ached.

Montenegro squinted. The old Juka was limber as well as fast. He recalled Sigmhat's high kick earlier and decided to gamble. Mimicking his actions against the younger Juka, he overextended a thrust. Thulann took the bait. With grace that astounded Montenegro the Jukan warrior twirled and swept her foot at his head.

In that instant he ducked and jammed the point of his longsword into her belly. She let out a warble and toppled over backward. Montenegro watched with amazement as she wheeled her feet over her head and landed with perfect balance several yards away. He had seen teenage acrobats perform such maneuvers before, though never in armor. So sure were her steps that he now understood her skill at stealth. If her armor had not been not streaked with blood, he would not have known she was injured.

Thulann was plainly more skilled than Sigmhat had been, and Montenegro had come close to losing that fight. He resolved not to allow her a moment's respite. With a loud cry he threw a false cut and then barreled atop her. Gravity spun. He heard a splash as he hit the ground with his armored back. The sky brightened as she struck him with some unseen weapon more fierce than a war hammer. Before he regained his senses she bashed him again and again. He was in a detached way aware of tremendous pain as the raindrops plinked him gently to sleep.

He woke propped against a small boulder. It was still night. The rain still fell. Next to the sputtering torch sat the

old Juka named Thulann in an easy, tranquil posture. A bandage was stuffed into her stomach wound. Her blade was sheathed.

"Again, I apologize," she said. "I had to subdue you. Someone was coming. Our cries must have alerted them. They are gone now, though."

The knight's head throbbed as he stood. He had difficulty assessing the moment. "It's . . . over?"

"It is customary for one duelist to yield to the other."

"Yield, you say?" He forced the helmet off of his head and drank a tongueful of cold rain. He shook out his long, black hair, wetted to a sheen by sweat and the storm. Then he pulled the helmet over his head again. "Stand up!" he barked as his bearings returned. "We're not finished."

"Of course, it is your prerogative not to yield. You can fight until death. But that would serve no one's interest. If you are determined to keep going we can continue as long as you like, though that would likewise serve neither of our interests."

"My interest is in winning. You're wounded, Juka. I'll bet you're feeling your age right now."

"Do not deceive yourself, Montenegro. We have barely begun. I once participated in a Black Duel that carried on for two straight days. I felt my age then. I was sixty. That was four years ago." She touched the bandage at her waist. "Your thrust was a nice one, by the way. How many such injuries will your men endure while I continue to beat you?"

The knight ground his teeth until they hurt. Though his heart denied it, his head recognized that this old woman was more than his match. He cast a dour look uphill. Flashes of fire and magic leapt over the precipice. The clamor of battle on the beach undercut the steady rasp of the downpour.

"I won't go down," he snarled, then picked up his sword from where Thulann had thrust it into the earth.

She sighed and rose to her feet. "It is your decision to make."

They charged at each other again. As before, Montenegro's attacks seemed fruitless while Thulann's slammed him to his aching bones. When her strikes flew he could have sworn she had several archers supporting her. His helmet rang with deafening fury. The staccato blows ushered him once more toward the sparkling fog of slumber. His limbs grew immovably heavy. Before unconsciousness overcame him, she relented and stepped back.

He mashed his eyes shut, battling the pain in his skull. Strength resolved in his limbs again. Then he let out a howl: "Damn you, Juka! Why do you toy with me?"

"It is not I who wastes time, Montenegro. Your soldiers and mine are paying the cost of these passing minutes."

Montenegro felt a surge of heat boil inside his chest. With a broad motion he sliced the air before him with his longsword. To the rain-soaked apparition before him he growled, "Your point is made."

Sloshing through ankle-deep puddles, he stormed past Thulann and headed for his tent.

Inside he slammed his sword into its scabbard and grabbed Damario, still unconscious. He lifted the young wizard by the folds of his robe and carried him outside.

The downpour spattered Damario awake. He stumbled, grimaced in pain and held his skull. "Montenegro, there was a Juka in the tent! What does—"

"Shut up," snapped the knight. "Go down to the beach and find my officers. Tell them to let the Juka gather their

dead and go free. Any man who hinders their retreat will answer to my blade. Is that clear? I'm calling the troops back. This action is over."

"But why? What's going on?"

Montenegro glowered. "You're forbidden to ask that question! Do you understand?" He almost shook his cousin by the collar, but let go instead. He forced down a heavy breath. "If anyone asks, tell them we've already beaten the Juka. This . . . is an act of Compassion."

Damaro stepped back. "I'm glad you came around to my point of—"

The knight shoved his finger against the wizard's lips. His glare was sharper than the jagged sea cliffs. Damaro said no more.

Montenegro shut his eyes. "Take care of things, cousin," he murmured, then stalked away. The wizard seemed compelled to watch for a minute longer, before rushing down the path to the beach.

At the wrinkle in the hillside, Montenegro stood beside the dying torch and drew out his longsword. "Thulann!" he shouted to the wet darkness. "Thulann of Garron! I'm here to give you your two days, if that's what it takes! This isn't finished!"

But the night gave no answer. The duel was over. Even the drone of the rain shower began to fade. A break in the clouds uncovered one of the bright moons, showing Montenegro his own reflection in a pool at his feet. The image wavered, disrupted by the black silk scarf that floated in the clear, cold water.

## CHAPTER

# 2

### Repercussions

Dawn came as a pearly mist over the beachfront. Montenegro sat on top of a boulder, gazing out into the dense fog that concealed the ocean's horizon. The black scarf was draped over his knee.

"Cousin. You've got to help me."

Damario's voice came from a grey silhouette in the mist. Many heartbeats passed before the knight blinked and replied, "Not now."

"Please. Gabriel, I beg you. This can't wait."

Montenegro glanced at the younger man. The knight's expression was profoundly dark. "Make it fast, then. I'm not in an indulgent mood."

Not far down the beach Damario pointed out a large, dark mass that had washed up on the smooth pebbles. Montenegro knelt for a closer look. He grimaced. They were human corpses, five of them, dressed in civilian clothes.

The young wizard struggled to speak calmly. "These are the ones I drowned last night. I thought—I believed they were Juka. In the name of Honesty, I truly believed that."



Montenegro wiped the kelp from the faces of the dead men. He grunted. "I know these people. I discharged them from the militia a few weeks ago."

"They're from Vesper? By the Virtues! I'll be hanged, Montenegro!"

"No, you won't." The knight stood and perched a hand on the back of his cousin's neck. "Listen to me. These men were thieves. That's why I discharged them. They probably came here last night to loot the dead. They got what they deserved."

The wizard rubbed his eyes and nodded. "All right. If you think so, then it's all right." He tried to smile, but it was a vain attempt. "Dammit! What should we do? Thieves or not, the people in Vesper are going to want my blood." He spat a curse to the heaving ocean. "This has to be a nightmare."

Montenegro tightened his grip on his cousin's shoulder. "It will fade like a nightmare. Go home, Damario. I'll get rid of these bodies. No one has to know." He flared his nostrils as he looked over the dead men. "Thieves walk too proudly in Vesper. You did well, cousin. Justice and serendipity make excellent partners."

Travelers to the port of Vesper always watched the city come alive when dusk purpled the sky and lit the endless streetlamps. Workers from the docks and shipyards would stream into the cobbled lanes to sip the simmering nightfall. Pubs and taverns swelled with laughter. In the city's center, built on dozens of bridges over the rippling bay itself, the reflections of carousers smiled up from blue water. The port's spirited character was older than Britannia itself.

Yet this evening the revelry was subdued. Tales spread of

the gargoyle invasion that had been averted the previous night. Dozens of men lay injured and at least fifteen were killed. Mindful of the dead and wary of the coming night, the carefree streets of Vesper darkened to a quiet, sober demeanor.

The mood of the city was apparent from the second-floor window of the office of Admiral Duarte. The stocky, well-groomed gentleman stared out at the grim nightfall through panes of irregular glass. "Insubordination is a grave offense, Montenegro," he mumbled, tugging the lapels of his gold-buttoned overcoat. "I ordered you to let the strangers land, yet you attacked them still. You're going to answer for it."

Dressed in an embroidered tunic and tight breeches, the knight stood unflinching before the admiral's desk. The black Jukan scarf was tied to his belt. "With respect, Admiral, I was not bound by your orders."

Duarte creased his brow and stared at Montenegro over his shoulder. "Are you suggesting I don't outrank the captain of a garrison?"

"Your expertise is naval combat. Mine is land warfare. When foreign troops set foot on our soil, my judgment supersedes yours. Rank be damned."

The admiral's face shaded red. "That insolence of yours has finished you this time! I'll see you stripped of your command."

The knight snorted. "I've already been promoted. I'll be a general—your equal in rank—as soon as my term in Vesper ends. Duarte, let's be clear on this: I shall defer to you when the pirates get too bold. On all other occasions I suggest you confine yourself to shipbuilding and politics. They make better use of your talents."

Admiral Duarte smacked heavy palms on the wooden desktop. "What an excellent suggestion! You make light of me as a commander because I also sit in the Royal Senate? Very well, let me show you what a senator can do. I'm taking this matter to Britain. The Senate will decide whether you should be punished or praised for your actions against these Juka. If I were you, I wouldn't commission my general's uniform just yet."

"Britain has lively hunting this time of year. I look forward to the trip. Admiral, if these invaders had been orcs or trolls, you would never question my decision. My campaigns against the inhumans are well-known. And you know my record puts me in good stead with the House of the Lion. Lord Valente will take my side. With his support I've got nothing to fear from the Senate. If you drag this into the public eye you'll only make a bigger fool of yourself."

Duarte sniffed. "Your ruthlessness on the battlefield is also famous. Not everyone in the capital appreciates that, including Regent Salvatore and the House of the Dove. So save your boasting, Captain. You bring your case to the Senate chamber and I'll bring mine."

The knight's eyes darkened. "I'm feeling doubly ruthless right now, Duarte. Think twice before you challenge me."

The heavysset gentleman aimed a plump finger at the knight. "You've never lost a battle, but you make enemies like a bull makes chips. All I have to do is gather them to me. You may not think so, Montenegro, but you can be beaten."

Sharp words leapt to Montenegro's tongue, but before he could speak them he glimpsed something from the corner of his eye. It was the black scarf, draped through his belt. His expression soured.

With a dagger glare he simply said, "Do what you must," then turned and stalked out of the office.

He met Damario on the hushed, cobblestone street. The amethyst sky was rousing with stars. As they started to walk, the knight rubbed his hands over his face and grumbled, "I need your services as a wizard again. Can you cook up a spell to rescue warfare from the bureaucrats?"

The younger man chuckled. "Not even an archmage could work that miracle."

"Get your business in order, Damario. We're going to Britain in two days' time. Duarte is reporting to the Senate about my handling of the Juka. He's going to try to ruin me. I need to organize my defense."

"You want me to be a witness on your behalf?"

The knight lowered his voice a step. "More than that. You're still on good terms with your old master, Gregorio, right?"

"I'm proud to say so, yes."

"Perfect. When we get to the capital I need you to talk to the old man. Convince him to speak to the Senate on our behalf. He throws a lot of weight in the House of the Griffin and I need those sorcerers on my side."

Damario blew out an exaggerated sigh. "You're assuming Master Gregorio will agree with how you handled the encounter. He is . . . an opinionated man."

"I'm counting on you to convince him. Do your best for me, Damario." He patted his cousin's shoulder. "We're all that's left of our grandfather's legacy. We have to help each other."

The wizard nodded. He glanced quickly up and down the

street, a habit he had developed over the course of the day. "I'm happy for the excuse to get out of Vesper. I keep imagining every pair of eyes belongs to a vengeful guild of thieves."

Montenegro shrugged. "Not much point in worrying about it. The dangerous ones you never see coming." He followed the comment with a pensive silence.

"You're about as comforting as a knife in the dark," muttered Damario, though his manner was a degree or two brighter for his cousin's company.

Down a torchlit corridor of hard, polished granite, Thulann of Garron moved with silent steps. Her long legs took easy strides, with a grace that doubted her advanced years. Dressed in a colorful silk coat and loose breeches, she was long, willowy and limber as a green sapling. Her hair of metallic grey swirled into a bun atop her head. Her old Jukan eyes glinted with uncharacteristic impatience.

The Palace of Garron was a stern, commanding place, but to Thulann these steep-pitched walls of granite were the warm welcome of home. The glossy surfaces formed a garden of colors, greens and oranges dappled into patterns that were at once austere and playful. They echoed sounds as sprightly as rocks skipped across a puddle. Thulann could almost hear the rebounding laughter of children who had played here over the long decades the palace had stood. Her own childhood voice numbered among them.

At the end of the corridor she reached a doorway of etched bronze. She paused with her hand on the lever, calmed herself with a long, indulgent breath, then pulled open the door and walked inside.

The chamber beyond was a jungle of columns and silk drapery. Somewhere in the center was a platform of carved white stone, lush with pillows and rich bedding. From this deep tapestry emerged a mountainous figure. Two heads taller than Thulann, the man possessed a warrior's physique and a ruler's regal bearing. He wore a voluminous pair of satiny pants and no shirt to conceal his broad chest. His head was bald. His short, backswept horns, common to all male Juka, were uncovered. His face was chiseled by as many years as Thulann's.

She felt a girlish thrill at the sight of Turlogan, Shirron of the Jukan Clans. It was an old, familiar sensation, like the snap of a cold morning in late winter. As he approached she smiled at his warmth and sweet scent. When their hands clasped together she was home. No kiss or embrace was required; his palm against hers conjured all the seasoned nuances of a lifetime of affection.

"You return," he said in a resonant voice. She saw understated relief in the glimmer of his eyes. "Tell me all your stories."

She shook her head. "Tell me yours first. I am a month behind on events in the south. Is it true Blackthorn is pushing us hard in the mountains?"

Turlogan nodded as they moved hand-in-hand into the room. "There is fighting all along the border now. The Technocrats make a contest out of every new settlement. We outmatch them on the lines, of course, but the clans have trouble coping with these machines from Logos. How do you fight something that flies a hundred feet over your head and rains lightning like a cloud?"

"The same way you fight every opponent—with honor

and discipline. But I have heard those reports already. What I want to know only you can tell me. In your honest judgment, can we beat the Technocrats?"

The warrior squeezed her with his massive hand. "We need allies."

"Is there word from the expedition to the west?"

"No. I wonder if the people of the western islands are just a myth."

At the corner of the marble slab that formed the Shirron's bed, Thulann bade him sit. She stood before him. "Then let me tell you about the race of humans we met in the north. They are no myth."

"Like you, I have heard reports. The rumors say they have power like the Technocrats without the use of machines. Like wizards in the old legends."

She slid a long needle from the coils of her hair. Her bun fell loose in long, grey swirls. She laid the needle on the bed. "Believe the rumors. I have never seen such miracles. There are wise men among them who command the elements like soldiers. Fire leaps from their fingers. The sky obeys their orders. Nature itself is their weapon."

"And they have no alliance with Blackthorn and his humans?"

"They are related, though I do not know how. But they are not allies. These northern humans call their land New Britannia. I wonder if they have ever heard of Logosia." With no urgency she slipped the long coat from her shoulders and began to fold it.

"I see." He laid his wrists on Thulann's hips. Though he was sitting, his eyes were nearly level with hers. "That does not help us, though. They were hostile to you."

"They were aggressive, yes. We were strangers crossing their border. But they are an honorable people." She stepped close to him, standing between his thighs. Her fingers draped over his wide shoulders. "I have told no one else this. During the fighting I met their leader. His name is Montenegro. We settled the battle with a Black Duel."

Turlogan flashed a smirk. "I would not wager on Blackthorn himself against you in a Duel."

Thulann pinched his neck gently. "You are charming, but you are not listening. Montenegro honored the outcome of the Duel, even though his troops were winning. It was plain to me how much he hated to do so. Yet his honor is the reason our expedition returned at all. I cannot exaggerate my admiration for that human, Turlogan. If these New Britannians have such traditions of honor, then we have common ground. I think we can fashion a bond from that."

"Then we have to send another expedition as soon as you can organize one. Time works in the Technocrats' favor."

Her brow pinched. "I agree we should hurry. But my return has made you giddy. My ancient carcass will not be going back there again."

"You must. No one else has your qualifications."

She leaned her hip against his leg, lifted her foot and began to slip off a boot. "Turlogan, I have served your family for forty years. I have been an advisor, a diplomat, a general, and a spy. But as of today, I am finished. I intend to be a teacher and a grandmother and nothing more. Warfare and intrigue are best left to young spirits and young knees."

"You only have to talk to the humans. Surely your tongue is as limber as a young woman's."

Despite herself, she let out a giggle. "I have no intention



of setting foot on another ship. I am old and that journey is hard. The sea wears like bad armor. My joints ache, my skin is chafed and I am tired in all the wrong places. Besides, I have a vow to fulfill. I promised to teach your son in the Way. I will not forsake him."

"Not even for me?"

She laid a finger on his lips and smiled. "Do not ask a question unless you want to hear the answer."

"I am sorry. You are tired. We can talk about this later." His broad hand caressed the long, tight muscles of her back. She paused, closed her eyes and moaned. His smile twinkled. "Your return is always wonderful news, Thulann. You are my rainbow."

She laughed with warm derision. "You always were an awful poet. Every time I come back to Garron, for just a moment you degenerate into a twenty-year-old."

The aged warrior grinned wide. "Do I? You make me feel young."

She opened her eyes, stroked a thumb across his cheek. "Why do old men always equate lust with youth?"

"Nostalgia, I suppose."

Thulann shook her head. "Memories are like wine—they acquire details. Let me tell you what a wise woman knows: Young men spend their lives escaping from their passions. Old men spend their lives escaping to them. Give me the latter, if you please."

Turlogan laughed. "You are magnificent."

A clatter erupted across the room. A door swung open and a man in formal attire entered. Turlogan stood and aimed a fierce glare at the intruder. "Dhayin, I told you not to interrupt me!"

The young Juka bowed his head. "Forgive me, Shirron, but Warlord Bahrok is on his way. I cannot stop him."

Turlogan and Thulann exchanged a glance. She murmured, "I want to speak with him." Turlogan nodded. Dhayin stepped out.

The Juka who stormed through the door was a boulder of a man, wide and solid and rough-edged. When Warlord Bahrok moved, his bulk stirred the air. Silk draperies wafted from his path. He was clapped in armor decorated with spines and spars. Of a height with Thulann, he stomped before her and glowered into her face.

"You killed my son." His voice sounded nearly bestial in his cavernous lungs.

Thulann bowed her head, then brushed a wayward stream of hair from her eyes. "Sigmhat died honorably, in single combat with the leader of the enemy. His death brings glory to Clan Varang. I am proud to have served in his final expedition."

Bahrok snapped, "You were supposed to look after him! Had you done your duty he would have returned with you."

At Thulann's side, Turlogan bristled. "Your grief overwhelms your judgment. Calm yourself."

Thulann laid a hand on the Shirron's side. "No. This is the time for harsh honesty. Your son was a man, Bahrok, not a child. He led the expedition and he made his own decisions. Sigmhat thought we would be safest to enter the shoals, where the humans' giant warships could not follow us. I warned him that the shoals would steal our mobility. He weighed my counsel and made his choice. I obeyed him. And so my boat could not reach the shore in time when he was attacked. That is the entire story, Bahrok. I grieve for him as you do."

The warlord clenched a heavy fist in the air. "What do you know of my grief? I was not even present for his cremation!"

"His body would not have kept all the way to Garron. We had no choice but to cremate him at Nakura."

"Stop it! You may be so old that death is just a practical matter, but my heart still burns with fire, Thulann! What action shall I take to avenge him? By the Great Mother, whose blood will wet my sword in payment for my eldest son?"

Thulann nurtured a deep breath. "I have lost daughters and sons in battle as well. An honorable death asks no vengeance."

Bahrok pushed his large face close to Thulann's. "Those are easy words on your lips. When your husband died your children disavowed you! They did not have a fraction of Sigmhat's honor."

Turlogan barked, "Enough! You will not speak that way in my chambers!" He planted a large hand on Bahrok's chest and shoved the warlord back from Thulann. The two men faced each other with inferno stares.

Under his breath Bahrok snarled, "Shirron, this is not a battle you want to start over something as mundane as a mistress."

"He is right." Thulann stood with her head bowed. Her long hair drew a veil of shadow across her face. "Bahrok, some morning in the next few weeks, you will awaken with an understanding of Sigmhat's death. You will regret what you have said here. That is the nature of grief. Until then you and I have but a single reason for contact. When that reason is satisfied I shall not meet with you again."

The warlord bared his teeth. "What are you talking about?"

"Sigmhat's Life Words. He asked me to sing them for him, if he did not return from the expedition. I intend to announce him to the Blessed Halls of Honor."

A thick silence oozed between them. Bahrok opened his mouth several times before words formed. "He . . . wanted you to sing for him?"

Thulann nodded. **Briefly** the light flashed across one clear eye. "It is my inexpressible honor to do so."

The warlord glanced up at Turlogan. The fury had fled from his gaze. Then he mashed shut his eyes and snorted. Whirling toward the door he grumbled, "Tomorrow morning at dawn, then. I shall await you at my estate." Without another breath he stalked out of the room. The bronze door slammed heavily behind him.

Turlogan watched the door for a moment longer, as if guarding against the warlord's return.

Behind him, Thulann dragged the hair from her face and exhaled a chestful of tension. "And you wonder why I tire of adventures? They never end quite as soon as you would like."

The Shirron moved closer and enveloped her in his arms. His bare torso was warm against her cheek. "Shall we escape now, my weary old rainbow?"

The old woman shut her eyes and conjured a smile. "Once and for all," she murmured, though they both knew no escape could promise that.

The chambers of the Royal Senate of Britain were a raucous verbal melee. Delegates from the various cities and

their supporters argued in loud voices from their seats around the perimeter of the room. An audience of onlookers joined in with vigor. The vaults in the stately wooden ceiling scattered noise like a fountain, until a newcomer would have had trouble determining exactly who was delivering a speech or what was being debated.

As Montenegro sat before the collected politicians, he felt no intimidation. The Senate was only marginally louder than an outdoor battle. He heard order in the cacophony. He recognized every voice as a distinct entity and could put a name to each.

*Bureaucrats*, he chuckled silently, *more concerned with the volume of their words than the weight*. Dressed in a simple black tunic, he was conspicuous among the riot of colorful doublets and jewelry and hats and rampant plumage. That difference served his cause. Among statesmen he nurtured the appearance of a simple, skillful warrior, more attuned to practicality than political concerns. The iconic image evoked the romance of battle. It often smoothed the jagged edges of reality.

The chairman of the Senate, Regent Salvatore, stood behind the official podium. He banged his staff on the dais. A loud crack split the air, quieting the chamber to a cauldron of murmurs. The old regent commanded the stage with a tall, gaunt frame and a wolf-eyed visage. "My fellow senators, we have heard the evidence both for and against Captain Montenegro. Admiral Duarte has detailed the captain's insubordination. I speak for the House of the Dove when I condemn Montenegro's bloodthirsty attack on the Juka, who showed no evidence of hostility. They spoke our language, as witnessed by many. Indeed, the fact that they

learned to sail the seas suggests that they are closer to our allies the Meer than to such dangerous races as the orcs and trolls. Yet they were assaulted without warning, like so many primitive savages."

From a nearby pew, Duarte indulged in a smug grin. Montenegro ignored him. The knight lifted a cup to his lips, to find that he was out of tea. He hoped he could stifle his yawns without it.

"Speaking for the House of the Lion," continued Salvatore, "Lord Valente has recounted for us Captain Montenegro's well-known record of defending New Britannia against the inhuman tribes. The argument, of course, is that Sosaria is a ferocious world, and in Montenegro it has forged a ferocious opponent. His instincts as a warrior left him no choice but to disobey Admiral Duarte's orders, for the good of Vesper and New Britannia. This fact merits compassion for the captain's disposition. Have I stated your case correctly, Lord Valente?" Seated beside the regent on the dais, the burly, white-mustached Valente nodded.

"The House of the Griffin and the Order of the Shepherd have nothing to add. If there is no further testimony to be heard in this matter, I shall call for a vote to determine if and to what degree Captain Montenegro should be punished for his actions."

Montenegro blinked and looked up. The call had occurred sooner than he expected, a move no doubt calculated by Duarte and Salvatore to decrease the chance of anyone else coming to the knight's defense. Montenegro, luckily, had armed himself early.

He stood and raised a hand. "My lord, if I may, I have one more piece of testimony to present."

The regent leveraged the amplifying qualities of the chamber. "Captain, we have already heard your account of the events in question."

"It is not I who will speak, but someone on my behalf. I would like to summon before this council Master Gregorio of the Order of the Magus."

A murmur bolted through the room. At the far end two figures rose from the stands and made their way down the center aisle. One of them was Damario, smartly clad in a wizard's formal gown. Walking beside him was his old teacher, Master Gregorio. The archmage was a spectre of a man, his ancient flesh draped like kidskin over a hard, jutting skeleton. A colorless beard hung like briars from his weathered face. His eyes vanished inside deep sockets. He wore a simple brown robe that seemed to reject his esteemed status among his fellow magicians.

It was a great mystery of New Britannia just how old Master Gregorio was. Damario had once guessed ninety-nine years, but Montenegro presumed that number was too low. The only certainty was that Gregorio had been a master mage forty-five years ago, when he collaborated with the Meer to develop new schools of magic. His skill with sorcery was unfathomable. Some even hinted it was unsurpassed in human history, though such a statement would question the legend of Nystul, the archmage's own teacher before the Cataclysm. Master Gregorio made no such comparisons. He belonged to that species of great man whose own legend annoyed him like a recurring toothache.

Rumors also suggested that the wizard's advanced age had begun to tax his mind. In prudent circles, of course, such talk never rose above a whisper. Montenegro was confi-

dent no one would question Gregorio's mental fitness at these proceedings. And the weight of his testimony assured the knight the support of the House of the Griffin. Though Montenegro had not spoken to Gregorio himself, the archmage had known his grandfather, the famous Sir Lazaro of Cove. He seemed to view Sir Lazaro's grandchildren with nostalgic warmth. That fact had granted Damario his prestigious apprenticeship. It would gain Gregorio's support today.

Pleased with the direction of the proceedings, Montenegro caught his cousin's eye and smiled. The young wizard darkened and glanced away.

Montenegro's stomach went cold.

Regent Salvatore called the chamber to order. When he reached the dais, Gregorio captured the room with a single, silent gaze. When he spoke, his voice was parched and leathery. "I came here today at the behest of a memory. Captain Montenegro's grandfather, Sir Lazaro, and I traveled together during the golden years before the Cataclysm. Sir Lazaro, as you know, served the Virtues like few other men, perhaps short only of the Lost King himself. As his friend, I feel it is my duty to come to the aid of one of his last grandsons.

"Like Montenegro, I am a veteran of the perilous wilds. I must agree with Lord Valente that they instill ruthlessness in a man. Under common circumstances I would defend Captain Montenegro's actions as being wholly in the spirit of his noble grandfather, who always placed the safety of Britannia above less noble concerns."

Montenegro saw Admiral Duarte wince at the statement. The knight himself could not have scripted a better endorse-



ment, yet the archmage was not finished. Montenegro braced himself and kept his eye on Damario.

"However, these circumstances are not common at all. Some new pieces of information have caused me to doubt whether Captain Montenegro has truly inherited his grandfather's honor and patriotism." Now Montenegro winced. The room cascaded with whispers. "When Damario asked me to speak to the Senate, I consulted the Ether to see what I could learn. What I discovered was shocking. My divinations confirmed that these Juka do in fact belong to the same strange race of gargoyles which serves the tyrant Blackthorn himself. I have no doubt whatsoever on this matter. I call now for the House of the Griffin to begin an intensive campaign to divine more. This could be a preamble to the invasion we have so long feared."

Based on what Thulann of Garron had told him, Montenegro knew that was only half true. Some Juka served Blackthorn, while Thulann's people did not. Or so she had claimed.

The knight held his tongue.

The rest of the Senate chamber erupted into noisy chaos, until Regent Salvatore struck the podium with his staff enough times to return order. The regent lifted a heavy eyebrow. "This is grim news indeed! But Master Gregorio, to the matter at hand, does this not support Captain Montenegro's defense? Should not agents of Blackthorn be treated harshly?"

"Indeed so!" added Montenegro, standing again. "I had honest suspicions that they might be Blackthorn's troops. Damario will confirm that."

Gregorio lifted a crooked finger. "Damario has confirmed

many things to me, you see. Captain, if you were convinced that the Juka were such a danger, tell the Senate why you let them go free."

The knight closed his eyes. By the conditions of his Black Duel with Thulann, he was bound to secrecy. He could not reveal even that their meeting had happened. That fact burned like a cinder inside him. But his mind now raced—could Thulann have lied to him? Did she serve Blackthorn? Montenegro shook his head. Though the Senate might condemn him for it, he could not place a seer's word over a warrior's. He would not break his oath to Thulann. Sir Lazaro himself would have agreed with him.

"As I have said, it was an act of Compassion," he answered finally. "My grandfather dedicated my family's shrine to that Virtue."

Gregorio looked unimpressed. "You set them free without taking a single prisoner? Not one prisoner who could have told us what dark plans Blackthorn is enacting?"

Montenegro clenched his fists. He recognized his precarious position. "Prisoners . . . proved difficult. You heard the story. We captured their leader, but he fought us so fiercely that we were forced to kill him."

The archmage gestured as if swatting away the knight's words. "You deceive by omission. Your cousin is more dedicated to the Virtue of Honesty than you are, it seems. Damario, tell the Senate what you told me."

The young wizard stood. Nervously he brushed down the wrinkles in his robe. He avoided Montenegro's eyes.

"When my cousin and I were resting in his tent, a Juka warrior came in. A female. Before I could react she knocked me unconscious. When I awoke, Montenegro had changed

his mind. Instead of slaughtering the Juka he had decided to set them free. He would not tell me what had happened."

Master Gregorio frowned deeply under his ancient beard. "What do you think happened, Damario Coventine?"

The wizard swallowed, then met Montenegro's gaze. "I think my cousin made a secret bargain with the Juka."

The silence that followed squeezed the knight. Like thick raindrops came the shouts from the audience, building to a violent swell.

Amid the cacophony Regent Salvatore shouted, "Is this true? Captain Montenegro, did you make a pact with the enemy?"

Montenegro gazed at the horde of bureaucrats screaming for an answer. They clamored like a flock of colorful birds. These were not opponents for whom he would compromise his honor.

He struck a proud stance and crossed his arms. "I will give no answer to that question, my lord. Not now, nor ever."

He did not hear the thunder of fury in the chamber. His eyes hardened into a fierce, dark glare. It was not fixed upon Regent Salvatore, however, nor even Master Gregorio, who now waved off a barrage of heated questions.

Montenegro stared at his cousin Damario. The wizard tried to challenge the gaze, but failed. Instead he vanished into the crowd as guards began to converge around the knight.

The rising chaos marked the end of the day's proceedings. All in all, the delegates would later agree, the morning stood as one of the liveliest the Senate had seen in many weeks.

The Jukan city of Garron resided atop the sharp, windy peaks of a harsh mountain range. Like ancient ruins it stood

stony and proud, its thick walls and brusque angles challenging the crags of the surrounding terrain. Yet smaller details told of a more refined era. Old metal glinted around the city, in shapes and frames not designed by the Juka. These were the skeletons of decayed machines. Most were little more than stalks and pipework; steel rodent bones. A few more were ponderous and rusty, toothed with gears and springs. In the middle of the city rose the largest of them all, a foul apparatus shaped like a giant dagger aimed straight down at the stony mountaintop. The Great Machine punctured the center of a lake of fiery molten rock. It was some manner of pump, as the mythsingers recounted. It once sucked the very blood of the Great Mother. For generations the abandoned device had lurked silent in the Juka capital, like a claw left behind by some unimaginably monstrous beast. The Juka regarded it with quiet awe.

Garron stood as a monument to the Jukas' dark past, as much as it heralded a glorious future. It was a place of tradition and memory.

Scattered through the mountains around it was a collection of small, arid plateaus. Wild flora dappled these basins, sharp-edged and colorful. Game-size insects and other peculiar beasts crawled among the rocks and crevices. It was not uncommon to find citizens of the capital city wandering these miniature wilds, hunting or riding ridgebacks or other, more exotic pursuits.

The warrior Thulann was engaged atop one such plateau. She sat on a flat rock, her legs tucked under her. Past her shoulder, the afternoon sun reflected off the granite walls of the city.

In front of her stretched a field of low grass. In the center,

two short wooden posts jutted up from the ground. A young man in tight breeches was perched upside down upon them, one hand braced on each post. His Jukan face was a dark jade color, strained and sweating. His arms shook in small bursts.

Thulann's eyes were keen as she watched. At last she blinked and sighed. An instant later the young man faltered, then toppled to the ground. With one motion he tucked his legs beneath him and rolled to his feet. Then he spat out an obscenity and punched the air.

"Again, Venduss!" shouted the old Way Master. "Get back on the posts, you nursling! You can curse me when you complete half an hour, if you have any strength left!"

Abruptly a long shadow slithered over her. In a deep voice it said, "You teach him to insult you? I was not aware that was part of the Way."

Turlogan grinned and laid a playful slap on her shoulder.

Thulann smiled up at the towering Shirron. "Come to watch your son learn humility?"

He laughed. "I am not sure I have that much patience. No, I come with news. I have begun to organize a second expedition to New Britannia."

She twitched a smirk. "Then you gave up trying to convince me to lead it? Good. Your patience certainly does not extend that far."

"You are a stubborn woman. I was forced to choose a replacement."

Thulann glanced into his face, then grimaced. "Not Bahrok."

"I had no choice. He insists on leading the next contingent. He has too much support among the greater clans for me to deny him."

Thulann sighed. "He wants revenge."

Turlogan nodded. "From the sound of it, he wants it very badly. He is putting together a force of four hundred warriors. I would not want to be your Montenegro when Bahrok arrives."

The Way Master rubbed her eyes. "He leads us into another war when we cannot win our present one! You have to stop him."

"I shall keep him in check, anyway. I have chosen someone to go with him, to make certain he does not get out of control. I am confident in my agent's ability."

"There is no such person."

The Shirron smiled. "Of course there is. You know my faith in my son has no limits." He motioned to the field, where Venduss had resumed his handstand atop the two posts. The teenage boy's face was stony with determination.

Thulann bolted to her feet. "I knew it! You want to trick me into going along. It will not work!"

"Will it not? Venduss is going. If you want to keep your vow to train him, you are going as well."

She scowled. "I have a mind to return to the temple and leave you both."

"You have no such intention. Please, Thulann. Why pretend this is a surprise? You left me no other course."

She shook her head. "I had hoped you would respect my wish to stay."

"I do not have that luxury. Neither do you. Besides, sending Venduss will show Bahrok that I am willing to risk just as much as he. I have made my decision. I am sorry, my dear."

Her eyes wandered over to Venduss and his exercise. "Sorry enough, I hope, to spend the rest of your nights alone."

"That is a pale lie."

"Only to myself." She softened her frown and took the warrior's hand. "You see how weak I am in my old age. You really should send someone else."

"I see how hard you are on my son. You will never be a doddering old woman, Thulann, if you live past a century."

She did not respond, except with an expression of longing. Instead she watched the distance as a flock of glittering firewings took to the air, flashing iridescent red and orange in the calm, sunny sky above Garron.

"I am not in the habit of sticking my neck out like this for one soldier, Montenegro."

In the stark beams of sunset, Lord Valente paced before the pillars of the Senate chamber. Around him spread the busy majesty of Britain. The capital city was a labyrinth of half-timber buildings and tile roofs, crowded inside an old stone wall that had long forgotten its purpose as a hedge against invaders. Britain had not been challenged in over a century. It was now a center for government and the grandeur that inevitably attended it. The winding cobblestone lanes seemed designed for parades and pageantry, festooned with banners even when there was nothing to celebrate.

In that proud setting Lord Valente seemed at home. The retired knight had a warrior's frame and a statesman's attire, all glittering brocades and gold trim. His snowy mustache bent into careful curls. His hands were rough from a lifetime of work.

"If you were any other man," he added, "I'd let the wolves have you."

The setting sun threw his burly shadow against the weathered bricks of the Senate. Montenegro stood nearby, in the shade of a high column. Only a slice of the knight's face was visible. "I appreciate your help, my lord. What has the Senate decided?"

"They've accepted my proposal. You won't go to prison. No other seers can confirm Master Gregorio's claim that the Juka serve Blackthorn. But you're stripped of your command. Forget being a general. You're not even an officer anymore."

The knight could not restrain a growl. Then he blew out a breath. "This will pass. I'll get my command back."

Valente's eyes were cold. "Tell me the secret you're keeping, and maybe I can salvage something for you."

"I can't. My lord, trust me when I say it's a matter of honor. I gave an oath of silence."

The old soldier fingered his white mustache. "I believe you. But if you won't talk, the news is worse, I'm afraid. You're going to lose your rank as Commander of the Knights of the Silver Serpent. Nothing will get that back for you. You're lucky not to be removed from the Order altogether."

Montenegro felt his fist tighten. Without conscious thought it flew through the air and slammed into the stone column. The knight drank in the pain. He turned his back to Valente and attempted to compose himself.

The lord did not relent. "It wasn't an easy thing to get you that much. I used some expensive favors for it. You've got to give me something in return. I want your pledge, Montenegro."

The knight spoke to the wall. "What now?"



"Forget about revenge. I don't want to see you chasing after Duarte or Salvatore or Master Gregorio."

"They're powerful men. What threat could I be to them?"

"Don't play simple with me! I know you. By now you're already scheming to get back at them. You'd rather die than let a slight go unanswered, wouldn't you? Well, you're going to leave this whole business behind. You got that? It cost me a sackful to buy your freedom. Don't throw it away. I mean it, Montenegro. I want your pledge."

Montenegro's jaws hurt. He unclenched them. "You have my word, my lord."

Valente grunted his approval. "Now go spend some time at your estate. I know you haven't been home in a long while. Brew some ale. Find yourself a chambermaid, or dare I say it, a lady. A few months of relaxation will put things into perspective. I'll see you again at the Wisp Hunt in the autumn."

"Maybe you're right." He raked his fingers through his long, black curls. "I've got it in mind to start a new training regimen. I have this nagging suspicion that I've lost my edge." His words almost faltered. Losing in the Senate was infuriating; it boiled in his belly. He craved to strike back at Duarte and Salvatore and Gregorio, all three. But a Senate debate was neither his arena nor his choice of weapon. He was, however, entirely unaccustomed to losing as he had to Thulann of Garron. Not blade against blade. That was unacceptable. It could be said that his failure in the Senate stemmed directly from his failure in the Black Duel.

His heart was hungry for acquittal. When next Montenegro met the Juka warrior Thulann, the outcome would be different.

"Excellent," said Lord Valente. "Look after yourself."

Montenegro bowed. "Thank you, my lord. You're right. It's time to take care of myself." As he turned away he added, "And my family," then vanished into the stark shadows of sunset.

Among the back streets of Britain, the night whispered with furtive voices. The city so steeped in pomp and grandeur during the day took on a secretive aspect under two watchful moons. An old song once claimed that all glory came to Britain to rest and all intrigue spread out from its walls.

Britain was known as the City of Compassion. The schemes required to keep that honor could tangle the craftiest spider.

Within the old walls, in the southwest corner, a figure crept out of a large building and stole away through the blackness. It made its way in the direction of the city gates. It carried no lantern, but kept to the deepest shadows. When it crossed a bridge of moonlight that leapt between two tall shops, the figure came to a sudden stop.

A longsword had appeared in front of it, jabbed into the ground an instant before. The figure shrank back toward the shadows, only to collide with a much larger silhouette. The scent of ale wafted on a breeze.

"Don't run, Damario," said Montenegro to his frightened cousin. "You and I have some matters to discuss."

Damario started to raise his hands. The knight snatched both of his wrists and held them firmly. The wizard let out a yelp.

Montenegro's eyes captured moonbeams. They glistened

with drink. He let his cousin go. "I'm going to pretend you weren't about to cast a spell at me. That will make this go much easier."

Damario stepped back a pace and stilled his rampant breaths. "What do you want, Gabriel?"

"An explanation."

"I only told them the truth. Truth is the purpose of the House of the Griffin. You forget they have my allegiance."

"Don't hide behind them! You turned on me, Damario. You handed the axe to the Senate and told them to cut me down. I deserve to know why."

The young wizard turned his face into a shadow. "I . . . had no choice. Master Gregorio was against you from the moment he cast his divination. How could I stop him?"

"You could have refused to stand before the Senate. You could have remained silent. By the Virtues, have some backbone! Who is Gregorio compared to your own family?"

"He is my master. He is . . . history. I couldn't deny him. I tried, Gabriel. You've got to believe me."

The knight's glower hinted no mercy. "At least you could have warned me. I dragged the chopping block into the Senate chamber and stuck my own head on it. Not only did you ruin me, you made a fool of me!"

"Please, Gabriel! Gregorio knew I would warn you. He forbade me from contacting you. Why do you think we never spoke before the trial?"

"I hear your words, cousin, but the knife still stings in my back."

"I beg your forgiveness. I can do no more. I'd give the world to take it all back!"

"You may yet give much, cousin." He walked past the

wizard and retrieved his longsword. Its blade glinted under the moon. "Have you heard of a man named Anzo?"

Damaro paused. "The thief? I don't understand."

Montenegro sheathed his weapon. "He's more than a thief. He's the head of all the thieves' guilds in New Britannia. He's also called the King of Pirates. He wields more power than Regent Salvatore could ever dream."

"What has he got to do with—"

"He may become a very important man in your life. You see, I visited a tavern by the wharf tonight. I was angry, as I'm sure you can understand. I fear the ale got the better of my tongue. There were men of . . . questionable pursuits in the room with me. Guild members. I explained to them how you killed those five thieves in Vesper."

The wizard paled. "If Anzo finds out, he'll contract my life. That's what you're saying, isn't it?"

The knight gazed at him with glassy eyes. "He may never find out. The men I talked to were quite drunk. They might not even remember what I said. But if they do, word of your guilt could easily find its way to Anzo's ear. If it does . . . well, were I in your position I'd start concocting a spell to disappear." He crossed his arms, paced in the moonlight. "Oh, and I'd stay away from your estates if I were you. I doubt Anzo's men will harm your father or sister, unless they have cause to follow you there."

Damaro cried, "You've murdered me!"

Montenegro growled back, "No! I didn't want this, but you twisted the knife inside me! Now your future is no more nor less in doubt than mine. I've just evened the score!" He rubbed trembling fingers over his eyes, regaining his composure. He looked away from Damaro. "You brought this on

yourself, cousin. That's what you must remember when you lie afraid in the dark."

The wizard clutched his fists to his ears, then began to stumble away. "I can't believe it. I can't believe you'd do this to me!"

"At what point, exactly, did you think I'd stopped being ruthless to my enemies? I didn't cross you, Damario. You crossed me!"

But the young sorcerer had careened away into the rich darkness of Britain. Montenegro could almost hear his distant sobs. With a hard frown the knight squeezed shut his eyes. He doubled over, fighting the ache in his gut. A feeling of dreadful emptiness flashed through his bones.

He drew something from his belt and held it up to the moons' rays. It was Thulann's black scarf, clutched in his fist so tightly that his hand began to shake.

He had nothing left now. Nothing except his wealth and lands, and a fire that roared inside him. And all the time he could ever desire, which he would use to train himself. No more drinks. No more indulgences. Only training.

Once he had been invincible. He would be so again.

## CHAPTER

# 3

### Treachery at Buccaneer's Den

When Sister Raveka looked at the steel windmill, she saw geometry given flight. The steady churn of the axle, the riveted design of the blades, the brisk, chaotic flow of air that kept the machine in motion, all were physical expressions of the boundless mystery of numbers. At the sight of the device a lilt of excitement rose within her. For more than half her twenty years she had studied numerical mysticism in the Order of Mathematicians, yet never did she feel less than wonderment when she plumbed the ancient equations. Hers was an elite stratum of Technocrat society. Where most Logosians saw iron machines surrounding them, Raveka watched the intricate dance of numbers. It was a gift enjoyed by very few.

The sensation brought a smile to her pale face. Of course today was more exciting than most, so she did not mind indulging in the overt display of emotion.

Sister Raveka wore a deep grey robe that fluttered against her long legs. Her wide hood flared. Rather than fight the wind, she flipped the cowl from her head and let the air tickle her short, black hair. She stepped up to the base of the

stanchion that held the windmill aloft. It leaned out over the edge of the city. Raveka nudged against the railing and gazed down a thousand feet.

The floating city of Logos was a technological legend. Built as the last citadel of a fallen race of Overlord engineers, the gigantic structure hung in the air like a dark metal cloud. Hidden reservoirs of refined levitant held it aloft. Only a few, seemingly insufficient strands of steel connected the city to the earth far below. It was a place of awesome mystery.

The histories claimed that Logos was impregnable, even when the Juka rebelled against their Overlord slavemasters just before the Great Cataclysm sundered the world. The city had not been attacked in the decades since Blackthorn became the Techno-Prophet. Though the Technocrats and Logosian Juka had mastered a mere fraction of the Overlords' abandoned science, no one doubted that Logos would hold fast against anyone bold enough to attempt another assault. Even to contemplate invasion would have been folly.

Of course, Logosian society extended beyond the safety of the city itself. The land-bound Technocrat settlements, particularly those in the northern mountains, were in fact in present danger. It was this danger that brought Raveka out of doors this morning, and that put the sparkle in her brown, feather-shaped eyes.

A whistle of wind curled past her. She turned a white cheek against the chill, when she saw another person approaching. Like Raveka he wore the cowled robe of a Mathematician, though his raiments sported a black tabard of rank. When he neared, she erased her smile and assumed a proper demeanor.

Inside a yawning hood the middle-aged man bowed his head. His face was composed of high, sharp angles. His skin was veiled with endless tattoos, depicting mathematical equations in a rich, arcane filigree. From the midst of these numbers he regarded her with a hard, precise gaze.

"Sister Raveka," he spoke with thin lips.

"Father Gaff," she replied with a bow, then they exchanged a brief chant. It was a verse from an elaborate geometrical proof, which served as a greeting among their sect.

"Thank you for meeting me here," said Father Gaff. "Something has occurred. Quick action must be taken. I've need to put you into play this morning."

Raveka nodded. "Garron has sent diplomats to Britain."

Gaff lifted an eyebrow; an equation painted on his temple assumed a fresh nuance. "Who told you this news?"

"No one informed me, Father. It was obvious. When I heard that Captain Lynch was coming to Logos, I knew you must be preparing to send me to New Britannia. Since we've never sent a spy there before, surely only the war with Garron would prompt you to take such an action."

The old Technocrat tilted his head in acknowledgment. "A sound probability. Yet you also know about the Jukan diplomats. Please elaborate."

"I merely investigated. You've ordered a two-seat carriage for me to fly. The only person with whom I've trained to travel is Pikas, the Jukan assassin. You would not send a Juka to New Britannia unless many other Juka were also there. Otherwise he'd stand out too much. Therefore, the clans must have sent another expedition. Since it would be absurd for Garron to attack the Britanniens, their entourage must have diplomatic aims."



Father Gaff bowed his head again. "Splendid logic. I'm pleased that your skills are sharp."

Raveka blinked slowly, a gesture of submission. "I wasn't limited by logic. I tracked your motives by intuition. I've learned about you, Father, while you taught me my trade."

Gaff steepled his fingers before his face. His lips suggested a smile. "Excellent. But you won't have an old spymaster to give you hints in New Britannia. Stay alert to all sources of information. Your mission is a critical one."

"What's my goal?"

"Sabotage." He squinted against a stray bolt of sunlight. "Listen, no matter how many times we drive them off, the Juka clans continue to build settlements in our northern territories. A full war is inevitable. My calculations show that we can win it. But if Garron allies with Britain, the equations will swing against us. We may well lose."

She entwined her fingers before her breast. "So I'm to make sure no alliance is formed."

"Precisely. I've taught you how. In this endeavor, complexity is your weapon. Remember that diplomatic accord is nothing more than the solution to an equation. Increase the major variables and the problem becomes too difficult to solve. In other words, stir the pot."

"I know what to do, Father. But I have questions."

"Proceed."

"Who else knows of my mission? Lector Caleb? Blackthorn's Chosen? Does the Techno-Prophet know?"

A soft growl escaped Gaff's throat. "Garron has spies among us as surely as we do among them, so I've kept this quiet. The one man I would trust—Blackthorn—has not been told. Lector Sartorius is exercising his right as the

Chosen to restrict access. Sartorius himself knows nothing, nor does he need to know. Of course Lector Caleb has been informed. As the head of our sect he's prepared to take credit if you succeed. He knows you're my best student."

She pinched her lips and glanced over the edge. "As long as I know whose eyes are watching me."

"Forget your cares in Logos, Sister. I have balanced the variables here. You just make certain no Britannian eyes discover you." He reached out both hands and lifted her hood back into place. "I suggest you maintain strict decorum before you leave. Fortify your adherence to the wisdom of the Machine. You've seen the emotional behavior of the Logosians outside our sect. New Britannia dwarfs it. When you take on your disguise there, Entropy will try to snare you."

Raveka straightened the hood, then shook her head. "I can defeat Entropy. I've trained for it most of my life." Her eyes narrowed, glinting in the morning sun, a kind of stoic smile.

Father Gaff frowned openly. "Entropy is not the danger, Sister. It is the struggle against it that becomes addictive."

Sister Raveka bowed her head. Even under the shadow of her cowl, however, the sparkle did not leave her eyes.

"Pretty Sister Raveka," said the grizzled old sailor as he watched her doff her grey robes, "I'm proud you've grown into the daughter I never got to enjoy."

In her personal chambers, dim and stone-walled, Raveka turned her back to the man as she slipped out of her clothes. Her body was long and curvaceous. On the bunk before her lay a new wardrobe of considerably livelier color and weave.

She sorted through the piles, selected a white chemise, and stepped into it.

Without looking back at the man she answered, "I'll use every skill I have to make myself worthy of your name."

"So you must, lass. To be Shanty Lynch's daughter is to devour life bite by bite. Though I'm twelve years gone, you're going to find my reputation in New Britannia is as strong as three-day-old fish! There was never another buccaneer like I used to be." With a laugh, Captain Lynch leaned back against the wall and shoved his hands into the leather pockets of his overcoat. His cheeks were a thicket of wiry hairs and crooked scars, which pulled into a webwork of lines as he smiled. "I knew them old clothes would still fit you. By the Virtues, you're going to be the palest, prettiest goose ever to walk through Buccaneer's Den."

Raveka shrugged on a wine-colored vest, then unfurled a bright red skirt. "It will be . . . a challenge. But you've been patient with me all these years, Captain, and I intend to reward you for it. We've crafted an impenetrable disguise. I shall portray Riona Lynch with the highest precision."

Captain Lynch burbled a vulgar sound from his heavy lips. "Pah, I came here to refresh you on how to be a Britannian. Your first order is to stop talking like a damn Mathematician! You're supposed to be a courtesan. Ain't no man going to hire a tongue as dry as that."

She threaded the laces of her vest with meticulous care. The result was convincingly sloppy. "Father Gaff suggested that I hold close to the ways of the Machine until I reach New Britannia. He believes your homeland will tempt a young woman like me toward entropy."

"Gaff said that, eh? He's a shrewd man, your master. He'll

be Lector himself one day, mark that. And he's right, there's every temptation you can think of at Buccaneer's Den, and a damn sight more you ought not think about. So you forget about ol' Shanty here and heed Father Gaff's words instead." He fished a small, black bottle from his pocket, uncorked it and tipped a swig. Catching his breath he added, "But see here, lass, I've got my own sort of scruples as keen as your master's. And they tell me there's one man at the Den who can help you like none other with this business of spying and sabotage. They used to call him the King of Pirates. Anzo is his name."

Raveka adjusted the crimson skirt, then pointed a bare toe to flare out the wrinkles. "I know about Anzo. Every thieves' guild in New Britannia answers to him. I prefer not to dally with thieves."

The old sailor sneered. He patted himself on the chest. "What do you think a pirate is, a fisherman with bad aim? Thieves are like anyone else—some are honest and most are crooked. And you have to dally with them sooner or later. Anyway, Anzo ain't a thief himself. He's a businessman. You deal straight with him and you can count on getting whatever you pay for."

Her eyes narrowed. "That does interest me, now that you bring it up. The buccaneers answer to him, as well?"

"The wise ones do. The stupid ones . . . well, look here, I was brassy enough to cross him and you see what it got me—shipwrecked in a strange land. I thank my good fortune that strange land turned out to be Logosia. A place of miracles, this is, and pretty little Sister Raveka the brightest of them all." He smiled, flashing metal teeth. "You've got to give him my thanks for that, when you see him."

"I'm sorry, but I won't be mentioning you to anyone, except as my late father."

Lynch wiped his chin. "Just as well. You take care out there. If you deal with Anzo, don't give him cause to turn on you. Be wary of them rich gentlemen in Britain, too. Don't be fooled by their gold and feathers. There's no more than a few good apples in that whole barrel of rot. And there's one last fellow you need to keep an eye on."

She turned an expectant look at him as she arranged the rest of the clothes into a neat stack.

He pointed at the doorway. "I'm talking about that Jukan bladesman they're sending with you. Pikas. You watch him close, hey?"

Raveka paused. "I plan to. You don't have to warn me about him."

"I'm warning you anyway. He's as deadly as any man I've ever seen, and that includes them Way Masters from Jukaran. And worse, he takes too much pleasure in the killing. I don't trust a fellow like that."

"I'll stay alert. And I'll be armed."

Lynch grunted. "If you're ever worried about him, you disappear. Understand? Don't tarry if that beast turns wild." He chewed a busy frown, then stepped close beside her. From her stack of clothes he retrieved a pair of slippers. "Come on, lass, put some shoes on. You're a courtesan, not a wharf girl. Here now, give old Shanty a glimpse of his new daughter Riona, eh?"

For an instant Raveka worked the muscles of her face. A curve of her lip here, an exact tilt of her eyelid, and the Technocrat's features glowed with warm life. Then she smiled and a soft blush crept across her white skin.

The old pirate cupped her cheek. "Ahhh, see there? I swear when you do that, the woman inside you shines like a lamp! It suits you better than that cold face you always wear."

Her cheeks reddened more. She looked away from him, her brown eyes sparkling. "You know I always dreamed of going to New Britannia. Ever since I heard the old stories as a girl, of Sir Geoffrey and the young Blackthorn and them all."

"I know. You'll fit in quite natural there, lass. But mind what Father Gaff told you, as well." He clutched her half-bare shoulders and grinned. "I almost wish I was going along, too. But then I see that light in your face and I know you've got my spirit inside you."

In a whirl Raveka grabbed his wiry beard. Conjuring her best Vesper accent she blurted, "Come on, you bony old dog, let's get on with the lessons before you're too withered and ancient to keep up with me! Tell me again how to be a Britannian courtesan. I'm ready to be refreshed. What's first on the list?"

Captain Lynch rattled out a steady, eager laugh. "The first thing, my child, is to reacquaint yourself with this old friend." He handed her the bottle of liquor. She regarded it with an expression of dread. The old sailor chortled. "Remember now, there's a loose tongue inside this bottle. It's your job to pour it into someone else's mouth and not let them pour it into yours. That takes practice. Bottoms up, darling!"

Raveka held the glass bottle to her lips, stifled her breath for a moment and then drank. The sour parade of reactions across her face whipped her instructor with coarse laughter. She sneered at him, then braced for another try.

\* \* \*

The outlaw port of Buccaneer's Den was the opposite of Logos in as many ways as Raveka could number. Where Logos hovered somberly under a moody, cloud-softened sky, the Den spread out open and raucous in the pure island sunlight. Where Logos was a museum of wondrous technology, the Den strutted with ramshackle pride, seemingly tossed together from junk and flotsam and fragments of looted opulence. Where the Technocrat city enforced strict laws, the people in this tropical haven grew loud and brazen, carousing noisily despite the late morning hour, fighting blade-to-blade in the streets, laughing and singing and debauching with an almost belabored diligence. It was louder and soggier and filthier than the worst image Captain Lynch had ever described.

The dawning glee inside of Sister Raveka brought color to her pale flesh. She incorporated the feeling into the mask called Riona Lynch.

Dressed in her crimson skirt and vest she strolled down one of the main avenues. Beach sand leapt onto her like fleas, nestling in every fold and wrinkle. She gave up trying to brush it off. Her skirt was soon fringed with the stuff.

She bemused at her own fastidiousness. This was going to be hard work. But everyone here was grimy with sand and sea spray; at least she imagined she might blend in a bit more this way. And she needed every scrap of help she could gather. With her soft, white skin she could not have been more conspicuous if she set herself on fire. The denizens of this island were tanned like leather. These were tough people. As she moved among them they watched her like bored sharks.

The Den felt dangerous. Raveka trusted her own combat

training, but she was glad of the stout figure who strode beside her.

Pikas of Enclave stood high and wide among the New Britannian humans. Presently he was wrapped in loose garments, concealing every inch of his green Jukan flesh. Only his steady eyes peered out from a turban and scarves. The costume was especially unusual in this balmy island climate, but they had no other choice—it would not do for a Juka to be spotted at Buccaneer's Den, and Pikas had refused to wait for her in secret, lurking like a fleshwing in the reedy swamps and palm groves surrounding the bayside town. So he sweated in his exotic garb and stood out like a lost phantom. Raveka did not mind. They would not be here for long, and with his powerful build, mindful gait, and bristling weapons he was not likely to be the target of unwanted inquiry. Besides, Raveka was confident that Pikas was at least the equal of the five best swordsmen on the island, at once.

In any case, he looked no more unusual than some of the more flamboyant revelers who haunted the lanes and balconies of the town. These would be the pirates themselves, as Captain Lynch had explained it. Anarchy seemed to be their order of fashion. Garish consumption was their mode of living. Raveka could readily put her old friend Shanty among those wide brims and painted breastplates and sumptuous, seaworn overcoats. At that moment, and for the first time, his strange behavior seemed completely logical.

The tropical sky heated her face. She returned it a warm smile.

"What a wanton place," grumbled Pikas from beneath his muffle of scarves. "Humans in their natural state are barbarians."



Raveka's eyes reflected the sun. "Isn't it amazing? Pure, innocent lust, unsullied by civilization. You almost have to admire it."

The Juka swiveled a dark glance at her. "You enjoy this role too much, Sister. I liked you better as an icicle."

"I am still who I always was, Pikas. Just not in the open like this." She stopped at a cross street and gauged their position. Then they proceeded down a side lane. "Besides, I would think that piracy might appeal to your own proclivities."

"Forget it. Pirates work during the day. I work the darkness."

"I ply them both. But then I'm a spy, not an assassin."

Pikas snorted. "Everything interesting happens at night."

"The night keeps secrets. In the day, people talk. Daylight is my coconspirator."

The Jukan assassin folded his hands together and popped a few knuckles. "I won't debate a Mathematician. But if you're playing a courtesan while we're here, you'd better work well under the moons."

She almost snickered. "You're as sharp as they say."

"As sharp as I need to be." Then his garments fluttered and a sword whisked in his hand. He thrust it around a blind corner. Stepping forward, Raveka saw a man's throat pricked by the point of the blade. The man froze.

She nodded. "Excellent, Pikas. I hoped you'd spotted our shadowers when I did."

They drove the young man back into the narrow alley where he had been waiting. The Juka glowered at him. "There's five crossbows pointed at us right now. Call them off or I'll carve a flute out of your windpipe."

Raveka judged the man not a day older than she. He was fair-haired, handsome and conspicuously clean, which made her oddly nervous. His clothes spoke of casual elegance. He was unarmed and talked with calm reserve. "I can't call them off. They don't obey me, they just protect me. So I'd suggest lowering your weapon. Some quarrels you can't outrun."

Pikas snarled, "I'll take my chances."

"Wait." Raveka wagged a finger at the young man. "You work for Anzo, don't you?"

He nodded. "You did come all this way to see me. You might as well put my windpipe to its intended use, no?"

With a swishing sound Pikas's blade reappeared in its scabbard. "What's your name?"

"I'm called Mister Chase. I speak for Anzo today. And who am I speaking to?"

Raveka stepped in front of Pikas. "I'm Riona Lynch. Shanty's daughter."

"The buccaneer? You don't look like I remember him."

"Tell it to my mother. I want to negotiate for Anzo's services."

Mister Chase cast a skeptical look over her. "Do you, then? And what do you have to offer?"

From a fold in her skirt she produced a silken bundle. A loose corner revealed a glint of metal. Raveka peeled away a bit more of the cloth, uncovering a bizarre device rendered in springs and gears. It was no longer nor wider than a dagger. A short crossbow bolt was nocked in a groove along its top.

Chase widened his eyes. "Very exotic. A weapon, I suppose, from the fabled lands of Blackthorn? Perhaps we can

do business. Of course that depends on, eh, what it is you want Anzo to offer."

Raveka reached one hand to Pikas's cheek. With a deliberate motion she pulled away the scarf, revealing his Jukan face.

Chase blinked twice. "Oh my. Very intriguing. Yes, I think we can talk further. Come with me."

The Den's dockside fluttered with activity on the morning the big ships prepared to sail. A total of four vessels crawled with sailors, loading up weapons and supplies. The tall masts creaked as beams were hoisted into place. The sky seemed full of ropes and tackle and sputtering banners.

Leading the outfitting was a robust man with an even more robust bellow. He wore a chain mail hauberk under his pirate's frock coat. His broad hat geysered plumage. From the wharf he roared commands and the bustle swirled around him, the eye of a human hurricane.

Two people watched him from the shade of a tavern doorway. One of them was a fair-haired young man, handsome and conspicuously clean. The other was a small girl of eighteen. Though her dress was a swag of colorful tatters, her freckled skin was freshly bathed. Her long, red hair was combed and braided. Her sea-green eyes were captivated by the activity on the docks.

She fidgeted with a patterned scarf around her waist. "Tell me it's true, Chase. I can't believe it."

"What, that Anzo made a deal to appease Jack Bullock?" Mister Chase offered a tiny smirk. "The evidence is right in front of you, Toria. Bullock's setting sail with Anzo's maps."

The girl wrinkled her nose. "Who cares about Captain

Bullock? He's an ass with rotten breath. What I mean is, is it true he's going off to rob a fleet of gargoyles?"

"So they say. Though how Anzo could have learned about a Jukan convoy is beyond me. Personally, I wonder if it's not a ruse."

Toria's expression tightened. "Don't say that! Anzo could have found out from a wizard. I've heard the seers in Britain know all about the Juka now. How there's some that work for Blackthorn and some that don't. How they've got their own kingdom on a big island in the southern seas. Can you imagine it?"

"No, I can't."

"I can. And I'll tell you something else." She tilted her head closer to Chase. "I'm going out there with Bullock. I want to see these 'civilized gargoyles.' "

The young man grimaced. "Maybe that's not a wise decision."

"Aren't you curious, Chase? I mean, what are the Juka like? What do they wear? What do they eat? What songs do gargoyles sing?"

"I know this—the Juka attacked Vesper six months ago. Gargoyles are dangerous creatures. I'd reconsider if I were you. You're a minstrel, Toria, not a pirate."

She spat a dismissive sound. "You know Bullock is just going to loot those ships and sink them. He doesn't give quarter. Well, I'm not going to miss my only chance to get a look at some living Juka. I'm sailing with him." She let out a giggle. "Besides, if it wasn't dangerous, it wouldn't be an adventure, would it?"

Chase shook his head. "You say that with the conviction of someone who's never been in a real battle."

"Got to get my sea legs someday, hey?" She laughed and sprang away down the sandy path on bare, sun-hardened feet.

"Don't go, little girl," repeated Chase in a whisper, then sighed.

A bluff of old coral rose above one corner of the bay. Two figures stood upon it, studying the distant preparations at the docks. Raveka still wore her crimson attire. It was several shades dingier for the few days they had been on the island. She took strange comfort from that.

She motioned to the four tall ships in the harbor, which began to unfurl great white sails. "There you are, Pikas. I calculate four hundred eighty-six pirates on board. They should put a stop to Garron's diplomats."

The Logosian assassin shook his head. "That's not enough."

"These are veteran sailors. I understand Warlord Bahrok never set foot on a boat until this expedition. That's a great factor in the humans' favor. The battle might be close, but the equation weighs to our benefit."

"I don't care about your calculations. Bahrok's equal to twenty humans by himself. He's got some of his best lieutenants with him. This is hardly going to slow them down." He bit a mouthful from a tropical fruit in his hand. "You think too much of these Britannians, Sister. It comes from spending your nights drinking with them."

A twinge of sinful joy flickered within her. She subdued it before it showed. "Don't criticize me just because you can't join in. I'm here to establish my identity as a courtesan, in case I have need of it. I'm refining my skills. It does take practice, you know."

Pikas spat out a seed. "Some of the locals have been trying to follow you."

"I know. I've discovered a trick with my hands that makes them want to catch me alone. I think their attraction is quaint. Don't worry, none of them have the skill to shadow me."

"No? Hmm. Maybe you're right." He finished the fruit and tossed the core over the edge of the bluff. "Still, I took no chances."

Raveka glanced at him. "What do you mean by that?"

"You remember the kid with the long topknot and his two tall friends? From the tavern last night? They got close enough to you to make me nervous. I killed them and dumped their bodies in the harbor."

Her flesh tingled. "You did what?"

"It won't attract any attention in this place. The bay is choked with skeletons."

She stammered on a word. "That's not the point! I didn't tell you to—"

He barked in her face, "No, I made my own decision to kill them! Are you going to question that, Sister?" She opened her mouth to speak, but Pikas cut her off. "Do you remember Mister Chase's archers? That's me. I'm here to protect you, not to follow your orders. I have my own expertise. I'll practice it, just like you do."

Raveka felt her flesh grow hot. Here was the brutal, undisciplined man she knew would eventually show himself. For an instant she thought of the spring-powered weapon strapped to her thigh. But the next second Pikas shot her a look that turned her bones to ice. His hand was relaxed, ready; poised by the handle of a throwing dagger.

She kept his gaze, though she knew the gesture was pointless.

After many heartbeats, Pikas cracked his knuckles. "Keep calm, now, Sister. A Mathematician is supposed to be calm. Father Gaff warned you not to forget that, right?"

Raveka turned away from him. She bunched her fists in the wrinkles of her skirt. "We'll know by nightfall if the pirates managed to sink the Garronites. If they have, we can go home. I know you hate it here."

The Juka spoke through a wide grin. "I don't know. I'm just now starting to like this place."

"Come now, Tiny Tori! Sing us a song!"

The crew of the barquentine *Liberty* convened noisily amidships. The mob clanked and clattered with a savage assortment of weapons. Many of them were armored; many more were half-naked. To a man they stared up at Toria, who dangled her legs off the lowest beam of the mainmast. She laughed brazenly, though she clung to the tall pole for comfort as well as balance.

Captain Jack Bullock hovered just below her, his eyes bloodshot and his teeth bared in a grin. "Aye, my little red stowaway, give us a song like you did at the Dead Eye last night! Or show us what else you can do to be useful here." The order prompted gruff cheers from the crew.

The ocean lurched around the ship. Buccaneer's Den had long vanished over the northern horizon, far behind them.

Toria swallowed. She waggled her hands at the restive crowd. "All right, then, lads! Give me some quiet, hey? I can't sing while you're lowing like milk cows in a barn!" Laughter skittered among the sailors, who calmed a bit. "I

wrote this yesterday evening, when I first heard tell of Captain Bullock's intrepid adventure. Shut up now and listen."

The pirates obeyed, after a fashion. From Toria's sultry lips came a clear, mellow voice:

*Crest the far horizon sea  
Whose shores unknown shall ever be  
And bring the dust of distant lands to me.*

*Mount your lunging ebon ship  
And breathe sweet foreign wind into my lips.*

*Proud sea-walker, slip between  
The heavens grey and ocean green  
And tell me of the wonders you have seen.*

*Mountain's glint and desert's sighs,  
Silver hills and golden skies;  
O, let me lie among them in your eyes.*

*Mount your lunging ebon ship  
And breathe sweet foreign wind into my lips.*

When she finished, the wooden barquentine croaked in the silence. Two hundred solemn eyes gazed at her. Then Captain Bullock's roar cracked the moment.

"Heaven's nipples, you ain't singing to a boat full of women here! Give us something for lads going to battle! Make it worthy, girl, or I'll make you a prize for the man who brings me the most Jukan heads!"

Toria did not like the enthusiasm with which the crew greeted the suggestion. She decided her best course was to



play to the clamor. Twisting a familiar melody she improvised, to the glee of the sailors:

*For the first one I meet, I got me a plan:*

*I'll cut out the heart of that ol' Juka man!*

*With a hey! and a holly!*

*I'll always be jolly!*

*I'll cut out the heart of that ol' Juka man!*

*The next one I meet, if his mistress can stand it,*

*I'll cut off that part of that ol' Juka bandit!*

*With a hey! and a holly!*

*I'll always be jolly!*

*I'll cut off that part of that ol' Juka man!*

*If the third one I meet turns his tail-end to me,*

*I'll cut out the fart from that ol' Juka flea!*

*With a hey!—*

The blare of a trumpet cut short the chant of the crewmen. From the crow's nest a watchman shouted, "Ships ahead!"

Captain Bullock threw his mouth open wide. "Already? Take me for a damn cherry! No one could have plotted a course that exact. Who the hell did Anzo get that chart from?"

Toria's instincts screamed at her to get belowdecks and hide. Mass melee was not her choice of fun. But something reached inside her chest, seized her by the heart and dragged her higher up the mainmast. From this new vantage she spotted sails in the distance. Their shape was peculiar. The emblems on them looked jagged and alien.

Her green eyes glistened as she perched atop the mainsail

and watched the Jukan ships appear. A few feet away the red battle flag of Captain Jack Bullock hoisted past, snapping in the stiff breath of the ocean.

When the *Liberty* pulled closer to the lead Jukan ship, Toria surrendered to her instincts. The gargoyle fleet counted a dozen longboats. The pirates outnumbered them, but not comfortably. The battle might be ugly.

She could almost make out details of the Jukan soldiers in the distance. The thrill of it made her head light.

The cargo hold was dank and moldy. Toria hid herself among empty crates and piles of sailcloth that swayed with the rocking of the ship. Cold seawater sloshed over her bare feet. The timbre of the ocean sounds told her she was below the waterline. She heard the thump of heavy footsteps above and the war cries of the pirates. Arrows thudded against the ship. Then something bumped the hull near her and metallic clanks issued from above.

She shivered, monitoring the battle by its noises. There were screams and snarls; she could not tell to whom they belonged. Seconds and minutes drew out until she lost all sense of time. It seemed the fighting would continue forever. She held fast to the dagger she had brought with her, imagining it might save her life.

With a crack, sunlight spilled into the hold. The hatch flew off and a wave toppled in. But it was blood, not water. The dark stuff drooled over the lip of the hatchway in impossible amounts. Then a spectre fell through the hole and slammed heavy feet into the deck. He was a walking mountain, clad in exotic armor, streaming pirate blood from his drenched clothing. The being crouched, raised a pick-like

weapon and smashed the bulkhead. Toria choked down a squeal at the jarring impact. Several more blows followed. Wood fractured. Then the foamy, red-stained seawater rose around her ankles and up her calves.

By the light of the hatchway she made out the Jukan warrior's strange face, angry and fierce and savagely proud. He plucked something from his belt and lifted it beside his helmet. It was the liberated head of Captain Bullock. The Juka pointed it at the hole in the ship's hull.

"This is for Sigmhat, you barbarian," he growled, then cast away the head. It plunked into the water not far from Toria. She sucked down a shallow breath and froze.

From the sounds overhead, she knew the battle had finished. The Juka climbed out of the cargo hold and shouted at somebody on deck. Toria did not listen. She could neither move nor think. As the hold filled with cold, crimson water and the ship began to list, the little minstrel knew she could never escape. Though she would drown here, she vowed that first Juka's face would be the last she ever saw.

And so did she witness the sinking of the *Liberty* from the inside, as Captain Jack Bullock danced around her with lively, grinning abandon.

Sister Raveka wore her Mathematician's robe that night. As she knelt on a beach away from the Den, she peeled down the garment to her waist. The island air was warm on her bare skin, though the light of a half moon gave chilly illumination. Before her in the sand was a small pot. She dipped a stylus into its inky contents and began to inscribe symbols on her arm.

With each new mathematical formula she painted, the

familiar cadence of numbers and equations unfurled inside her. They were soothing and calm; reliable old friends. Precise inscription was a powerful ritual. Verses of proofs rumbled hypnotically through her mind.

She recognized Pikas's footsteps long before he reached her. She did not break her ritual. Most of her torso and arms were now shawled with intricate formulae.

"What's that?" asked the assassin, pointing.

"Cleansing. Do not interrupt." She closed her eyes and rendered symbols upon the soft lids.

The Juka did not seem to hear her. "The word in the Den says that all four buccaneer ships sank."

She sighed, then answered without pausing in her work. Her fingers moved with a lifetime of practice. "I know. They would have returned three hours ago, had they been able. It appears you were correct about their chances. I suspect Anzo deliberately sent that pirate captain out to die. I am led to understand they were not on the best terms."

"Then Anzo didn't live up to our bargain."

"But he did. We paid for a fleet of buccaneers and that's what we got. It wasn't wasted. Solutions proceed by ordered steps. We've dictated Warlord Bahrok's mood. It will hinder diplomacy with Britain."

Pikas frowned. "So why waste time with this ceremony? We've got work to do on the mainland. Let's fetch the car-riole and set off."

"I've already located an inn outside Britain, where no questions will be asked of us. But I shall have to play Riona Lynch considerably more once we're there. Before we travel, I am grounding myself in the arcana of the Machine. That was your advice, wasn't it?"

He kicked the sand, producing a small hole. "Mathematicians. Always take everything literally."

She reduced his voice to a distant whisper in her ear. The stroking touch of the stylus provided a focus for her concentration, each tiny jolt a stimulus to subsume. By the time she had painted herself from scalp to waistline, she felt as comfortable as if she were nestled in the mechanical thrum of Logos.

Entropy, she now understood, was a subtle opponent. It lured the mind to emotional snares. But she had identified the Chaos within her. She could resist it. In point of fact, she enjoyed resisting it.

She was hungry now to face the mainland and the lords and knights arrayed handsomely upon it.

## CHAPTER

# 4

## Masters and Warlords

The Jukan longship was a sculpture in wood. Wrought with clan patterns, its contours alternately curled and dagged in stark, elegant shapes. A dozen pairs of oars were stowed on benches in the foremost section, to be manned by warriors when conditions required. From the single mast hung a sail woven with the symbol of Garron. Under its rippling shadow, twenty Juka were scrubbing the battle from the planks of the deck and hull.

The aft third of the ship was a roofed enclosure. Inside was space for supplies and cargo, as well as actual bunks for a privileged few. Thulann sat on the edge of hers. She wore a wrinkled caftan. Small grunts peppered her breath as she rubbed the soreness from her limbs.

This vessel was opulent compared to those employed on Sigmhat's expedition, yet comfort seemed a remote fantasy to the old Way Master. The cabin roof warded off sunlight and rain, which was a welcome relief, but it trapped too much moisture. Puddles sloshed on the floor. Thulann felt as if she were traveling inside a wet shoe. Each day marked a fresh persecution of her joints and digits.

Down the steps and into the room trotted the young warrior Venduss. He was dressed in nothing but tight breeches, displaying his acrobat's physique under banded jade skin. His footfalls were sprightly and his long, ebony braid bounced. He bowed his head to Thulann.

"Why are you down here, teacher? The warriors are telling their tales on deck. We won a barrellful of glory today!"

Thulann grimaced at a stubborn knot under her hipbone. "Bahrok too often confuses death for a measure of glory. I would rather we had left one ship intact, and perhaps a survivor or two on board. Besides, I would trade all the glory in Jukaran right now for a hot bath, a dry pillow, and a meal that was neither washed with nor spawned in salt water. I shall pass on less substantial distractions."

The teenager smirked. "As you please, teacher. I return."

"Stay, Venduss. Your armor needs cleaning."

"Can it wait until evening?"

"It cannot. Do as I say, now. My mood is choppiier than last week's storm."

Venduss grumbled and fetched his armor from a hanging stand. Streaks of drying blood crisscrossed the steel plates. From a cask he dipped a cup of fresh water and began to brush at the stains. "Your mood has turned because you did not kill any humans yourself. Confess it, teacher."

Her face twisted as she flexed a stiffening knee. "Need I record my deeds in a ledger? I lost count of them long before you were born, nursling."

"I slew six myself. I did not see you in the battle at all."

"Neither did the humans, until I allowed them. Now attend to your work and let me enlighten you on the subject

of my mood. Bahrok is outraged. He is now convinced that the humans are bloodthirsty animals. That means we must work doubly hard to keep him from sailing us into a second war. We are here to make an ally, not an enemy."

Venduss shrugged. "The humans seemed savage enough to me. I cannot argue with the warlord on that account."

"Do not judge an island by its rocky coast. I recognize the leer of bandits, whether in the Jukaran deserts or the waters of New Britannia. Though I grant you these were uglier than most." She reclined on her bunk and bent her body. Her spine crackled. "Ahhh. No, those were hardly fair representatives of New Britannia. One thing does disturb me, however. Let me show you something I found. Open that metal box in the corner and bring me what you see inside."

The young warrior twinkled a grin. "Ah, loot from the giant ships? Now I know what you were doing while we fought on deck." He raised the hinged lid of a strongbox. As he reached inside, the box toppled to the ground. A stack of other stores clattered around it. Then a large, pale shape darted out of the corner toward an open window.

Venduss tucked his head and leapt through the air. He landed with one bare foot on the invading creature. Thulann appeared beside him. They stared at the intruder, pinned between the shoulder blades, facedown on the floor.

It was a human, though far smaller than any they had encountered. Her shape was girlish. She wore a ragged, colorful dress and her red hair was woven into braids. Her body was drenched with blood and seawater. She gasped for air, though she did not move.

Thulann exhaled her tension. "Great Mother, she is nearly



a child. Let her up." Venduss carefully removed his heel from her back. The human girl whimpered, then wriggled into a corner. "Calm yourself, please," murmured Thulann in a gentle voice. As she knelt closer the girl brandished a long knife. The Way Master removed it without effort. Then she held up her hands and said, "I will not touch you, child. Catch your breath and relax. We will wait to talk."

Thulann ushered Venduss to the far side of the room. With a finger she cautioned him to silence. They glanced up the steps, barred the door to the open deck, then waited. Many long moments later, the girl adjusted herself to a less awkward position.

"Are you ready to speak?" said Thulann from her bunk.

The red-braided girl rasped, "Am I a prisoner now?"

"No. I do not have the means to keep a prisoner."

She swallowed. "Will you let me live?"

"If you satisfy my one condition. Tell me your name."

"Toria."

Thulann smiled up at Venduss. "Venduss, meet Toria, our secret stowaway. Toria, meet my student, Venduss, son of Turlogan, Shirron of the Jukan Clans. And I am Thulann of Garron, Master of the Way. I greet you with respect and honor."

The wide-eyed Toria almost managed a smile in return.

"I'm pleased to meet you."

"Are you injured?"

"I don't think so."

The old Juka cocked her head. "Unless you are a very convincing actor, I would not place you among those men who attacked us. Were you someone's servant on their ship? An escaped captive, perhaps?"

The girl appeared unable to remove her eyes from the Juka. She gazed at them and answered, "No, my lady. I, um . . . stowed away on their ship, too."

After a pause, Thulann let out a laugh. "And skilled you are at it, I must say, to have escaped my notice. Almost as skilled as I was at your age. Well, child, come out of that corner and tell us your story. Then we shall tell you ours. It is a long way still to New Britannia." She selected a clean, roomy shirt from her trunk. "Here. I cannot offer you dry clothes in this swamp they call a ship, but I can do better than what you have on now."

Thulann imagined she could feel the vessel tilt when the massive Warlord Bahrok climbed on board. Soldiers moored his dinghy alongside. He swept the deck with a disapproving glower. Thulann recognized more than just his usual commander's severity in that glance. His mood was still black.

He met her at the rudder with a stern look. "What have you got to show me, Thulann, that you could not bring to my ship?"

"Two different objects of interest. Here is the first." She handed him a roll of parchment. He opened it between his fists.

"A map of the sea. You took it from the humans?"

"I did. I am no navigator, but look at these markings and tell me what they mean to you."

The warlord examined a series of lines in red ink. Seconds later his expression hardened. "This is our course! How could they know of us?"

"I fear you hold the answer in your hands. Compare the navigational marks to the rest of the chart. The map is

Britannian, but whoever plotted our course upon it was far more precise. Even their penmanship is flawless. That sings a familiar song to me."

Bahrok snarled, "Technocrats."

"As much as I can piece it together, our attackers were directed by parties from Logos."

"Then New Britannia has allied with Logos." He ground his large teeth noisily. "I knew diplomacy would be useless!"

"The situation is not so bleak. The humans who attacked us were outlaws. You interrogated some of them yourself. Do you not suspect that New Britannia would send warships if they wanted us dead, and in greater force than that? No, I say our mission is not yet in jeopardy. But the enemy has arrived before us. We have to keep up our guard. Logos is trying to sabotage our alliance."

"You assume an alliance is even possible."

Thulann lifted her chin. "If the Technocrats are afraid of it, then I approve of our course."

A low rumble sounded in the warlord's chest. "Maybe. Well done, then. But you could have brought this to my own ship. I am not at your service. We do have eighteen dead and three score wounded to attend, in case you have forgotten."

"I shall hurry. The second object I have to show you I dared not expose to the others yet. Come and see." She led him to an open window that looked inside the roofed cabin. Within sat Venduss on the floor by his bunk. Curled up on the pad in front of him was the diminutive Toria, all freckles and legs, lost in the volume of Thulann's blouse. The human girl was crooning the lyrics of a languid, haunting song:

*Proud sea-walker, slip between  
The heavens grey and ocean green  
And tell me of the wonders you have seen.*

The Way Master rested a palm on Bahrok's shoulder and whispered, "She was a stowaway on one of the human ships. She is innocent."

"If that is your judgment. Why should I care about this?"

"Because I have decided to look after her until we reach the continent. Better I than these sea-weary soldiers. The girl needs calm and shelter, or she might lose that ridiculous, pearly complexion of hers." She squeezed his arm. "I also want you to see there is more to the humans than claws and teeth. They have sons and daughters to lose, just as we do."

Bahrok curled his lips and hissed, "Do not patronize me! That sickly child is a weak argument for the death of Sigmhat."

His forceful statement hurled through the open window. Venduss and Toria turned toward them. When the girl's eyes fell upon Bahrok, her face constricted with horror. With a yelp she ducked behind Venduss, clinging to his arm. The young warrior seemed startled, but obliged her. He did not meet Bahrok's gaze.

Thulann pulled the warlord back from the window. "You frighten her! These people do not know us. We must give them a chance to do so."

Bahrok pushed brusquely past. "I shall decide what we must do, not you. I respect your skills, Thulann, but not your authority. If the Shirron wants to control me, he should have come himself instead of sending his mistress."

After he climbed back into his dinghy, the Way Master realized her first impression had been correct: When the

warlord departed, a great weight was lifted from the vessel. She rolled her head to loosen her neck, then hurried down the steps to Toria, whose sobs were audible now across the entire longboat.

Several days later the sun rose unseen behind a tapestry of grey clouds. The fleet from Garron, twelve proud longships, dropped anchor in a sea choppy with breakers. A thousand yards before them was the coast of New Britannia. They were farther east than the first expedition had landed. The cruel stone cliffs were replaced by tumbling green hills and a pebbled strand. Lights from distant villages blinked out as the morning unfolded.

A force of human soldiers lined up along the hilltops, a quarter mile back from the beach. Both their pennants and their strange, nimble mounts pranced in the gusts of day-break.

By the order of Warlord Bahrok, every Juka was dressed for battle. Thulann joined the commander on his flagship, a willowy figure next to a pillar of muscle. Beside her stood Venduss, arrayed proudly as befitted the eldest son of the Shirron. At his side was the diminutive Toria, wearing the young warrior's oversized shirt and vest like a short dress. Her patterned scarf was wrapped around her brow, fluttering amid loose hair like a colorful banner.

New Britannian warships clustered like a storm several miles to the east of the Jukan force. Yet approaching them from the shore was a single, small rowboat. Three humans stood aboard it, while a fourth manned the oars.

Bahrok grumbled to Thulann, "Is one of these the man who killed my son?"

"No. He is not among them. Patience, Bahrok. These are the moments that save the lives of soldiers."

As the human delegation neared, Toria whispered, "Hey, that's Admiral Duarte there!"

The stocky officer called out from the rowboat, "Good morning to you, honorable sirs! We wish to parley! Humbly we request permission to come aboard your vessel!"

Bahrok mustered his fiercest scowl. "Where is the human named Montenegro?"

"Captain Montenegro no longer commands the Vesper garrison. I have replaced him. My name is Admiral Duarte. I have with me Mistress Aurora and Master Gregorio, two honored scholars of my people. We bring welcome to you from the Royal Senate of Britain."

"We can ask for no more than this," murmured Thulann. "Accept them."

The warlord grunted agreement and shouted, "Come onto my ship, then! I am Bahrok, Warlord of Garron and chieftain of Clan Varang. I greet you with respect and honor."

Thulann betrayed relief in her posture as the humans were assisted over the bulwark. They had crested the first wave of the gale. She hoped there would not be many more.

Around a table in Bahrok's cabin sat the warlord, Thulann and the three human diplomats. The Britannian sailor stood quietly against a wall. The discussion proceeded in formal tones.

As she listened Thulann marveled at the ancient sorcerers Aurora and Gregorio, and the latter in particular. They must have been half again as old as she. Not even the Shirron

Narah had lived so long. Thulann could not decide if she was comforted by this or unsettled.

The youngest of the humans, Admiral Duarte, looked to be Bahrok's age. He wore no armor but rather a brass-buttoned overcoat, not unlike many of the pirates. His fleshy face was shaven and his hair was neatly cropped. His hands moved as if they helped him speak. "And that is the regrettable tale of how insubordination ruined our first encounter with your fine race. No one knows just what transaction occurred between Montenegro and your esteemed, mysterious representative that night. Perhaps we can answer that question at a later time. It does not change the grave injury we have given you. We are prepared to make restitution in whatever quantities you see fit."

Bahrok cast a quick glance at Thulann. She blinked assent. The warlord understood that a Black Duel had occurred and he seemed, for the moment, to respect her discretion. Another wave crested, she hoped.

Grimly, Bahrok rumbled, "How has Montenegro been punished for the assault on our expedition?"

"He's been stripped of his command. He's not really a soldier anymore, though I understand he lurks around the training salons in Britain like a sad ghost. In point of fact, he's fallen on other misfortunes of late, as well. His lands turned feral from disuse. Personally, I think his sins caught up to him."

From his tattered beard Master Gregorio interjected, "I do not see how that is related. But you may forget about Montenegro, good sir. He is broken worse than even death could accomplish."

Bahrok answered with hard silence.

Thulann's heart sank, though she concealed it from her face. It was Montenegro's honor as much as anything that had prompted her to suggest this alliance. Though she had no reason to imagine the Royal Senate was any less honorable, she saddened at the thought of that proud knight being shamed. Especially since it was clear he had maintained his vow of secrecy concerning the Black Duel, perhaps at the expense of his career.

She resolved to address the situation. But now, in front of Bahrok, was not the time.

"After my first divination," Master Gregorio was saying, "that is to say, after my first magic spell that revealed you Juka to me, the House of the Griffin put forth their maximum effort to find out all we could about you. We were pleased to learn that while many of your kind do serve the villain Blackthorn, many more of you do not. We have long foreseen a war between my people and Blackthorn's minions. You are a strong race, you see. I believe you are the key to our victory in that war."

Mistress Aurora pressed her palms together before her chin. Though her great age was evident in her colorless flesh and hair, her manual grace and warm demeanor showed no unsteadiness. "What Master Gregorio means is that your arrival is a great joy to us. We hope that our two peoples can forge a bond of friendship. Please grant us the honor of accepting the hospitality of our fair capital, Britain."

The admiral spread open a smile. "Indeed. You shall be the celebrated guests of the Royal Senate."

Thulann nodded to Bahrok, though the warlord's decision looked firm already. "I accept your invitation with honor. We have very much to discuss. With all respect,



Mistress Aurora," he motioned to the sorceress, "you do not need to soften any talk of war against Blackthorn. I have wetted my blade with Logosian innards on many occasions. They are undisciplined and cowardly."

Master Gregorio offered a ragged, spidery grin. An odd trail of sparks formed in the wake of an anxious hand gesture. "Splendid! We are of the same mind, then."

Thulann and the warlord exchanged another glance. For the remainder of the discussion they respected a subtle distance between themselves and the ancient wizard.

"Honored scholars!" laughed Bahrok while the humans rowed back to shore. "What deceit. Those two old creatures might have sunk us all with a wave of their hands, if I understand your reports from the first expedition."

Thulann pursed her lips. "Nothing a wizard might do would astound me anymore. Those two shone power like beacons."

"You noticed that? They walked with pure confidence among us. I do not trust them, but Great Mother's bags, I may come to like them."

"Let us first ensure that they like us. They have offered to heal our wounded. Perhaps they may teach us their deadly little art."

The warlord snorted. "They will not. The old man fears us. That is why he wants us as allies."

Thulann gave him a tilted glance. "By my honor, you have grown astute since I last turned my back on you."

"I am wary. If that ancient creature fears us, then others will also. Fear is a short step from hostility. Mark this: We shall walk into their capital as a battle-ready force or we shall

not walk in at all. I refuse to compromise our ability to defend ourselves."

She sighed and rested a hand on the bulwark. "I cannot fault your tactical skill, but your diplomacy is as flimsy as that sail above your head. Bahrok, four hundred armed warriors marching into their city will make them more fearful, not less. Do not make that mistake."

The warlord gazed at the distant humans as soldiers pulled the rowboat onto shore. "Did you not come on this trip as Venduss's teacher? Maybe you should see to him now. He could be neglecting his lessons while you waste your time here. You know how the young are."

The Way Master grimaced. "You have a point. Venduss should be diligent. Someday he may actually lift himself above the status of amateur."

At the misty shoreline, the ocean waves drummed against the stones of the beach. Whitecaps sparkled like teeth.

Aboard her own vessel, Thulann heard Venduss talking as she descended to the cabin. She silenced her footsteps as she entered.

The young warrior still wore his armor and formal attire from earlier that morning. He perched in a precise, one-legged stance. His arms described ritualized combat maneuvers in the air. At the same time he was speaking to Toria, who lounged on his bunk. "The Overlords enslaved us longer than anyone could remember. But after my grandfather and grandmother rebelled against them, there were only a few left, including the Prime Overlord. That was in the time of the Cataclysm. Since then they have all vanished. Blackthorn and the refugees from your land took over the

old citadel and called it Logos. They named our continent Logosia. The Juka who had been loyal to the Overlords began to serve Blackthorn instead. I suppose the Overlords' science became some manner of cult in Logos, since you say Blackthorn was not a Technocrat when he left New Britannia."

The girl attended him with a rapt expression. "Yeah, Blackthorn was just a wizard. But what were these Overlords? Some kind of 'alive machines?' "

"They were a horrible mingling of machine and flesh. Some say a few still exist in Logosia, but I do not believe it. If they enslaved us for so many centuries, they must have been extremely powerful. How could the Technocrats keep them from regaining control? Besides, the land is full of old machines that no longer work. The days of the Overlords are through. We killed them."

In the pause Thulann inserted, "Bahrok warned me you might be shirking." She emerged from a shadow and fashioned a scowl on her face. "Damn you, suckling, for proving him right!"

Venduss's wide eyes protested. "But teacher, I am practicing the forms!"

"You are not practicing them, you are mocking them. The forms exist for focus and precision, not to keep your hands busy while you jabber!"

The warrior bowed his head and fell to his knees. Water splashed from a puddle on the floor. "Forgive me, teacher!"

She rapped a knuckle on his scalp. "Go out on deck and start again. If I catch you speaking to anyone else we shall work on lightsleep for the remainder of the journey. Is that clear?"

"Yes, teacher." He darted out of the cabin.

Thulann sighed, then glanced at Toria. "Do not be afraid, child. It was his responsibility to practice in silence, not yours." She eased onto her own bunk and massaged her eyes. "I do not blame you for being curious about our history. Once, when the world was young and the stars were brighter, I was just as hungry to learn as you are. It is an admirable, if doomed, pursuit." She looked across the cabin at the human. "But we are seeing the last of you now, are we not, Toria? We have reached the continent. Surely you want to find passage back to Buccaneer's Den."

The girl nibbled her lip. "Not really."

"No? I am surprised. I rather thought you would already be gone when I came back here, and half of my possessions with you."

Toria gaped. "Why do you say that?"

"Only because you have rummaged through the contents of this entire room over the past few days. Oh, worry not, you covered your explorations with remarkable skill. I would not have discovered it, except that I am who I am. But your skill betrays you. You are more than just a minstrel."

She looked away. Her face was ashen. "I'm . . . sorry, Thulann. I just wanted to see it all. I didn't keep anything."

"I noticed that. You were wise not to. At first I took you for a spy, but I am an overly suspicious old woman. You are just a common thief. We have them in Jukaran, as well, you know. I shall not tell you what we do when we catch one. Your ears look too pale and delicate to bear it."

Her eyes swelled. "You can't feed yourself in the Den just by singing! I could make a living by . . . other means, but I won't do that." She pulled on a lock of scarlet hair, until Thulann

imagined the pain must have throbbed. The action looked unconscious and well-practiced. "Don't worry, I'll go."

"Sit still, child." The Way Master fastened a hard stare upon Toria. It hid the swirl of emotions in the old Juka's head. Finally Thulann said, "You wish to come with us, do you not?"

Toria wrinkled her brow. "Yes . . . ?"

"I do not take on guests, but I could make use of a servant. But I shall not abide you poking into my belongings or anyone else's. Is that understood? If I find you doing so I shall strip you naked and drag you behind the ship. If we are on land I shall drag you myself."

The girl bolted upright and cast her eyes at the floor. "I understand. Thank you. Mistress."

"I confess you have a talent for what you do. Perhaps I can turn it to more honorable pursuits. Mind you, now, I will not have you distracting Venduss from his training. That is very important. He has a destiny greater than either of ours. But he is young and he is male and you are just exotic and agreeable enough to make him forget who he is. It is a strange probability, but real enough."

Toria's blush revealed much. Thulann held back a frown.

"If we have an arrangement, then come here. I need to get out of this damp armor and you need to learn to assist me. I intend to find fresh water on the shore and bathe in it for a very long while. We leave for the city called Britain tomorrow, and I suspect we shall not have an opportunity for relaxation again for quite some time."

Britannia Bay was a dazzling garden of fluttering streamers and flags. What must have been the entire population of

Britain crowded the docks and lanes. The late afternoon sun peeked through rifts in the cloud cover, hurling golden beams like javelins at countless tile roofs and chimney pots.

A boiling cheer greeted the Jukan ships as they rowed toward the wharf.

Yet Thulann spotted apprehension in the humans' faces as the flagship nudged parallel to the dock. Bahrok had chosen an entourage of fifty warriors to accompany himself, Thulann and the Way Master's two attendants. When they arrayed themselves to disembark, the citizens of Britain stepped back many paces.

Replacing them was a blinding display of polished, silvery armor. These would be the Knights of the Silver Serpent, Thulann realized, come with pennants on their spears and garish crests wagging on their helmets. Thirty of the proud soldiers formed an escort that would lead them to the Royal Senate. It was the theater of lavish diplomacy, she knew, but the message of strength was clear.

She did not like the way that Warlord Bahrok glowered at the knights as he walked past them.

The Way Master took a deep breath and glanced up at the dramatic sky. *Forgive your tired, old rainbow, Turlogan, she murmured in her mind. I am fighting for peace, but I wonder if I have the stomach for it any longer.*

Beside her Venduss maintained a proud demeanor, though she recognized the thrill in his young features. On her other side was little Toria, braided in a Jukan fashion and clad in her neat, makeshift dress, looking ravenous with excitement.

As they started down a wide avenue toward the walled section of the capital, Thulann searched the crests of the

knights for the one belonging to Montenegro. She did not see it, nor had she expected to. In fact, she admitted to herself that she had no clear idea what to expect at all. The time had come to be bold and politic and above all, alert. The days ahead would move quickly.

A man in an elegant black tunic watched the parade from a balcony inside the city walls. His long, sable curls poured luxuriantly over broad shoulders. His gaze was grim and studious.

A shorter, dark-skinned man stood beside him. As he crossed his thick arms, the long sleeves of his doublet whispered against one another. "I concede to you, Montenegro, they look every bit like the fearsome warriors you described. Can you see the size of that one in the lead?"

Montenegro scanned the Jukan entourage for Thulann of Garron. When he spotted her, a hot tingle cascaded through his well-muscled limbs. "Nor is he the most dangerous of them." He stared for a moment longer. "Tell me, Aziz, why aren't you marching among their escort?"

"I don my armor for combat, not to decorate the Royal Senate. You and I are alike in that regard."

"Indeed so." Despite his efforts, his eyes would not turn from the spectacle in the street. The sight of the Juka brought an eager twitch to his fingers.

Sir Aziz took a heavy breath. "You're quiet for a man whose redemption is near. If the Senate makes this alliance, your name could be cleared, eh? You might even command again."

Montenegro subdued his impatience and answered, "I've learned when to hold my tongue. I'd rather my actions speak in its place."

"Sir Gabriel speaks judiciously. You are indeed a changed man."

The taller knight barely heard his companion's words.

It had been a difficult summer since Montenegro lost his command. The Virtue of Humility was an arduous companion. But the sultry weather had a cleansing effect, and he had achieved exactly what he had planned. Now, as the evening winds cooled and the leaves began to brown, his time of satisfaction was at hand.



## Interlude

"Sartorius, I miss the baying of the hounds."

"Pardon me, Your Eminence?"

"It seems like there was a time when I had many hounds underfoot. Do we still have them in Logos?"

"Yes, Your Eminence. There are hounds native to this land. They're called Jukan hounds. They are grotesque to behold, but large and fierce."

"Treat them well, Sartorius, even if they are ugly. A man's worth is summed up by the manner in which he treats his hounds. Don't you agree? Oh, I'm sorry. You came here to talk about something, didn't you?"

"Yes, Your Eminence. The Lectors have been discussing plans for dealing with the Jukan barbarians in the north."

"Proceed."

"Lector Braun of the Engineers has put forth a proposal to strike against them. It involves transporting our troops by airship. Lector Caleb of the Mathematicians does not think the calculations favor such a strategy."

"And what do your people think, Sartorius?"

"The Theorists favor decisive action, Your Eminence. Lector Braun has always excelled at that, especially when he has supported our own initiatives."

"I had a splendid hound once. He was sleek and fast and tirelessly loyal. He had a nose that could always sniff out problems for me. I truly miss that one."

"As you say, Your Eminence."

"His name was Exedur. He was a marvelous brute."

"Your Eminence, Lector Exedur was your first Chosen. Do you remember?"

"Yes, I do. Marvelous brute."

"I see."

"Very well, Sartorius, tell Lector Caleb to adjust his calculations. There must be some configuration of troops and logistics that will service Lector Braun's strategy."

"It shall be done, Your Eminence. Thank you."

"I do not want to lose this war, Sartorius. Make sure the others know that."

"Your Eminence, there will be no doubt in their minds. I shall not fail you."

"Marvelous. Carry on, Sartorius. Tell me about Braun's plan. I like a good war story."

## CHAPTER

# 5

## STORM OVER BRITAIN

**T**he Senate chamber was crowded with tension. The Jukan entourage had entered with twenty of their warriors. The remainder of their force was stationed at the doors of the building and along the road leading to it. The deployment was strictly tactical, as if Warlord Bahrok intended to flee and expected resistance.

Though they maintained ceremonial aloofness, the Knights of the Silver Serpent assumed posts in opposition to the Juka. The wordless contest was obvious to the throngs of uneasy onlookers.

Inside the Royal Senate, Thulann hid her frown as she assessed the situation. Bahrok's actions were as inappropriate as she had feared. To the warlord she whispered, "What do you hope to win by frightening them like this?"

Bahrok responded with a sneer. "Look at this 'Senate' of theirs. Nothing but a pond full of colorful, fat fish. They would be frightened even if I entered alone."

"These are not war clan leaders. They are merchants and statesmen. Yet their trades are as honorable as warcraft."

"You would have me hold these politicians as my equals?"

Should I stick feathers on my head and hope to impress them?"

"We come to make an alliance. In my estimation this is the wrong way to do it. If you want to impress them, put them at ease."

A tall, gaunt human appeared before them. He wore a bright purple robe and a plumed hat. At his gesture the senators reluctantly took their seats. The soldiers in the room tinged the silence with the clicks and clanks of fidgeting armor.

The human at the front of the chamber boomed, "I bid welcome to you, Warlord Bahrok of Jukaran! I am Regent Salvatore of the House of the Dove. It is my honor to speak today on behalf of all the citizens of New Britannia."

The warlord asked, "You are the ruler here?"

"I lead the Royal Senate. We have no ruler, as such. My position is an administrative one, established since the disappearance of the Lost King in the dark time of the Cataclysm."

Bahrok turned to Thulann and in a clear voice remarked, "They are led by a clerk, it seems."

A gust of protests swept through the chamber, but Salvatore merely laughed. "I am not a warrior, I freely confess. I handle matters of policy and leave the fighting to the House of the Lion and its most noble knights." He gestured to the men in glittering armor stationed around the room.

Bahrok glanced about. "It would be better to leave the fighting to your sorcerers, in my judgment. They are your true source of military power, do you not agree? Not these smartly dressed soldiers."

The knights bristled. Thulann gritted her teeth, forced a smile onto her lips and added, "Warlord Bahrok is saying, in his own, unique manner, that we have an overwhelming respect for the miraculous spells of your wizards. Sorcery is foreign to us and we marvel at its power."

Regent Salvatore presented a grandiose bow. "Thulann of Garron, isn't it? I give you humble thanks on behalf of the House of the Griffin. Perhaps we may arrange a demonstration during your visit. But please, we have much to discuss today. Let us proceed while there is still daylight. Then shall you accept the hospitality of Castle Britannia, the most lavish palace in the kingdom."

The warlord smiled. "You are a most polite host. We accept your hospitality."

"Excellent! Allow me to open these proceedings, then, by offering a dedication. I do hereby proclaim that these negotiations are undertaken in honor of that brave Jukan leader Sigmhat, whose tragic passing six months ago shall be an eternal source of sorrow to the people of New Britannia. Solemnly I offer this to Warlord Bahrok in atonement for the death of his son."

Bahrok shot Thulann a glare so fierce that it startled her. She leaned close to him and murmured, "I explained the situation to Admiral Duarte."

"It is my right to present that grievance! You go too far!"

"They deserved to know. It impacts these negotiations. They are fully willing to accept responsibility."

"Are they?" barked the warlord, then whirled to face Salvatore. "I lose my son to your savagery and you offer me words in return? The words of a clerk? I spit on your dedication!" Though safely distant from the regent, Bahrok swung

his mailed hand in a violent gesture. The knights in the room clattered as they stepped closer.

"Stop!" bellowed Salvatore to the human soldiers. To the warlord he said, "Sir, I withdraw the dedication if it offends you. I beg you, if it is possible, explain to us what more must we do in payment for this tragedy?"

"Show me to this palace of yours! I am through talking for today. Tomorrow we shall begin again. We will see if you are able to parley without insulting me." Amid the shouts of angry senators Bahrok continued, "And in the spirit of reciprocity, we shall present to you a demonstration of our own martial skills. Just after dawn we will convene by that large building on the hill, in the center of this city."

Salvatore said, "The Cathedral of the Virtues."

"There shall you summon your four best knights, who will face my blade in a contest of skill and power."

"Four knights against you, sir?" The regent glanced at the warlord, then nodded. "As you will. It shall be done."

Bahrok grinned. "Yes, it shall. But they will not fight me. Rather they will fight my advisor, good Thulann here, who shall wield my blade on behalf of the Shirron and the people of Jukaran. Worry not, despite being an old woman she is equal to the task of defeating humans."

The Way Master kept her composure, but with a cold stare berated the angry Juka. Bahrok ignored her. She said nothing as the regent agreed to the challenge, though his face registered clear objection. The rest of the Royal Senate displayed their ire with far less subtlety.

*I have failed you, Turlogan, she called silently to the south. Bahrok cannot be tamed. But perhaps he can be corralled.*

The Jukan procession moved out of the Senate chamber

in an orderly withdrawal, which resembled nothing so much as a brisk military maneuver.

Lord Valente coughed a mirthless laugh from beneath his waxed, white mustache. "You must be mad, Montenegro! You're the last person I would pit against the Juka."

Under a westering sky they sat in the corner of a small quadrangle. The garden in the open space was webbed with flagstone walkways, outlined by torches on tall posts. Valente and Montenegro each occupied a wooden chair, joined by Sir Aziz. A small table sat between them, laden with wine and glassware.

Montenegro leaned back in his seat. "Why shouldn't I be there? The warlord requires our four best. I am one of them."

"Once you were," smirked Aziz, swallowing a mouthful. "Once you might even have been as good as I. But you didn't fight in a tournament all summer. You're in no shape for it."

"I spent the season in training. You know that."

Lord Valente waved his hand. "That's not the point. That troll of a Juka knows you killed his son. This whole affair is brittle enough as it is, without you setting a spark to the kindling. Besides, I don't want to be controversial. We're too close to the Wisp Hunt. If things get stirred up any more these negotiations will take forever, and I don't want to be stuck in the Senate when the wisps are mustering."

Aziz shook his head at Montenegro. "In the last six months you've lost your command, lost your rank in the Order, lost your lands to the forest and lost your cousin to who knows what fate. My friend, you've had a hard year. Why don't you stay out of the storm this time?"

Valente mumbled, "Because he's not had a chance at vindication. For that injustice, good sir, I do feel for you." He sighed and gulped his wine.

The stern-eyed knight said nothing. He gauged the demeanor of the old lord. Tension stiffened Valente's back; he was trying to conquer it with drink.

Montenegro sipped from his own cup, which contained water, and then lowered his voice. "Was Warlord Bahrok truly as insulting as I've heard?"

"And more," grumbled the lord. "He hardly spoke a word that didn't belittle us. That was his entire agenda this afternoon, and no mistake. I could see it in the old female's eyes. She tried to rein him in. This whole fighting demonstration is nothing more than punishment for her efforts. An old woman, too! What audacity."

Montenegro murmured, "Never underestimate an old warrior."

Aziz growled, "I heard the way Bahrok insulted the Order. Would that he were fighting for himself tomorrow and not hiding behind that old woman. I would very much like to shove those words back into his enormous gullet."

"We can do exactly that," said Montenegro. He poured a fresh round of wine for his fellows. "The answer is simple. Allow me to fight, my lord. What would gall Bahrok more than for his champion to be defeated at my hands? We'll hide my face until I strike the last blow. I promise to give him a warm smile when it's over."

Valente grinned darkly into his glass. "Sometimes your sense of irony is diabolical. I've always admired that about you, Montenegro, though I'll deny it to anyone except the present company." He drank a bit, then shook his head. "You truly



tempt me, I admit. But it's a moot point. I've already promised the duel to Vegard, Dominic, Evanthe and Aziz here."

"I am the better of every one of them."

Aziz almost lost a sip of wine when he burst into a laugh. "If you were my better I'd relinquish the honor to you freely."

Montenegro locked eyes with him. "I accept your wager."

The stocky Aziz licked a droplet from his lips and grinned. "Ha! Very well, I'll fetch some sparring swords. I could use a bit of practice before the morning's fete. You're going to regret this," He set down his glass and sprang out of his chair.

Valente rapped his knuckles on the little table. "I believe I have some input to this arrangement of yours."

Montenegro steeped his fingers. "Name your conditions, my lord. Tell me what you require of me, in exchange for making this happen."

The old lord twisted the curl of his mustache. His voice was wet with drink. "This shall be no end of trouble, but so be it. The pair of you may duel for the honor of fighting tomorrow. I ask just one thing of the victor. You must beat the Juka. Embarrass them. I want them to pay for their arrogance in the Senate."

The knight's grin was as ominous as the gathering clouds.

Amid the torches of the quadrangle Montenegro and Sir Aziz faced one another. They had stripped to their hosen, displaying well-honed bodies in the amber firelight. Each held in his hand a wooden longsword.

The taller Montenegro saluted. "Name the conditions of victory."

"The loser is he who yields, fades, or perishes." Aziz saluted back. "And there's a vial of that healing potion for each of us. Use yours wisely."

"I shall not be needing it."

Aziz shrugged. "Lay on."

When they closed, Montenegro jabbed his sword quickly. Aziz moved to parry, but found that his blade hand was empty. His weapon landed softly in a bed of flowers.

Montenegro offered a brief smile. "You weren't ready yet. My apologies."

Aziz widened his eyes, blew out a breath. He knelt after his sword. "That was a fencer's trick. It seems I was wrong to joke about your rapier training. Does it work with heavy steel as well as wood?"

"I haven't labored this hard to become an expert with practice weapons. Again."

Their blades cracked together in quick rhythm. Every fourth blow landed somewhere on Aziz's body. The smaller knight retreated and recouped his strength. Montenegro granted him a moment, then thrust at his belly. Aziz parried and struck toward an opening.

Montenegro performed a calculated dodge and smacked his elbow into his opponent's breastbone. With a loud pop Aziz collapsed backward, clawing his chest for breath.

Lord Valente hurried to the knight's side and dribbled a healing potion into his mouth. Aziz sputtered and sat up. "You spar rough these days, Sir Gabriel."

"You brought the healing potions, Sir Aziz. I made the bold assumption that you were prepared to use them."

"By the Virtues, you have improved in a season. Let's find out how much. Lay on!"

The quadrangle echoed the ferocity of the clash. Within the first minute it spread out from the narrow course of the flagstone paths. The two knights trampled through flowers and ivy, ducking and lunging with powerful grace, swinging harsh blows that sometimes struck flesh and bone, sometimes the other blade, sometimes empty air and occasionally the posts that supported flickering torches. Many small flames lay gasping in the garden brush. The warriors' unprotected skin striped with welts and bruises, with ragged cuts and gleaming ribbons of blood. Sweat and heavy breaths drenched the course of the duel.

Lord Valente tipped the last of the wine into his glass and watched carefully.

Aziz was falling back more often than advancing. When he took three successive hits to the face, he howled and pressed forward. Montenegro struck with savage design. The cracks of the swords heaved louder and louder, until the blade held by Aziz split and frayed and shattered under a flurry of devastating strokes. Montenegro twirled and punctured Aziz's hip with his own, undamaged weapon. He spun again and scooped up the shorter man with one arm, then slammed him onto the unmerciful stone pathway.

Montenegro fell atop Aziz with his knee on the downed knight's chest. He raised his sword again. With a purple face Aziz bellowed, "Enough!" Montenegro pulled back, just before Lord Valente arrived to stop the battle.

Night had fallen. A few red leaves swirled into the quadrangle on a corkscrew breeze.

Montenegro panted, his eyes reflecting the haphazard torchlight like a wild animal's. Then he snatched his own healing vial from the table and flung it at Aziz. The defeated

knight clutched his injured pelvis while he swallowed the potion.

Valente patted Sir Aziz on the shoulder, then faced Montenegro. "By glory and Valor, I've never seen you fight like that before. Nor anyone else!"

"No one has ever fought like me," said Montenegro. "I've probably invented my own damn school of swordsmanship this summer. And I undertook the entire hellish enterprise for one reason—to reclaim that status in the House and the Order, which I owe to my grandfather's honored name. Now, I want to stand among those knights tomorrow morning against Thulann of Garron. Do I have that privilege?"

Aziz's breath had not quite returned.

"Do I have that privilege?"

"Yes!" cried the fallen warrior. He smashed the empty healing vial against a wall. "Take my place! Just give me a moment's peace."

Montenegro devoured a draught of savory autumn air. His hands were still trembling with excitement. He closed his eyes and focused, and a calm overtook him. His cuts and broken ribs gave him only distant pain. He nearly smiled.

A light rain began to scatter across the courtyard. Aziz turned his face to the cool drizzle, then lay back on the flagstone path and muttered, "At least the weather grants me some mercy. By the lost shrines, Lord Valente, if you've emptied that bottle I'll devise a very painful means of expelling you from your own house. As soon as I have the strength to stand."

The old senator chuckled and walked back to his chair, out of the evening rain.

\* \* \*

Warlord Bahrok was a clamorous presence in the stately halls of Castle Britannia. His boisterous laughter careened off exquisite wood paneling and around high, jeweled chandeliers. He wore an open robe, loose trousers and a blade and scabbard at his waist. With one hand wrapped around the neck of a leather bottle, he leaned against a tall window busy with panes. The city beyond seethed with lanterns in the rainy blackness of night.

Thulann stood beside him, her expression sullen.

The warlord pointed out the window. A small cluster of brightly-dressed women was filing into a side door of the palace. "See there? The Britannians provide us with entertainment as well as food and drink. I cannot fault them with being inhospitable. These human women are comely enough, despite their brittle bodies and tender little beaks. Turlogan is never so kind to his guests."

Thulann rolled distaste on her tongue. "After your behavior this afternoon, I should be careful of poison kisses."

"I thought my performance was superb today. Sigmhat would be proud of his father, do you not think? The regent was contrite enough. I have put us in a good position. The negotiations will proceed at my pace now. One must seize control of every moment if one is to lead."

"And one must know the difference between seizing a moment and throttling it. You are as subtle as a rampaging pteranx."

Bahrok grunted. "What use is subtlety? It has no place in my achievements. I shall speak loud enough that the entire world must heed me! My words today will not be soon forgotten, eh? That is how you and I are most unlike, Thulann. Your part in history will be remembered by

scholars in side-notes. I shall stride boldly through books and legends.”

The Way Master’s temples began to sting. She massaged them and said, “Then I wish you a long life. Perhaps when you are very old, you will stop all that striding and find some peace.”

“I shall not stop. I shall be Shirron and unite the Juka. I shall be the conqueror of Logos.” He bit down on a hearty grin. “And who is to say I must end with Logos? This land is fair indeed.”

Thulann grimaced. “Watch how you talk in this place. There are knights and noblemen all around us and your voice, as you have pointed out, carries.”

At the far end of the corridor, banging sounds preceded the entrance of a handful of women in rich, colorful dresses. They were brushing off the rain. Bahrok set the bottle on the marble floor and rubbed his hands together. “They have arrived! Go away now, Thulann. It is time I sampled the local flavors, and you must rest for the morning’s encounter.”

“I shall rest well enough, but Bahrok, watch how you lay down tonight. A courtesan’s knife will turn you just as cold as a soldier’s blade.”

The warlord scoffed. “Do not take me for a fool. I fear no one around whose throat I have my fingers.” He kicked over the half-empty leather bottle as he started down the corridor. Blood-red wine pooled around it.

Thulann watched him walk toward the humans, who hid their fear behind crafted smiles. The Way Master lifted an eyebrow. To herself she whispered, “Courtesans.”

“I have an errand for you, Toria,” she informed the girl after returning to her luxurious suite. “Go into the city, but

do not let the guards see you. I want you to locate several orders of clothing. The first shall be a set of clothes in which you may move about in public unnoticed. Those Jukan blouses you wear might draw too many curious eyes. I do not want your movements to be discovered."

Sitting in front of a large mirror, the minstrel laid down her hairbrush and tilted her head. "Is something wrong?"

"I am simply taking precautions. I do not trust Bahrok's methods. We must pursue independent action."

Toria crossed her legs on her chair. "What else should I get, mistress?"

"Something befitting a courtesan. Wearing it should enable you to move in and out of the palace without the need for stealth. Tension is too high to risk you creeping about in the dark." She glanced at the oval mirror and her own reflection in Jukan armor. "And then find human costumes for myself and for Venduss. Before this is over we all may need to walk these streets undetected. Make certain to get a few of those large cloaks with the hoods, so we do not frighten the populace with our gargoyle faces."

Toria smiled. "I don't think you look like gargoyles."

"You are kind, child. I cannot agree nor disagree, having never met one of the creatures myself. Though I begin to suspect the warlord's heritage."

The girl paused before asking, "Do you have any money? Or should I get the clothes some other way?"

Thulann clapped her hands together with jarring force. "Thievery is never an option unless I tell you otherwise! Is that understood, Toria?"

"Yes, mistress."

"Take this." She unfastened the short sword from her hip

and tossed it to the girl. "It should fetch enough to pay for our disguises. I presume you know of some means to sell that without drawing attention?"

"I do, mistress."

"Good. I intend to make use of your 'professional' skills in the coming days. Now, enough of that yawning! Go this moment, while the rain and darkness cloud the guards' eyes. Quickly, child!"

Toria scrambled out of the room. Through another door stepped Venduss when the girl was gone. His arms were crossed. "You are very stern with her, teacher. I may get jealous."

"Bahrok thinks I am too soft and you think I am too hard. I have refined my temper for six decades and achieved mediocrity. Venduss, that child is undisciplined. I am fond enough of her to change that. You should feel the same. But enough, now. The night is only beginning and you have an important role to play in it."

"Me?"

"Stay here and stay awake. If anyone asks after me, tell them I am in my room resting for the demonstration tomorrow. I must not be disturbed."

"As you please, teacher. But shall you not be resting?"

"Not just yet. I am going to meet with Regent Salvatore to try to rescue this floundering mission."

Venduss whistled low. "Bahrok will be furious if he finds out. And if he comes here I do not think I can stop him from barging into your room."

"I assure you the warlord is otherwise engaged. Now help me change. I have worn this armor for so long today, it feels as if I just returned from battle."



As the night deepened, the storm swelled. Thunder shook the thick stone walls of the opulent castle and the rocky earth beneath it.

The spires of the Cathedral of the Virtues reached toward the heavens with majestic splendor. Erected atop a hill in the center of the walled city, the temple was Britain's proudest achievement during the years that followed the Cataclysm. The shrine within, dedicated to the Virtues of the Lost King, had served as a beacon in New Britannia through those dark, worrisome times. It continued to do so.

Though an overcast sky painted the world steel-blue, the stained glass windows of the cathedral kept their luster. They glowed from lights within. Their colors decorated the muddy hillside like ghostly, brilliant mosaics.

A sea of eager faces lapped at the base of the hill. The city had come to watch the Jukan martial demonstration. Already the appointed time was nearly past. In the nip of the early hour, the mood of the audience was growing rowdy.

A troop of Jukan soldiers stationed themselves on the pathway, in formation around Bahrok, Thulann and Venduss, remaining stoic against the jeers of the more spirited onlookers. Warlord Bahrok himself appeared to revel in the attention.

Montenegro observed the setting from the window of a small room in the cathedral. His heart thumped a quick tempo inside his heavy breastplate. His fingers gripped the hilt of his sheathed sword. *Patience*, he commanded himself. *Savor the anticipation. Your life turns today.*

"Dash it!" exclaimed a voice from behind him, followed by a thump and a loud splash. The knight looked back to see a brother of the Order of the Shepherd, one of the cathe-

dral's caretakers, splayed on his hands and knees by one of the room's doors. His plain brown robe was half drenched. A bucket and scrub brush had toppled on the floor, in the center of a soapy puddle. The balding man grimaced as if in pain.

Montenegro hurried to his side. "Please, allow me," he said, helping the brother to sit up.

"My humblest thanks. This floor gets slippery after a good rain." The man smiled, though his brow creased in a wince. He held onto one knee, which had begun to bleed.

Montenegro examined the wound. It was a wide cut, but shallow. "Not to worry, brother. You'll survive."

"But I'll have to find a bandage, and meanwhile there goes my water. Damn these clumsy feet." The suds from the pail trickled away toward the nearest door, which was down a gentle incline.

"What is your name?"

"Brother Jos, good sir."

"Go find yourself a bandage, Brother Jos. I'll see if I can put your fugitive water to some use." He crouched in his plate mail, picked up the hand brush and began to scrub the tiles of the floor.

Brother Jos waved his arms. "No no, kind sir! You should be preparing for your contest. I'll just—"

"Nonsense. A Knight of the Silver Serpent doesn't balk when there's work to be done. Now hurry, before you bleed on my floor."

As the brother rushed off, Montenegro chuckled. Of course his gesture had not been entirely altruistic. Scrubbing the floor would pump his blood and keep him occupied while he waited for Sir Aziz and Lord Valente. The morn-

ing's subterfuge called for Montenegro to wear Aziz's helmet in the fighting demonstration. The crest would misrepresent his identity until the moment he decided to reveal himself. It was an innocent sacrifice of Honesty, they had decided, in furtherance of the cause of Justice. But Aziz and Valente were oddly late.

Brother Jos returned, his knee wrapped in a clumsy dressing. He reached for the scrub brush. Montenegro shook his head. "Sit down and fix that bandage properly. I believe I'm up to this particular task."

The brother sat back against the wall and unwrapped the strip of cloth. "Again, I humbly thank you."

"It's the least I can do to repay you for granting me the privacy to prepare this morning."

"You nobly serve the Virtue of Humility, sir, and Compassion as well."

Montenegro glanced up as he worked. "My family shrine is dedicated to Compassion. Have you ever heard the tale of Sir Lazaro and the Dragon's Tear?"

He was wrapping the bandage again, with more care. "In faith, sir, no."

The knight twinkled a smile. "This is the first story I ever heard about my grandfather. Once there was a fierce dragon named Malgotha that terrorized the villages around Cove. Sir Lazaro gathered up his ten best knights and rode off to slay the beast. They tracked it to a narrow cave in a black mountain. No more than two men at once could stand abreast inside the cave. At the end they found Malgotha. Sir Lazaro and another knight battled the monster side-by-side, but the other knight was devoured. A second took his place. That knight was eaten as well. So on through the entire

company did they proceed, until finally Sir Lazaro fought the dragon alone. Yet each fallen knight had inflicted a ferocious wound on Malgotha, so that my grandfather found himself in combat with a dying beast.

"Then Malgotha spoke. It begged my grandfather to spare its life, for it had once been a human being. A witch had transformed Malgotha into a monster cursed with insatiable hunger. Sir Lazaro felt Compassion for the brute. He vowed to let Malgotha live. When the dragon heard this vow it wept a single tear of joy. As the tear fell it transformed into a golden heart, and Malgotha changed as well, into the beautiful young maiden she had once been. Sir Lazaro's Compassion had broken the spell. He was so moved by the miracle that he built a shrine outside the cave. He placed the golden heart within the shrine and dedicated it to Compassion. Malgotha he took as his loving wife and built a home for her at the foot of that black mountain. Indeed, I can attest that my family estate lies in that very spot and Malgotha was my grandmother's name."

The Brother of the Shepherd finished his bandage. He laughed. "It's just as they say, every act of Compassion brings welcome mystery. Magnificent! I have a knight with dragon's blood in his veins protecting the cathedral this morning. And with that impatient crowd outside, I feel safer for it."

Montenegro shrugged. "Not even the rowdiest mob would be wicked enough to defile this place."

"Yet broken patience leads to broken rules. Who's to say a little red sneak-thief might not poke around in here behind my back?"

The knight squinted, but before he could respond a loud

voice proclaimed, "You there, washing boy! Have you seen a heartless, arrogant knight around? We're looking for one."

Sir Aziz grinned as he entered, followed by Lord Valente. Both men wore breeches, boots, tunics, and cloaks against the morning chill. Brother Jos greeted them, then took back his scrub brush.

Montenegro chuckled as he stood. "You've seen through my disguise. My reputation shall never recover."

"Catch," warned Aziz as he tossed his helmet. Montenegro plucked it from the air and tried it on. The fit was adequate. He felt a tickle of relief.

Lord Valente thudded a fist onto his shoulder. "I apologize for being late, but I've brought you something. I thought you might want to use it." He held up a scabbard containing a longsword. The weapon was forged of black steel, its hilt and crossbars ornate with astrological carvings. Light swam upon its dark surfaces.

Montenegro raised his eyebrows. "Ah, the famous Starfell! I thought you only trotted it out for the Wisp Hunt."

The nobleman patted the sheath. "The hunt is only a week away, and I thought this occasion warranted special consideration. Take it. Thulann of Garron is wielding Bahrok's blade. It's only fitting that you use mine."

Montenegro held Starfell in his hand. Even sheathed, its balance was impeccable. In the golden years before the Cataclysm, magic swords had been relatively plentiful, but this was one of the few he had ever seen. He had always envied Valente for it.

He handed the weapon back. "No, my lord. Thank you, but I'm going to win with plain steel and muscle. My honor demands it."

"See that you do," murmured Valente.

Aziz adjusted the straps of Montenegro's armor. "You look ready to go. I've never seen you so relaxed before a bout."

The knight's body felt as if it were bursting with power. His eyes locked on the door to the outside. "Thank Brother Jos and his scrub brush. But it's the calm before the storm, my friend. I'm a bolt of lightning inside this mail."

A sudden commotion erupted nearby. Brother Jos limped to a far doorway, through which dashed a small figure. The brother chortled. "Run, little sneak-thief!"

Valente cried out, "Little spy, you mean! That looked like the red-headed urchin who serves the Juka woman. Now she knows it's you in the fight!"

"Never mind," said Montenegro. "She's running the wrong way. The challenge will start before she returns. Who knows, it may even be finished."

Using the long hafts of their spears, a ring of armored knights held back the eager crowd. Within the clearing was a second ring of soldiers, Jukans, arrayed about Bahrok and Venduss. Across a large open space stood the assembled members of the Royal Senate of Britain.

In the center of the muddy clearing waited Thulann of Garron. Her peculiar crimson-and-grey armor was polished to an impressive shine. In her hand was Bahrok's curved, single-edged sword. Unsheathed, it was the topic of many admiring whispers.

Facing the willowy Juka were four New Britannian knights. All four were clad in plate armor. One of them held a spear in his hand. Another carried a broadsword and

shield. A third hefted a two-handed mace in her clamshell gauntlets.

Montenegro was the last. Aziz's helmet covered his face. He saluted Thulann in unison with the others. Thulann returned the salute. When the marshall called to lay on, he allowed the other knights to advance first. He jabbed his swordpoint into the mud, crossed his arms, and watched.

Thulann slithered into action. The sight of her circling the other knights lit a strange thrill in Montenegro's chest. Throughout the past six months he had replayed their Black Duel in his mind, many times a day. He could count off every step, every strike, every smallest detail. He had reconstructed her moves in his mind, could visualize their nuances, yet before him now she re-created the fighting style to perfection. Her maneuvers were different this time, though hauntingly familiar.

Sir Dominic was the first to engage her, with his broadsword and shield. She seemed in the beginning to fall into a simple game of parry and riposte, but soon unleashed her exotic tactics. Swinging her blade at his knees, she forced him to lower the shield. An instant later, employing her astounding flexibility, she twirled her leg overhead and kicked his steel helmet. The crowd gaped at the move. Sir Dominic stumbled backward. Thulann darted inside the sweep of his shield, jammed her swordpoint into the chain mail under his arm, then used her strong back to propel a vicious thrust. The knight cried out and dropped his sword. In a fury he bashed her with the edge of his shield. She tumbled with the momentum of the blow. When she rolled to her feet her polished armor was clotted with mud, but she seemed none the worse for the hit. Sir Dominic was having

trouble retrieving his broadsword with an unresponsive arm.

Montenegro recognized her technique. Over the summer he had worked out how she struck almost exclusively at joints and nerve centers. It made every blow seem doubly brutal. The practice required flawless precision. And so he had built his own training dummies in a rented townhouse in the city. Every morning and evening he drilled, pushing himself to exhaustion while demanding perfection. He never achieved it, but each day he moved closer.

That was around the time that Damario fled the city. In a lucid moment Montenegro had sought out his cousin, hoping for reconciliation. He had found no trace. Nor could he determine whether the thief-king Anzo had put a price on Damario's head. His only recourse was to continue his training, using the pain as a fire in his furnace.

Every day and night, he saw Thulann's face on those blank practice dummies.

Now Vegard and Evanthe attacked Thulann in tandem, after individual engagements proved futile. Vegard tried with the spear to usher her into Evanthe's mace blows, but the Juka's mobility made the effort difficult. Montenegro could not spot a single misstep, even in the slippery mud of the hillside. Finally with a swift advance, Thulann lunged past an overextended mace swing. Six percussive blows rained on Evanthe's helmet. Thulann pirouetted to dodge Sir Vegard's spear thrust. Continuing the spin she kicked Evanthe into the mud, yanked the spear from Vegard's hands and closed with the weaponless knight. Vegard retreated.

Sir Dominic stepped to his companion's defense. Thulann relented for the moment.



Now all three knights surrounded her. Montenegro knew she would have to rely on fast dodging and perhaps acrobatics to fight them all at once. When they closed she became a whirlwind, tumbling between them, leaping over their strikes, as often kicking and punching as hammering them with her blade. They could never corral her between them; one of the knights always found himself chasing after a moving target. They toppled and scrabbled through the clinging muck. Blood began to streak the New Britannians' armor, and hers as well.

So many answers were falling into place for Montenegro. Every day for six months he had tried to solve a new problem, piecing together how she had stepped or twisted or tumbled that rainy night outside of Vesper. Now she was showing him everything. Each new technique that she demonstrated, he inserted into his battery of knowledge. He recalled the months of daily wrestling, the endless footwork drills, even seeking out entertainers to instruct him in acrobatics. It took nine weeks of struggle and many pulled muscles to convince him that there was no quick way to reproduce her flips and cartwheels. Even the healers had warned him to curtail the abuse of his body.

In fact he had indulged a week's respite, in late spring, to return to his estate outside of Cove. When he arrived, he found his home overrun by a rampaging forest. Wild predators stalked the grounds. The orchards could not produce. Even the modest silver mine came up dry. It was sorcery, without question. But Damario was not skilled enough to commit such an act, so Montenegro despaired to learn the identity of his enemy. After his disgrace in the Senate, the House of the Griffin refused to give him aid. So he did the only thing he

could. He abandoned his home, moved to Britain and resumed his martial pursuits.

The land had been his last connection to his grandfather. He had tried to convince himself he could regain his honor and earn a new, fertile estate. After all, Sir Lazaro had built his own, why not Sir Gabriel?

But when he trained to take his mind off his misfortunes, he found himself growing angrier. Combat became a place of rage for him. Rage to be revenged. Rage with no clearer target than she who had touched off his downfall: Thulann of Garron, Master of the Way.

The combat demonstration was turning ugly. Blood and muck covered the combatants. Neither side would yield. When Evanthe's mace squarely impacted Thulann's back, the old Juka cried out and hurtled into the mud. The crowd cheered at the blood in her mouth and howled for more. In a languid tumble she kicked Evanthe off her feet, leapt overhead and smashed her heel into the lady knight's half-armored neck. Evanthe did not move after that. Dominic and Vegard chased the Juka until she reversed directions. She brutalized Dominic's injured arm until he staggered away, snarling helplessly.

Montenegro realized the audience was screaming at him. It was time to act. He plucked his longsword from the ground. In his immaculate armor he approached.

Thulann and Vegard were circling. The knight was plainly exhausted. The Juka staggered as well, her fluid movements diminished by a nasty barrage of punctures and bruises.

Montenegro banged his pommel on Sir Vegard's shoulder. The knight acknowledged him, then stumbled back to give him room.

Through the eye slit of his helm, Montenegro gazed into Thulann's face. The old Way Master was tired and wounded and filthy, but the pride remained in her eyes. That damnable pride which had silently mocked him during the Black Duel. The pride he had battled to exhaustion every day since.

His body felt searingly hot. His muscles tightened. He controlled his strength as he slipped a glass vial from his belt and held it out to Thulann.

She seemed to recognize the healing potion. For an instant she hesitated, then inhaled a deep breath and accepted it. After she drank, her strength returned. Her stance straightened. Her motions flowed like silk again. It was the only way Montenegro would do this.

The audience protested. The entourages from both races rose to their feet and watched in silence.

He felt a wicked smile crawl across his lips as he lifted the visor of Aziz's helmet. When his face met the morning's steel-blue light, his name cascaded through the crowd.

Someone roared on his left: "Montenegro!" It was the Juka warlord, Bahrok, after the wave of whispers that stilled the crowd reached his pointed ears. Montenegro paid no attention to what Bahrok was saying. Rather he peered into Thulann's eyes. The shock on her face was ambrosia to him.

He tensed to strike.

Then Thulann of Garron did something he did not expect. She smiled back at him. It wasn't a fierce smile, or an ironic smile, or condescending or even amused. It was warm and genuine, almost joyful, as if she had met a longed-for old friend. Then she knelt in front of him, laid Warlord Bahrok's sword across her forearm and offered it to him.

She yielded.

Montenegro's mind whirled. This was not right. He distantly heard Bahrok bellowing like a wild beast, and noises from the Senate that sounded like cheers, but the only voice that mattered was his own inside his head. It shouted, *You can't do this to me! I won't let you do this to me!*

Montenegro received the exquisite blade from Thulann. With a brusque motion he lifted it over his knee and snapped it in half. He flung the two broken pieces into the mud.

Pandemonium erupted on the hillside under the Cathedral of the Virtues. Warlord Bahrok charged across the field, despite his own soldiers attempting to restrain him. The knights converged to protect the senators, allowing the riotous crowd to break free.

Now Bahrok was clashing unarmed with citizens and Jukan warriors and New Britannian knights alike in a berserk gambit to reach Montenegro. But he made little progress and the knight paid him no mind. Montenegro was staring at the expressive old face of Thulann, who still knelt in the clinging muck. Hurt and anger and confusion battled across her strange, wrinkled features.

In the grey light of morning, he imagined his own face was very nearly identical.

## CHAPTER

# 6

## The Mathematician's Formula

The common room of the Black Goat Inn was warm from the heat of a blazing hearth. Flames veiled the crackling logs like a glowing mane. The wood of the room—walls and pillars, tables, and chairs—soaked in the warmth and radiated it again. The heated timber emitted a mild scent. It was mellow, with highlights of smoky tang.

Sister Raveka scooped up a mouthful of thick stew. It steamed on her spoon. When she tasted it, the roasted flavors filled her mouth with earthy, piquant richness. The tepid sting of local ale provided a pleasant finish.

Outside the closed shutters, fallen leaves skittered and skipped like playful children.

Raveka could not deny the appeal of this land. New Britannia possessed a unique, insistent charm. It was everything she had imagined from the stories she had heard as a child. She found herself relishing each detail. Even the close embrace of her courtesan's gown had become an amiable sensation.

She was careful to recite a litany of numerical proofs each morning, to reassert the discipline of the Machine.

Her plan was proceeding by ordered steps, according to her calculations at Buccaneer's Den. She and Pikas had arrived at this inn outside of Britain over a week ago. Since then she had established her identity as Riona Lynch among the locals, many of whom recalled lusty ol' Shanty with colorful tales. The denizens of the Black Goat had even come to accept Pikas, disguised in his enigmatic garb. He was a familiar spectre in the halls. She was relieved, too, that the Jukan assassin was coming to tolerate the Britannians. As far as she knew, he had not killed anyone since they landed.

Each evening she traveled into the capital. Riona had charmed a niche among the courtesans who plied their trade at Castle Britannia. She was likewise welcomed by the visitors from Garron, carousing with the soldiers more easily than did the Britannian women, who were not yet accustomed to the strange, stout Juka. The soldiers divulged much to her. She was especially interested in the drama of the combat demonstration three days earlier. It bore out the probabilities she had already deduced. The tension between Britain and Garron wound as tightly as a coiled spring. It begged for a saboteur to release it.

She had reduced the complexity of the situation to a few, simple factors. Tonight came the next step in her plan. It was time to turn the gears.

This was the first evening since arriving in New Britannia that she felt the shadow of real danger. It was all the more stimulating since she was now immersed in a dreamworld of knights and lords, once limited to her childhood fantasies.

Father Gaff had taught her that the greatest threat to a complex calculation was not adequately sharpening one's quill. And so she sat in the common room of the Black Goat

Inn, ate her dinner and enjoyed a gentle hour of New Britannian hospitality.

Others dined this evening, as well. Two of them caught her attention and raised their mugs. She answered with affable eyes. They rose and approached, pitcher in hand. The taller of the pair was an athletic man, his tanned skin contrasting a squall of golden hair. He was dressed in well-seasoned leathers and smelled like the outdoors.

The second man was not human. He was a Meer, covered in short, tawny fur that darkened with spots on his limbs and around his face. His animal-like ears stood tall from his neat brown hair and his opal eyes had a smooth, soulful depth. His clothes were the easy, tailored skins preferred by many of his race.

Raveka felt a touch of apprehension. The Meer government, in the land of Avenosh, had opened tentative relations with the Technocrats several years earlier. A few of them actually dwelled in Logos. She had been introduced to a Meer in Logosia a few months previous, in the formal context of a diplomatic errand. Raveka had difficulty reconciling their animal appearance with their spiritual, pacifistic demeanor. She always imagined a predator must lurk inside those graceful bodies.

But Riona Lynch had no cause for distrust, and in this guise she greeted the two men who joined her.

The blond human leaned on the back of an empty chair. "May we sit with you and share a bit of that beautiful smile you have?"

Her glance was softly rakish. "Share whatever you like, gentle sirs, but do it quickly. I leave for the city when this bowl of stew is empty."

The Meer chuckled as he glided into a seat. "Then shall we do our very utmost to keep it filled."

The human introduced himself as Fairfax. He belonged to an order of Britannian soldiers known as rangers, who patrolled the vast wilderness to keep its less neighborly inhabitants in check. The Meer was named Jatha. Unlike his companion he was not a warrior. Rather, sorcery was his expertise, a realm of study that occupied an integral, spiritual role among his people. Meer spellcrafters were peerless. The New Britannians, Raveka knew, had profited greatly when the two lands exchanged magical knowledge. The humans in this place seemed to have accepted the Meer completely.

In contrast, the Logosians were intrigued by them, but cautious. While Meer sorcery employed almost mathematical precision, still any sort of magic possessed a wild aura. The Technocrats did not place their trust in it. Such methodologies, the Techno-Prophet once warned, had led to the very Cataclysm itself. The Machine properly subsumed magical elements into a more disciplined role.

And so Raveka had double cause to be uneasy in the presence of this Meer wizard, though he did seem far less aloof than the others she had encountered. And naturally, she did not intend to lose an opportunity for gathering intelligence. Devising an ingenuous look on her face, she said, "You've come from Britain, haven't you? Tell me the latest news. Is it true the Juka have asked the House of the Griffin to teach them magic?"

"Indeed they have," replied Jatha the Meer, "though Master Gregorio altogether opposes it. Do you know who he is? A great sorcerer, but scared as a rabbit by the Juka. I



heard he gave the Senate a rather enthusiastic speech about the dangers of teaching magic to a race of people who were both 'uninitiated and discourteous.' " He chuckled and gulped a quaff of beer.

Fairfax added with a smirk, "As if that withered old prune was anything but bitter himself. He's older than the best wine I've ever tasted, and turned to vinegar as well, by the sound of it."

Raveka shrugged, "But Jatha, your own fine people won't be so skittish, hey? Surely the Meer will teach the Juka magic. You seem to be made of harder stuff than a flaccid old human." She nudged him and winked.

Jatha laughed. "I very much doubt we will. That would mean taking sides. There's a war on between Blackthorn and the Juka, or so says the Jukan warlord, and the Matriarchs have no interest in wars. Neutrality is the burden of peace, and all that. I for one agree. Why die for someone else's cause?" He waved an impatient hand in the air. "But come now, I haven't been closely attending that ugly affair. My companion Fairfax and I are engaged in a matter of tangibly greater importance."

"Greater than all those senators and warlords? The two of you? I'm astounded. Is it a guarded secret, or can you talk about it with someone of poor Riona's status and profession?"

Fairfax stroked his hand across her back. "For you, my flower, we'll break every confidence. Never once did the promises of great men withstand the onslaught of a fluttering pair of eyes. Jatha and I are on a quest for that thing desired by all men of stout heart and loins, that goal which completes the journey of lust and glory upon which all souls

of true mettle embark." He lifted his mug of beer, sloshing a drop. "To wit, my ripe Riona, we seek the Perfect Draught."

The Meer wizard raised his own mug and they clicked their cups together, then guzzled the balance of the contents.

Raveka cocked her head and giggled. Her affected accent had become unconscious. "A worthy pursuit for sure, gents, but you've got it wrong. See, it's not the drink in the pitcher that matters, it's the company you share it with, hey?"

"That is the very soul of the puzzle!" said Jatha, tapping his finger on the table. "We've tasted fine liquors of every exotic persuasion. For that you only need coinage and a good pair of shoes. The Perfect Draught, on the other hand, encompasses an altogether more sublime convergence of social, emotional, environmental, and potable ingredients."

Fairfax added, "Every day we begin the quest anew. Tonight the trail has brought us to this fine roadhouse. Which is why I ask you, my succulent Riona, what we must do to dissuade you from undertaking your business in Britain this evening? Rather stay here with us and join in our bibulous adventure."

"Indeed!" cried Jatha. "I sense the trail we follow leads underneath this very table, winds up your shapely if unfurred body and ends at the rosy nexus of your lips, which, I modestly observe, would profit from a drop of dew." He topped off her mug from their pitcher, then the ranger's and his own. "To Riona's lips."

She licked them with a grin, then drank a mouthful.

"I fear I must slacken your sails, fine sirs. I've an appointment to keep or my employer won't take it kindly."

The ranger peered into his mug and picked a stray particle

from it. "Your employer? Would that be the large, lethal-looking fellow sharing your room, who wraps himself up like a swaddled babe so that nothing shows but his viperous eyes? Fain let him try to punish you in our company! What business does he send you on that's more important than ours, and requires you to walk an hour to the city when sun-down is less distant than that?"

Abruptly Jatha snapped, "Fairfax! Mind yourself. You forget the motto of this establishment." He pointed to an inscription over the mantel, which read: *Dry your feet, Wet your throat, And shun impertinent questions.*

The blond warrior bowed over the table. "I am an injudicious toad. Sweet Riona, ripest grape in heaven's vineyard, will you accept my apology?"

She laughed as she set down her cup. "Of course I will. I love apologies. It's the one thing in the world that men bother to be creative with." She pushed her dishes to the center of the table. "But still I must go, and alone, if you please. I wish you worthies success in your quest. Remember me to paradise when you find it." She stood, twinkled a smile and departed, a sprightly apparition in vivid scarlet.

"It shall not be paradise that wants for your presence!" called Fairfax to the closing door. With a sigh he murmured, "And so, once again, vanishes the evening's likeliest diversion. And toothsome she was, too. Well, in the absence of quality there's always quantity." He reached out to retrieve Raveka's half-filled cup of ale.

At his side Jatha the wizard flipped him a perplexed look. In a wet voice the Meer asked, " 'Bibulous adventure?' " The ranger replied with a shrug and the bottom of his cup.

Outside the inn, Raveka grinned while draping on her cloak. The words of the ranger repeated in her head: *Never once did the promises of great men withstand the onslaught of a fluttering pair of eyes.* It was a male reaction explained to her by both Shanty Lynch and Father Gaff. Masculine pride quailed before a properly presented woman. The men of Logos subscribed to that behavior, but in New Britannia they nearly prided themselves on it. Raveka could exploit the strange chivalry with ease, though oddly enough, the more chivalric the New Britannians were, the less she desired to take advantage of them. She could not explain the sentiment, and made a mental note to monitor it.

"I don't like the look of those two," growled a voice from a shadow in the surrounding forest.

Raveka grimaced. "Please relax, Pikas. Our enemies are not here. They're in the city, which is where we shall be soon, if you have prepared the carriage."

"It's ready. So tell me what's going on. I can sense by the way you're acting that mischief is in the air. Do we kill Montenegro tonight?"

"Don't be ridiculous. We'd lose much by killing him right now." She slipped off the road and through a hidden path in the undergrowth, where she met a dark shape. "Patience. I know you're anxious to cross blades with someone who can give you a challenge. You'll get to run Montenegro through soon enough. But tonight we've got a far more dangerous pursuit."

Concealed by the sounds and shadows of night, they crept away to their flying machine that lurked in the nearby blackness of the forest.

\* \* \*

By habit, Thulann entered silently through the door to her suite. In the antechamber she found Venduss practicing his martial forms. His bare flesh shone with sweat and his jaw thrust forward in angry determination. Across the room sat Toria on the floor beside the fire, her knees drawn up to her chin. She sang in a pale, haunted voice:

*Said the fox to the hare, "It's days since I've eaten.*

*"I cannot outrun you. My wiles you have beaten."*

*Said the hare to the fox, "If you had been faster*

*"Then you would not have to call hunger your master,*

*"For destiny favors the fleet."*

*Said the fox to the hound, "It's days since I've eaten.*

*"I cannot outrun you. My wiles you have beaten."*

*Said the hound to the fox, "If you had been faster*

*"Then you would not have to call hunger your master,*

*"For destiny favors the fleet."*

The Way Master rubbed her tired brow as she dropped into a chair. "Toria, have you ever explored the notion of learning cheerful songs?"

"I only learn cheerful songs, mistress. I write the others myself." The girl hurried to Thulann's side and began unlacing the Juka's clothes. "How did the meeting go tonight?"

"Well enough. Regent Salvatore is desperate to make amends for Montenegro's behavior. I reiterated our request that they teach us magic. Again Master Gregorio vigorously protested, though Salvatore approves of the idea, as does Lady Mariah, the chief sorceress of the House of the Griffin. I think we shall win that battle."

Toria pulled loose Thulann's overcoat. "And what about Warlord Bahrok?"

Thulann chuckled, though her face registered weary despair. "He still knows nothing about these secret negotiations. Thank the Great Mother for that, because his demands are not faring well. The Senate is not going to punish Montenegro, no matter how loudly Bahrok screams. Lord Valente stands behind his decision to place Montenegro in the duel. He insists that I insulted the man's honor by yielding, so his actions were justified." She shook her head and said no more. Somewhere the whole situation had turned backward on itself. She did not like the feelings that rose in her when she discussed it.

The silence became a cue for the minstrel to speak. "I told you what I saw in the cathedral before the fight. Scrubbing the floor and all. I don't think Montenegro is as bad a person as he seems."

"Toria, you are wrong," said Venduss from the other side of the room. The young warrior completed his exercise and stepped toward them. "He rejected an honorable surrender. That is an unacceptable insult to our dignity. The manner in which he did it triples the offense. If teacher will not be angry, then I shall be angry enough for both of us."

Thulann splayed back in her chair and spoke toward the ceiling. "Anger is for cowards. Rage is only a lack of discipline. Watch those words you are trying to put in my mouth, stripling." Her mood felt like a cauldron removed from the fire; only now did the boiling subside. And Venduss was applying heat again.

The sweaty Juka snapped, "Is it cowardly and undisciplined to want to defend one's honor? If it is, then I am both!

It is possible, you know, to be patient to a fault."

Thulann was rising from her chair before she realized it. "And now the nursling takes it upon himself to judge his teacher? You check that tongue of yours, if the rest of you wishes to continue in my instruction! Is that clear? Now, let us see if we can channel that fire of yours into something constructive. Tonight we work on endurance. Give me a one-armed handstand and hold it until I say otherwise."

"But teacher—!"

"Quiet! Your tongue is too strong and your body too weak. I intend to rectify both. Up now, or I shall string you up myself by that bellpull!"

With a snarl Venduss complied, inverting to a handstand and then balancing on one arm. Already overworked, his muscles trembled. Thulann watched the boy's face for a moment. When he surrendered to the mental techniques she had taught him to overcome fatigue, the Way Master turned toward Toria.

"The time has come. I need you to go out tonight and find us a discreet room somewhere. I want to move out of this suite tomorrow."

"But mistress, it's not safe for you on the streets. A lot of people don't like the Juka, after Bahrok injured all those spectators at the demonstration. They're threatening all kinds of nasty payback."

"Hounds bark most when they fear to bite." She glanced at Venduss for an instant, then added, "But that is precisely why I have no desire to remain here. Every day the unrest grows. You have seen how the people of the city do not trust us. It requires just one more undiplomatic action by Bahrok to turn a suspicious crowd into a lynch mob, and this castle

into a prison. I want some recourse if that happens. It shall be easier to conceal ourselves at a small inn than an opulent palace like this. Do not tarry, now, child. The courtesans will be arriving soon. Use your disguise to get out."

"Yes, mistress." But the girl's eyes fell on the upside-down Venduss, whose skin flushed dark green with exertion. "Mistress?" she said in a soft tone, so the young warrior could not hear, "forgive me, but you haven't said much about, um, what happened with Montenegro. I . . . am concerned. You know. About you." She kept her gaze pointed down.

Thulann closed her eyes. "You ask me how I feel about it?" A single, honest word popped into her head: *alone*. She had not realized how much it comforted her to imagine that New Britannia was home to a warrior like Montenegro, whose honor superseded all other considerations. For such was the Montenegro in her mind, though it was plain now that reality disagreed with her. In her chest echoed a small, empty place.

"Apparently I misjudged him," was her simple answer, and Toria asked no further.

The autumn night turned chilly. Though the damp cold nibbled at the flesh exposed by her courtesan's dress, Sister Raveka kept hidden in the alley, away from the warm street-lamps around Castle Britannia. From a clutching shadow she observed the high walls of the palace. Without sound her lips fashioned complex mathematical verses.

The voice of Pikas whispered from deeper in the shadows. "How much longer?"

"Soon."



"Are you sure about this, Sister? I don't know if I can help you once you're in there. That place is so tight, the guards guard each other."

She finished her silent meditation. "Be thankful. It works to my advantage."

"How can it?"

"Look there." Down the street trooped a collection of women gowned in vibrant colors. They moved toward a side door of the palace. "There aren't half as many here tonight as there were three days ago, before the fighting demonstration. The courtesans are afraid of Bahrok now. That gives me a higher probability of reaching him."

"You're not afraid yourself? It's not like you're walking in there with a bolt-thrower strapped to your leg."

She subdued a little smile. "I have faith in my training."

"You need more than that. It takes courage to face Bahrok. Have you got courage, Sister, or are you just stupid?"

"Discipline is courage. This is why I came to New Britannia. I'm prepared for his temper."

"You'd better be. I don't see how you can signal me if there's trouble."

She pointed to a window. "Most probably I'll be right there. Stay within sight of it." She lifted the hem of her dress, stepping between the puddles of the alleyway. She could not resist adding, "And if you get bored, try not to kill anybody."

"That's up to you. If you don't come out of there by morning, I'm going to assume you failed. Tomorrow I'll kill Montenegro and a few more ranking humans, just to stir things up. Then I'm back to Logos to collect my payment."

A chuckle leapt from the shadows. "When I think of it that way, part of me hopes that Bahrok strangles you tonight."

"Violent thoughts issue from small minds. Good night to you, now."

Inside the castle, she lined up with the other courtesans in a narrow stone corridor. A Jukan guard stood at each end. They leered over the edgy women. Waiting closest to the exterior door, Raveka rolled her eyes toward the bosomy woman next to her.

The plump courtesan chuckled and spoke quietly. "Not many familiar faces tonight, eh, Riona? And no wonder. Did you hear the big one busted up a few girls yesterday? They beat him at cards, as I heard it, and spurned him to boot. I hope he passes on me. I'll take one of those tired guards, thank you. A nice massage and a song or two and they'll drop right off to sleep."

Raveka winked. "Don't worry. The big one's mine tonight."

The woman widened her eyes and propped a hand on her rounded hip. "Oohhhh, you are the dangerous sort, aren't you? You know, there's a few knights I'm acquainted with who would love to meet you, then. You ever gone to one of Lord Valente's Wisp Hunts? He has one every year. It starts in just a couple of days. You're so young and pale, you'd have a gentleman's arm for the whole affair."

Raveka smiled and said, "One night at a time, Sasha," though her mind began to ponder.

"You be watchful this evening, though. That big Juka, he's not one to be careless with. The brute. Just look at the way he lines us up down here, like sheep in a chute. If the pay weren't so good I'd never come back."

The whispers of the courtesans abruptly ceased. At the

far end of the corridor, Raveka saw a huge shape round the corner. Warlord Bahrok was dressed in a flowing robe and nothing else. It was a custom among the Juka clans to wear as little clothing as possible. They prided themselves on their well-developed physiques. Sister Raveka had never appreciated that barbarian aesthetic, preferring the layered fashions of Logos, but she could not deny that Bahrok's wide frame and bulky muscles were startlingly impressive. She was almost surprised that he fit inside the tight corridor.

The other courtesans did not yet appear to be entirely comfortable with his sharp horns and calloused green skin.

The enormous Juka had a dour expression. He rubbed his chin as he gazed down the line of women. Raveka could sense the fear among her fellows.

Bahrok grumbled, "I want someone to dance for me tonight. Which one of you is going to keep me warm?"

"I've a nice fire in my furnace, sir," commented Raveka, stepping apart from the row.

The other women gasped, as if she had made a terrible mistake.

Bahrok aimed a stern gaze at her. "Have you, little human? Riona, is it not? You play with fire, that much is certain."

She glanced aside with a smirk. "I play with a lot of things, sir."

A grin sparked across the warlord's lips. "Great Mother's bags, you are a wicked little fool. You do not know what you are playing with right now. More than you can handle."

"They said you were a boastful sort, and to think I didn't believe it."

Bahrok's eyes blazed. Though his grin remained, he

strode at her with furious intent. "Juka do not boast, dog, and woe to the brittle fool who makes the accusation." Raveka steeled herself, recalling her litanies as the powerful warrior shoved the other courtesans out of his path. A few of them whimpered in horror.

"On your knees!" growled the Juka, "or I shall put you down."

Raveka felt herself shrinking back against the guard who was standing behind her. The practiced look of irony remained on her face, but only because she had trained it to.

Then Bahrok stopped, a good ten feet from her. To Raveka's confusion he looked to the side and barked, "What? What is this?"

In an instant he seemed to have forgotten her. Instead he reached out and clutched the bright red hair of another courtesan. Raveka did not recognize her. She was a wisp of a girl, not even standing as tall as his chest. The terrified child could hardly draw a breath.

Bahrok looked cruelly delighted. "Well now! I never expected this! Wandered a bit too far from your mistress' chambers, did you? Lost in the dark?" He pulled the girl to his side by a fistful of hair. "Well, come with me! Tonight you shall sing in my suite, little Toria. Perhaps you shall have a story to tell your mistress in the morning."

He started to turn away. Raveka lunged forward.

"Such a tiny thing for the likes of yourself, sir? Is that all the appetite you have?"

She slammed against Bahrok's outstretched palm. Her chest throbbed from the impact. "Your mouth is too noisy," he grumbled. "Follow behind me and keep it shut, or I shall break it."

Raveka let adrenaline drive her as she slithered around his powerful arm. Pressing against his torso she murmured, "Give me the chance and I'll make you forget this nibble of a girl."

Bahrok scowled. "Enough, woman. Away."

The Technocrat pushed onto her toes and whispered in his ear, "I have spoken to Montenegro."

The warlord clutched her by the throat. His teeth were bared. Raveka felt her airflow pinch. Breathlessly she mouthed, "Alone, sir?"

Bahrok hissed as he considered her words. With a snarl he released the red-haired girl. Then he clutched the low neckline of Raveka's gown and sneered, "Say nothing unless I command it, or you will suffer." He pulled her forward, off her feet. She scrambled to regain her balance, then scurried behind him as best she could.

As they left the narrow corridor she heard the other women gathering to comfort the sobbing child. Sister Raveka of the Order of Mathematicians began to wonder who was more out of place, that terrified girl or herself.

The warlord flung her into the antechamber of his suite. She tried to catch her balance, but spilled across the ornate rug. Bahrok chased out the other Juka until the two of them were alone. He banged shut the door and hammered her with a fierce glare.

"Who are you, woman? You had better hope I like your answer!"

"Riona Lynch, sir. Just another working girl."

"You lie!" He stormed closer as she rose to her knees. Roughly he grabbed the sleeve of her dress, tearing it as he

plucked her off the floor. Raveka had never felt so weightless and small. "If you lie to me again I shall hurt you. You are more than what you want me to believe. And you came here tonight to talk to me. Why? Who sent you? Montenegro?"

"Nobody sent me! I came on my own. Of course I want to talk to you."

He lowered his head. His short, spikish horns pressed inches from her brow. "Tell me what you have to say about Montenegro, then."

She attempted to wet her tongue, but failed. "I met with him at a luncheon yesterday, in a professional capacity. We talked about what's been happening. I thought you might want to know what he said, hey?"

The room tumbled. Something bashed against Raveka's skull. When the blinding flashes subsided, she realized she was lying on a region of the marble floor unsoftened by a rug. Blinking hurt.

Bahrok loomed above her. "I warned you about lying. You did not come here out of kindness to me. You want something. Now tell me what your game is or you will bleed from more places than one."

She warded off the sight of him with a frantic hand. "All right! Let me finish, hey? Montenegro spent the whole time laughing about what he had done at the demonstration. You're the butt of all the jokes among the knights now. You're no better than an orc or a troll to them. Not worthy of honorable treatment. Do you understand what I'm saying to you?"

Bahrok gnashed his teeth. "Of course I understand. You want me to kill him for you." Wedging his bare toes underneath her, he shoved Raveka to her feet again. She stumbled

against the wall. "When you have something to say to me, woman, say it! Do not insult me with this childish attempt at manipulation. I do not need your persuasion to want Montenegro dead. I have my own reasons. I want to know what yours are."

Something dripped in her eye. She wiped and saw blood. Her head throbbed. "Because—" She paused until the pain of speaking dwindled. "Because he made a fool of us. Of New Britannia. Because he dishonored his people and he doesn't deserve to get away with it."

"Enough of this!" roared the stocky Juka as he lunged at her again. He had a dagger in his fist. With a squeal she dodged to the side. His blow crashed against the wood paneling. Raveka's stomach leapt into her throat as she scrambled away from his abrupt attack. She wished she were armed. The window seemed miles away. She summoned up the training she had received in Logos, years of agility exercises that allowed her to gain her legs and dive for the window sash. She calculated that Pikas was no more than three hundred yards away and two floors down, at street level.

A silent mathematical verse came unbidden to her lips.

Then a brutal pain stabbed through her back and slammed her against the hard stone floor. She heard something crack in her torso. She lay prone. Her body did not move correctly. A frigid weakness rushed through her limbs. When she tried to breathe, she could not.

Something shoved against her back. It was Bahrok's foot.

The dagger clattered on the ground in front of her face. She saw no blood on it.

"I hit you with the pommel," snarled the Juka. "You get to tell one more lie, Riona Lynch, and then it will be the blade,

I promise you." He removed his foot. Air tumbled into her lungs and she coughed and choked. Her bodily senses returned painfully. She rolled onto her side and curled up, spitting blood and saliva from her swollen lips.

The warlord crouched in front of her. He shoved his big face close. His breath was sour with wine. "Now, you were telling me why you want Montenegro dead."

Through teary eyes she saw his expression. He was angry and heartless and smug. He knew she feared for her life.

He was precisely where she wanted him to be.

She captured the fear on her face, memorized it, and maintained its semblance even as her control returned. She heard the litanies chant within her, in Father Gaff's soothing drone; and also the words of a saucy ranger, speaking of great men and fluttering eyes. Inside, unseen, she smiled.

"Montenegro disgraced me," she whimpered, blinking at tears. "It's his fault that I'm forced into this profession. That's why I want you to kill him."

The warlord nodded slowly. "Now we reach the truth of it. You should have told me this at the beginning. Your pride nearly killed you."

"My pride . . . is all I've got left."

"I understand, then." He helped her into a plush velvet chair with surprising gentleness, and then poured wine into a pair of goblets. "Tell me how Montenegro ruined you, Riona Lynch. Then we shall discuss revenge."

She told him her tale. It was a compelling one, in which Riona had shed the stigma of her criminal father and established herself as a gentlewoman, only to be exposed by Montenegro following a brief love affair. The story touched upon many points of honor among the Juka, such as the



sanctity of oaths and the reputation of one's clan. She had crafted it specifically with Bahrok in mind.

To her delight, he seemed to take the bait.

He drank his wine almost by cupfuls. "Very well, you and I both have reasons to despise this knight. What do you propose to do? I cannot simply call him out and kill him. I would never leave these shores alive."

She stood and paced across the room. "You've got hundreds of warriors. One of them must be willing to die for you." She stopped by the window and nursed her aching skull against the cold glass.

"It does not matter which of us kills him. If he dies by a Jukan hand, we all suffer."

"Then once he's dead, offer up the killer as a sacrifice. They can have a public execution, or whatever you want, I don't care. It'll serve the Virtue of Justice and that should be the end of the matter. It's not like the knights are proud of what Montenegro did to your champion. They want this whole thing to be finished, too."

Bahrok grunted. "I have considered this already, of course. Do you bring anything useful to the table, or did you imagine that I would act in your service?"

She sipped another tongueful of wine. It was, she noted, the best she had ever tasted. "I can pinpoint him for you. I'll give you an exact place and time when he'll be alone. I'll even arrange transportation. All you need is to provide me with a warrior to do the deed."

"You make an enticing argument." In the many window panes, Raveka saw a reflected warlord approach her from behind. His large hand wrapped softly around her throat. She flinched. "So enticing, in fact, it is almost suspicious. You

could well be a spy, come to make me do something rash. If you were, I would kill you." He opened a grin and tightened his fingers just a bit.

She returned a nervous look to his fragmented reflection. "I just want Montenegro to pay. It's no more complicated than that. So give me a few days to figure out where and when he'll be vulnerable. Can you find an assassin in that time?"

He released her neck and traced his knuckles up the line of her jaw. His grin widened. "The Juka are not assassins. But I have just the warrior in mind."

She exhaled deeply. "Then our business is done."

"No. Your business is done. I still have that business for which I brought you here in the first place." He threaded his fingers through her short, black hair.

Her body tingled. Tension was uncoiling in tiny increments. "I see. And what if I'm too tired?"

"Then rest, and have some more to drink." He ushered her back to the soft, velvet chair. "We have all night ahead of us. I am in the mood for a poem, if you know any, and then you can dance for me."

Her goal was accomplished, but her duties remained. Sister Raveka rallied her strength, conjured a sinful smile and nestled up to a fresh, brimming goblet.

"So we're going to kill Montenegro at this 'Wisp Hunt.' " Pikas perched in the crook of a serpentine tree in the thick of the Britannian forest. His face was unwrapped from its mask of windings. With a long knife he whittled small, sharp slivers of wood.

Raveka knelt on the ground beside the tree. She had disas-

sembled her spring-powered bolt-thrower and was cleaning its components. "The likeliest outcome is that we shall not have to kill him at all. Bahrok's warrior will do it. I am sorry if that disappoints you."

"You trust Bahrok too much. What if he figures out you're a spy?"

"He will not, but it doesn't matter. I have inserted the plan into his mind. He's not the sort of man to let such an opportunity go by without taking some kind of action. If he follows my plan, then his man kills Montenegro. If his man fails, or if Bahrok doesn't follow my plan, then you kill Montenegro. One way or another, Montenegro will die at the Wisp Hunt."

"Then the Garronites get blamed and the whole alliance goes into the gutter. Except I'm not so sure the Britannians will play their part. Look, Montenegro embarrassed them. Why should they care if he dies? If I was on the Senate, I would've voted to have him executed myself."

"The Senate will not punish Montenegro. In this affair, to vote against him is to vote against Lord Valente, who heads the House of the Lion. No one is going to fight that kind of battle just because Warlord Bahrok is upset. In fact, there's a good number of senators who are secretly happy that Bahrok is angry and would welcome a reason to throw him out of the city."

Pikas finished carving an aerodynamic sliver of wood. He flipped it from the end of his knife. Its sharp point embedded in the tree bark. "Not so secretly, if you know about it."

"Riona has the confidence of some highly-placed tongues."

"Including Bahrok's, hey?" He placed another dart on the tip of his knife.

She shook her head. "Two nights in his company is enough. We've planned our endeavor. I won't be returning to him again, if I can avoid it. He is a boor."

The assassin flipped the second sliver. It stuck into a narrower branch. "Sure you'll return. You want to kill him."

"No, I don't. He's just a pawn."

"Doesn't matter. He hit you. Sooner or later the animal part of you is going to want to get back at him."

"If I were undisciplined, perhaps. But I'm not. I am a Mathematician. Besides, it was my intention that he strike me, so I could gain his confidence."

The Juka did not seem to hear her. "My guess is, you can deny it for another day or two. No longer than that. Then you'll be thinking of ways to kill him. You may know more than me about a lot of things, Sister, but when it comes to killing—" He flung a third dart higher into the foliage. Something squealed. A small shape plummeted from the tree and thumped on the ground in front of the Technocrat.

Pikas picked up the next sliver of wood. "—I know more than you ever want to."

Raveka frowned with a curl of her lip. She knew Pikas was wrong. She needed no vengeance against Bahrok. As long as the discipline of the Machine kept her baser emotions in check, Pikas would remain wrong.

She nudged the dead, furry animal behind a gnarled tree root, where she did not have to look at it.

The forest was deeper and wilder in the region where Lord Valente gathered the knights for the Wisp Hunt. The trees made a rustling green canopy overhead. Hunting trails crisscrossed the area, with a tide of brambles and under-

growth worrying at their edges. Insects and sunbeams dashed between tree trunks that smelled of earth and autumn.

The forest brimmed with animal life. Raucous sounds of every timbre leapt from a thousand unseen places. It sang a sweet invitation to sportsmen. The many pavilions erected by the knights stood unpeopled, but for a collection of servants who prepared a lavish meal while their masters were stalking game in the woods, and a smattering of courtesans who had begun to arrive. They preened after the three-hour carriage ride from the capital.

It was deep into the afternoon, on the eve of the wisps' mustering.

Alone among the trees, Montenegro soaked in the pleasant vibration of the hunting bow as he loosed an arrow. The sound was dull and calming. The flight of the missile seemed like an extension of himself. He felt it push through the air and through the leaves and thunk into the pulp of a tree. A startled pheasant fluttered on short wings out of the brush. Its colorful feathers vanished amid veils of ivy and hanging moss. Its cry faded seconds later.

"You've lost your touch, Sir Gabriel," said a gruff voice on the trail.

The knight glanced at Lord Valente as he lowered his bow. "I wasn't trying to kill it, my lord. I just wanted to see it fly."

"You take pleasure in frightening it?"

"I wanted to see its plumage." He propped against a tree and perched one hand on his bow. "I'm enjoying the forest from a rather more sensuous perspective today. It pleases my senses."

The nobleman's white mustache stood out straight across either cheek, waxed to excess against the erosion of the wild atmosphere. It made an odd counterpoint to his simple, practical hunting leathers. Overall, the effect was to amplify the frown on his face.

"I'm glad you're taking pleasure from the hunt. It's the last gift I shall give you."

Montenegro heard restraint in the old soldier's voice. "My lord?"

Valente drew an arrow from his own quiver and nocked it. He scanned the dense foliage. "For the moment, I have to show my support for you. Were I to admit what a dreadful mistake I made in letting you fight the Juka, I'd be laughed out of the Senate. Lord Gideon is waiting like a vulture to steal the Lion from me, you know. Waiting for just such an admission of weakness."

"I know, my lord. Words cannot express my gratitude to you for standing by me. And for allowing me to come here while the situation in Britain is still hot."

Valente raised his bow, took aim into the forest, then shook his head and lowered it again. "Don't thank me so quickly. I'm only waiting for this affair to blow over. Once the Juka are gone, you must be punished. You truly let me down, Montenegro."

The knight's stomach growled. He knew this was coming. "Tell me more, my lord. I stand ready for it."

The nobleman sighed. "I'm afraid you won't be ready for this. Technically you committed no crime, so you're not vulnerable to imprisonment or confiscation. However, I'm going to petition the Senate to remove you from the Order of the Silver Serpent. You'll lose your knighthood. It's the

only reasonable punishment for the disgrace you brought to us." He locked eyes with Montenegro. "What do you have to say to that?"

An ache began to rise in Montenegro's gut, like the coming of a harsh winter. Yet the knight did not flinch from the old veteran's gaze. "If I have no other redress, I accept your judgment with regret and humility. However, I pray that you reconsider your decision, in light of the fact that I was fulfilling a promise I made to your lordship. You asked me to humiliate the Juka. I did so in the only manner left to me, given the circumstances."

"That you did, rather more than I expected. Another mistake on my part. But don't stand there and tell me that your actions were motivated by anything other than outrage. You wanted to fight that quite astonishing Juka woman. She robbed you of the opportunity. You lost your temper. That is the whole of the story, as I read it on your face in the field that morning."

Montenegro looked away, squeezing his grip on the bow. "That is not the whole of the story, but your lordship knows I am bound to an oath not to discuss it further."

"Yes, I know that. But your mysterious oath doesn't absolve you from civilized conduct. It's a phantom excuse, Sir Gabriel. It's not good enough to justify the trouble you've caused for me and for the House of the Lion. I'm sorry."

The knight glowered. "You'll forgive my frankness, my lord, if I point out that you don't sound sincere when you say that you're sorry."

Valente grumbled, "You've been an excellent officer and a friend to me for many years, and in that spirit, I caution you

not to pry loose my personal feelings in this matter." He whisked up his bow and fired an arrow into the distance. A rabbit screamed and flopped around the dead leaves.

The knight's heat rose. Something within him caught fire. "You caution me? Why? What do I risk? What do I have left that can be taken? You're already stealing the final piece of me. And you're doing it when you know in your heart that I'm true to the Virtues, as true as any knight in the Order. My only sin is that I exposed my human weaknesses in full view of the Royal Senate. Admit it, Valente!" He lurched close to the old warrior. "You look me in the eyes and tell me you don't think I deserve to be a knight!"

Lord Valente did look into his eyes, directly. "That's not the point! I took a risk to help you and in return you gave me no end of embarrassment. No, let me be perfectly honest. You made a buffoon of me! Do you know how ridiculous it feels, standing before the Senate and making up reasons why Sir Gabriel Montenegro had just cause to spit in the face of the Jukan delegation? Knowing that my lies are transparent? In the end I had to flee the discussions. I just retreated. I told them I had to attend the Wisp Hunt, but that was another lie. I couldn't stand to be degraded any longer. Not one moment longer!"

"And that's it? That's all of it?" Montenegro's voice soured with disdain. "You're going to ruin a friend and fellow knight because he embarrassed you in front of a bunch of squawking peacocks?"

Valente growled, "You'd do worse to me if our positions were reversed. My ruthlessness pales against yours, and no oath in Sosaria can conceal that fact."

In his mind, Montenegro watched a memory of Damaro



replay itself. The young wizard sobbed as he staggered off into the midnight shadows of Britain.

The knight had long ago given up trying to turn away from the image in his mind.

"I am cutting my own path toward redemption," he said with a grimace, "though it causes me no end of pain."

Dry leaves crackled nearby. Both men whirled to see Sir Aziz standing in the footpath. His face was drawn with concern. "I apologize if I interrupted. I'll go."

Montenegro raised his hand. "No, it's fine. Stay. His lordship and I have said all there is to say."

Valente grunted. "Indeed we have."

Aziz contributed nothing more, but distracted them with news of a hind he had spotted nearby. They agreed to stalk the beast. Montenegro was glad of the imposed silence, though his pounding heart clamored on.

Twilight fell in the manner of old forests, the trees growing so black that they squeezed out all but the meekest illumination. The pavilions ignited with a hundred lamps as a sumptuous dinner unfolded. The day's prizes roasted over a trough of seething coals. Dozens of knights gathered around long, thin tables, joined by their number again in festively-gowned courtesans. Hounds sniffed for scraps underfoot. Laughter and conversation filtered through the cool, slithering air.

One chair remained empty. A single lantern moved away from the dinner. Montenegro walked alone down the path to his own encampment. He knew he was not unanimously welcome among his peers, nor did the soldiers' camaraderie agree with his present mood.

His face was almost featureless in the grey veil of dusk. His head teemed with thoughts.

Lord Valente planned to remove him from the Order of the Silver Serpent. When he contemplated the idea, his chest constricted with a peculiar tightness. It was not an odd feeling of itself. He had experienced it to varying degrees since the night he lost the Black Duel. Rather the strangeness came from a darker place. He craved an end to the tension, and there could be only one end.

Somehow, Montenegro sensed that he would only find peace if he lost everything, including his knighthood.

When the notion first struck him, the evening after he broke the Jukan sword, he could not fathom the logic of it. He attributed the sentiment to anger and fractured nerves. He called it the seduction of despair. But today, the serenity of the forest had quieted his spirit and allowed him to glimpse the plain, sobering truth.

A knight's charge was to uphold the Virtues, as they were laid out generations ago by the Lost King. The Virtues numbered eight: Honor, Justice, Sacrifice, Compassion, Humility, Honesty, Spirituality, and Valor. Each of these he had demonstrated during this troubled year. Yet his past deeds could not redeem him. The Virtues were not a goal to be reached, after which one might retire. Nor were they characteristics of a man, somehow intrinsic to his flesh and soul.

Rather the Virtues were a course of action. They defined a quest upon which a knight embarked, that led to the fulfillment of his destiny.

Montenegro's single dream had always been to reach the same heights of glory as his grandfather once did. Today, in the forest, he realized he could not do so unless he started at

the base of the mountain. Sir Lazaro had been born a commoner. He had earned his way to the top. Montenegro would do the same.

He would be a juggernaut in the pursuit of his destiny, wherever the Virtues took him.

He arrived at his darkened pavilion. In the wavering yellow lamplight it seemed modest by comparison to the others. He had brought no servants nor indulgent furnishings, since the failure of his lands had drained his purse, and so his tent was little more than a modest ring of canvas with a conical roof, draped with the Montenegro banner.

When he tried to open the flap, he found it tied shut. He examined the scarf that bound it.

The cloth was the blackest silk, of a weave and heft that were familiar to him. He clenched his fist in astonishment.

#### A Black Duel.

His heart drummed. He scanned the darkness of the forest. "Show yourself, Thulann of Garron."

Something rustled nearby. He followed the noise to a small clearing, where a tall silhouette in Jukan armor awaited him.

"I am not Thulann," said Venduss, "though I come to defend her honor, since she will not."

Montenegro held up the lantern and examined the boy's face. The hatred in the Juka's eyes was penetrating. "I recognize you. You're the boy who attends Thulann. What's your name?"

"I am Venduss of Garron, son of Turlogan, Shirron of the Jukan Clans."

The knight bowed, though he kept his eyes on Venduss. "I am Sir Gabriel Montenegro of Cove. I greet you with respect and honor."

The Jukan warrior blinked, then lifted his chin to a proud angle. "And I greet you with respect. I cannot greet you with honor, or else I would not have come."

"Understandable, if misguided. But how did you find me? We're a long way from the palace. Someone must have brought you here."

"That is not your concern. I have issued a challenge. Since you dueled my teacher once before, you know what that scarf means. Do you accept?"

Montenegro wrinkled his brow. "You know about my duel with Thulann?"

"Only the loser of a Black Duel is bound to secrecy, not the victor. Though I assure you that my teacher is discreet about whom she tells. She is the noblest person I have the honor of knowing." He sucked in a deep breath and fidgeted with the hilt of his sword. "No more talk! I have come to win satisfaction for your insult against her. Do you accept my challenge?"

Montenegro glanced at the scarf, then back at the Juka. "No."

Venduss dropped open his jaw. "You—refuse to fight?"

"I didn't say that. But I won't engage you in a Black Duel." He draped the scarf over a low-hanging branch. "No, I've had my fill of your customs. You'll get satisfaction on my terms. We're in New Britannia. If you want to duel, we'll stage a proper one."

The Juka looked suspicious. "What does that mean?"

"It means my choice of weapons and a second for each of us." With deliberate cadence he added, "And in full view of the other knights."

Venduss chewed on the offer with distaste. Finally he

nodded. "If you want an audience to your punishment, so be it."

The knights and courtesans gathered quietly around the clearing. Montenegro recognized their nervous anticipation. Not only was the arrival of a Juka at the Wisp Hunt a thrilling, if ominous surprise, but for several days the talk among the knights had focused upon Thulann of Garron's incredible display of combat ability. The three knights she defeated, Vegard, Evanthe, and Dominic, had become reluctant centers of attention, retelling the particulars of the fighting demonstration. In less than a week the prowess of the Way Master had adopted the status of legend.

The mood of the gathering was clear. The knights were certain that Montenegro had no chance of defeating the younger, fitter Jukan warrior.

"I'll be your second," suggested Sir Aziz to Montenegro with subdued volume. "He looks hungry to kill you. I want to be by your side, in case he loses control like Warlord Bahrok did. If he wants to lop off your head he'll have to do it in a civilized fashion."

Montenegro gave the knight a quick smile. "No, I want you to do me a favor. Offer Venduss to be his second."

"I? What for?"

"Because he has no allies here. I want someone by his side whom I know is trustworthy. This will be a proper duel, not some carnival show for the Royal Senate."

Aziz regarded the Juka for a moment, then nodded. "As you please. Who will second you?"

"Lord Valente, if he agrees. Venduss disrupted his party, after all. And maybe it's a first step to reconciliation."

The old lord consented to the arrangement, though he spoke no further than necessary. Montenegro contented himself with that. With Valente's help he donned a breastplate, skirt, gauntlets, and an open-faced helmet. He saluted his opponent with his favorite longsword.

Venduss returned the salute and closed quickly. Montenegro was calm as he evaluated the Juka's approach. It was a style similar to that of Sigmhat. The knight prepared a disarming move, as Thulann had once done.

Venduss threw the same maneuver at the same time Montenegro did. Neither succeeded, though the Juka's face displayed shock.

Montenegro gave him a smile. "I learn quickly."

The Juka could only snort and close again.

Blow for blow, parry for parry, the two warriors matched one another with furious vigor. Steel slammed against steel with sounds that ripped through the young night. What few strikes cleaved past the whirling parries bounced off their armor, or else inflicted minor cuts. The tempo of the battle rose. Their dodges and stances were extended, almost exaggerated, plying a limberness and athleticism on the part of both combatants that drew gasps and cries from the onlookers. When the duelists began to spin and tumble, the knights widened the circle and shielded the courtesans behind them.

As their blades sang together, Montenegro felt energized. Here was an opponent whose speed and repertoire were a fair test of his own, improved skills. Though Venduss was not as effective a fighter as Sigmhat had been, the boy had superior grace and precision. The knight imagined that they were dancing as much as dueling. Even their feints and stutters followed a hypnotic rhythm. For an instant he gained an

odd, wordless understanding of the artistry of Thulann's techniques, which she had called the Way. It fascinated him. He wanted nothing more than to continue to his own exhaustion.

But the time had come to finish.

He drew Venduss into a sequence of off-tempo cuts. Then he charged forward and attempted to bodily clench the Juka. Venduss locked the knight's arm and twisted it. They engaged in a contest of strength, though Venduss's hold gave him the edge. When Montenegro felt as if his arm might break, he turned his back to the boy, pointed his longsword behind him and stabbed.

Venduss gasped as the blade pushed into his abdomen. Montenegro felt a bolt of lightning strike his head and he stumbled forward; the Juka had answered with a blow to the knight's helmet. Montenegro's senses pierced through the pain in his skull. He saw Venduss stagger to one knee, rise, and then drop again.

Aziz knelt at the warrior's side and assisted him to stand, but the effort was futile. Venduss's chin and stomach gleamed with blood. Despite the Juka's coughing protests, Sir Aziz and Lord Valente called the duel completed.

Venduss remained in the center of the clearing, on his hands and knees, a heaving shadow in a patchwork of golden torchlights. He waved off all assistance.

Montenegro removed his helmet and stood before the teenage warrior. "Well fought. You have honored me with this duel."

The Juka wiped blood and saliva from his chin. His voice rasped with anguish. "It makes no difference. I have failed. I am a fool."

"I can't comment on that, but you are certainly bold. For that I salute you, as would my fellow knights if they had any idea what to think about all of this."

Venduss struggled to sit up. "What now?"

"You declare to the seconds that the matter between us is settled. Then you let that healer mend your wounds."

"Very well. Though I deserve all of this pain and more." The fallen Juka could not meet the knight's eyes. "Let the healing be done quickly. I must return to Britain. Please, do not follow me. I have pledged anonymity to my accomplices."

"No one's going to follow you. I'll see to that."

Venduss scowled, staring at the ground. "I must tell you, with all confidence, that you would have lost to Thulann."

"You had all confidence when you came here tonight, too, I'll wager, so I'm afraid your credibility is damaged. Conjecture, by definition, is not truth." He shook his head. This exchange helped nothing. Without another word he beckoned the healer to attend the Jukan warrior, who seemed only too glad to abandon the conversation.

In the shadows of the forest, two figures in black cloaks waited as the audience reluctantly dispersed. Sister Raveka watched a healer conduct his business upon Venduss with streaks and flashes of light. In an offhanded tone she remarked, "We underestimated Montenegro."

Pikas replied, "Or overestimated Venduss. I thought the son of the famous Turlogan would've fared better."

"He looked skilled enough to me, for a man so young. But no matter. Our plan proceeds apace. I still applaud Bahrok for his choice of a warrior to send. He's craftier than



I gave him credit. Now let me take our scapegoat back to his carriage, then we'll continue with the next step. It looks like you'll get to kill Montenegro after all."

They observed as the knight grimaced while testing his injured arm. The stately Lord Valente, dressed now in a luxuriant tunic, gave him a curt nod of approval. Montenegro answered with a very subdued bow.

Pikas chuckled and murmured to the knight, "That's good, Sir Human. Make your peace with everyone. By morning I'll have tasted your heart's blood and smoked your head over a campfire."

## CHAPTER

# 7

## The Wisp Hunt

When the stars reeled into their midnight positions, the wisps began to muster. The party of knights extinguished their fires and collected on a hilltop that overlooked a round, sparsely foliated valley. Moonlight collected in the depression like ghostly milk in a bowl. A satiny breeze swooned through the forest.

The knights fell silent when the first of the fantastical creatures appeared, as a bobbing light among the trees of the valley.

Not even the most learned scholars understood the nature of the wisps. The dominant theme of conjecture was that the mysterious beings were some manner of spirit or ghost, though nothing in Sosarian cosmology revealed a plausible supernatural origin for them. Wisps comprised a unique, ageless enigma. When they manifested, which was a rare event, they appeared as a volume of bright light, of elusive geometry, which swayed and hovered as if bound to unknown currents of wind and gravity. From a distance a wisp could sometimes be confused for a lantern with tinted panes. In the darkness they might lead unwary travelers

astray, and cautionary tales ascribed to them an almost mischievous sentence.

Worldly folk, though, knew better than to demean them with such frivolous stories. Older tales spoke of men who could talk to the wisps and learned from them ancient, extremely potent magicks. Even the Meer Matriarchs respected their power. It was presumed that the glowing, shapeless apparitions were merely the visible evidence, like footprints, of far more otherworldly entities.

Wisps were unchallenged in power. To assault one was to die. In all the lore of New Britannia, only a single instance recorded a knight to have slain one of the creatures: Lord Valente's great-grandfather, Sir Jacob of Yew. The wisp itself appeared to arrange its own death, for unknowable reasons, at Sir Jacob's hands. The weapon used was the Valente family's magic longsword, which that day earned the name of Starfell.

With that blade upraised in the flowing moontide, Lord Valente now welcomed the gathering wisps. The valley danced with a constellation of restless lights.

Montenegro stood apart from the others. He leaned against the jagged bark of an old, languorous tree. He had changed into a fresh doublet of black velvet and gold. His hair, cold from a washing in a stream, tumbled over his shoulders in ink-black curls. His flesh was only now losing the tingle of its recent healing.

He watched the mustering wisps and let his thoughts meander among them.

A sound whispered behind him. He knew the rustle of a courtesan's dress. A sigh crawled out of his chest.

A pleasant voice said, "Beautiful sight, hey?"

He glanced at the long woman who drew beside him. In the skeletal illumination she shone like glazed, white porcelain. Her hair was as black as his own, though clipped unusually short. The handsome lay of her features struck him like a painting, with not a dimple or eyelash out of place. Her gown was probably bright scarlet by day, but the deep night unmasked a bloody hue. She wore the shadows like a tailored cloak.

He smiled, "So it is," and then looked away from her.

"I'm Riona. I just got here and, um, thought you might need a goblet." She held up a silver cup and pitcher.

"I no longer drink," he said.

Her head tilted. "Ah, you're of the abstinent persuasion. A tragedy for the vintners, for the sight of you would complement any bottle." She laughed and dangled the silver at her hip. "It's just as well. It was only an excuse to come and talk to you."

He raised his hand to brush her aside, but at the last moment decided against it. She had an easy manner, an agreeable smile, and a lack of the cloying perfumes so rampant in her profession. Instead he shrugged and murmured, "As you like, though I'm not in a conversational mood."

She wrapped her wrist into the snug of his elbow. "I've got no agenda, sir, except to sit with you and watch this amazing sight."

Though she tried to hide it, her voice lilted with excitement as she observed the shimmering display. Montenegro found a small grin working onto his lips. "It is amazing, isn't it? There's nothing else like it in the world. Once a year we're invaded by stars."

She curled around his arm and nestled closer, with a courtesan's quick intimacy. "What do you think they are?"

"Who knows? More than a humble knight can fathom." Her fingers entwined with his. Her skin was warm. He enjoyed the simple pleasure. "I'll tell you what I see. Take a gemstone and shine a light on it. Nothing else casts a shadow like that. It changes shape. It's dark and it glows at the same time. That's what those lights are. Someone is shining a light on a wisp and we're seeing its shadow on the wall."

The metaphor, he recognized, strangely applied to his current state of mind. He had a powerful drive to pursue his destiny, but he did not know what it looked like. It was as if he tried to apprehend the shape of his future by examining its inconstant shadow. He explored blindly.

The courtesan named Riona was staring at him. Her face registered something like astonishment. He gave her a fleeting smile. "Forgive me. You're here for pleasure and I'm boring you."

"Quite the opposite. I didn't expect geometric thoughts from a knight. You surprise me. Your name is Sir Gabriel, isn't it?"

"Some call me that."

She looked at him with dark eyes, haunted by intricate thoughts. "Gabriel, would you like to walk with me that way, to the cascades? We can sit and watch the valley from there."

He narrowed his gaze. "You're a trusting sort. That waterfall is completely isolated, and you don't even know me."

"Your chivalry is cute, but I'm no moth's wing. I'll keep my guard up if you keep yours up. Maybe you should be afraid, good sir, instead of me. They say I've got hidden fangs."

The statement was devilish, but her expression showed little flirtation. Her brown, leaf-shaped eyes dared him to investigate its meaning. Montenegro squeezed her hand tighter as he started up the path. "Let's hurry, then, before the beacon comes. We shall see how readily your fangs prick."

Not far away a crystal brook toppled down a stair-stepped outcropping. The white falls sprang from rock to rock and sparkled as if thronging with silver-scaled fish. The boulders around the cliff hissed in echo of the stream. The air smelled crisp.

Montenegro and Riona found a flat slate beside the falls upon which to sit. From this vantage they obtained a clear view of the valley, which by now enclosed dozens of bright wisps. The sight reminded the knight of the torches of a gathering army, flowing into and out of patterns that were never consistently obvious.

By now, at the group encampment, the hounds must have fallen into a strident baying, though he heard nothing here but the tumbling water.

Riona pulled off her slippers and dangled her pale feet into the spray. She shivered and let out a small cry.

Montenegro sat on the edge of the slate, one knee drawn up. He pointed to the base of the falls, fifteen feet below them. "The pool down there is good for swimming."

She lay back on the rock. Her eyes lit up. "I had that very idea in mind."

"I know you did. But the night is a bit cold for it, don't you think?"

"Then we'll have to do our best to stay warm."

He chuckled. "Do as you desire, Riona. I'll content myself with watching."

She slid close beside him. "Later, then. I can swim whenever I like, but you won't always be at hand, now will you? So tell me a story, Gabriel Montenegro. What kind of man are you?"

Montenegro laughed, despite himself. "Whose viewpoint do you prefer? Everyone has their own." When it appeared she would not be content with that, he added, "Opinions about me are as different as night and day, and follow upon each other just as reliably. I'm either a cruel man with a good heart or a virtuous man with a black heart, depending upon which of my enemies you ask."

"But I'm asking you."

"Ah, my worst enemy of them all. I'm afraid my own opinion is ill-informed and inconsequential." He stared out at the glittering amphitheater of the valley. "Tell me, do you see any patterns in that chaos?"

Riona watched the wisps for a moment, then nodded. "Yes, I do. But you're dodging my question."

"You do see a pattern? What is it? I've tried for years to find one."

"It's too complicated to explain."

He smirked. "There's the answer to your question, as well."

With graceful strokes of her hand she brushed glinting droplets from her legs and feet. "And to think I had heard that you were fearless. But you're terrified of my curiosity, aren't you?"

He grimaced. "Just as I had heard that polite discretion was the chief difference between a courtesan and a trollop."

She jabbed him with a sharp glare. "The chief difference is that a courtesan maintains her dignity. And so I'll leave

you now, for the warmer company of that pool." She stood at the lip of the slate platform and began to pull her dress down over her shoulders, revealing the filmy chemise underneath. Though he attempted not to look, his eyes drew to her. He was caught by her uncommon paleness and elegant movements. She was cold, beautiful marble in the moonlight.

Yet she paused before removing her dress. He sensed a peculiar gravity in her sideways glance. Then she worked the gown most of the way back to her shoulders, composed herself and lounged beside him again. Gazing at the wisps she commented, "Recently I read a sage piece of advice. It said, 'Dry your feet, wet your throat, and shun impertinent questions.'"

Montenegro chuckled. "Ah, yes."

"And here I am with wet ankles, nothing to drink, and nosing my way into your head. Forgive me for losing my place, hey?"

Her voice rang sincere, though he was unsure if she was not simply very skilled at her profession. Either way, he was charmed. "I'm sorry, as well. What happened to your wine?"

"I left it back at the tree. I won't get into my cups if you're not joining me. You look trustworthy, but there's a devil in there. I can feel his horns when I touch you."

He grinned and leaned back on his elbows, just as the sky burst with radiance. They both sat up and he called out, "Finally, the beacon!"

A new glow ignited in the center of the valley. A small pillar of sparkles twirled wildly in place, shining bright blue amid the whiter lights around it. The wisps leapt as if in joy at the glimmering beacon. Like a surging flock of birds they



careened above the treetops and arrayed into shapes in the sky. Fabulous glittering curves and angles tilted and spun and dissolved into new formations. The little beacon shifted subtly as if directing them, or reacting.

Montenegro felt Riona's hand squeezing his tightly. She looked soundly enraptured. He whispered, "There's nothing in the world so beautiful as this."

"You were right," she murmured back, "they're forming projected hyperhedrons! What can it mean?"

He glanced at her again. "I have no idea what you just said. You sound like a spellcaster I used to know."

"In my occupation it pays to be well read. Does anyone know why the wisps do this?"

"If you had an owl's eyes, you could peer across the valley to the opposite slope and see a collection of scholars and sorcerers. They come here every autumn to study it. But all anyone knows is that it happens every year, on this night and none other. Nobody has figured out why. The beacon is as mysterious as the wisps. But the sorcerers enjoy the show as much as we do, I'm sure. There's Meer over there, of course, as well as the House of the Griffin. There might even be Juka among them by now, after last night's vote." He snapped his fingers and reconsidered how Venduss managed to get this far from the city.

Riona squinted at him. "What do you mean? What vote?"

"The Senate voted to teach sorcery to the Juka. It happened yesterday evening, rather suddenly." He thought of the rage in young Venduss's eyes. "I wonder if that will appease them."

Her hand vanished from his grasp. She moved to the edge of the slate again and gripped her upper arms, as if prepar-

ing to disrobe. She stood in front of the dancing wisps, a pearlescent figure in crimson with spectacular celestial wings. Her eyes fastened upon him. They looked dark and cold. Very cold.

Montenegro nearly flinched, so sudden was her transformation. Then just as abruptly, she looked away and smiled. She returned and crouched beside him. "Sorry about that, Gabriel. I just remembered something very important that I've forgotten to take care of."

"For a moment I thought you'd turned to ice. It must be quite dire."

"It is," she answered, while sitting down behind him. Gently she urged him to lean back, until his head nestled in her lap. She was warm and soft in the coolness of deep autumn. "But not so urgent that I would give up this kind of pleasure."

For the duration of the hour-long spectacle Montenegro rested against Riona's long legs. Her fingers forked delicately through his long hair. They talked little. In the valley the magic beacon twirled brighter and brighter in its dazzling, graceful pageant. By the time it dimmed and faded away and the wisps ceased their ballet in the sky, Montenegro had drowsed nearly to sleep. As if in a dream, he felt Riona lay him back upon the stone. He looked up to see her smile framed between the dual moons. She knelt over him, as if for a kiss, but then giggled and touched two fingers to his brow. Tenderly she nudged his eyelids closed. He drifted off to the faint sound of her footsteps disappearing into the tumultuous hiss of the waterfall.

Raveka picked a route amid the blackness of the forest. Finally she stopped and rested her head on a tree, her brow

pressing against her forearms. Something large appeared beside her.

"What happened?" rasped Pikas with plain irritation. "You were supposed to go swimming! That was the signal, dammit!"

"We're not killing Montenegro tonight," she explained, her face hidden. "I'm sorry if that upsets you."

"Yes, it upsets me!" She heard the ring of steel being drawn. She tensed, but did not budge. The assassin growled, "I'm getting sick of these constant changes in the plan! What happened this time?"

"He can be useful to us. I realize that now. He's a much better asset when he's alive."

"You're fooling yourself, Sister. I watched the whole thing. I think you appreciate the company of that ugly knight. That's not a good enough reason to deny me."

A warmth swelled inside her, for just an instant. She smiled at the tree. "He isn't ugly to human eyes." Then she turned to face the Jukan bladesman, who resembled little more than a vague coagulation of shadows. His blade was a streak of dark silver floating in the air. She mumbled, "Listen to me. Montenegro told me that the Senate voted to teach sorcery to the Garronites."

"No, not this soon! When did it happen?"

"Last night, while we were scouting this place. I didn't realize they were so close to voting. They must have been negotiating in secret all along. And if they were, I can assure you Bahrok did not know. That means his advisor, Thulann, must be acting behind his back."

"I'd heard she was crafty in her day, as well as deadly. It should be interesting to see how the warlord puts her in her place."

Raveka dragged a hand over her face and sighed. "Forget about them. I'm much more concerned about the sorcerers. We cannot allow them to give magic to Jukaran. That's wholly unacceptable."

Pikas stiffened in the gloom. "Don't say you want me to kill one of those master wizards. We have no idea what they're capable of."

"No, I doubt that's the right course. Not soon after tonight, anyway. I shall formulate a plan, but in the meantime let's continue with our present endeavor."

"Yes. I'm going to wake up Montenegro right now."

"I'm serious, Pikas. Not him. I'm in his confidence. He's vulnerable to persuasion right now. We can use that." She chewed her lip. "No, I've got a different quarry for you tonight, one with smaller claws but much brighter plumage. Then we have to get back to Britain as quickly as possible. There's a lot more work ahead of us now."

The cascades chattered Montenegro out of slumber. He woke to the blue light of early morning and a wrinkled face staring down at him. It was a servant of one of the knights. The old man was aghast.

"We've been looking everywhere for you, my lord! Come quick! Something terrible's happened!"

A crowd had gathered around one of the pavilions. The other knights cried out with relief at the sight of Montenegro, who immediately pushed through them. Nothing would keep him from finding out what had happened to Lord Valente.

Inside the tent, he was not sure what he was seeing. The carnage was too dispersed. It was clear enough, however,

that Valente had been savagely murdered. Montenegro could not stand to see more.

Outside he grabbed the nearest man and barked, "Where are the healers? Send for the sorcerers across the valley! He can be revived!"

"They've been sent for," said the startled knight, "but it is far too late."

"What did this? A troll? A satyr? An orc couldn't have beaten Valente, not when he had Starfell!"

"The sword is missing! But we saw the murderer leaving the camp. It was the Juka you fought. The Juka killed him!"

Montenegro shoved the man away. "A Juka was that barbaric? Are you sure? Absolutely sure?"

"There's no mistaking that armor of his. It was Venduss the Juka!"

The knights and the encampment and the forest dimmed. Montenegro embraced the pain that was rising in his gut. He recognized the seed of revenge.

Yesterday he had wondered what path the Virtues would show him, what shape his future would take. Now his goal was clear, agonizingly so, though he mourned the cruel loss of ignorance.

Thulann's heart banged fiercely in her chest. Her body throbbed with the heat of anger. Each time she prepared to speak, she was forced to abandon the effort for fear of losing control. Instead she paced like a shackled animal.

The room at the inn was small and simple by comparison to her suite at the palace. Its walls were made of brushed plaster and beams of sawn wood. In the corner crouched a

single bed. Sparse, dusty light came from a narrow crack between the shutters of the window.

This inn had been their home for a mere two nights. That was enough time, apparently, for the whole diplomatic mission to go completely sour.

Venduss sat on a wooden chair before her. His head drooped in shame. His folded hands trembled.

So vigorously was she restraining her fury that Thulann drew steel when someone knocked on the door. When Toria's voice beckoned from the hallway, she sheathed her sword and unbolted the latch.

"Mistress! I've—"

"Quiet, child! Say not a word. I am in a precarious temper."

"But—"

"It can wait, Toria! You do not want to test me right now! Sit there on the bed. I want you to hear this." She double-checked that the latch was secure, then stalked back in front of Venduss. "Now tell me what happened, suckling, and this time be slow and thorough. You are enough of a fool already without being inarticulate."

The boy struggled to speak against overt despair. "Warlord Bahrok spoke to me in private a few days ago. He told me he could arrange it so I might face Montenegro in secret. I accepted the offer, because . . . well, you know why. So last night, after you left for your meeting with Lord Salvatore, I left as well. I was picked up by one of those enclosed carriages drawn by horses. There were two humans with me, a man and a woman. They both kept their faces hidden. I noticed that the woman's skin was very white. She explained to me that Montenegro was camping in the forest with many

other knights. The man with her said nothing, but just drove the carriage. When we got to the place after a couple of hours, I waited until Montenegro was alone and then challenged him. We fought a duel in the human fashion, in front of the other knights. I . . . lost. They healed me, the woman took me back to the carriage and the man drove me into the city. There is nothing more to tell than that."

Thulann fumed. "Nothing more to tell? If only it was so simple! Are you aware that Lord Valente was murdered last night and that you have been blamed for it?"

"Yes, teacher. I have heard."

"Valente was as important to these people as a chieftain is to us! And you are willing to vow upon the honor of the clan that you had nothing to do with that human's death?" She leaned in close and glowered.

"I swear it, teacher, upon the honor of the clan."

She snorted and paced again. "Then you are the dupe of a nasty bit of intrigue. I cannot believe that Bahrok would find some advantage in this, but what other explanation is there? Witnesses claim that a Jukan assassin fled from Valente's tent. Bahrok must have sent one of his soldiers to murder him after you so readily offered yourself as a guilty party." She stopped walking, focused on several deep breaths, and then snatched up a hooded cloak. "I shall speak to Bahrok and get to the root of this. The situation has turned deadly. The knights served Lord Valente and they may just seek revenge upon us."

Venduss dropped out of the chair and onto his knees. His eyes were damp and anguished. "It was a mistake to assume I could fight for your honor! What must I do to atone for it, teacher? Tell me!"

Thulann's blood boiled. "Right now you must stay here and do nothing! Meditate upon how you have forsaken the Way. Touch the Great Mother again. You stay as well, Toria, and watch that he does not stagger off on some new imbecilic misadventure. I shall return from the palace shortly."

Toria raised her hands. "But mistress, that's what I have to tell you! Warlord Bahrok isn't at the palace anymore. The knights turned hostile and he had to flee." The girl seemed to get a whiff of enjoyment from the statement. "The whole entourage took sanctuary with the Order of the Shepherd inside the Cathedral of the Virtues. The knights followed them. They've got the whole building surrounded!"

The Way Master enveloped herself with the voluminous cloak. "Thank the Great Mother we got out of the palace in time, then. Dammit! Each passing minute is our enemy."

"Mistress, how can you meet with Bahrok when he's surrounded by angry knights?"

"I can slip past them," she grumbled, then added, "as long as I am free from any more unsolicited actions on my behalf!"

The grand interior of the Cathedral of the Virtues soared up into colorful glass windows and high vaulted ceilings. At the center stood the shrine to the Lost King, gleaming with magical light. Yet the solemnity of the temple was now broken by the bootsteps of soldiers. The Juka posted themselves about the building according to a careful defensive strategy. The robed brothers and sisters of the Shepherd scurried among them distributing food and drink and with much enterprise, striving to nurture a tenuous calm.

In a modest side room the atmosphere was far more



tense. Warlord Bahrok stood beside a small window, dressed in his full battle armor. His fists clenched tightly. Thulann lurked in the doorway wearing Britannian clothes, her eyes ablaze.

"You still seek revenge!" she snapped, her anger unbound. "You tried to get Montenegro killed!"

"Of course I did! I would do it with my own hands if the opportunity arose. Did you think I had forgotten about Sigmhat so quickly? Or the insult he gave us at the fighting demonstration? Ah, but I am forgetting that you yielded to that dishonorable reptile. You have some sort of unseemly regard for him, and I have almost convinced myself that it is only to spite me."

"I have explained why I yielded to him. He suffered for his honor and I was acknowledging it. Do not try to divert me! You deliberately lured Venduss into dueling him, though you knew the consequences would be grave."

Bahrok narrowed his eyes. "I did not coerce the boy. In fact it took effort to convince him to wait until Montenegro left the city. He wanted blood, just as I do."

"Of course he did! And you took advantage of that. Why? Were you trying to strike some misguided blow against Turlogan? Are you so mad with grief over Sigmhat that you would arrange the death of the Shirron's son, as well? Surely you know that the Senate will want to execute Venduss for this crime!"

"So be it! Venduss is no child. He is responsible for his own deeds, just as Sigmhat was. But listen to me, I agreed to this as a blow against Montenegro. I never intended Lord Valente to be the target. That would have been far too dangerous."

A new voice interjected, "More dangerous than you may realize, since you've also struck me in the bargain." Thulann whirled in the doorway to see two humans behind her. One of them was named Brother Jos, a kindly member of the Order of the Shepherd. The other, who had spoken, wore light metal armor and no weapons. His countenance was icy anger.

Montenegro moved into the room with unflinching confidence. Thulann backed in to admit him. She was so surprised that she found herself keeping an inordinate distance.

"I'm here in the name of Justice," growled the knight at both of them. "I shall not leave unsatisfied."

Brother Jos interceded. "Good people, please. You have all taken a vow of nonviolence here. Pray remove the violence from your words, as well, out of respect for the sanctity of this temple."

Montenegro bowed. "Accept my apologies, Brother. I give you my word."

"As do I," said Thulann. She glanced at Bahrok, but the warlord said nothing. The stocky warrior appeared to bend all of his will toward maintaining composure. Thulann knew the timing could not have been worse, but they owed it to the Order of the Shepherd to follow strict civility, and so she began, "Sir Gabriel Montenegro, I would like to introduce to you Bahrok, Warlord of Garron and chieftain of Clan Varang."

The knight formed his lips around the words, "I greet you with respect, Warlord Bahrok."

Thulann stifled a wince. Montenegro made little attempt to conceal his venom. For an instant her own anger flared at his demeanor, but she contained it. Much treachery and suf-

fering was in the air. "Warlord Bahrok, I would like to introduce Sir Gabriel Montenegro of Cove, defender of New Britannia and Knight of the Silver Serpent."

The warlord flared his nostrils and spat on the floor. Brother Jos closed his eyes and sighed.

Montenegro snarled, "And I greet you with respect and honor as well, Thulann of Garron, Master of the Way. It is you who must answer the question I have."

She crossed her arms. "Ask it, then."

"Give me your word that you'll answer truthfully. I trust little right now, but you seem to keep your vows."

"You have my word, though it is unnecessary. I do not lie."

He grunted. "Did your servant Venduss murder Lord Valente?"

Bahrok barked, "Of course not! Venduss would not do such a thing! He is a young fool but he is a Juka, not an assassin."

Montenegro continued to stare at Thulann. She nodded slowly. "Warlord Bahrok speaks the truth. It is not in Venduss's character to commit such an act. I have known him all his life."

The knight looked dubious. "Young men are prone to crimes of passion. I had just humiliated him a few hours before."

Thulann murmured, "There is no shame in losing an honorably prosecuted duel."

"You'll do well to convince your servant of that, because when he left my company he could not have looked more disgraced."

"He is my student, not my servant."

"Then teach him how honor works," said Montenegro.

Bahrok emitted a bestial growl. His armored fingers raked the window sash. "Enough of this interrogation! Neither Venduss nor any of my soldiers committed the crime. Now pull back that ring of knights around this temple, lest we fall into bloodshed!"

Montenegro shook his head. "No living soul can call them off right now. They want Justice as I do. Lord Gideon has taken temporary control of the House of the Lion, but those knights would not leave if the Lost King himself appeared and commanded it."

The warlord stepped forward, nearly butting against Montenegro. They were similar in height, though the Juka was twice as massive. "Then you had best prepare them for battle, you murderous gulbani, because I shall not consent to being a prisoner in this building for very long. I came here to respect the peace, not for fear of conflict. I have four hundred of the finest Jukan warriors under my command. You do not know what carnage is until you have wakened my wrath."

Montenegro matched his gaze. "Because I have given Brother Jos my word, I shall confine myself to explaining that our military is more than prepared to handle any potential threat, large or small." He stressed the final word.

Thulann clutched at the air. "It shall not come to that!" She took an instant to control herself and continued, "If we should all pacify ourselves long enough to form a coherent thought, then one fact becomes quite clear. Someone has murdered Lord Valente and set the blame upon Venduss. What purpose would that serve? There can be no doubt as to the answer. It is sabotage against an alliance between our nations."

Bahrok smashed his fist against the wall. "Dammit! Remember the charts from the pirate ship?"

Thulann nodded. "The Technocrats. It must be."

"Wait, what are you talking about?" Montenegro waved his hands to silence them. "Technocrats? You mean Blackthorn's people?"

The Way Master rubbed her neck and said, "Precisely. The Technocrats employed pirates to attack our ships as we sailed here. The same agents must be at work in this affair, as well. There is a spy somewhere in New Britannia, gentlemen, who does not want Garron and Britain to ally against Logos."

"And I know one of their hirelings," growled Bahrok. "The hussy who arranged things for me. Let me tell you about her. I owe no debt of secrecy to anyone who aids Blackthorn."

Thulann mumbled, "I suspect you are going to say she has very white skin. Venduss described such a woman."

The knight coughed and widened his eyes. "Riona? The courtesan?"

Bahrok exclaimed, "That is the serpent herself! Then her story was true."

"What story?"

Thulann steeped her fingers. "I believe it is time for each of us to explain what we know. We are strands in a braid, all three of us. Let us undo the knots."

Briefly they told their tales and began to piece together the truth. Montenegro mentioned, "Riona talked as if she knew all about geometry. Does that relate to the Technocrats?"

Thulann chuckled without mirth. "There is a sect in

Logos called the Order of Mathematicians. They devote their lives to the pursuit of numerical theories and ideas. It is the most elite group of Technocrats and the most mysterious. So, Riona is not just an agent of Logos. She must actually be Logosian! And if her disguise is as convincing as the two of you tell me, then we must reevaluate the subtlety of Logosian espionage."

"She is . . ." Montenegro paused for a moment. "She is very good at her work. Quite charming. And her Logosian Juka must have been watching the entire time we were together."

Thulann pointed out the window. "We must inform the Senate as quickly as possible. An hour's delay is enough to turn suspicion into hate."

"Agreed," said Bahrok. "Let us hurry."

Montenegro shook his head at the warlord. "You stay."

"What? You presume to give me an order?"

"It's not an order, but a piece of advice. This temple is surrounded by knights who want nothing less than to spill Jukan blood. I can walk out of here. I know Thulann can sneak out. Unless you're equally as stealthy, then I put it to you that your best interest lies right here, safely among the brothers and sisters of the Shepherd."

"He is correct," said Thulann. "The soldiers need you here. I can represent our case to the Senate."

The warlord growled, "As you have been doing for many nights now, eh, Thulann? In your secret meetings with Regent Salvatore?"

She nodded. "Indeed I have."

"Of course I suspected you were up to something, but I did not know you would undermine the authority given to

me by the Shirron himself. Well, I applaud the success you have had. But make no mistake. I see it as a challenge to my position. When the circumstances are suitable, I intend to address that challenge."

The Way Master sighed. "You must do what you feel is honorable. I cannot begrudge you that."

Bahrok continued, "I'll stay here, then, in the interest of peace. But listen, Sir Gabriel Montenegro. One way or another this predicament will end. At that time I shall avenge my son. I am going to kill you."

The knight smirked, his eyes darkening. "I'll schedule you an appointment. And while we're making things plain, I'm not sure I completely believe this story of yours about the Technocrats. I'm not very trusting just now. But believe me, I will find the murderer. If the evidence leads to one of your soldiers, Bahrok, then I'm going to hold you responsible before the Senate. I don't care one way or another if it destroys an alliance between our governments. And Thulann, if I find one more piece of evidence that points to Venduss as the guilty party, I'll personally hand him over for trial. There exists no man or child who isn't hiding something."

"I shall protect Venduss's life with my own," answered Thulann, "yet he himself would be hard pressed to deny you, should the evidence damn him. His honor is beyond question."

Brother Jos stepped into the middle of the group. "Then break your meeting now, please, and hurry to the Senate chambers. I must concur with the good warlord. This temple is not at all a seemly place for a siege."

\* \* \*

In a private office Regent Salvatore listened to their tale, his brow heavy. At its conclusion he said, "We must conduct an investigation in haste, and in secret. If there's truly a spy working against us, we must deny her all information."

Montenegro bowed. "My lord, I humbly ask that you allow me to find the assassin."

The regent chewed on the proposal. "I intend to put seers on the task. But I concur. You shall have my authority to investigate, only because I know how much Lord Valente has given you over the years. I trust you'll pursue this matter with honor and restraint, and perhaps use it as an opportunity to redeem yourself in the eyes of those whom you have offended in the past."

"I shall, my lord. I can do no less in the name of Lord Valente."

"Good. Then proceed. And take Thulann of Garron with you. Her skills are remarkable."

The knight pushed down a laugh. "What? You would send a drunkard to guard the wine cellar? She is Venduss's mentor! She cannot be impartial."

"Neither can you, Montenegro, though I trust you as well. There is no choice in this. Someone from the Garron delegation must take part in the investigation, lest its conclusions be suspect."

Thulann added, "I know about the Technocrats. They are clever in ways you may not imagine."

"And dare I say it," said Regent Salvatore, "but this good Juka is one of the foremost people whose forgiveness you must earn. You think on that."

Montenegro swallowed the statement with patent distaste. "As you wish, my lord. Sometimes fate decrees that the



best things for us are bitter to taste and foul to the eye. Shall Venduss come along, as well?"

Thulann sniffed. "In point of fact, yes, he must. I shall not submit him to official custody without better proof against him, and I dare not leave him behind while we follow the trail."

"So be it," nodded the regent. "Both of you will be responsible for him."

The knight grumbled, "Then let's start this, so we can finish it. Go get your student, Thulann. The first step on this path lies an hour east of town. I want to get there well before dinner."

She lifted an eyebrow. "You know something already?"

"Indeed I do. There's a certain roadhouse where I believe Riona Lynch has stayed. I intend to ask some impertinent questions there."

The afternoon sun did not penetrate the darkness under the bridge. Two shapes faced one another, though their forms were indistinct.

"Thank you for meeting me," said Sister Raveka in a subdued tone.

The answer came on a gruff, crackling voice. "I do not want your thanks! I have only agreed to this distasteful meeting because the situation is dire. Now say what you came to say."

"Very well. I can deliver the Jukan murderer of Lord Valente."

"I see. And you believe that will suffice to break the alliance?"

"I do, assuming his prosecution is undertaken in a suitably public fashion."

The voice grunted. "Very well. Bring this assassin to me. I am willing to tolerate this transaction with one such as you, if it means the Griffin will not teach sorcery to the Juka."

"I shall not give the murderer to you. Rather I shall see that he is delivered to the Senate. You must only ensure that he is found guilty. Is that clear?"

"Your impudence does not serve your cause, Technocrat!"

"Neither does yours, Master Gregorio. Now, do we have a deal?"

The ancient archmage grumbled. "So we do, you loathsome insect. So we do."

## CHAPTER

# 8

## Secrets at the Black Goat

Jatha the Meer laid down his tall ears, wrinkled his nose and commented, "If you're open to honest criticism, Fairfax, this is without question one of the most degrading acts I have ever seen."

The wizard and the ranger lurked in a sunlit ravine, spiky with grass and reeds. Dried rivulets on the slopes had uncovered roots from the trees of the surrounding forest. These thick, twisting projections served as footholds for the two men.

Jatha balanced atop a fat oak elbow and watched Fairfax at work. The ranger's burst of yellow hair was pulled back into a knot. The rest of the man was spread out low, nearly prone to the ground. Each hand and foot perched upon a different curl of root, arranged so that his face was near the muddy slope. It was an impressive feat of strength and agility.

He was sniffing a large, black pyramid of dung pellets nestled among the grass and muck. Insects buzzed around his head.

Jatha crossed his arms. "I believe that I shall indulge in a presumption, my dear friend, that moments such as this are the reason why women run away from you."

"Women don't run away from me!" Fairfax protested in a voice muffled by its proximity to the earth.

"They certainly don't run toward you. Like dogs, they can sense when something is not entirely palatable." He rotated his head, trying to get a better view, until his furred cheek touched his shoulder. "You'll admit it to yourself presently. The Black Goat is named after a local legend, not local fauna. That's only deer spoor you're examining."

"No, it's not!" Fairfax grunted as he extracted himself from the hazardous perch. His well-worn leather garb creaked as he stood. "That pile began on the inside of a black goat. And if you're bold enough to wager a pitcher on it, I'll pit my proof against your skepticism."

Jatha smirked. He tapped his companion on the chest. "Done! On the condition that you wash your face before we share any manner of comestibles."

The ranger laughed. "'Comestibles!' Very good." With a dun-colored sleeve he wiped the sweat from his brow. "If you had any knowledge of spoor whatsoever, those big eyes of yours would recognize the difference between deer droppings and goat droppings. Those came from a goat. But my proof is more obvious. The black goat, as you know, is a carnivorous animal of supernatural ancestry. Even an untrained observer can distinguish between dung fashioned from meat and that formed from vegetation, as an ordinary goat would produce."

The Meer twitched his ears and sighed. "I suspect your point must be forthcoming."

Fairfax tapped his nose. "The difference in odor is unquestionable. I say that those pellets fell from a carnivorous goat. On your knees now, master wizard, and tell me that I'm wrong."

Jatha patted the ranger's shoulder. "Better I buy the pitcher than consent to that. I surrender the point. Without a doubt you have a better head for dung than I."

"Moreover," Fairfax continued, "this black goat passed here just last night, walking down the ravine. I tell you, Jatha, tonight's the night we find the damn thing."

"Who am I to argue with such a masterly nose? But please, let us return to the roadhouse. I would very much enjoy taking a bath before dinner, and even more so if you were to take your own bath, as well. I'm certain our fellow patrons at the inn will concur."

Jatha followed behind Fairfax as they wound their way through the trees. Though the wizard doubted that any black goats dwelled in this particular forest, he did not mind obliging his companion's whim to locate the mythical creature. Jatha savored the human's fellowship. Fairfax possessed a valuable combination of great skill, free spirit, and abundant leisure that harmonized with his own nature. The two had traveled inseparably since the day they met.

When he longed for the jungles and crystal cities of his homeland, Jatha found it easy to forget his cares in the company of his friend. Their pursuits had leaned toward carousing of late and the Meer took refuge in that. Properly conducted, frivolity could be a durable shelter. And the skies over New Britannia were clouding with ominous signs. Jatha had every interest in avoiding political troubles. Let the nobles in Britain handle the Juka and Blackthorn; the Meer did not participate in wars. And Jatha was happy to express his neutrality in the language of pleasure.

They arrived at the Black Goat as the late afternoon whisked breezes through the leaves and dust. The smoke of

the evening's dinner pitched over the tile roof of the two-story inn. They saw a new horse tethered outside the door. It was a tall, proud beast, stout as a hill and black as jet. Jatha recognized the trappings of a knight—a tooled saddle inlaid with a crest, inordinately large saddlebags and light leather barding clapped to the animal's body.

He thumped Fairfax on the shoulder. "It looks like we'll have fresh company tonight. I'll wager you another pitcher the owner of that stupendous beauty can afford the best wine in this place and moreover, that if you properly groom yourself we can convince him to share it."

Fairfax threw up his arms and laughed loudly. "That's a fool's bet, my friend, for I recognize that ugly excuse for a crest! This knight is none other than Captain Montenegro himself. There was never a more ruthless officer in the history of the kingdom, though his heart is pure and when his mood is fair, you won't meet a more charitable soul."

"Montenegro? The one who's been rousting up so much trouble in the city?"

"The very one. Or else someone who's stolen his horse, though I wouldn't want to be that thief when he's caught." They stopped beside the impressive mare, who regarded them with suspicion. Fairfax patted the animal's flank. "Steady now, Humbolt. That is your name, isn't it? I can see it in your eyes. You see, Jatha, I told you it was Montenegro. He always named his horses Humbolt."

"How long did you serve under him?"

"More than a year. Did I ever tell you that he once asked if I would be his squire?"

"This makes three times."

"It was the greatest honor I ever threw away. I owe it to

his unmerciful hand that I am the mighty warrior you see before you today."

Jatha chuckled. "I shall not allow that to taint my judgment. But if you're still in his good graces, then you must talk him out of a cup of that wine."

"You may have to do that yourself."

The wizard perked up his ears. "Why? Won't you speak to him?"

"Perhaps not. Look there." He pointed to a swirl of footprints in the dirt path leading to the door. "See those tracks? If I'm not mistaken they're the same, strange boots once worn by that phantom who shared a room with Riona Lynch. And if her delectable smile has returned to these halls, then it will not be Montenegro whose company I seek tonight."

Jatha grinned and moved toward the entrance, ahead of the ranger. "Though if I reach her first, you shall have to console yourself with your erstwhile commander! The finest woman in your entire race cannot match the beauty of a homely Meer, but fair Riona, now, she's a treat for whom I'd be willing to compromise my refined Ishpurian standards."

"I'll meet that challenge!" smirked Fairfax, jostling past, "but no spells, damn you!"

Montenegro collected Thulann, Venduss, and Toria at the inn's cramped back hallway. The knight wore a collection of plate armor suitable for traveling. The remainder of his gear filled two large bags on his shoulders. Toria was dressed in a simple gown and bonnet, while the Juka hid their identities under commoners' garb and wide, hooded cloaks.

The knight led the small party down the wood-framed corridor to their rooms. He had paid for the two at the end. "The women get that room. Venduss, you and I will sleep in here." He pushed open a door and motioned to the chamber, which contained two beds and a short table.

The young warrior set down the bags he carried and lifted his chin. "I see no reason that I should sleep with a guard at my side."

Thulann responded, "Do as he says. It is the custom of this land to divide the sexes at night. It gives one a reason to get out of bed in the morning."

"Thank you," said Montenegro, "but Venduss has the right idea. I intend to keep an eye on him. He's not been cleared of anything yet."

The Way Master frowned. "Sometimes candor makes more enemies than friends."

"It makes no difference to me whether you're my friends or my enemies. What matters to me is that Justice is done."

Thulann creaked open her door. "Your choices are your own, naturally. But righteousness alone does not warm the bed beside you, and cold virtue is still cold."

"A soldier is accustomed to the cold." He shoved his bags into his room. "Hurry and move your things in. I'm going down to the common room to see what I can find out."

"Go with him," said Thulann to Toria. "He might want for pleasant company."

As they headed down the corridor, the minstrel glanced up at Montenegro and shook her head. "Why do you hate Thulann so much?"

He chuckled dryly. "Call it force of habit."

"It's because she beat you in that duel last spring, hey?"



"You know about that, too?"

"She told me about it."

His face grew warm and his brow wrinkled. "Apparently I'm the only one who felt it was supposed to be a secret." His teeth made a noise as they ground together, but it passed. "Secrecy is an insidious condition of the duel, but then I shouldn't be surprised. Thulann's always got something hidden, doesn't she?"

"She was mad at you, too, you know. I told her I thought you were a good man."

He looked at her with surprise. "Did you, now? Why?"

She lowered her volume as they stepped off the stairs and into the common room. "When I was growing up, you were one of the heroes, you know? The famous orc killer. Champion of the Virtues. I got older and figured that it was just a story. Just another lie. But I changed my mind since I've met you. You're not so selfish. You're a lot like the hero I heard about when I was a kid."

His lips suggested a smile, but he turned away and it passed. As he scanned the dimly lit common room he said, "Thank you, Toria. No one in Britain feels that way anymore. I don't know where Thulann picked you up, but I hope there's more people like you there. Where are you from? Vesper? The Den?"

The girl did not answer. Montenegro considered pressing the question, until something caught his eye. The common room of the Black Goat comprised a series of oak tables around a central stone hearth built. The seating was arranged so that no patron received the full light and heat of the fire unless he deliberately moved his chair to do so. The resulting ambience was somewhat furtive. Among a smat-

tering of customers passing the time until dinner were two men staring at Montenegro and Toria. One of them was a Meer, dressed in casual leathers. The other was a human ranger, who waved at them and grinned.

Montenegro could not suppress a laugh. "By Valor and Humility, I don't believe my eyes. If that's who I think it is, Toria, then he'll chew your ears off with nonsense, but we may just be in luck if he's seen anything."

"Captain Montenegro!" cried Fairfax as he stood to greet the knight. "By the Virtues, I was wondering if you would make it down here with us common folk! And joined by as delicate a butterfly as my eyes have ever beheld." He gave Toria a half-bow. "I am Fairfax of the rangers, presently on leave in the company of this hirsute but accommodating fellow, Jatha of Ishpur."

"Good day to you both," smiled Montenegro. "I was not sure I would ever again lay eyes on that unfortunate face of yours, Fairfax. I'm not accustomed to having my offers turned down. But I'll hold off seeking reparations for the sake of your companion." He chuckled and nodded to the Meer. "I am Sir Gabriel Montenegro of Cove. Ah, this is my traveling companion, Toria."

Jatha rose and bowed. "It's my pleasure to meet you. Two more agreeable faces we could not ask for, to join us for dinner tonight. Please, be so kind as to eat with us later? I promise you both a pleasant diversion. That is to say, I shall make every effort to ensure that Fairfax isn't offensive, and I place myself at the service of this handsome, russet maiden."

Toria giggled. "You're strange for a Meer."

"Exceedingly so," said Fairfax, "but he's forgetting two of your party. Please extend our invitation to the Juka who

travel with you, Captain. Though surely they're strange companions even for one as mysterious as yourself. What brings them so far from the city, and with such a clandestine demeanor?"

The Meer barked, "Fairfax!" With a sharp jab he pointed out the motto on the mantel.

Montenegro fixed a dark stare on the ranger. "No, it's quite all right, Jatha. I've stayed here enough times to know when the motto applies and when it does not. And what makes you think they're Juka, my old friend?"

Fairfax seemed unable to decide whether to look contrite. "Their shoes, of course. They have the same, quite unique soles that I once saw worn by another Juka who until a day ago stayed here. He tried to disguise himself just as industriously as your companions do, and just as transparently to one with my particular competencies. It never fails. People in disguise eventually get lax about their shoes."

Toria looked at Montenegro with secret alarm. The knight patted her shoulder and said, "If there was another Juka here, Fairfax, you must tell me about it."

"There is little to tell. He talked to no one, nor did any of the clientele seek his company. He shared a room with the most supple, fragrant blossom as ever my imagination has been privileged to touch. I thought she had returned when I spotted your companions' footprints on the path outside, until I saw you four going up the stairs. Alas, that ivory vision of paradise was not among you."

Montenegro stroked his jaw. "Riona Lynch?"

A glance passed around the table, after which Jatha the Meer sighed, "Fairfax, my furless brother, once again we have studied the ground and missed the storm gathering

over our heads. Well, we have some time before our baths are drawn. I conclude from the look on the good knight's face that there are many questions to answer and, I daresay, to ask."

Thulann inhaled as Venduss pulled tight the buckles of her chest armor. For the first time in weeks, she was glad to feel the stiff leather and metal secured to her body. "Be gentle with it, nursling," she grumbled, though it was affected ire. "I would prefer that my armor remain intact. It helps the flesh underneath remain intact."

The young Juka hissed. "I am sorry, teacher."

"You resent being in the custody of Montenegro."

His sneer was answer enough.

Thulann brought a reprimand to her tongue, then swallowed it. The boy was clearly punishing himself. "Patience is your ally right now. Until we lay our hands on the assassin, your honor must shine bright enough to be seen from the Senate chamber."

"I do not care what the Senate thinks of me! I—" He bit his lip for a moment before proceeding. "It is you I have failed. It is difficult for me to consider atonement when that human's mantagon eyes are staring at me."

She snorted. "Your obstacles come only from within. Are Montenegro's eyes more daunting than half an hour on the balance posts? You have beaten the posts and you can beat this human's eyes. Venduss, your heart swells with a chieftain's blood. You shall not be true to yourself until no man can sway you from your purpose. Does your father flinch at a hard look? Does Bahrok?" She rubbed his taut shoulder. "Enough, now. This situation is only temporary. Go fetch

me your short sword so I can wear it under my cloak. I find I miss mine, now that we are more than just diplomats."

As she watched him cross the hall, she rolled her own shoulders and spine and found them conspicuously loose. New Britannian healing had removed all the stiffness and fatigue from the combat demonstration. Old instincts were awakening in her body, readying her for action. She was glad of the physical relief, though her heart grew heavy. For years now she had tried to extricate herself from the intrigues and conflicts that had dominated her entire life. She was floundering in grand fashion. Though her life was blessed with few failures, they were invariably magnificent in their thoroughness. Apparently this would be no exception.

From the opposite room Venduss's voice shouted, "Teacher!"

She dashed in to see the warrior holding the long bag that contained his weapons. Its flap was open, revealing the hilts of his own two swords and that of one other. Thulann pulled out the unfamiliar weapon. It was a human longsword. Its metal gleamed black as obsidian, etched with strange symbols and shapes that had nothing to do with the common language.

The Way Master growled as she realized what the blade's perfect balance meant. This was Starfell, Lord Valente's lost weapon. "Where did this come from?"

"It was here in my bag. It was not in there when I packed. I swear it."

"And how many times has this bag left your presence?"

"Only just now, when I came in to assist you."

Thulann threw an intense look around the room. Nothing

seemed out of order, though she would have to scrutinize the latch on the tightly shuttered windows.

"Arm yourself," she murmured. "Our spy may be at hand. I shall look around. As for this," she hefted the magic sword called Starfell, "tell no one about it, not even Toria. I must find out how it got here before we inform Montenegro. Otherwise he will take it as sufficient evidence to remand you to the hospitality of the Senate, and I shall be hard-pressed to deny him."

Venduss grunted, his face pinching in frustration. He pulled on his long braid with angry vigor. Thulann recognized Toria's unconscious habit. She almost swatted his knuckles, but her mind instead churned with defensive strategies. Venduss was best served now by quick, detailed planning and resolute action. The next few hours might determine his fate.

"I've got a plan," Montenegro explained to Thulann, as he drew her into his room less than an hour later. Venduss and Toria remained across the hall. "I've met an old friend who's staying here. He and his companion can keep an eye on Venduss tonight, while you and I see what we can find. Riona doesn't have a room here anymore, but I've reason to think she might have set up a camp in the forest nearby."

"There is not much daylight left," said the old Juka.

"When else does a spy come out, but at night? And the Jukan assassin who works for her, or for whom she works?" He explained their conversation with Jatha and Fairfax, and how it led him to believe that the two Logosians had stashed the tools of their profession somewhere outside the plaster-and-wood building. He took particular note of Thulann's

reaction when he described Riona's Juka partner. Something had passed over the Way Master's eyes that looked foreign to her face. Not fear, exactly, but something very close to it. Montenegro took the expression as a measure of advice, to treat the Logosian warrior with extreme caution.

And with no mercy, he noted, for if this Juka was the man who killed Lord Valente, Montenegro would certainly sheathe his sword in the murderer's chest.

The Way Master nodded. "Venduss is beside himself tonight. I agree he could use the diversion of these two men, if you think they are trustworthy."

"Fairfax I would trust with my life. Not many years ago I nearly took him as my squire, which is not much different than Venduss is to you. Tell me, how does the boy hold his liquor?"

"Liquor? He does not drink."

"Good. He will tonight. With any luck Fairfax will put him right to sleep and he shall be one less wild card for us to worry about."

She grimaced. "You have a cruel sort of logic. I cannot argue with it. Though I would ask you to speak more empathetically of Venduss. He may be young, but he is the most honorable of us all. Surely you recognize that."

"Maybe, but I need proof. Until I get it he's a suspect for murder, and I won't be lured by empathy into complacency. That is the end of it. It's nearly time for dinner, so I suggest you get ready."

When she exited, he closed the door and stripped off his leather tunic. The water in the basin was icy as he splashed it over his face and broad chest. He was thankful the small fireplace had already been lit, strewing red and gold light

around the chamber. After he dried himself with a towel, he threw it down with a quick move and whirled around to face the open window.

Standing before the open shutters was an apparition in black. Its dark robe was flared and pleated in an alien fashion. Its gaping hood served to mask the person's face in shadow. Or would have, if not for her bone-pale skin. She had a device in her hand, an incomprehensible collection of gears and springs, though the tip of the crossbow quarrel was plain enough to him.

He spread out his hands. "Riona Lynch. I didn't expect to find you this easily. I take it from your unconventional outfit you are in fact one of these Technocrats I've been told about?"

The voice from the pale face answered, "I am proud to confirm your suspicion."

"I confess I preferred your more feminine identity."

"I would expect you to. Sometimes I imagine I prefer it myself, but it's really nothing more than a formula. A set of clothes I wear and a sequence of expressions into which I twist my face, in order to achieve an effect in the target."

Montenegro's body coursed with energy, though he dared not move. He did not know the parameters of her mechanical weapon. The sound of her voice, however, did hint a smile onto his lips. "If that's true, then I must applaud the Technocrats for developing such an artful disguise, because you were more enjoyable to be with than most real courtesans."

"Thank you," she said, followed by silence.

Montenegro slowly let his hands drop to his sides. "Where is your Jukan partner?"



"On an errand, I fear, or I might introduce you."

His sword and baldric were lying on the bed, a few feet away. He noted the distance and did not look again. "Are you here to kill me, then? Am I next on your red list, after Lord Valente?"

"Of course not. That would have been much easier at the Wisp Hunt. I don't intend to kill anybody tonight. And though you may not believe it, I did not kill Valente, either."

"Your partner did, which is the same thing in my eyes."

"No, he didn't. He's only here to protect me. I'm afraid you already know who the murderer is."

He smirked. "Venduss."

"Correct."

"That's a lie. You arranged the whole thing to put the blame on him."

"I did construct the scenario, of course, but simply to entice him into murder. He performed precisely according to my design. I did not expect the savagery of the actual execution, though, I must admit."

Montenegro crossed his arms. The Technocrat twitched her weapon. The knight blinked, then pursed his lips. "So what do you want with me?"

"To pursue the Virtue of Justice. I bring you proof of the boy's guilt."

"You think I shall trust anything you give me? I take back my commendation of your craft. You're as naive as you are beautiful."

She chuckled just once, an oddly musical sound to emanate from such a dour figure. "I bring you only knowledge, Gabriel. The proof you need is in the possession of

Thulann of Garron. She has hidden it in the flue of her room."

He tilted his head. "You put the evidence there, I presume?"

"She hid it herself, after discovering the object in Venduss's bags. Make your own inquiries. I am simply telling you what I have witnessed. You must pay attention, Gabriel. Thulann is covering up the boy's guilt right under your nose. I did not arrange this entire plot so that you could let it die through lack of perceptiveness, hey?"

Montenegro sucked in a hot breath. "You are a soulless machine, Riona."

"You say such kind things to me, sir. And my name isn't Riona, but of course you must know that."

"What is your name, then?"

She took a step back, rotating just enough to catch a splash of firelight under the hood. Her smile was free and her face was unblemished elegance, as he remembered it to be. She replied, "I'm going to leave you now. Convict Venduss for the murder and Thulann for covering it up. You won't get them in a better position than you have them now, and you know it. You can try to capture me the next time, if you so wish, for I do intend to visit you again. I find I enjoy your company, Gabriel. Perhaps I'll tell you my real name then. I may even let you catch me, if you promise to treat me nicely."

He grinned coldly. "I'll treat you nicely right now, if you like. I've bought the finest bottle of wine in the roadhouse for our dinner. Join us."

She reached up a hand and pushed the wooden shutters open fully. "I had in mind something more . . . confidential."

Then Montenegro leapt for his sword. He twisted into a dodge just as a metallic sound clacked from the Technocrat's weapon. The bolt missed him and hit something solid. He snatched up his scabbard and grabbed the hilt, but the blade would not withdraw.

The bolt was stuck through the sheath, pinning it to the base of the blade. His eyes widened when he saw that the tip had punctured steel.

"I'm not here to kill you, Gabriel," she repeated. "Don't be ungrateful."

Montenegro watched as she leapt out the open window, or perhaps she was pulled out, for she flew away with impossible speed. When he rushed to track which direction she went, he saw nothing but the windy autumn dusk. No footsteps tapped the roof above him.

With a clatter his door burst open. He crouched. A blur tumbled into the room and rose in the corner. Thulann had two throwing knives in one hand and a short sword in the other. "Dammit!" she spat, "I saw a Juka outside my window! He moved like a professional assassin! Did you see anything?"

Montenegro paused for an instant, then answered, "No, not here. Let's get after him!"

"I'll tail him and come back in a few hours! Look after Venduss!" She sprang out the window herself. He moved to follow, then realized the futility of it. She had already vanished as well.

With a snarl he punched the wall. The plaster flaked. He was tired of being one step behind Thulann, one skill less capable. Quickly he reached for his leather tunic.

Then he glanced out his open door. In the hallway stood

young Venduss, armored and armed, looking as sullen as a child sent to bed. Beside him was the diminutive Toria, her big, green eyes glistening with fear, pleading to him for guidance.

Beyond them was the door to Thulann's room, where Riona had claimed the evidence was hidden.

He threw down his tunic. "There's nothing we can do, dammit. I have to look after you, Venduss, so let's get down to dinner. I have friends to introduce to you."

"I shall go armed."

"I insist on it," said the knight, "but wear your cloak and hood. It does us no good to make the customers here nervous."

Toria let out a nervous sigh. "Thulann ordered me to stay here and watch our things."

Montenegro nodded, then tried to smile. "Don't be afraid. She's just being cautious. I don't think Riona Lynch has any reason to try to hurt us. In fact I suspect she wants one of us very much alive." He motioned with his head to Venduss. "We have nothing to fear tonight. I am absolutely certain of it."

After dinner and two bottles of wine given to his three companions, Montenegro unveiled the prize vintage of the Black Goat, a rare ninety-year-old red from the celebrated pre-Cataclysmic vineyards of Trinsic. Even Venduss pushed out his glass for another. Though drink had not alleviated his grim mood, at least he now joined in the conversation. Jatha and Fairfax made sure the Juka was engaged in the frivolous ambience, through the verbal equivalent of siege warfare. They followed Montenegro's wishes to perfection.

The knight sipped the last of his water and then stood.

"Gentlemen, enjoy that bottle. It was no mean purchase since my lands have turned against me. I'm going upstairs to check on young Toria."

Venduss murmured, "I shall come with you."

A muscular arm wrapped around the Juka's shoulder. Fairfax shook his head of bushy hair. "You're staying with us, my emerald friend. Captain-No-More Montenegro has delivered you into our eager hands, and you shall not be disappointed by our choice of adventure for the evening. It is an endeavor as challenging and surpassing glorious as ever you shall see devised by two young wanderers drunk in a pub on a harvest night."

Jatha added, "And that is not an insignificant boast."

Montenegro smiled at the confused Venduss. "I bought them that wine in exchange for keeping an eye on you tonight. I sensed you were not pleased by my own company. Don't look so surprised. Sometimes I may even act with your interests at heart."

The warrior nodded to him, which was more than Montenegro really wanted. He walked out of the noisy dining room and up the steps. At the end of the hallway he knocked on Thulann's door. Toria opened it, peeking through the crack.

"Is there any sign of your mistress?"

The girl sighed. "No."

"May I come in, please?"

"What for?"

He held up a wooden plate of food. The door swung open and he stepped inside. Toria began to eat at a small table.

Montenegro sat on the bed. "She'll be all right, you know."

Toria paused. "How do you know?"

"I've never seen anyone like her. She vanishes in the darkness. Literally vanishes. I honestly believed she was a sorceress when we first met."

"I hope you're right. I worry about her. She's so amazing but she's . . . well, she's too honorable, hey? I'm afraid it will get her into trouble."

Montenegro squinted. "You think that's a fault?"

"It can be. Where I come from, people who count on honor too much don't live very long."

He chuckled. "Ah, so you are from the Den. I thought as much. Look, I've devoted my life to the Virtues. That's what it means to be a knight. Study my deeds, if you have the opportunity, and then tell me that I am weaker for my honor."

"You're different. Your type of honor is different."

"Thulann and I are not so different. She does what she needs to do to protect herself, just as I do." He glanced at the crackling fire. "Toria, I thought about it over dinner and I have come to a conclusion."

"About what?"

"You're up here by yourself tonight. I'd hate for you to be lonely. I've decided to provide you with some companionship."

The girl's face knotted with shock as she looked him over. The knight laughed. "I only mean that our two grandiloquent friends downstairs are taking Venduss out on a late-night hunting trip. It occurred to me that this would be a splendid opportunity for you and he to spend some time away from Thulann's vulture gaze."

Toria kept a deliberate calm. "I'm not sure what you mean by that."

"You realize that time is of the essence here. They'll leave soon and you'll never catch up to them in the night."

"Why would I want to go out with Venduss?"

Montenegro rolled his eyes at her. She blushed furiously. "But I can't. Thulann told me to stay here and watch our things."

"I'll play guard. And I'll make your excuses if Thulann gets back before you do."

The freckled girl squirmed.

Montenegro opened his mouth wide. "Ah. You're supposed to guard it from me."

She nodded.

"Well, trust shines like a candle in a blizzard, as they say. Not to worry, we can work this out. There in the corner are the bags you must guard. One of them is yours and one is hers, correct? Then take Thulann's bag when you go. I give you my word I shall not go through your own possessions, and your mistress herself will vouch for the quality of that oath."

"But I'm supposed to stay in this room."

He wiped a hand across his face. "By the lost shrines, girl, we're bending the rules here! Trust me, honor shall be your downfall if you're not willing to hammer it a little to your own needs. Now do you want to have a few hours with Venduss or shall I go downstairs and pour wine down his gullet until he passes out?"

She left most of her food untouched when she darted past him, toward the corridor. Then she stopped, knelt at his side and kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you, Montenegro." She hefted the Way Master's half-empty bag, fetched her walking boots and hurried away on thumping bare feet.

Her voice had contained a lilting quality that encapsulated all the magic of an adolescent girl. At that moment it brought the knight no pleasure to hear.

The basin of water sufficed to douse the blaze in the small hearth. He thrust his forearm up the dirty flue and found something metallic. It was barely warm, though the flames must have licked it for hours.

He pulled Starfell from the chimney. He had last seen the enchanted weapon in the hands of Lord Valente, ceremonially calling the wisps to their mysterious autumnal dance. The knight's jaw clenched until it began to hurt. Laying the sword across his lap he reclined in Toria's chair, in the dark, and waited for Thulann's return.

The Way Master made no sound, for fear of her life. In the heavy blackness of the nighttime forest she blended into the silhouette of a slender tree. A chittering chorus of nocturnal insects thrummed around her. Somewhere close was a second person, almost as stealthy as she.

Thulann had managed to trail the mysterious Juka as he fled into the woods. The chase exercised her most advanced skills in stealth and perception. So nimbly and quietly did her quarry travel that she concluded he must belong to the elite Janissars or some equivalent, highly trained Logosian order. A less knowledgeable person might mistake the man for a Way Master himself.

His exact identification, of course, was not as important as his skill with a blade or bow, or the fact that he was aware he was being followed.

For what must have been three or four hours she had stalked him through the lightless forest, playing the tena-



cious predator to his crafty prey. She felt invigorated as her old skills resurrected, uncovering pathways in her body and mind she had not traveled for many years, awakening memories of youth and ceaseless training. Yet she dared not pause to enjoy the sensations, even for an instant. The man she followed could exploit any hesitation. He had circled and spiraled and laid low countless times to lose her.

The latest attempt, perhaps, may even have been successful. She knew he was close but could not mark him. Her skills told her he must be moving away. The crawling of her flesh suggested he was now stalking her.

A whisper of air to her left confirmed the latter. She made no move, nor even breathed, until the instant she ducked low and whisked out Venduss's short sword. The clang of her parry broke the trance of stealth. She lunged at her prey, who had now become her attacker.

His blade uttered a grinding noise. Thulann recognized the growl of a clockwork sword, which confirmed that her opponent was Logosian.

Not a ray of light touched either of them, nor could mortal eyes have followed the speed of the battle.

His style was quick and furious. Thulann knew then he was a master assassin. For eternal seconds she fended off his thrusts and kicks and punches. In a few moments her reflexes would adjust to him, but now she parried for her life, leaping and dodging and battering away what seemed like a dozen blades and a hundred fists and feet. Where his clockwork sword struck metal, the spinning blades coughed bright sparks. Several blows slammed against her torso, though she did not falter. Her chest tingled as it nursed a single breath.

Finally she seized upon an instant's respite to shift the momentum, and summoned within herself a core of spiritual power to drive a barrage of her own attacks. Many of them struck home, including a handful of sword cuts. Her opponent compensated with remarkable deftness. One of his leg sweeps caught her ankles. She fell and immediately tumbled up the trunk of a tree and kicked into a flying somersault.

When she landed, a bright light sparkled in her face. It was a side effect of the deep thrust wound she received to her chest. Her breath vanished painfully.

The assassin in the dark whispered, "I wasn't going to execute you tonight, but now you've given me blood fever. Your corpse will make a fine trophy."

She sprang forward. She could easily fight without breathing, though a pierced lung would limit her to ten or twenty seconds of effectiveness. Some distant corner of her thoughts rejoiced that her opponent did not simply drop back and wait for her to weaken. Instead he indulged his "blood fever." Thulann allowed him. They clashed body-to-body now, pitting grapples and throws against contortions and sheer strength. Unseen blood lubricated the contest. The Way Master was aware of the assassin's mechanical blade chewing the flesh of her arms and legs. But the wounds did not exist for her. With singular intent she maneuvered his throat under the razor edge of her sword, then slowly dragged her weapon to lay open his artery.

Despite his skill, for a fraction of a second the assassin took stock of the wound. The action gave Thulann enough time to press her fingers into the cut, shift her weight and flay open the skin of his neck.

The man let out a ragged scream and pushed her away. She had fastened a leg lock on him intended to prevent such a defense, but her strength now failed. The Way Master channeled her momentum into a roll. She came up on her knees. Only moments of consciousness remained to her. With luck, it would outlast her opponent's life.

He did not attack, as she expected. Rather he leapt into the air, so that she could almost make out his shape among the pinpoint stars revealed by the forest canopy. New sounds met her ears, of rushing air and liquid churned by a paddle. Something large and flying plucked the assassin from the air and ascended. The shape broke through the foliage overhead. Thulann caught a hazy glimpse of it in the moonlight above the trees, before it vanished with her dying opponent.

She squinted. It had been one of the Technocrats' flying vehicles, like a large saddle that sprouted gears and pipes and metal tanks, driven by what looked like a spectre in a Mathematician's robe.

Thulann had found, and lost, Riona Lynch.

The nighttime world hummed around her in fading swirls as she groped at her belt. The small vial in her pouch was thankfully unbroken. The fight to bring the healing potion to her lips was every bit as challenging as the battle itself, and once victorious she collapsed into the crackling leaves and struggled no more.

The rush of wine in Jatha's head was a cousin of the cool forest breeze. The stars themselves seemed to twinkle at the wind's touch. The Meer wizard flared his ears and nostrils to appease his every sense from the luxurious banquet around him. Leaves danced, frogs piped, branches creaked, and a

thousand natural smells debated for his attention. Moonlight glistened on his fur. At such moments he questioned why he would ever bother to remain indoors. Such doubts always made him laugh.

Fairfax had traveled ahead, in the tracks of the legendary black goat. Soon he would either send out a call to come subdue the quarry, or more likely, trudge back to admit that the trail was too old or misleading. Then they would continue through the woods, searching for the next clue. Hunts with the ranger mostly fell into that pattern, especially at night, when Fairfax matched his skills against beasts of a nocturnal variety. The Meer had grown to enjoy these moments of calm, solitary waiting.

Tonight, of course, he was not waiting alone. His duty was to watch the Jukan warrior Venduss, who sat with him in the moon shadow of a small tree. On the Juka's opposite side knelt the human girl, Toria. One of her hands clutched a mysterious bag, while the other fiddled nervously at a spiral lock of hair. Jatha grinned. The attraction between the two teenagers could not have been plainer, yet both of them studiously ignored it. The coy ritual, apparently, was universal to all civilized cultures.

They made a strange couple, yet perhaps no stranger than Jatha himself and the smattering of human women with whom he had spent time. The world was becoming exotic and wonderful. After the Cataclysm the count of enlightened species of men had grown to include the humans and the Juka. Jatha wondered how many others lived undiscovered in this new world.

He had known about the Juka for some time, of course. His government in Avenosh had sent diplomats to Logosia

several years before, meeting both Juka and Technocrats alike. The Matriarchs had found it prudent to conceal that fact from the New Britannians, in the interest of maintaining neutrality. Spending most of the last few years on this continent, though, Jatha had never come into contact with a Juka. Nor were the Logosian Juka, by all accounts, similar to those from the land they called Jukaran. Their lives and culture contrasted in interesting ways. The Juka who served the Techno-Prophet had a relaxed, quiet demeanor. The delegation from Garron had proven to be louder, more aggressive and more given to rituals and displays of honor. Yet Jatha could not dismiss them as barbaric. Venduss was proof that this philosophy called the Way involved considerable refinement and sophistication. Though he was young, drunk and depressed, the Jukan warrior adhered to strict codes of behavior and decorum which even a Meer as prudish as a Matriarch might hesitate to condemn. Jatha could not help being impressed.

Just now he admitted to himself, as well, that he had no patience for the awkward silence that his two companions had cultivated. While gazing at the stars he murmured, "Toria, did you say you once pursued minstrelsy for a living?"

"That I did."

"Then pray do myself and your somber companion there the kindness of rendering a song with your voice, which I'm certain must be as lush and satiny as those beautiful garnet curls that fall on your shoulders."

She giggled. "Fairfax babbles better than you. I don't think he realizes he's doing it."

He laughed, closed his eyes and leaned back against the

small tree. "Be wary. Fairfax's manner of speech is exceedingly contagious, like a dusty cough that sticks in your throat."

Venduss mumbled, "Right now he is probably trying to charm the black goat into surrendering."

Jatha smirked. "Romantic seduction is more his preference, if not his forte, in which case I find myself overflowing with pity for that poor, unsuspecting beast."

Toria chuckled, took a heavy breath and sang:

*Autumn dust, fly on the wind  
And wrap your arms around me.  
Powdered leaves of summer,  
With your gentle touch astound me.  
There is a lad whose twilight words  
And sunset eyes have bound me.  
His footprints walk away from where  
This quiet grave has found me.*

*So harvest from the autumn dust  
His single, fallen tear  
And from the dusty earth reclaim  
His footsteps, broad and clear,  
And blow them 'round this sorry mound  
Which lies so still and near  
That I may rest beneath the touch  
Of him who held me dear.*

The deep cadence of his breathing was to Jatha the perfect coda to the girl's smoky voice. He lay for a while with his eyes still closed. Then he twitched an ear and glanced to

his side. Toria was sitting in the arms of Venduss. Neither said a word, though Jatha could practically hear the thumping of their hearts.

He smiled and closed his eyes again, indulging the swirl of wine and wind.

In the darkened room, a shadow had crept in through the open window before Montenegro realized it. He heard breaths and the tiny creak of floorboards. From his seat he whisked Starfell to the neck of the intruder. The sword's enchantment guided it around an unexpected parry, until the point touched the underside of the person's jaw.

Thulann's surprised face caught a stray moonbeam from the window. She looked down at the blade he held at her throat, then let out a sigh. "You shall not like my explanation for that, Montenegro, so at least allow me the dignity of cleaning up before telling it to you. I picked up a few scratches while I was in the forest, you see. Where is Toria?"

"I took over her guard duties."

"I might have known. That child is undisciplined. It shall be the death of her someday, and perhaps by my own hand."

He bit down a bubble of anger. "Why did you come in through the window? Were you trying to sneak past me?"

"Not past you, but rather past our fellow guests downstairs. They might think tomorrow's dinner had escaped from the slaughterhouse."

In the dim light he looked her over and noticed dark bloodstains on her clothes. He lowered the weapon. "Did you kill the other Juka?"

"Perhaps. His throat was laid open when he fled, but in this mad land that does not mean a thing. I stand before you

now as proof." She wearily tossed a log into the dark fireplace. "I know you must be upset, but would you mind if we sent for a pitcher of water to drink? It has been a storm of an evening and my windpipe is short on wind. And Venduss ought to be here to explain his part."

Montenegro shook his head and glared. "Venduss is unavailable at the moment, and because of this sword in my hand, I intend to make him unavailable for some time to come. Now let us start talking. I am very unhappy."

The ground thundered as the black goat stomped around the clearing. Its rough-furred body was the size of a horse. Its red eyes glowed with unnatural fury. Jets of steam flew from its nostrils.

Jatha, Fairfax, and Venduss surrounded the beast, coralling it with weapons and wild gestures. When the monster charged too near they would converge and rain blows upon it. Fairfax brandished a hunting spear and Venduss his fine Jukan longsword, while Jatha's spells gathered seeds of lightning from the air and cracked them open, illuminating the forest with great, flashing forks of energy. Of course the Meer's inebriation hindered both his sorcery and his aim, but he felt no embarrassment. Any one of them, he knew, could handle the black goat alone. This was a contest of style and daring and sheer, uninhibited merriment.

Which always gave Fairfax the edge, it seemed. Presently the human darted into the center of the clearing with an animal howl, feinted around the monster and then leapt onto its back. He draped over it like a cackling, flaxen-haired saddlebag. The black goat lowed and reared. He buried his hands into its coarse ebony fur and managed to hold on,



though his spear toppled loose. The monster bucked in a thrashing spiral, spraying dirt and rocks, gnashing the earth with heavy, cloven hooves.

Venduss tumbled past the creature and retrieved the lost spear. Jatha pointed at the ranger, who clung to the goat's withers. "Fairfax! Take your mighty spear Goatspit and ready that thick-haunched devil for breakfast!"

The Juka hurled the spear to Fairfax. As the ranger drew back for the blow in overdramatic fashion, the black goat tossed him into the air. Quickly Jatha and Venduss chased it away as Fairfax thumped to the ground and laughed in pain. The beast stormed off, then in an instant rose on its hind legs and reversed directions. The Meer and the Juka leapt out of its path. It roared past them, great twisting horns lowered, and slammed into Fairfax unawares. He let out a gurgle and flew into a tree.

Jatha winced at the sight. Venduss emitted a frightening war cry and charged. The Meer watched with astonishment as the Jukan warrior leapt completely over the monster's back, rolled upon landing and came up with Fairfax's spear. He twirled the haft in dizzying circles that looked like wheels in the moonlight. Then he set upon the black goat in a parade of acrobatic spins and lunges and rapid-fire thrusts. The creature's dark blood sprayed around him. The black goat snorted and bellowed, though its strength began to waver.

Jatha knelt beside Fairfax, who lay motionless on his back. As the Meer summoned between his palms the warm, white light of healing, the ranger's fist rose weakly into the air. "Revenge me, mighty Venduss!" he called out, then let his arm flop down. Jatha guided the soothing enchantment like

water from his fingers into Fairfax's body. The human exhaled relief as he sat up.

Venduss jumped backward as the black goat stumbled on its huge, deadly hooves. Then the Juka whirled the spear around himself in a complex, elegant display that reminded Jatha of a billowing cloak, and finished by jamming the spear tip under the monster's jaw and into its head.

The black goat fell with a loud thump. Jatha and Fairfax sent up a cheer, echoed by Toria, who scrambled down from the safety of a tree. She rushed into the Juka's arms, then shrank back and squealed with laughter at the blood he had smeared on her clothes.

The black goat squirmed and tried to gain its feet again.

Venduss snatched the spear from its throat and buried the point in the beast's chest. The goat slumped down again, motionless. For good measure Fairfax repeated the motion with a playful curse. Jatha followed suit, then handed the spear to Toria. She laughed, lifted it over her head and looked away as she stabbed the giant carcass. Everyone cheered again.

Fairfax caught his breath and said, "I wonder if it's truly possible to turn one of these hideous brutes into something palatable?"

"Who cares?" laughed Jatha. "I know what wine best complements it, raw or cooked! Toria, if you please, surrender that bottle which is so enviably nestled in your dress."

The girl pulled out the Trinsic wine Montenegro had purchased. Jatha removed the cork. Fairfax untied a leather mug from his belt and handed it to Venduss. "The two of you can share my leather jack, good Jatha has his own, and I shall content myself with the finest dregs straight from the bot-

tle." They filled the two mugs and hoisted their drinks in the air. "Venduss, since yours was the kill, yours shall be the toast!"

He panted, "I do not know any," then bent over to listen to Toria's whisper. As one, the girl and the Juka lifted their shared leather cup. Then Venduss shouted, "Tonight let the stars guide their ships by our light!"

Jatha poured the exquisite wine down his tongue and decided it was an excellent mate to the fragrance of grass and willows. He smiled warmly at Fairfax. "Ah, my furless brother, this time we may have struck as close to the Perfect Draught as is possible on this dismal, barbaric island of yours."

But the ranger grinned and shook his head. "Not you and I." With his eyes he pointed to their young companions, who attempted to sip from the leather mug in tandem, spilled most of the wine in the endeavor, and captured the remainder inside the seal of a slow, rolling kiss.

The Meer chuckled as he watched. Fairfax, as it happened, was under the rare influence of a speechless moment. He took Jatha's arm and nudged him away, as the twin moons splashed the clearing with a cool, silver mist.

## Interlude

“T  
ell me about the plans for war.”

“Everything has been decided, Your Eminence. It shall only take a few weeks to put together the necessary configuration of troops and airships. Then we may strike at will.”

“So the Mathematicians were able to calculate the logistics for a victory?”

“Yes, Your Eminence. Lector Caleb called upon one of his underlings to assist him.”

“You mean Father Gaff, the spymaster.”

“In fact, that is just who I mean, Your Eminence. I did not know that you monitored these affairs.”

“I’m not blind up here in this tower, Sartorius. I know that Lector Caleb does not trust the safety margins of this plan.”

“Respectfully, Your Eminence, why did you ask me if you already know what’s happening?”

“Because I rely upon you for the truth, Sartorius, not my own eyes. Eyes can deceive you. No two pairs of eyes ever see the same thing.”

“As you say, Your Eminence.”

"Then tell me, what is the truth here? Will the Mathematicians' calculations hold out?"

"Yes, Your Eminence."

"Excellent. You see? Truth seems truer on the tongue than in the eye. I've always thought that."

"I am happy to agree with you, Your Eminence."

## CHAPTER

# 9

### Assassin's Requital

**T**he shroud of night still darkened the forest as Raveka watched the glow of windows at the Black Goat roadhouse. The Technocrat stood beside a thick tree and strained her ears. She could hear the murmur of voices inside Thulann's room. Shadows moved within.

Pikas stalked a small path behind her. To himself he grumbled, "I should have backed off and let her die. I should have backed off."

Sister Raveka closed her eyes for a moment. "Will you please hush? I'm trying to listen. It's difficult to spy with all that chatter."

"Stick it up your skirt! I have to work this out in my head."

"There is little to work out. You blundered and let an old woman catch you. She almost killed you and I saved your life with a healing potion, for which, if memory serves, you claimed we would have no need."

The assassin responded with silence. Raveka did not feel comforted. "You must relax. The plan is proceeding within acceptable tolerances. Even though Montenegro knows

we're behind Valente's murder, he'll have to take Venduss back to the city tonight. The evidence demands it. By tomorrow night all of Britain will be clamoring for justice. My design is proving to be sound."

Pikas sneered, "Sister, at this moment your designs mean nothing to me."

Raveka rolled her eyes. For an assassin, Pikas was strangely prone to histrionics. Then movement in the darkness caught her attention. She smiled. "Ah, it's the Meer and the ranger, returned from the hunt! But where are Venduss and the girl?" Pikas said nothing. "I'm going to have a closer look. Stay here." She crept forward to watch Fairfax and Jatha amble in the front door. Tracing their route from the woods, Raveka found what she was looking for: two shapes, one tall and one short, creeping through the gloom toward Thulann's window.

Raveka followed them and listened.

In a whisper Toria exclaimed, "Venduss, no! We can't climb up to the window! Thulann is in there."

The Juka warrior was locating handholds in the timber of the exterior wall, just underneath Thulann of Garron's window. "I can hear her and Montenegro. I want to find out what they are talking about."

Toria clasped her hands nervously as she watched him scale the wall. Raveka was impressed by Venduss's nimble skill. The youth perched under the sill and turned his pointed ear into the light. After a few moments he dropped down to ground level again. Immediately he pressed his palms against his face and staggered away from the girl.

"What is it? What did you hear?"

"He found the sword. By the Great Mother, he found the sword!"

Raveka grinned. It seemed Montenegro was behaving perfectly.

Venduss stamped toward the trees. Toria followed him. "What sword are you talking about?"

"Lord Valente's sword! It was in my bags!"

The girl paused and stared at him. "You . . . had Valente's sword?"

"I cannot explain it now! I—"

He moved past the shadow where Pikas was hidden. The air hissed and Venduss' sentence cut short with a gurgle. The Juka stiffened and fell to his knees. The point of a blade thrust out of the darkness, puncturing the youth's back again and again, until black fragments flew from the holes in his armor. The Juka collapsed in the dirt, utterly motionless.

*Dammit!* shouted the Technocrat in her mind. Her bones chilled. She rushed forward past the little minstrel, who was frozen with horror. When she got a close look at Venduss, Raveka realized no potion would help. The boy's torso was a gory ruin.

"That," said Pikas from the gloom, "is what I should have done to Thulann."

Raveka puffed up her chest with rising anger. "You idiot! Why?" From her robe she snatched her spring-powered bolt thrower and aimed it at the place where Toria was standing. But the girl had vanished. Raveka growled. "You madman! Venduss was the key to our plan! What possessed you to kill him? What purpose did it serve?"

The assassin shrugged. "I feel much more relaxed now."

Gnashing her teeth, she thrust the point of her weapon at



his silhouette, half-hidden in the foliage. Darkness could not obscure the precise trajectory to his heart. Her hand twitched on the spring lever.

"This ought to be very interesting, sister."

The stony timbre of his voice suggested that he was not unprepared. Raveka weighed her options. Clashing with Pikas would serve no useful purpose now, when quick action was necessary. Instead she lowered the bolt-thrower and snapped, "Get the carriage! We're leaving right now!"

In a sliver of light from the inn, Pikas opened a chilling smile. "But the night is still young, and there's a few more hearts to lance."

"You've ruined enough for one night, hey?" She scooped up the dead Juka and plunged through the tree line. "Hurry up, or I'll take the carriage alone and you'll have to swim back to Logosia. Father Gaff will not begrudge me leaving you in this madhouse!"

Thulann held aloft a rippling torch and scoured the underbrush of the forest. Each bent leaf and snapped twig told the story of a passing creature. She collected every clue into her memory with ravenous speed. Some pattern was bound to reveal itself. The answer must be here.

Not far away, voices mumbled in the night. She identified Montenegro's smooth cadence and the purring tones of the Meer named Jatha.

"It is grievously clear to me," the wizard was saying. "Look at the blood and remains on the ground. No one could survive these kinds of wounds without advanced healing from the school of water magic. I'm certain of it."

Montenegro responded, "The closest place to get that

kind of healing is in the city. It would take too long to get there, even on a fast horse." He growled. "I'm forced to agree with you. Venduss must have been slain. But why would they kill him when they've worked so hard to charge him with the murder of Valente? And why take his body? It doesn't make any sense."

The Meer had no answer.

Thulann continued to search for some trace of her missing student. With a Way Master's discipline she focused on the task at hand, disregarding the vacant feeling in her chest and the gentle, faraway song that lilted within:

*Cry, my golden chieftain's child,  
For soon your mighty warrior's cry  
Shall lead your clansmen off to war  
And enemies shall terrify.*

The voice was her own, the rhyme a lullaby of the sort designed to soothe fatigued mothers as well as their babies. She had sung it to Venduss when he was an infant. She was not his mother, of course, but had served the role somewhat after Turlogan's wife died in childbirth. That was several years after her own children had abandoned their mother to her demanding career.

Thulann suppressed the memories as they began to boil up. She selected a fresh patch of undergrowth and searched anew.

The conversation between Montenegro and Jatha was joined by the ranger Fairfax, who emerged from a nearby stretch of woods. "There were two of them, just as Toria said. A woman and a Juka. I wager you every feathered cap

in Britain it was Riona and her viperous partner. But here's the strangest verse of the riddle. Their tracks end a hundred feet inside the tree line, as if they mounted a horse. Yet either they had no horse with them, or the horse had no feet, for it left no hoofprints."

The knight said, "Thulann mentioned that Riona has some sort of machine that flies. They must have escaped through the air. Damn!"

The Way Master blocked out their discussion and continued searching, as the lullaby crooned on:

*Weep, my golden chieftain's child,  
For one day shall you mourn the dead,  
Courageous hearts your mighty sword  
To battle and to glory led.*

She came to the edge of the brush. She lifted her head and scanned the woods, thinking of the arduous task before them. Much ground remained to be covered. Venduss must be nearby.

Then she saw the three men watching her. Their eyes were wet with sorrow and anger and pity. Pity for her. They had satisfied themselves as to what had transpired. When she considered the evidence, the rational part of her agreed with them. Venduss was gone. He could not have survived.

Her heart could not accept it.

Beyond them, on the porch of the Black Goat, a shuddering form clung to a wooden pillar. Toria was a bundle of red curls, sobbing and clutching Thulann's own bag. The tiny girl sat alone.

Thulann stepped out of the forest, past the men and to

the minstrel's side. Gently the Way Master peeled Toria's grip from the wooden post, then wrapped the girl in her broad cloak, in her long arms. The human convulsed with tears. Thulann listened to the lullaby inside of herself, humming aloud the gentle melody:

*Lie still, my golden chieftain's child,  
For someday shall your noble might  
Hold safe the clan within your arms  
As you lie still in mine tonight.*

She held tightly to the girl and spilled a solitary tear. Turlogan's name perched on her lips, unspoken.

The sewers underneath Britain were, to the Britannians, an engineering marvel. Composed of endless stone archways and twisting canals, they kept the city dry and relatively clean. They were the proudest achievement of the dark years after the Cataclysm. To those who ventured within, however, the hidden labyrinth of tunnels was a grim, putrescent chasm infested with all manner of ravenous life, strewn the dank blackness with squeaks and grunts and the scrape of bestial feet.

Yet no creatures molested a small group who gathered in a less noisome corner of the sewer complex. Pikas and Sister Raveka stood before a granite platform, across which lay the ruined corpse of the warrior Venduss. A very old man hunched over the body, his long staff tipped by a bright, eerie glow.

"You were wise to come with all haste," commented Master Gregorio, wiping his hands together. "The soul does

not immediately untangle from dead flesh. I can resurrect him. Another half an hour, of course, and he would have become so much lifeless clay."

Raveka indulged a wave of relief that coursed through her body. "You have my thanks. What good is a murder suspect who's been murdered himself?" She glanced at Pikas with a frown. "My associate believes he understands mayhem, but he has much yet to learn. As a wily friend once told me, one cannot be indiscriminate with charity and assassinations."

The Jukan bladesman stood with an alert, upright attitude. He kept a suspicious eye on Gregorio as he answered, "Wars are won by warriors, Sister. One dagger is more potent than a hundred calculations. You're far too lost in your own head."

"If you looked beyond your own bloodthirst, you'd see that warfare is a game of numbers. I have the formula for victory in my head."

"And one dagger can remove that head and everything inside it. Shall I demonstrate?"

"Be silent!" The withered sorcerer smacked the butt of his staff against the stone floor. The sound danced away through the dark vaults of the sewers. "I'm not interested in your methods! Ours is an arrangement of convenience, not respect. Let us discuss the terms of this deal. I shall resurrect this Juka. In exchange, you must give him into my care."

"That is not suitable to my needs." She intended to return Venduss to Montenegro. She lifted her bolt-thrower into view. "Have this device for payment instead. You will find it embodies many core principles of the Machine, which I am certain a scholar such as yourself will find very enlightening."

The ancient man's sunken eyes literally flashed. "Take that abomination away! Blackthorn mocks the proper order of the universe by employing cold metal where living mana rightly belongs! I'll not have any of his horrible creations near me. Now. I have named my price. The Juka belongs to me or he belongs in a crypt. Which shall it be?"

Raveka's mind iterated through a series of equations. Finally she murmured, "The boy is guilty of murder. Do I have your word he'll be tried before the Royal Senate?"

"Of course he shall. I am as committed to the Virtue of Justice as any knight or statesman."

As long as the result was a public trial, she concluded, Gregorio was an acceptable alternative to Montenegro to deliver Venduss to the Senate. "Very well. I agree to your price."

"I thought you might. Now stand away from the body. And I would avoid looking at the light, if I were you."

The spell of resurrection churned the air with strange, warm sensations. Raveka felt her gut squirm as it had only once before, years earlier, when she had witnessed a woman giving birth. The Technocrat's flesh seemed to writhe. The funnel of sparkling lights that engulfed the Jukan corpse peaked in synchrony with Sister Raveka's peculiar anxiety. She decided that she very much disliked sorcery.

Pikas stood back from the scene, his face pulled into a disquieted expression.

The last of the mystical currents ebbed from the stale air. When the spell was finished, the body of Venduss was gone.

Raveka squinted. "What happened to him? Did it work?"

Master Gregorio showed no fatigue for the miracle he had

performed. "He is alive, yes, but elsewhere. I transported him to the abode of a trusted friend. He is safe now."

"I thought you were going to take him before the Senate?"

"And I shall, but not before Warlord Bahrok departs. The city is like a cask of oil right now, and that Juka is a spark that can set it ablaze. Which was your intention, I have no doubt."

Raveka rubbed the bridge of her nose. "Indeed it was. That is the sole reason why I needed him alive."

The sorcerer's leathery face wrinkled into a grimace. "I'll not be party to your mischief, woman. I have my own to conduct. Let me demonstrate." He wriggled his gnarled hands through a series of odd gestures, finishing with a shouted verse. Abruptly a fountain of glowing red fluid streamed from his palm at the unsuspecting Pikas. The assassin gave a cry and hurtled away from the attack, though his shirt caught fire from the spray of lava. Then he leapt at the wizard with an animal snarl. His sword flashed through the smoky air. Somehow the blow missed, as if Gregorio's body had become vapor.

The sorcerer laughed. A band of crimson light swirled around the Juka and seemed to tangle him; he moved now as if in a dream, with sluggish torpor, while Master Gregorio plucked another spell from the dense, prickly air.

A blinding flame erupted from the ground at Pikas's feet. Unable to struggle, the assassin screamed while the burning pillar engulfed him. A horrid smell cut through the air. Then the flames ceased. In a clinging shroud of smoke, the ashy form of the Juka flopped unconscious to the stone floor.

"And now for the Technocrat," grumbled the ancient wizard.

Raveka heard him as an echo behind her. Terror drove her onward. She plunged through the darkness of the sewers, invoking years of training at stealth and tactics. In her mind was a precise map of the maze, or as much as she had seen of it when they came in. The slimy touch of the walls was her only means of navigation.

She selected a route to double back and lose the sorcerer. Her mental image of the labyrinth was like a beacon, a stable construct that guided her through the hollow, clutching panic that welled up inside.

When an eerie glow flared in front of her, she knew the endeavor had been futile. Her stomach knotted.

"Don't bother running," said the silhouette of the wizard, half visible in the furtive light.

Raveka fired her bolt-thrower at Gregorio. The missile thumped into something hard. She could see him flinch, though he did not fall. His staff raised and his gruff incantation ricocheted through the sewers. A sheet of something crystalline flew at her. A thousand glass knives punched through her flesh. Raveka fell onto her back in a shallow puddle, her body pulsing with fiery pain. When she tried to move, her limbs did not respond.

Master Gregorio stepped over her and looked down. His face was a web of shadows and wrinkles. "Worry not, there shall be healing for you both. I'm arranging an expedition, you see, and I need you to guide me to a place I have never been."

She gasped, "I'm no navigator," though it was a lie.

"Perhaps not, but surely you know the way home to Logos. You see, behind your wicked actions lies a single



man. It is past time that someone holds Blackthorn accountable for his evils, past and present."

Sister Raveka did not believe what she was hearing, though the agony of her wounds insisted it must be true.

The mob of knights and soldiers besieging the Cathedral of the Virtues had simmered in its rage. Dawn light found the armed men milling about with sullen faces, muttering in small clusters and grazing the building with barbed glances. Tradesfolk speckled the grounds, selling them bread and steaming tea.

Swaddled in a nondescript robe, Thulann entered the Cathedral amid a clump of obliging Sisters of the Shepherd. As she searched for Bahrok, she realized her ears were ringing. She had slept little in several days and not a wink last night. She felt ragged. Her body pushed onward through a hollow, clinging fatigue, as if old age had ambushed her once more.

The warlord occupied a small room that had become his temporary quarters. When she entered, he was completing a ceremony to greet the day. She waited quietly for him to finish.

When the ritual was complete, he rose from his knees. "What news have you brought? Did you find the murderer?"

"He found us," answered the Way Master.

Bahrok looked at her from beneath his heavy brows. "Something is wrong. What happened?"

She drank a deep breath. She needed plenty of air to carry the weight of the words. "Venduss was killed last night."

The warlord gaped, then looked away from her. "Tell me how it occurred."

Thulann explained what they knew. With much effort she added, "We must not turn our anger upon the New Britannians. This is not their doing. Riona Lynch is a Technocrat and the assassin is quite likely a Janissar."

"I know." He propped his arms on the sill of the small window and gazed out at the morning. "But this is the final outrage, Thulann. I will stand for no more. I am declaring this diplomatic mission an abysmal failure."

She closed her eyes. "I cannot argue with that."

"I am tired of these humans and their so-called Virtues and their cloaks and plumes that take the place of honor. Today we leave this barbaric place! When I get back to Garron I shall inform the clans that humans cannot be our allies. They are too weak and undisciplined. And I shall remind our people what I have known all along—that we need no allies to defeat Logos. We are strong enough on our own."

Thulann bit her lip. "Are you saying you will challenge the Shirron's strategy?"

He met her gaze. "I am saying I shall challenge his title. I intend to replace him as Shirron. This ill-conceived mission is his final mistake. It will crumble his support among the clans."

She furrowed her brow. "This has all been a ruse, then? You had no intention of making this alliance work, did you? And I am a fool for thinking otherwise." Her mind whirled, as if her scattered thoughts were suddenly reeled onto a spindle. "You came here to revenge your son and to weaken Turlogan. Now because of your schemes, Venduss is dead. Bahrok, you are no better than a murderer yourself! You are a disgrace to Clan Varang!"

The huge warrior moved forward, shoving his face into

hers. "Watch that talk, Thulann! I have done what I must to pursue my destiny. My conscience is clear and my honor is intact. Through me Clan Varang will soon govern Jukaran. History shall judge who is disgraceful, not the mistress of an ineffectual Shirron!"

She curled her lips back from her teeth. "You will receive my scarf over this."

"A Black Duel? I accept your challenge! I should enjoy sparing myself your company on the return voyage."

"We cannot do it here. I must locate Venduss's body. But once we are in Jukaran . . ."

He waved his hand as if to brush her away. "Your threats are of no interest to me. Hand me the scarf or keep your mouth shut. Though I need not remind you of who it was that delivered your only defeat in a Duel. You lasted two days that time. How long will you last next time?"

"I promise to keep it short."

He snorted. "Go now. You had best hurry if you want to bring Venduss's body back with us. I shall not wait for you."

"And I shall not leave him in this place uncremated."

"Then we understand one another." He pursed his lips, then bowed his head to her. "I do grieve for Venduss. He had fire. It is a pity when the young and innocent die, yet it makes for wily elders, does it not?"

Thulann responded with an icy glower. "As I shall demonstrate to you in Jukaran, young pup." She donned her Shepherd's hood and stalked away, her steps once again quick with stormy vigor.

As they were on the day the Jukan ships arrived, the streets of Britain jammed with anxious townsfolk. Yet this

cloudy afternoon saw no cheer in the faces of the onlookers nor pennants coloring the wind. The Knights of the Silver Serpent did not glitter with polished splendor. Rather they stood grim and weather-worn, lining the central avenue in hostile formations, awaiting the announced departure of Warlord Bahrok and his soldiers from the Cathedral. Cavalry kept the surly crowds in check. Some distance away, on the docks of Britannia Bay, more knights kept a tense vigil around the Jukan forces arrayed beside their longships, preparing to receive their leader and his entourage.

The sewers would fill with blood this morning.

When the door of the Cathedral swung open, the voices of the crowd thinned to an undulating whisper that hung in the air like a layer of mist.

Montenegro watched from between two adjacent buildings. Unlike the knights in the street, he wore only his traveling armor and hid himself under a cloak and hood. He made no sound, but fixed his keen eyes on the Cathedral doorway.

When figures began to emerge, Montenegro narrowed his eyes and nodded. Wisdom had prevailed. Bahrok and his men were shielded from the angry knights by a dense phalanx of robed brothers and sisters of the Shepherd. Neither the soldiers nor the restless mobs dared to raise a hand against the unarmed bravery of the Shepherds. Slowly the procession moved down the avenue, through the gates of the city wall and toward the crowd-choked wharf.

Montenegro slithered through the townsfolk as he followed alongside the entourage. His gaze now turned on the crowd itself. Though the Shepherds were keeping hostilities at bay, even a trivial act of violence might well uncork a

frenzy. He could think of no better circumstance for a saboteur to destroy what little hope remained of an alliance between Garron and New Britannia.

Riona must be nearby. He was certain of it.

Something touched his elbow from behind. A voice said, "I thought I might find you here."

He whirled to see Fairfax standing among the crowd. Montenegro exhaled and shook his head. "What is it?"

"Jatha has some news. I've come to summon you to the Shrine of Compassion, where information of considerable portent awaits us both, or something to that effect."

The knight raised a hand. "Not now. Come with me first. Disaster lurks in this parade. The arrow is nocked and the bow is drawn. Let's hope no one startles the archer."

They moved along with the gathering audience as Bahrok and his fifty solders marched to their ships. When their boots clumped onto the boardwalk, Montenegro released some of his tension.

Fairfax commented, "Thulann is not among them."

"I noticed, though that's impossible to tell with certainty. For all we know she may be standing right in front of us."

The ranger shook his head. "No, I mean she's at the Shrine of Compassion, waiting for us. It seems she is staying behind in our virtuous land while her fellows sail on."

"As would I in her position. She must pursue Justice for Venduss."

"And tell me, captain-no-more, do you truly believe that Venduss was the assassin who murdered Valente?"

Montenegro kept his eyes on the crowd. "Truly? Riona's deadly accomplice is the likeliest killer. Poor Venduss was probably an innocent decoy. I should have made a mistake to

prosecute him without more evidence. Perhaps that is a craven thing to say now, but it is sincere."

"Good. I was rather hoping that would be your answer. Jatha and I both agree he was a good fellow. We want the record to be honest."

The knight nodded. "Justice shall be done. Be quiet, now, and use that sharp eyesight of yours. I say Riona and maybe the assassin himself are somewhere before us. I cannot imagine they would let this opportunity pass."

Yet Warlord Bahrok and his men arrived at their ships without incident. The servants of the Shepherd formed a wall of robes around them as they boarded. Bahrok himself was the last to leave the dock. As the oars deployed and the peculiarly artistic vessels meandered toward the mouth of the bay, Montenegro spotted on the warlord's face an expression of smug disdain, as if in the fiasco of his visit the Juka had won some undisclosed victory.

Montenegro bristled at the sight. Stepping to the end of the dock, he threw off his cloak and hood with a flamboyant gesture. Bahrok saw it, and then saw him.

The warlord's face turned sour. Montenegro kept his hard gaze until the last of the ships from Garron vanished in the foggy distance, on their way back to Jukaran.

Behind him, the entire city seemed to breathe more freely again.

"Well," remarked Fairfax, "as the old wives say, strange visitors are better than none at all."

"We have more visitors among us still. Come on. Maybe Jatha has found the ones from Logosia. I'm eager to show them Montenegro hospitality."

\* \* \*

Some distance outside of the capital sat the Shrine of Compassion, in a garden grove surrounded by lanky ever-green trees. Simple and solemn in its spiritual role, the monument took the shape of a circular dais ringed by six finger-like stones. Once this had been the most visited of all the shrines that had survived the Cataclysm, because the city of Britain itself was dedicated to the Virtue of Compassion. Supplicants made offerings of food and money here, while the less fortunate took away what they needed, in full adherence to the Virtues. But an influx of goblin raiders decades ago had diminished the flow of charitable offerings. Though the rangers had brought the inhuman problem under control, the shrine had never regained its former glory. Now it was primarily a haven for beggars and the wandering poor, hoping to be present when an infrequent offering was made. They haunted the grove like tattered spirits.

The beggars maintained a respectful distance from Montenegro and his companions, who gathered in the farthest corner of the garden. Yet the eyes of the poor watched with hopeful anticipation. The knight was forced to turn his back to them, so wrenching was the sight.

Montenegro and Fairfax joined Thulann, Toria, and Jatha at the shrine. With them as well was a very old woman in the bleached robes of a sorceress. Mistress Aurora was a pale, proud figure, her long white hair braided with gold and silver threads. Jatha attended her with a diligence that suggested the Meer had once been her student.

The enchantress spoke softly enough that the beggars could not overhear. "I shall keep this as brief as I can, for time is not abundant. The House of the Griffin has gathered

its seers and discovered some happy news. Venduss of Garron is not dead."

Thulann thrust her head forward. "What? Are you certain of this? How can you know?"

"Several of us have consulted the Ether and reached the same conclusion. He was revived from death by no less a personage than Master Gregorio himself."

Thulann and Toria clasped hands tightly. "Where is he?"

"That is the troubling part. Master Gregorio cast a spell that sent Venduss north and east of here. Yet Gregorio himself is not to be found. He owns a small ship that is now missing from the bay. The whole situation bodes ill. I must tell you that for some time the Griffin has monitored Gregorio's activities. We suspect that his private business may be . . . less than wholesome. We know that he has been sending rare alchemic reagents to the place where he transported Venduss. Yet we know of no human nor Meer settlements in that area."

Montenegro creased his brow. "If you're referring to the lands south of the Serpentspine Mountains, they are too overrun with trolls and orcs to be safely populated."

Mistress Aurora nodded. "The area in question is just inside the mountain range. And it is indeed trolls with whom we suspect Gregorio has been communicating."

Jatha perked up his tall, spotted ears. "That's the part I don't understand, Mistress. Trolls would have no use for magical reagents. They do not know sorcery."

"I have personally fought orc spellcasters," said Montenegro. "Trolls are not much less intelligent."

The sorceress added, "It may be that Gregorio has taught them, though personally I suspect he has human



representatives living there. I can't imagine why Gregorio would give Venduss into the care of unsupervised trolls. But now you understand why I say that we must take action quickly."

Toria turned her green eyes to Montenegro. "Can you gather up a troop of knights to go after him?"

Thulann squeezed the girl's hand. "That would be a tactical mistake."

"Thulann is correct," said the knight. "A large force would be slow and conspicuous in the mountains. Knights are like a war hammer. This kind of action requires a lockpick."

Toria blinked and nodded.

The Jukan Way Master patted Toria's palm and let it go. "Enough speculation. We must not wait any longer. Mistress Aurora, I humbly request that you join us."

"I cannot. I have business in the city. The Order of the Magus is preparing a response to the departure of the Garron delegation. Some of us have not given up hope for an alliance. I have told Jatha all that we know about Gregorio's activities, including our best guess as to the location of his operatives. I suspect Jatha is better equipped for the journey than I am, in any event. Remember, Thulann of Garron, I am not as young and fit as you are."

The Meer smiled and glanced at Fairfax. "Would you care to join me in this worthy escapade?"

"You'd be lost by the second day without me," answered the ranger, "and besides, the decadence of civilization threatens to dull our edges. We belong in the wilds, where the air is savory with freedom."

Montenegro drew a jingling pouch from inside his tunic. He scooped out half of the gold coins it contained, then

handed the bag to Fairfax. "Good. Then take this into the city and stock our provisions."

The ranger eyed the coins in the knight's hand. "That gold you removed would suffice to provision us with wine of a quality befitting our refined sensibilities. Not everything about civilization is unwelcome in the forest. Do you not agree?"

"Before you volunteered for this enterprise, I intended to pay you and Jatha to help me. But your selfless generosity will benefit these hungry souls." Montenegro pointed at the Shrine of Compassion. "This gold shall now be an offering."

Fairfax looked forlornly at the paupers. "You have a cruel species of Compassion, sir."

"Take heart. This is the last of my income for the year. I haven't the money to be cruel any longer."

Thulann stepped abruptly between them. "I have no wish to appear rude, gentlemen, but the most important person in my life is being held captive by the beings you call trolls. I do not intend to delay our journey by one wasted minute! Please learn to walk and talk simultaneously."

Framed from behind by the tall, stone shrine, Montenegro bowed his head, then fastened his dark eyes upon the agitated Way Master. "You have my apology, Thulann of Garron. And you are well aware of how difficult that is to come by."

She gave him a considered nod, then headed out of the grove with Toria close behind.

Beneath an overcast sky, a little one-masted ship galloped over the choppy waves off the rugged coastline of Vesper. Its hull was inscribed with runes. Sitting near the prow, Sister

Raveka let the breeze ruffle through her short, black hair, which had nearly doubled in length since the day she left Logos.

Her face and her thoughts were dark. Master Gregorio intended to turn south very soon and sail across the open sea for Logosia. Raveka had no desire to return home under this kind of coercion. The problem, she realized, was that she could not formulate any other circumstances that she would prefer.

She was not at all ready to leave New Britannia.

Pikas appeared beside her. She tensed at his furtive demeanor. The Juka laid a finger on his lips and whispered, "Quiet, now! Gregorio has fallen asleep."

Raveka darted a glance at the stern of the ship. "He has? Can we unbatten the carriage without waking him up?"

"I've already done it. It's ready to go."

"Then let's get to shore as quickly as possible! He'll never find us among those cliffs and boulders."

The assassin shook his head. "I'm going alone. I stand a better chance that way."

She grimaced. "What? You want to leave me a prisoner of that senile old dreadnought?"

"No, I won't leave you as a prisoner. You know too much. Besides, I've wanted to do this from the moment we left Logos." He drew a knife from his sleeve and slashed it at her throat.

With a clank the knife sprang out of his grip and over the prow, vanishing into the waves. Raveka tossed back a fold of her robe to reveal the bolt-thrower hidden in her lap. She met his gaze. "You're not the only one who managed to get a weapon on board."

But she had fired her only missile to disarm him. The fact registered on the Juka's hungry face.

Raveka knew this moment would come. She had calculated the scenario in countless permutations, all of which flooded her mind in an instant of silent foreboding. They reduced to a simple, inevitable conclusion: Her chances of surviving an attack from Pikas were almost negligible.

This was not cause for despair, she realized, but for decisive action. There was no time for fear. In the most shrill voice she could muster she let loose a shout of calculated pitch, directed at the sleeping Master Gregorio, and then leapt into the air and tangled her wrists into the rigging.

Pikas silenced her with a savage blow to the back. The weight of her body pulled the sails askew, listing the small ship with a harsh creaking sound. Raveka saw her hands unwind from the ropes. She realized she was falling. Her impact on the wooden deck seemed gentle by comparison to the sequence of brutal kicks that the assassin struck at her joints. Like hammer blows they cracked into her body. The Technocrat could not help but marvel at the Juka's precision. One strike to each shoulder, one to each hip, and Raveka was immobilized and yet completely conscious. Her broken bones felt like spikes pinning her to the deck.

Pikas drew back for another strike. She tried to identify his killing move from the dozens he mastered. But the blow never came. Instead the assassin vanished. She heard the sound of the carriage's spring-powered engines grinding to life. A hovering shadow passed overhead. Then footsteps approached.

Master Gregorio leaned over her. She squinted at the sorcerous light that splashed from his fingers. Where it struck

her body she felt relief and pleasure unlike anything she had imagined.

"Get up," commanded the sorcerer, who now scanned the waves between the boat and the shore. Raveka pulled herself to her feet. She spotted Pikas soaring toward the cliffs of the shoreline, pushing the carriage to its fastest speed.

She glanced at the ancient wizard, whose face pinched with disgust. He threw his arms into the air and with clawed fingers seemed to scoop out a distant mass of silver-grey cloud cover. The sky above Pikas darkened and flickered, then discharged a torrent of lightning. Relentless thunder pummeled Raveka's ears. The assassin vanished in a forest of blinding white light. When the attack was over, the atmosphere above the water thickened with ashy smoke.

Charred pieces of the carriage danced on the waves. Raveka and Gregorio watched for a moment in silence. Then she spotted movement. "There he is, still alive," she grumbled. The pain of his blows still lingered in her joints.

Pikas was swimming toward the shore. Gregorio grunted. "He could not swim that far if he were uninjured, and he is certainly injured now."

"Do not underestimate the endurance of a Juka," she warned.

With a sweep of his hand the wizard stilled the breeze that propelled the ship forward. They balanced on the pitching deck and watched.

After a few minutes, the tiny form of Pikas crawled onto the rocky beach and staggered to his feet. Gregorio nodded. "Very well, then." He broadened his stance, locked his fingers in an elaborate grip and started to chant.

Sister Raveka drew up her black hood and stood well away from him.

Thunder rolled in from the shore. It was not the same rumbling as the wizard's lightning storm, but something deeper and harder, like boulders crashing together.

The ship quivered. She saw the water between themselves and the beach begin to heave and toss with unusual animation. Then the thunder became a loud cracking sound.

Before Raveka's eyes, the hundred-foot cliffs that curtailed the shoreline split and reeled and toppled onto the beach. A great tumult of dust and debris billowed into the air, up and down the coast as far as the Mathematician could see. She felt her head grow dizzy. She braced herself on the bulwark.

The spell was impossible. In that one instant Master Gregorio must have summoned more power than the entire city of Logos consumed in many months. Her mind calculated the numbers but could not accept them.

Then the tidal wave came, thrown high by the collapse of the cliffs. The seawater climbed sixty feet into the air. Gregorio splayed out his fingers and ejected a burst of radiant sparks that surrounded the tiny vessel. In another instant the wave was past them. The ship had barely twitched.

Raveka trembled to her bones as she clung to the low bulwark. She had heard the ancient tales of sorcerers, but never dreamed the scope of their abilities.

Master Gregorio pinched his lip. "Damn. That's going to cause some problems in Vesper, now that I think it through. The whole city will flood." He pondered in silence, then shrugged. "Alas. It couldn't be helped. The cause was just, and Vesper could use a good cleansing now and again. Now

then, Technocrat, let us turn this craft southward. I look forward to seeing whether Blackthorn will fare any better than your murderous friend just did."

She knew then that the sorcerer was as mad as the Techno-Prophet himself. Nor was she certain any longer which of the two had more power, though in her lifetime Blackthorn had always seemed like a fabled, unassailable god. When two gods met, she imagined, the heavens would shake.

## CHAPTER

# 10

## Despise

**T**hrough a late-night carpet of mist, five horses and their riders trotted down the forest road. At the lead was Montenegro astride his heavy black mount, kicking up glowing curls as he sliced through the moonlit fog. Behind him rode Jatha and Toria in silence, followed by Fairfax and Thulann.

The Juka lurched uneasily on the back of her horse. The beast's vertical movements differed from the side-to-side motion of the ridgebacks she rode in Jukaran. The adjustment was not easy. She might have acquired the rhythm by now, were it not for the brisk pace Montenegro was setting. Yet she gladly sacrificed comfort for speed.

Ahead of her Jatha carried a long staff, the tip of which glowed an unearthly blue through the action of a magic spell. The light filled the gaping shadows thrown by twin moons. In the magical radiance the darkness took on a less predatory demeanor, which somewhat relaxed the mood of the weary riders.

Thulann found herself watching the young Meer wizard in off moments. According to what she had been told, the



Meer were arguably more skilled at sorcery than the New Britanniains. That gave her peculiar comfort. She did not doubt that they were the race of men rumored to lie across the sea west of Jukaran. Turlogan had sent an expedition to those lands a year earlier. Perhaps an alliance with the Meer would compensate for Bahrok's diplomatic sabotage here. Although Jatha insisted that his people had no interest in a war, the wizard's own behavior revealed a moral character and a thirst for action, two traits that gave Thulann hope.

This was the end of their second, long day of riding. Thulann knew they were not far from the town named Cove, and so she was not surprised when a smaller road split off presently to the southeast. A short distance down the side lane stood an iron gate between stone pillars. The bars were choked with thick vines and foliage. Amid the dense growth, Jatha's blue light uncovered the shield and crest of the estates beyond. The emblem was a heart seized by a reptilian claw. It was the same design inlaid upon Montenegro's fine saddle.

The land on the other side was a snarl of trees and brambles that devoured the road and everything around it. No horse could hope to penetrate such dense foliage. The black hulk of a rocky hill presided over the scene.

The knight led them past the lane that led to the gate. He did not give it a glance.

Thulann turned to Fairfax, who rode beside her. The ranger edged his mount closer so he could dampen his voice. "I hear Sir Gabriel has not gone home in many months. From the look of the place I must confess there's little to return to."

Toria was dressed for the road in a short leather tunic.

Among the thumping of hooves and the rush of the forest wind, she sang as clear and soft as a wooden flute:

*To Honor, death does not befall.*

*Like a ghost it haunts us all.*

Montenegro's horse whinnied and tossed its great head. The knight looked back over his shoulder. "We'll be steering off the road soon. There are places an hour or two north of here where we can make camp. No more singing, Toria, or you'll draw an audience of Gnawbone goblins. Trust me, they'll find your flesh much sweeter than your music."

The group fell quiet again. Thulann recalled a saying of which her mentor, Shirron Narah, had been fond: *There is no flame brighter nor darkness deeper than one's own hearth.* Tonight the proverb reminded her of Venduss. The thought drove her on with renewed endurance.

The Serpentspine Mountains cut across the afternoon sky like a jagged sawblade. Four days of hard woodland travel had brought the group to rocky terrain. The horses proceeded with nervous caution, picking out a twisting route among evergreens and angular boulders, edging up and down rubble-strewn slopes. The dry autumn air had grown cold and sharp. White, windblown clouds distended overhead.

Thulann recognized the complexion of the landscape. It was the sort of inhospitable environment where few creatures could survive and those that did were obliged to be ruthless and alert. The mountains around Garron were similarly perilous. She found her senses heightened even before she realized the cause.

They plodded now along the bottom of a treeless ravine. Just ahead she saw Fairfax draw beside Jatha. The two murmured between themselves. Then the ranger cast her a heavy look with a clear meaning: *Be wary*. She took a mental inventory of her weapons and surroundings and waited.

The Meer pulled a small jar from his shoulder-slung bag. His tall ears pressed flat. He chanted something quietly and the jar emitted a brief crystalline shimmer. The light danced onto Fairfax, who flinched, and then smiled. They glanced up the slopes. Then in a single, swift motion, Fairfax lifted his hunting bow, drew back an arrow and fired it toward the peak of the ravine wall.

Something bestial roared in pain. Abruptly a small avalanche of rocks poured down the steep slope. The horses pranced and cried, pulling away from the stones as they smashed into the ground. Thulann realized this was not an attack in itself, but rather a prelude. Several very large creatures appeared at the top of the hillside and dislodged the stones as they scrambled down, brandishing dagger-length tusks and powerful claws and long, flailing arms. The naked, apelike monsters were covered in coarse, brindled fur and ran on all fours, their knuckles pounding the hillside as they moved.

Thulann had not expected the trolls to be quite so large. They seemed nearly twice her own height. The four giants descended with alarming ferocity. She decided it would be prudent to abandon her terrified horse and fight on foot. The mount galloped away without hesitation. She saw Toria dismount as well, scrambling up the opposite slope; she felt glad the girl was nimble enough to escape. Jatha and Fairfax remained astride their steeds, while Montenegro, oddly, climbed off his warhorse.

The troll that leapt at Thulann had an arrow stuck in its chest. The howling giant barely seemed to notice. Its enormous, lumbering mass hurtled upon her with a buck of its knifelike fangs. Dipping her head, Thulann rolled underneath its charge and drew her longsword in one hand and Venduss's shorter blade in the other. The choking musk of the creature slapped her sharply. Without thought her blades flew, chopping into the flesh of the troll's hip. When she felt the stone-hard impacts, she knew the battle would not be easy.

The monster snarled messily and whirled to face her again. Slaver glistened on its fangs. It stooped over on its knuckles and lunged, long tusks jutting like spear tips. She dodged to the side, jumped over the swipe of its arm and jammed her longsword into its back. Bracing against the hilt she kicked her leg high. Her heel smashed into the troll's ear. It barked and rose to its full height. Its long arms lifted high overhead. Thulann gauged the stroke of its next attack, then unleashed a sequence of slashes across its exposed belly. Tatters of blood and flesh cascaded from its torso. When it struck again she was prepared, ducking backward with a quick handspring.

The troll snorted and gnashed its teeth in pain. But when she looked again, Thulann noticed that its wounds did not dribble blood. In fact she could swear some of the smaller cuts had somehow vanished.

Montenegro had warned her about a troll's ability to regenerate injured flesh, but the full implications were not apparent until that moment. She sucked in a deep breath and rushed forward again.

Her companions were working just as hard. In the

shadow of his own, titanic opponent, Montenegro swung his shield and the sword named Starfell like an armored whirlwind. Thulann glimpsed flashes of strange light as he moved. She suspected Jatha had enchanted him in some way. She immediately discerned the effect. The knight dodged and tumbled with a skill he had not demonstrated during their Black Duel six months earlier. His weapon slashed with speed that nearly equaled her own. He even ignored several brutal, hammerlike blows against his shield. She understood now why he had dismounted. Like her, his enhanced quickness and agility were best employed on foot.

It occurred to her then how beneficial an alliance with spellcasters could be. She almost imagined Montenegro could be a match for herself in this state.

Jatha and Fairfax exhibited an even more refined cooperation. The Meer had perfected a chant that caused the stony earth to quiver and cough and thrust up tentacles of rock to ensnare the two remaining trolls. Then from the air the wizard fashioned balls of lightning so bright that to look at them was painful. He flung these crackling spheres at the roaring monsters while Fairfax barraged them with a stream of arrows. When one of the trolls smashed free of its bonds, the ranger used his spear to engage it until Jatha had enough time to summon the earth to entangle the brute once more.

Meanwhile, Thulann relied upon raw skill and steel. Both seemed to serve her well, though her limbs throbbed in several places where the troll's hooked claws had slipped past her guard. But the monster staggered a bit now. She had worked out the limits of motion in its gigantic body and kept herself just out of its grasp. Again and again she plunged her blades into the dense muscles of its torso. Many

ought to have been killing strikes, but the monster did not fall. Thulann dared not relent. She calculated the giant's injuries could heal entirely within one or two minutes. Only an unyielding battery of deep thrusts would end the fight.

At last the troll faltered and toppled to its knees, soaked in its own blood. Thulann availed herself of the extra moment to line up a powerful stroke. Twirling her body and kicking her legs for extra power, she whisked her longsword upon the monster's neck. The blade split flesh and bone. Thulann did not quit until its head tumbled along the ravine floor.

The others dispatched their respective opponents shortly thereafter. They gathered together to catch their breaths, while Jatha splashed each of them with glorious healing light. Thulann was growing quite attached to that particular sensation. She was pleased the Senate had agreed to teach her people the secret—provided, of course, that some sliver of hope still remained for any form of peaceful exchange.

Toria clambered down the hillside and announced that she could see no more of the creatures in the area. Fairfax trotted off to retrieve the horses from the far ends of the ravine. Thulann and Montenegro began dragging the massive corpses into a pile, which Jatha ignited using a potent snap of electricity from his fingertip. The Meer explained that incineration was the only certain way to kill a troll, lest the tiniest remnant of life allow its ruined body to refresh itself.

Thulann wiped the sweat from her cheek. "These brutes are as stubborn as some clan chieftains I know, but we seem to have outlasted them. I am confident we can rescue Venduss from this species of wild man."

Montenegro swallowed a gulp from his waterskin. "Don't

let this battle go to your head. These were only scouts. If Venduss is in a troll lair, there will be guards and warriors to fight. They're twice as dangerous and half as friendly, and we'll get to meet dozens of them all at once."

"You have a gift for inspiring morale," she muttered, "yet with Jatha's enchantments in our favor, I retain my confidence. He put a storm in your strokes, Montenegro, and the wind in your steps."

The Meer glanced at her. "I cast a spell to increase his strength. The way he slithers and strikes is his own serpentine magic."

Thulann raised her eyebrows. "The knight who just killed that troll cannot be the same one I met on my previous visit."

Montenegro spread out his arms. "Then I stand before you transformed, for what you saw was my own skill."

"You improved that much in six months? How did you accomplish it, if I may delve into the miracle?"

"Hate can be a potent fuel," said the knight with a dark gaze. "I shall not lose when you and I next cross swords."

She sighed. "Then it is as I suspected. I represent failure to you."

He scowled as he shoved his waterskin back into the saddlebag.

Thulann shook her head. "Will you ever forgive me for defeating you?"

With a sharp yank he tightened the strap of the saddlebag. "Yes. You'll be forgiven on the day I even the score."

"You only battle yourself. There is no victory in it."

"Then I suppose you'll just have to indulge me."

She flexed her mailed hands. "My mood is not indulgent

right now. I shall not participate in your self-destruction." As Fairfax approached she looked away from the knight and asked, "Did you find anything?"

The blond ranger smirked. "A blind man with half a nose could follow the trail these brutes leave. Unless I am drunk or irrevocably incompetent—and I have not touched a drop all day—their lair is a day's ride north of here, just as Mistress Aurora foretold."

Thulann walked to her skittish horse. "Then we should not delay. Judging from these specimens, I presume that Venduss is not enjoying the company of trolls. But my greatest fear is that they are enjoying his company all too much. An hour is a lifetime to one in torment."

Under his breath Fairfax added, "And a lifetime no more than an hour to one caught in a troll's dungeon." The ranger had attempted to keep the comment from Thulann's ears, but failed. Jatha rammed his elbow into his companion's gut. The Way Master showed no reaction, though she climbed onto her long-legged mount and trotted away without waiting for the others. The smoke of burning bodies coiled above her in great, black spirals.

From the shelter of a moss-capped boulder, the group studied the entrance to the cavern. Two trolls squatted quietly outside the irregular opening in the cliff. A thin creek burbled nearby, lending a haunting calm to the scene.

When the wind shifted, a tide of musky stench tumbled past them. Thulann heard Toria gag. Gently she rubbed the girl's back.

Montenegro gathered the group close. "Let's be clear about this. The most favorable outcome is that we get



Venduss out of there before the trolls realize anything is wrong. That means stealth. Thulann, Fairfax—you two are the best candidates. See if you can find Venduss and get him out. Jatha and I will stay outside. If there's any trouble, we'll start a diversion and try to draw them out long enough for you to escape. Toria, your job is to keep the horses quiet and ready to move."

Jatha held out his hand. In it sat two river-smoothed stones, which he handed to the Juka and the ranger. "These are special alarm stones. They're enchanted to tell me when anything comes or goes within thirty feet. If you need a diversion, throw your stone thirty feet away. I'll know if you do. That will be the signal for Montenegro and I to come to the rescue."

Thulann slipped her stone into a pouch. "Everyone check that your healing potions are safe. Use them sparingly." She placed two fingers on her brow and murmured, "Great Mother, please grant that our efforts are skillful enough to save Venduss, for he is the future of my clan."

The Meer added, "May our ancestors favor us with good fortune today."

"I ask for nothing," said Montenegro. "Rather the Virtues ask something of me. Let us serve Valor and Sacrifice. They are the footsteps of a warrior."

A sudden rustle in the brush attracted the attention of the trolls at the cave entrance. The simian giants growled and lumbered into the trees to investigate, using their deadly hands like forefeet. The distraction allowed Fairfax and Thulann to creep inside.

When she penetrated the bleak, noxious gape of the cav-

ern, the Way Master tensed with the visceral sensation that she had passed inside a living creature. The air seemed to ebb and huff as if the stone mountain were breathing.

She employed techniques of shallow breathing as a defense against the rancid stink that clogged the dark. The cavern had a cloying, animal miasma. Dung and debris cluttered the floor. She was thankful that Jatha had cast an enchantment over herself and the ranger, giving their eyes a limited ability to penetrate the blackness. It allowed them to navigate a path among the filth and refuse. Total darkness, she knew, was the enemy of stealth.

Without a sound they plunged deep into the rocky tunnels. The ground rose and fell as they proceeded, though the overall slope angled downward. Thulann soon lost all notion of how far underground they might be. She took absolute care, however, to memorize the path to the exit. The prospect of getting lost was terrible to consider. Thulann preferred to focus on avoiding such a fate.

The deeper they traveled, the more she spotted evidence that the caves were not entirely natural. Stone archways supported high spots in the ceiling. Occasional standing stones, artfully carved, were strewn along their path. Thulann wondered who might have built this place, for it did not resemble any human structures she had yet seen.

Sometimes the grunting sounds of trolls echoed close to them. They hid easily in the rougher corners of the caves, allowing the hulking creatures to pass by unmindful of the intruders. But when a guttural squeaking wafted through the dense air, Fairfax considered it reason enough to whisper, "That's the sound of a giant rat. Sometimes they serve as feral watchdogs in places like this."

At that moment Thulann detected a scratching along the wall. Two of the hound-size rodents crouched mere feet away, glaring at her with tiny, red eyes. In an instant she unsheathed her blade, darkened with mud to diminish its gleam, and sliced both creatures in half with one stroke. The action produced no detectable noise.

"So kill them if you can," the ranger continued, "because they're a nightmare to hide from." When he glanced back and spotted the slain rats, he laughed and pressed forward.

For half an hour they tracked through the tangled passageways of the cavern. They found evidence of other creatures roaming the darkness—the ropelike strands of an enormous web, an inhuman, unnerving giggle somewhere far away, a heap of dung pellets Fairfax insisted came from a carnivorous goat—the deadly, fantastical menagerie of the underworld. Thulann had experience with such subterranean creatures in Jukaran. That land was pitted with caves left by the Overlords. But the monsters there had a mechanical nature. Thulann strangely longed for those metal beasts, so much more familiar than the organic creatures she now faced, twisted by wild sorcery. Somehow, the machines seemed more wholesome.

Yet among the bizarre contents of the cavern, most surprising was the tunnel they discovered to be clean of any signs of infestation. The place had a sharp, stinging smell, as if designed to repel curious beasts. It looked almost entirely constructed from stone blocks.

Thulann halted her companion. "Trolls would not keep a lair in such order, would they?"

The ranger shook his head. "I think we've unearthed Gregorio's agents. Look there."

Adjusted to the effects of Jatha's spell, Thulann's eyes had trouble discerning the faint glow at the end of the corridor. Yet when she recognized it, her heart pounded with such volume that she invoked a brief meditation to calm herself. "Care is everything now. One mistake could mean Venduss's life. Step deliberately."

Fairfax chuckled at her. It was his primary means of relieving stress, and Thulann thought nothing of it.

They crept to the bend in the tunnel from which the light emerged. A large room came into view on the other side. When they entered, the Way Master knew they had found what they sought.

The chamber was made of the same stone as the rest of the complex, though the mingled flickers of many lamps revealed colors and striations in the rock she had not made out in the dark. Most interesting of all was the elaborate display of scrolls and glass equipment stacked on dozens of inset shelves. The room was clearly some manner of apothecary or laboratory, though far more complex than anything she had ever seen in Jukaran.

Master Gregorio's agent must be a wizard himself, she realized. Luckily, he did not seem to be present.

On the far side of the room was a second tunnel. Beside it lurked a shadowy niche. Thulann pointed Fairfax toward the second doorway while she slunk toward the niche. Both of them kept watchful for alarm stones.

In the gloom the Way Master discovered an iron gate. Its lock was sophisticated and quite probably trapped. Thulann had experience bypassing such mechanisms, but she did not recognize the strange design. New Britannian security measures put her at a disadvantage. Since the mechanics were

hidden from view, she had little faith that she might disable them.

She peered beyond the gate. The dark hall was lined with crude statues of a vaguely troll-like shape. No doubt they were some sort of icons, secured against looting giants. Along the far wall was a more slender, man-shaped carving with upraised hands.

No. It was not a carving but an unconscious person, shackled to the stone. As her eyes adjusted again to the blackness, she recognized fine Jukan armor.

She had found Venduss.

Quickly she seized Fairfax by the shoulder. "Can you get through this gate?"

He shook his head as he gazed into the long room. "That's not my expertise. Hey, is that—"

"Yes, it is he. Listen to me. You must go back outside and fetch Toria. She will know how to get through without alerting anyone. She is not a warrior, but I think she will surprise you with her skills."

"You're staying here?"

"I shall not leave Venduss's side. Hurry now, before the wizard returns. I am not at all sure I can hide from magical eyes."

"Look to your own eyes," frowned the ranger. "Both your enchantment of perception and your alarm stone might expire before I get back. Are you sure you want to be alone when that happens?"

"I am not alone here, and neither is my student any longer. Make haste, Fairfax, for the sake of the denizens of this dismal hole. If I am discovered before we free Venduss, they will find their cave has been invaded by a force more lethal than an army of trolls."

Fairfax shrugged. "As you wish. You are a remarkable person, and no mistake." As he turned away he lifted a finger. "By the way, I'd keep my ears perked down here. In places like this, statues have an inconvenient habit of deciding they're alive and lumbering after you. There's eight of them around Venduss. If the sorcerer finds you, he may be the least dangerous of your opponents."

But she had already vanished into the twitching shadows. The ranger could not even trace her footprints. With a shrug, he slipped out the way they had come.

The Way Master crouched in the shadows between two lamplit shelves. Not daring to make a sound, she occupied the long wait by studying the contents of the room. The assortment of jars and bottles and coiled tubes reminded her vaguely of a Technocrat laboratory she had once encountered during the ongoing border skirmishes between Logos and Jukaran. Both places were a tumult of exotic clutter. Yet the Technocrat workshop had possessed a sharp, angular character, strewn with gears and pipes and jointed rods. By contrast, this wizard's lair had an organic temper. The curves of glass and copper and half-furled scrolls were enigmatic in a warmer, more intimate fashion. Thulann fancied she could read the sorcerer's identity from the contents of the room. The notion was almost comforting in this pit where the voices of beasts and monsters echoed from black doorways.

One particular object caught her eye. Sitting on the shelf beside her was a small, golden casting, glittering in the fire-light. She had to look twice before she recognized its shape. It was the figure of a heart, no bigger than her fist. Clutching it was a dragon's claw.

The statue depicted Montenegro's family crest.

She nearly reached for it, but her instincts warned against touching anything. She must not allow any amount of curiosity to jeopardize the rescue of Venduss.

Then she tensed. Footsteps approached from the unexplored tunnel. The faceted glow of a lantern wobbled into view.

The man who entered did not see her lurking in the dark. He was wrapped in a coarse, dingy robe. His dark hair and beard splayed unkempt down his neck. He was a young man, slight of build, moving with a brisk step. She caught a glimpse of his haggard face before he turned his back to her and began to unwrap a bundle of cloth, in which were collected roots and mushrooms and what looked like animal bones.

A cold sensation crawled down her back. She recognized this human hermit. She had first seen him in a tent six months ago, when Sigmhat was killed and she had won her people's lives with a Black Duel.

This wizard was Montenegro's cousin, Damario, who had been missing ever since.

Her stomach tightened. Her mood began to turn hot. Strange dealings were at hand and she resolved that they would not entangle Venduss any longer.

From the floor she retrieved a small pebble. Then she calmed herself with a long, silent breath. Her aim had to be true. The margin for error was oppressively slim.

She flipped the pebble across the room, between the bars of the locked gate and halfway to the captured Jukan warrior. It clattered against the rough stone floor.

Damario startled. After squinting into the gloom, he

pulled a short wooden rod or wand from the folds of his robe. With caution he approached the gate. When nothing stirred in the locked room, he reached into the bag again.

The ring of keys jangled as he lifted it into view. Thulann stared as a predator registers its prey.

But the young wizard paused. Tugging his knotty beard, he muttered words in a language she did not understand. He finished by saying, "See what that is."

Within the dark cell, something very heavy moved. From the texture of the noises Thulann knew that one of the statues must be walking. Fairfax's warning, it seemed, proved trustworthy. She wondered what other solid objects might serve a wizard's commands.

Damario shrugged when the noises ceased. The living statue had found nothing. He slipped the keys back into his bag.

Thulann acted swiftly. She plucked the golden heart from its shelf, then upset the balance of a tall bottle next to it. Before Damario could face the room she darted out the doorway, toward the cavern through which she had entered. She stopped outside the laboratory.

An instant later the bottle fell over and crashed to the floor. The wizard gasped. His footsteps rushed in her direction. Just before he rounded the corner Thulann pitched Jatha's alarm stone down the tunnel. It skipped with a terse clack. Damario passed inches before her and gazed into the corridor, toward the sound.

Thulann slipped her hand into his bag, hoping to wrap her black scarf around the keys. If she could not muffle their jingling, combat would surely follow.

Abruptly a bright flare stole her eyesight. Her face and



hands exploded with pain. A harsh roar shoved her back against the cavern wall.

Damario's bag had vomited flames. Her vision returned, though cloudy, just as the magician whirled to face her. His wand began to emit a dazzling glimmer.

Thulann snapped a high kick. The wand twirled out of his grasp, streaming loops of light. He shrank back as she unsheathed her longsword and pirouetted. Her spinning stroke cut through his robe but struck something harder than flesh. Immediately the flames enveloped her again, searing exposed flesh and heating her armor and clothes. She reeled for an instant when smoke thrust down her lungs.

Damario spat a mouthful of cryptic words. Thulann recognized them and sprang high into the air, just ahead of the earthen tentacles that plunged out of the ground. Apparently Damario and Jatha had studied the same lessons. While airborne she pushed off of the wall, tumbling over the wizard's head. Her blade clanked onto his shoulder. When the fire engulfed her she fought through the agony, landing cleanly and thrusting again. Damario yelped when the tip of her sword jammed against his belly. But some magic kept the blade from penetrating. Instead he was pushed backward, slamming against the opposite wall.

He yelled out a chant with his eyes closed. Thulann flung a dagger at him just as his hand disgorged a flood of red, glowing lava. The molten rock streamed out like a giant, burning fan. She leapt away but the searing heat pursued her down the corridor, away from the laboratory and away from Venduss. She ducked around a corner and caught her breath.

Bestial growls approached from the darkness ahead of her. Damario's allies, the trolls, were coming to investigate.

The wizard coughed with a wet sound that announced the dagger had stuck in his chest. Yet a single healing spell could erase the wound. She did not have the luxury of a quick victory. As she had planned, however, Jatha's alarm stone had skipped more than thirty feet down the tunnel. That meant a distraction was forthcoming. And by this time Fairfax and Toria were surely halfway to the laboratory. Thulann's best option, then, was to lead the enemy away from Venduss.

If she had no choice but to sacrifice herself to save Turlogan's son, then fate would have granted her the most glorious death she could want.

She fingered the golden statue in a pouch at her belt. In a cold voice she called out, "Damario Montenegro, I have your dragon's heart. I shall return it to your cousin." Then she slunk into the shadows, seeking concealment before the trolls arrived. With luck she could draw them and the wizard far away from the laboratory before Jatha's enchantment of perception wore off.

Already the blackness was creeping in. She tried not to think of what she might do when her sight vanished completely, though she suddenly felt sympathy for prey animals swallowed whole.

Montenegro held his breath when he charged into the foul-smelling darkness. Starfell blushed with a faint glow as he swept it in powerful arcs at the three trolls who faced him. The apish giants roared and stood to their full height. The posture exposed their torsos to him, which he proceeded to slash with the keen, enchanted edge of Lord Valente's sword. When the monsters struck back, he bashed away their claws

using his steel shield. Once again Jatha had gifted him with a spell that increased his strength. Likewise a magical wind made swift his armored feet. He became a deadly cyclone among the enormous creatures, cleaving a gory path as he advanced into the fetid gloom.

He made certain that his war cries echoed deep into the cavern. He was answered by the barks and snarls of more trolls on their way to defend the lair. If Montenegro had his wish, every troll in the place would come to fight, freeing Thulann, Fairfax, and Toria to release Venduss.

Behind the knight, the Meer wizard followed a superb design to lure the inhumans to the entrance. With flung staves of lightning he bathed the pit in white strobes. Thunder rattled the debris on the floor. As fresh groups of trolls emerged, never more than two or three at once, he would wait for them to round a blind corner and then seize them with his earthen snares. The bolts with which he killed them served to attract the next bunch.

Montenegro supplemented this endeavor and the sorcerer in turn supported him with power and quick healing. The knight was glad to have a skilled enchanter behind him. Jatha presented an imposing figure in the halo of the cavern's mouth, brandishing the elements like a troop of obedient soldiers.

Montenegro imagined he himself must be a frightening apparition to these monsters, as well, covered as he was by metal and rivets and shrouded in a whirling cloak. Though he had battled trolls countless times before, never had he felt so fleet and powerful. The techniques he had refined to counter Thulann's skill served doubly well against these ponderous giants.

Yet his pride would be false, he knew, if Venduss could not be extracted from the lair. He wondered how much time might elapse before he and Jatha would be forced to delve into the tunnels, to rescue the rescuers.

If the Virtues of Valor and Sacrifice demanded such action, he would not hesitate. More than ever before, he hungered for such a dangerous opportunity. He almost felt as though anything less was a disservice to the Virtues. The emotion was heady; it drove his sword arm to fiercer strokes and his howls to greater volume. In answer, several more trolls appeared, as if to grant him his desire.

As she crept through the cavern, Toria kept herself from shivering through a supreme exertion of willpower. She clung to a long knife as if it were a totem against evil. The thick, musky air pawed at her senses. Distant sounds leapt into her ears, stealing from her any semblance of calm.

Fairfax lead the way with his hunting spear in hand. Though the ranger was proficient with stealth, each footstep he took sounded loud as a drumbeat to her. She scolded herself, to little effect, for being a frightened child.

Only the mental image of brave Venduss kept her from fleeing this terrible hole altogether. His spectre loomed before her, more compelling than any monster.

When Fairfax grunted aloud she choked on a breath. He twirled his spear at something ahead of them. The thing was black and brusquely chittering. Its body was the size of a barrel and it flailed many insectoid legs like long, crooked staves. Fairfax engaged it in a quick, savage melee that was nearly silent. She could hear the *chunk* of his spear embedding into its flesh and the hissing scuff of his boots on the stone.

Toria drew out a throwing knife. Gauging the ranger's movements, she hurled the blade past his hip and into the creature's body. Fairfax followed her attack by plunging his spear straight down atop the thing. It spat and chattered. Its spindly legs ceased dancing.

Slowly she moved beside Fairfax. The slain beast was a gigantic spider, black and weirdly glistening. It probably weighed more than she did. Her knife was lodged into its grotesque face. The spider flinched when she retrieved the weapon, causing her to squeal and leap behind the ranger.

Fairfax shook his head as he shook the gore off his spear. "Jatha will despise me," he whispered, "but I haven't time to milk its venom. There's a kiss awaiting you down that tunnel and it's my duty to deliver you to it."

The comment warmed her a little, though when they continued deeper into the cavern she did not turn her back on the corpse of the giant spider.

They found the passage to the wizard's laboratory, just as the ranger had described it. Yet Fairfax seemed confused by the heat and smoke in the air and the rough carpet of hot stone that smeared across the blocks of the floor. "Something's happened since I left," he mumbled, then hurried ahead. Toria followed quickly.

Neither Thulann nor anyone else occupied the laboratory. When she spotted the shadowy niche Fairfax had mentioned, Toria bolted across the room. In the darkness beyond the gate she picked out the shape of the unconscious Venduss. A glorious smile touched her lips, even as dread tightened her chest like a fist. She now had a formidable task.

The lock was old but constructed with impressive crafts-

manship. The mechanism had been wrought with many more tumblers than usual. Some of them doubled as triggers, attached by thin cables to traps in the stone walls. She could not fathom what perils lurked behind the coarse blocks.

In her experience such thoughts were only a distraction. Any trap, great or small, became irrelevant when disabled. Yet the hollow, overwhelming quiet of the room was a still bigger distraction. As she pulled out a sack of lockpicks, she realized her senses did not want to focus upon the gate. Her ears were far too alert to the approach of the cave's denizens.

To the ranger she whispered, "Fairfax! Talk to me. I need to hear your voice while I work."

"Talk about what? I confess at the moment my thoughts are running on the morbid side."

She twirled a thin iron rod between her tiny fingers. As she slid the probe into the keyhole she murmured, "I don't know. Tell me why you didn't become Montenegro's squire."

"Ah, sometimes I ask myself that very question. But the answer is always the same. Knights, you see, are hammered from steel. They're forged like weapons to defend the Virtues. Myself, I have no desire to be made of steel. My own nature is far more supple."

She counted thirteen tumblers in all. Five of them, she guessed, were trapped. This operation was going to be precarious. She licked a drop of sweat from her lips and whispered, "Supple?"

"I'm neither a crusader nor an officer. I avoid quests and causes as much as I can. The freedom and solitude of the wilderness are far preferable to my libertine sensibilities."

"Solitude? How can you want solitude when you talk so much?" She used words to steady her breath as she twisted two angled picks inside the lock. The trigger tumblers had a springy quality; they pushed back, requiring her to hold one pick steady while the other wriggled deeper inside. If she lost her delicate grip, the traps would spring. "Besides, you're not alone. You and Jatha are never apart."

"That is true, but there is nothing in the wilderness so quiet as a Meer. Don't mistake them for animals, though. Ishpurian culture makes us humans look like naked barbarians by comparison. Rather I find that Jatha harbors a depth of serenity that is peculiar to his race. Especially considering he's more of a scholar than an outdoorsman. I think the natural world runs strong in his people. They're born with it."

Toria executed a risky maneuver, wedging one lockpick underneath the other to catch an obstinate tumbler. She succeeded, though time was now short. Only the strength of her fingers kept the triggers from activating. She had three more tumblers to go.

Fairfax fell abruptly quiet. Even his breathing stopped.

Toria widened her eyes. "What is it?"

"You'd better hurry."

"Why? Did you hear something?"

"Yes. Hurry now." He stepped behind her. She heard him lifting his spear into a guard position.

Her fingers trembled for an instant. One of the tumblers slid away from her, just a bit.

Behind her, from the doorway through which they had entered, sloppy grunts and heavy, shuffling footsteps came nearer.

Fairfax whispered, "Forget it for now. Get ready to run."

"I can't stop now."

"We can come back. Get your knife ready!"

She shook her head, tossing a sweaty curl from her eyes. "I really can't stop! It'll take longer to pull out than to finish!"

"Dammit, Toria—!" Then the grunts became growls. The footsteps sharpened as claws smacked against the stone floor.

"By the Virtues," rasped Fairfax, "that's the biggest damn troll I have ever seen."

Toria's fingers shook as she lunged her lockpick deeper, reaching for the last tumbler. When she hooked it, she strained against searing fatigue to complete the job.

Fairfax growled back at the intruder. Then the giant belowed, startling Toria, though she dared not look away from the lock. She heard the troll's huge feet thumping in a charge. Its foul odor stung her nose. Fairfax's hand latched onto her shoulder and yanked her away from the gate.

The final tumbler fell into place as he did so. The gate swung open as the ranger hurled her across the laboratory.

Toria caught her balance and looked back to see Fairfax facing a troll half again larger than those they had battled in the ravine. It wore bands of metal on its limbs and tusks. The ranger did his best to weave around the giant's lunging talons. With his spear he jabbed wounds in the monster's gut, but she could see he stood little chance of winning. When the troll caught him with a savage blow, Fairfax hurtled against the wall as if he weighed nothing. Bottles smashed and human blood rained on the shards.

Toria let loose a scream. The troll turned its doglike face at her and roared, dagger tusks gleaming.



She darted for the exit.

The monster thundered after her, galloping at twice her speed. Its momentum was unstoppable.

At the doorway the minstrel kicked her foot against the wall to change directions. The giant roared past her. She scrambled back to Fairfax, who was trying to stand on his unbroken leg. Toria seized his hand and in a panic dragged him through the gate.

The troll stormed back. With her toes she shoved the gate closed just as the monster bashed against the heavy iron bars. The lock engaged, as she knew it would. The troll wrapped giant hands around the barrier and shook it with such force that the stone in which the bars were set crackled and spat dust and pebbles.

Fairfax grabbed Toria's sleeve and shoved her toward Venduss. His voice was bloody and strained. "Get him loose and give him a healing potion! I'm going to indulge in one myself, if you don't think it's extravagant of me."

She sprang down the elongated room toward the unconscious Juka shackled to the far wall. Even in the dark, with her eyesight distorted by Jatha's enchantment of perception, Venduss's face looked regal and distinguished. She could not see any wounds on him, except for nasty bruises where his weight strained against the bonds. Blood streaked his armor and clothes, but the stains were old. His eyes were shut in peaceful slumber.

She hesitated to touch him, then shook her head and wrapped an arm around his waist. The feel of his warm body was wonderful in this horrid place. With one hand she tilted up his chin, uncorked a vial of healing potion and dribbled it onto his lips. Immediately his eyelids pinched, then

opened. His glassy eyes turned upon her. He squinted, then smiled.

Toria smiled back and murmured, "You're going to be trouble to keep up with, aren't you?"

He almost laughed. "Next time, we shall spend the evening indoors. Is teacher here?"

"She's around. Let's get you loose. There's not much time!" She motioned with her head to the rampaging troll behind the iron bars. Venduss winced at the sight.

Fairfax called out, "I can't find any other exits! Venduss, do you know of any?"

"No, there is only the one," answered the warrior, still gazing at the troll, "and we shall be hard put to get past that beast."

The ranger jogged beside them. "He's a big one for certain, but surely you and I together can handle him."

"We must make the attempt, but that one is feared even among the other trolls. He is a prince."

Toria was working on a shackle. "I didn't know trolls had princes."

"You would be surprised." He flexed his arm as the shackle popped open.

The minstrel reached for the second manacle, but paused. "Do you hear that?"

A coarse grating noise erupted from several spots around the chamber.

Fairfax slapped a hand over his eyes. "The statues are moving. I don't even listen to my own advice, it seems!"

"I thought I had dreamed that they were alive!" Venduss turned anxious eyes on the ranger. "Would you have a sword that I might, um, borrow?" He leaned forward and laid a kiss

amid Toria's tumbling red curls. "Teacher always says that haste is a doomed man's crutch, but in this case I think I am doomed without it."

"Don't rush me," countered the girl, though when she glanced at the eight tall statues that stirred with a crackling noise, her fingers quickened noticeably.

The darkness had begun to close in upon Thulann. The spell that allowed her to see without light had faded to half its potency, so that the cavern became a thick grey murk, its walls and features little more than deeper blackness. Yet she pressed on, bending her remaining senses to keep her bearings.

The wizard Damaro aided her even as he pursued her. He had retrieved his wand and a quivering flame leapt from its tip, illuminating the corridors through which he passed. When Thulann found herself lost in the gloom, she would call out to the human and lure him and his light closer.

She did so once more: "Damaro Montenegro, is it revenge you seek against an innocent Juka? Revenge for the circumstances that drove you into hiding?" She was careful to project her voice into the vaults of the ceiling and move away after the last word left her tongue.

Damaro shouted back, "Don't call me that! My name is Coventine, not Montenegro! I am my father's son, as much as I am Sir Lazaro's grandson!"

The golden rays of his firelight reached around a bend. Thulann was able to confirm her position. They were nearing the entrance to the caves. She slinked down a tunnel, then halted to allow a pair of trolls to lumber past. They snuffled as they searched for her, gurgling in their throaty

language. When they were gone she put a few more corners behind her and called out, "Whose courage is it, then, which compels you to keep a prisoner who has done you no harm? Is this Montenegro cowardice or Coventine?"

"I serve a man greater than both families! His motives are his own. You made a mistake to come here and challenge him."

She gauged the shortening distance to the mouth of the cavern. "Think you so? Master Gregorio is not here, but someone else has come with me who is his equal in the arts of sorcery."

"There is no such person!"

"Is there not? Listen for yourself, Damario Coventine." In the settling quiet, thumps and cracks echoed around the stone walls. Jatha's distraction was thankfully conspicuous. "That is the sound of Mistress Aurora herself, come to rectify the sins of her wayward colleague. She shall set things straight."

"That's impossible! She couldn't make the journey!" The stridence of his voice belied the young wizard's confidence. His footfalls trotted in the direction of the entrance. "She's too frail for this kind of work. Trolls in great enough numbers will beat her."

"Leave them to it, then, if you believe that. I can elude you as long as you wish to chase me. But I suspect the combined might of Mistress Aurora and your cousin's knights will overmatch these witless brutes you call allies. In fact, Montenegro was quite looking forward to doing so."

A heavy pause hung in the foul air. Damario grumbled, "There is only one exit. You won't leave here with the Dragon's Tear." Then he coughed a series of words that

sounded to her like a human's interpretation of the troll language. He was answered by similar words from a monster's lips. Something large lumbered back in the direction of the laboratory.

Damario growled, "Maybe I'll have a word with my cousin, then. It's been a long time since we've spoken and it's far past time he and I caught up."

Thulann kept still as the sorcerer vanished down the tunnel leading to the surface. When she was satisfied he was gone, she nursed a long, slow breath. Then she moved through the murk once more. Her path followed the troll Damario had sent back toward the laboratory.

Only the thinnest remnant lingered of her enchanted eyesight. She hoped it would be enough to render her useful to Venduss. Either way, she wondered if she had seen the sunlight for the last time. If so, it would be the latest in a series of regrets over the course of this journey, though by no means would it be the greatest of them.

## CHAPTER

# 11

## The Four Princes

**I**n the long, narrow room behind the iron gate, eight stone giants shamled after Toria, Venduss and Fairfax. Individually they managed to dive and scramble away from the creatures' cask-size fists, but their luck could not hold out for long. The Juka and the ranger employed their weapons when dodging was not sufficient. Metal sparked as it bounced from bodies made of solid rock. One of the living statues they could have defeated together, or perhaps two or even three, but they were more than overwhelmed now.

When chance brought the three together in a corner, Venduss shouted, "They are determined not to let me escape! What in the name of the Great Mother are they?"

"They're called golems," explained Fairfax, "and they will obey until death the commands of the wizard who created them!"

Toria leapt away when a golem hurled a punch at her. The wall shook when its fist slammed the stone blocks. The minstrel yelped, "Until whose deaths, theirs or ours?!"

The ranger brushed back his filthy blond hair and glow-

ered. "Enough of this. We have to get out of this room. Follow me!" He executed a serpentine dash toward the iron gate. In the laboratory beyond lurked the giant troll prince, still attempting to shake loose the cage door. Fairfax drew from his sack a pottery vial. Purple fluid stained its corked lip.

Toria and Venduss clambered beside him. The Juka asked, "What's that?"

"Something very old, from before the Cataclysm. I don't even think they make them anymore. Cover your faces, now!"

He flung the vial at the gate. In the next instant the room vanished in a flash of light and a titanic boom. A wave of dust pushed them back. Toria squealed as she bumped against an approaching golem. Its hands reached for her. Venduss plucked her away with a margin of inches.

Fairfax grinned. "Good, it was still potent."

The iron gate was gone, blown out of the niche by the ranger's exploding potion. A dusty fog choked the laboratory, in which they could see the troll prince struggling to regain its feet.

Toria mumbled, "You could have done that all along!"

"Stealth was our goal," answered the ranger, "and that lock looked expensive. Go on!"

They hurried into the laboratory. The giant troll snarled and bashed a claw into the floor, then charged.

Enormous hands seized the creature and halted its attack. Three golems beset the troll prince, who howled with wild fury and fought to defend itself, turning away from the three intruders.

Fairfax hissed, "That's our invitation to leave!" though his

companions had not remained long enough to hear him speak.

Jatha held his ground as three more trolls lurched up from the darkness of the cavern. The air around him snapped with power. He plucked a handful of lightning seeds from the Ether, prepared them with a gesture and a chant and then hurled them at the rough-furred wildmen. A stream of white radiance lanced at the first troll. It struck with a bright shower of sparks; then the bolt jumped from its first target to the second one, then the third, striking each down in a burst of embers and pale smoke. Montenegro fell upon the wounded creatures to finish them off.

But something was wrong. As he gathered sorcerous mana for his next spell, Jatha felt the currents changing, tugging slightly in a different direction.

Another wizard was near.

When an orange flash lit up the cave, the Meer leapt for cover. A tumbling ball of fire rocketed directly through the place where Jatha had been standing. It plunged into the canopy of an evergreen tree, which exploded into a cinderous inferno. Heat singed the fur of Jatha's cheek.

A few dozen yards inside the cliff, Montenegro whirled to see what had happened. The next instant the two trolls he had not slain tackled him. The knight broke free and the scuffle continued around a corner, out of the wizard's field of view.

Jatha flipped up his ears and searched the darkness. Was Master Gregorio present after all? His stomach felt hollow at the thought. But no, the attack was neither powerful nor precise enough to have come from the archmage. This new



opponent was learned in the school of fire magic. Jatha knew a spell or two that might prove effective now. He reviewed them quickly as he hid among the boulders outside the cave.

A robed figure emerged from the gloom. He held a pulsing wand in his grip. Jatha cupped a hand over his eyes to make out the face. When he did, the Meer grunted. He recognized the human as a former apprentice of Master Gregorio's, though he could not conjure a name. The young wizard had a furtive demeanor, hugging close to the rocky wall as he scanned the sparse forest.

Jatha rose from his cover behind a boulder. Standing tall with the lowering sun behind him, he propped his hands on his hips and called out, "Have we run out of trolls, then, or are you the runt of the litter?"

The bearded human aimed his wand at the Meer. "Mistress Aurora indeed! Nothing but one of her students. I've seen you before." He chuckled to himself, then shouted, "I've called off the trolls for now. Stand down or you'll find out what kind of runt I am!"

Jatha laughed into the dry mountain air. "We shall leave at your discretion, if you would be a polite host and fetch the Juka boy to us, please."

"I'll deliver your request to my master, though he's rarely in an obliging mood."

"That is an indisputable fact," shrugged Jatha, then snatched a bolt of lightning from the air and launched it at the wizard.

The lightning stroke landed true. Amid the blast of sparkles, however, the robed man remained standing, though he did cough a bit at the smoke. "Air spells against an

earth mage? Didn't your mistress teach you better than that?"

Jatha grimaced. "I can work either school, if it pleases you!" From the ground erupted a shower of heavy stones, zigzagging through the air at the human sorcerer. He cried out under the barrage of rocks, then flung from his wand a glimmering counterspell. The Meer wove a sparkling shield with his hands. The attack ricocheted back toward Jatha's opponent, though it missed him by several feet.

The human's counterspell had been designed to sap the mana that powered Jatha's sorcery. This man was crafty. Doubtless it was Master Gregorio's teachings that made him so. This duel might require more time than Jatha had, realized the Meer, especially if a fresh wave of trolls arrived to engage Montenegro.

The human sorcerer thrust his wand toward Jatha and ignited a coiling yellow flame at its tip. The fire shot forth like a blazing liquid. The Meer snarled and attempted to duck, but the fiery stream curved like a serpent and bit him with fangs of intense heat.

Abruptly the attack ceased. Jatha brushed away the smoke and saw that his opponent had turned away. A second figure approached from deeper within the cave.

Despite being smeared with blood and dirt, Montenegro's armor still shone from the darkness. Starfell trailed light as the knight stepped closer to the human wizard. Some manner of recognition was passing between the two men, though Jatha could not hear what they were saying. Grunting at the pain in his singed flesh, he climbed over jagged boulders to get closer.

\* \* \*

Montenegro stood before his cousin and studied the wizard's bedraggled appearance. These six months had not been kind to the younger man. The knight sucked in a breath that felt colder than the autumn weather.

"I did not expect to see you here," Montenegro murmured, "though it does stand to reason."

"Where else could I go?"

"You look like hell, cousin."

"And you've got a nasty cut on your brow," answered Damario. "If you don't heal it soon, it'll scar."

"Are you feeling well?"

"I haven't been getting enough sleep lately. It's the changing weather, you know."

Strange ghosts of the past seemed to direct them. But Montenegro gritted his teeth and shook his head. "Damario, you've got something that I want."

"You can't have the Juka," growled the wizard. He held fast to his wand. His slender body shook with nervous tension.

Montenegro closed his eyes. "That's not what I mean." His chest tightened like a screw. With a rough motion he shoved Starfell back into its sheath. Then he fell to one knee and stared at his cousin. His gaze burned.

"Damario, I want you to forgive me for what I did to you."

When the request tumbled from his lips, Montenegro felt a crushing weight removed from his heart. The sensation made him shudder. His mouth trembled.

The young wizard's face registered stunned surprise. His features tightened, deepening into lines that had not been there in the spring. The wiry beard exaggerated his frown.

His tone was incredulous. "You think it's that easy? You think you can erase all those mornings I woke up despising you? No magic in Sosaria can make them vanish!"

Montenegro heaved a sigh. "I know that. I know what six months of hatred feels like. But Damario, I have forgiven you. By all the Virtues, I truly have. We both acted rashly that day, you out of fear and I out of pain. Those are not worthy reasons for a family to turn against itself." From his crouching position he held out his hands. "That kind of hatred is false, cousin. You know that in your heart. Now, please. It is not often I beg on my knees for anyone's sake. Please, Damario, grant me forgiveness. You know I deserve it."

"You deserve nothing but contempt!" The wizard clutched furiously at the air. "How dare you feign repentance now, after you imprisoned me in this filthy dungeon?"

Abruptly a pair of trolls galloped out of the darkness. Damario halted them by discharging a gout of fire from his wand. The giants squealed and drew away.

"We are family," said the knight. "We are both Montenegro."

The wizard's eyes flashed. "I am Coventine, not Montenegro! I reject that dishonored name!"

"You still speak with fear. You do not know what you're saying."

"Weren't you convinced when I choked your lands with wilderness? You can thank Master Gregorio for helping me with that spell. We had to take the Dragon's Tear from the shrine in order to make it work, but that shrine is already meaningless in your care. The Montenegro icon belongs in a stinking pit like this one. It no longer stands for Compassion, but for its opposite. You have Compassion for no one, Gabriel!"

Montenegro lowered his head. "All I can do is ask."

In a flash a brutal pain wracked the knight's skull. He clutched his face and gasped for breath against a searing heat in his head. Awkwardly he staggered to his feet and braced against the rock wall.

The pain ceased. Damario snapped, "Are you convinced now, cousin?"

Montenegro monitored the rising fury within him. He wondered if he could control it. "My patience has its limits, Damario. You know better than to test it."

"Save your threats. I neither fear you nor respect you. Six months in Master Gregorio's instruction has given me more backbone than two years under your wing. You're a blowhard, Gabriel, and a domineering coward! You have ruined every shred of honor the name of Montenegro ever possessed!"

As if in punctuation, the magical heat pounded the knight's skull once more. He struggled to fashion a coherent thought, but the pain overwhelmed him.

He felt his hand clutch the hilt of Starfell. In an instant the blade swished from its scabbard. He marveled at himself as he lunged for Damario, thrusting the black sword into the wizard's belly. Sparks tossed through the air as the enchanted weapon penetrated Damario's magical defenses. The bearded sorcerer gaped, exhaling a mouthful of blood.

The heat disappeared. Montenegro's strength vanished with it. He staggered back, dropping Starfell to the ground. His knees buckled. "By the Virtues! Damario!"

The wizard doubled over and vomited. Then he looked up at his cousin with devastation in his eyes. "You've killed us both," he retched, and slid to the ground. Weakly raising

his wand, he activated a spell that fragmented the very air around them. Montenegro sensed his body being invaded, as well as the caves, the mountain and everything else. Damario's power shook the entire world around him.

Montenegro whirled toward Jatha, who watched from a distance with a solemn expression. "Save him, damn you! I've got no more healing potions left!"

The Meer hurried toward the fallen wizard, but halted suddenly. Montenegro followed his gaze to the depths of the cavern. Something very large congealed from the darkness.

It was a collection of trolls unlike anything in the knight's long experience. Two of them advanced on either side of a third, larger one. All three wore metal bands and gauntlets that distinguished them as leaders. Yet the smaller trolls were as massive as any Montenegro had encountered, and the larger one was nearly the size of an ettin. The thought of such raw ferocity wielding that kind of strength caused Montenegro to stumble backward.

Damario had summoned a troll king more powerful than even legend remembered.

The giants charged forward emitting a parade of savage barks. Montenegro could not retrieve Damario before he had to flee, though he grabbed Starfell from his path. The troll king lifted the fallen wizard and cradled him in his titanic arms. A sadness crept across the monster's bestial features.

Then he roared, lifting his tusks into the air. The two troll princes lunged after Montenegro and Jatha, who were forced to stand their ground at the sun-dappled entrance to the cavern.

In a fleeting moment Montenegro prayed that the others might survive, so that Damario's death would not be forgotten.

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"I cannot see!" protested Venduss as he stumbled in the dark. "Light a torch so I shall not be blind!"

Toria and Fairfax held his arms, guiding him through the rank labyrinth. The minstrel whispered, "A torch would be like a beacon in here. Too dangerous. Jatha's enchantment will get us out. Don't worry."

Without warning something shrieked and growled mere feet ahead of them. The air whirled with the movement of a huge, musky body. Venduss juttied the ranger's spear ahead of them, but struck nothing. His companions dragged him against the wall and bade him to crouch.

"What is it?"

"Another big troll," said Fairfax, "like the one in the laboratory. Is there more than one prince?"

"There are four that I know of," said the Juka. His companions groaned.

"Wait. Look." Toria leaned forward. "Something's wrong with this one. It looks wounded."

"Then its attacker can't be far away," whispered the ranger. "I don't see or hear anything, though."

The beast howled in pain and sounded as if it were thrashing in the darkness. Toria murmured, "Did you see that? Something clawed it, clean across the throat! But what?"

Venduss's smile was plain in his voice. "Is it teacher? We have to help her!"

Fairfax grunted. "In point of fact, it doesn't look like she needs any help."

After a moment more of the giant's screams, a loud thump resounded through the stone corridor. Toria cried, "It's down! See, there's Thulann!"

Venduss heard a painful *crack*. Two more followed, and

then a softer *thud*. Fairfax let go of Venduss and spoke into the gloom: "You've grown comfortable in this place, old girl. I see you've met the local royalty. There's even a handsome crown on that trophy you're carrying."

"I recognize that unfortunate voice," said the Way Master in a shaky tone. "I count myself lucky that I am not subjected to your face, since my enchantment of perception has worn off."

Fairfax chuckled. "I noticed. You look awful. How about a healing potion to wet your whistle?"

"Have you more than one to spare?"

Her footsteps faltered. The metallic *clank* that followed caused Venduss to imagine that she had collapsed. He stood up blindly. "Teacher?"

The Way Master coughed. "Venduss! My child. I shall scold you for all of this just as soon as these broken ribs stitch enough to allow me a decent breath."

Venduss's spirit leapt. Her derision was more welcome than ever.

They collected together, clinging in the dark. Thulann pulled Venduss briefly to her chest and held him tightly. Then she let go and muttered, "Will somebody please light a torch?"

"Too dangerous," said Fairfax.

"Not so dangerous as you shall find me, if I am stuck in this darkness for another minute!"

Seconds later sparks cleaved the murk. The ranger ignited his swaddled spear tip. Venduss's eyes adjusted to the glare. The first thing he made out was Thulann rising to her feet. Her armor was black with trolls' blood. In one hand she held her longsword. In the other hung a brutish head, with bared



tusks and a steel band around its scalp. The Way Master's strength was returned by the potions, but her eyes glinted with a fierce sort of fatigue.

"We are close to the exit. Let us hurry. If any troll is foolish enough to molest us while I have the prince's head, he deserves the quick death he shall receive!"

Jatha's voice was hoarse from shouting incantations. The reagents that powered his spells—roots, mosses, ashes, black pearls—were running low in his shoulder bag. His store of mystic energy was drained. He could not fight much longer.

Yet the troll prince showed no signs of weakening. Despite the battery of lightning bolts and meteors flung by the Meer's waning spells, the monster had chased Jatha out of the cavern and up the side of the cliff. It was bad enough that the brute was now hurling boulders at him. Jatha also regretted leaving Montenegro behind. The knight relied upon steady healing. The wizard feared for both of their lives.

He resolved that if he was destined to perish today, he would do so at his companion's side. He dove from the path of an oncoming boulder, tossed by his gigantic opponent. Then he portioned a sliver of his remaining power into a spell of fleetness. The soles of his feet seemed to glide on a glassy platform of air. He dashed around the troll and into the mouth of the cavern.

What he saw around the corner was terrible.

Montenegro's body seemed held together by nothing more than the strength of his will and the joints of his armor. Swags of torn flesh bled on every limb. His shield arm was certainly broken. Yet the knight battled on, slither-

ing around the feet of the enormous troll, which did not look entirely healthy itself. Starfell carved great furrows across the monster's furry hide. The swipes of its claws were strained and hesitant.

The mountainous troll king watched from a distance, fidgeting with restless fervor.

Jatha drove a stream of pale healing light at Montenegro. When it splashed over him, the knight stiffened. An instant later he resumed his attack with increased vigor. The troll king barked a protest, but made no move.

Jatha could not help but smile. He had mana enough remaining for one more spell, after which he would be powerless. Then he would be killed. The notion of his own death evoked a pleasant kind of serenity in his spirit.

His own pursuing troll cantered upon him with a gruff snarl. Jatha prepared a final lightning stroke.

Then he twirled aside, out of the monster's reach, and abandoned his seed of lightning. Instead he used his last scrap of power to instruct a gust of wind. The breeze swirled over the rocky ground where the wizard Damario had fallen. From a pool of blood it rescued the young human's magic wand. Jatha snatched it from the air and pointed it at the onrushing troll prince.

The pillar of flame that exploded from the wand scoured the monster's flesh. It scrambled out of the cavern with a deafening yelp, trailing a pennant of smoke. The sting of burned fur raked Jatha's nostrils.

The Meer stared in wonder at the wooden rod in his hand. The artifact must have been constructed by Master Gregorio, for it hummed with great stores of sorcerous power. Jatha understood its purpose. Damario must have

wielded fearsome magic in order to gain the respect of the trolls. And trolls themselves feared nothing more than fire, which subverted their strange abilities of regeneration.

Jatha pursued the fleeing brute.

A heavy rock bashed the Meer's shoulder and sprawled him across the jagged stones outside the cave mouth. The troll prince leapt at him. Jatha swatted the creature away with another roaring fountain of flames. He pushed the limits of the wand. A holocaust erupted from its tiny endpoint. When he finally relented, the wizard was startled to find the troll prince lying motionless among the boulders, charred black. No breaths stirred the smoke that wafted from the monster's huge body.

Jatha rushed back inside.

Around the blind corner, the combatants did not seem aware of what had taken place outside. Instead the scene was as Jatha had left it: Montenegro and the prince fought under the oddly studious gaze of the troll king. Both human and troll combatants were tattered with wounds and gravely exhausted. Jatha saw several opportunities for killing strikes that Montenegro must have been too fatigued to exploit.

At last the knight dropped to his knees. He did not acknowledge the troll prince as it lifted its dagger claws for a ferocious blow. Instead Montenegro stared at the ground. He looked unwilling to defend himself.

Before the prince could unleash the death blow, Jatha hurled an avalanche of fire upon the unsuspecting creature. The troll king leapt to its feet and screeched its violent displeasure. The prince toppled into a smoking heap, either dead or too injured to move.

Montenegro looked up in a weakened daze. He seemed to recognize that his opponent was down, though he did not see the troll king charging forward.

Jatha aimed the wand once again. To his horror he realized its power was depleted. That explained why Damario had used it so sparingly in battle.

Something darted out of the gloom and snatched Montenegro from the path of the rampaging troll king. When Jatha recognized Venduss slinging the knight over his shoulders, the Meer jammed the wand into his bag and hurried forward to help. The troll king pounded its great fists into the ground, wild with uncontrolled fury.

Thulann emerged from the dark depths as well, carrying Toria across her shoulders. The Way Master flung a giant head to the ground. Finally Fairfax arrived, sneaking behind the troll king as it shook the unmoving body of its fallen son.

The Way Master called out, "Do not slow down until you see the lights of Britain!" The group burst out of the maw of the cavern and ran for the horses. Behind them emerged the towering, apelike king, waving its tree trunk arms.

The evergreens slowed its pursuit. The giant snapped pines in half with a single blow.

They found their frightened horses and spurred them brutally. A scattered hail of boulders crashed against the mountainside as they fled. As the ridges of the Serpent spine retreated behind them, they heard the monstrous, strident wail, roaring like a geyser from the harsh crags, of a mighty king mourning the death of his sons.

Though their horses foamed and stumbled, the group did not stop to rest until after sunup the following day. They

camped beside a windy hilltop. No one mentioned it aloud, but the cool, breezy daylight soothed them more than any healing magic.

While Fairfax cooked rabbits over a fire, Venduss wrapped his arm around Toria and related his tale. Thulann disapproved of their familiarity, but decided not to admonish the boy so soon after his ordeal.

With animation the young Juka explained, "Master Gregorio wanted to use me as a hostage to bargain with my father. He did not want the House of the Griffin to teach us magic. He was willing to sacrifice the alliance over it."

Thulann asked, "And where is Gregorio now?"

"He is gone. I do not know where. Neither did Damario."

The Way Master squinted. "What about the Technocrats? Do you know what relationship they have with Gregorio?"

"They are not closely connected, as much as I could tell. I was unconscious and did not see them, and Damario had never met them either. Though he did say something I thought was strange. He said Gregorio had *rescued* me from the Technocrats."

"He was likely referring to your resurrection." Thulann tossed the warrior a heavy look. "You came back from the dead, you know. I trust that will improve your humility rather than degrade it."

"Am I changed? I do not know." He stared at the roasting hares. "By rights I should be enraged by what happened. But I am not angry right now. Rather I am . . . thankful for the chance to atone for my mistakes, before my next death. Surely that must be a change from my usual reaction."

Thulann relished the smile that curled across her lips.

Toria looked up at Venduss and asked, "What was that place, anyway? It looked like some kind of ruins."

"Damario explained it to me," said Venduss. "That cavern is all that remains of a kingdom of trolls. Centuries ago there was an empire under the mountains. The trolls there were civilized. Skilled at working stone and metal. But the Cataclysm tore the kingdom apart. Those caves are the only part that did not collapse. What is worse, the earthquakes exposed the trolls to sunlight and outside air. They became barbaric, like their cousins on the surface. Apparently Master Gregorio thinks that they are creatures of the earth, so wind and rain and sunlight poison them."

Jatha twitched his long ears. "I sensed an unusual intelligence in the troll king when he was watching Montenegro fight the prince. He stood back and did not interfere, as if he was judging a duel."

Venduss nodded. "The king was least affected by the Cataclysm. Damario told me he had a litter of four sons. He was trying to decide which of them was strong and wise enough to be his successor."

Fairfax chuckled. "I daresay we made his decision easier. Did any of the princes survive?"

"I think it's a sad story," frowned Toria, nestling closer to the young Juka. "It reminds me of a song I once heard from a very old woman."

Jatha smiled. "Grace us with it, if you will. Chase away the echoes of that black pit."

The smoke of the morning campfire formed a haze around her verses:

*"Ultima terra," the Lost King cried  
 As his broken realm he surveyed.  
 "The last of my lands has fallen to dust,  
 My glorious kingdom unmade, unmade!  
 My glorious kingdom unmade!*

*"Who shall remember this tall race of men  
 Now that so many have died?  
 What shall remain of my house and my throne?  
 Ultima terra!" he cried, he cried.  
 "Ultima terra!" he cried!*

Fairfax smirked. "If that is the most cheerful we can be, then perhaps it is time to eat."

Thulann sipped a cup of spring water. She glanced around for Montenegro and found him sitting apart from the others, atop the corpse of a fallen tree. His limbs were swathed in bandages, his armor dingy with dried blood. The arid wind ruffled his ebony curls. He gazed beyond the hilltop at the green and rocky vista.

She approached him quietly, watching the landscape herself. "Fairfax caught a rabbit for you, if you are hungry."

The knight made no response.

She sighed. "I grieve for the loss of your cousin."

"I lost him long ago," came his abrupt response. "He—" Montenegro's words faltered. With a frown he muttered, "He suffered much."

"The dead do not suffer," said Thulann, "except through the living."

"Then I wonder if Damario shall ever find peace."

The Juka crossed her arms and leaned back against the

toppled tree trunk. "Among my people, we keep something called Life Words. They record a person's deeds. When death comes, we inter their ashes in the clan's tomb and sing their Life Words to the Blessed Halls of Honor, so that their spirit may be properly received. Tell me, then, Gabriel Montenegro. What will you sing for Damario Coventine?"

He closed his eyes. "Sing the Virtues. Damario was true to them, before I killed him six months ago. But I shall not sing. I did enough damage in life. I shall not meddle with him in death."

"Are you his only survivor?"

"He has a father who is so addled he recognizes no one, and a half-sister who is too frail to live through this winter. And myself." The knight shook his head. "No, Damario has no survivors."

"Then I shall sing for him."

She chanted to the tumbling wind, intoning the eight Virtues that the New Britannians held dear. She felt an unexpected catharsis in doing so.

When she finished, Montenegro turned his face away from her. Thulann said nothing more, but rejoined her companions around the campfire.



## CHAPTER

# 12

## The Battle of Crows

**T**he Logosian sky was a sea of smudged clouds presiding over a half-barren world. The sandy earth produced fringes of plant life among the pocks and depressions where rainwater gathered. Rocky hills jutted silently from the ground, the bones of a decayed landscape.

Sister Raveka clutched her wide hood against the stiff gusts that stalked the bluffs. Her black raiments swirled and danced behind her. The craggy ground unsteadied her footsteps, forcing her to balance against sharp rocks and the boles of squat trees. In several places her arms bled.

She had walked for more than a day without rest. Her legs and feet ached. Yet the spectre who drove her onward showed no evidence of fatigue. Master Gregorio, despite his tremendous age, marched with the endurance of a Jukan warrior. His wizard's gown rippled against his gaunt, doddering frame. His ancient glower compelled her forward without mercy.

Nor did he exhibit any sympathy for Raveka's lack of sleep. Though her Mathematician's training allowed her to

function with very little slumber, the dizzying ocean journey to Logosia had robbed her of any true rest. Gregorio's small ship had charged across the sea on the crests of magical waves. A conjured hurricane flung them to speeds well beyond the fastest carriage. Impossibly, they had arrived only a few days after departing. Yet the ceaseless, staccato bucking and pounding of waves had challenged her ability to concentrate. Her meditative techniques strained. She thought she might go mad.

The purgatorial conditions had no effect at all on the withered sorcerer.

She had led him to a rugged strip of uninhabited coastline. The Logosian shore was paradise to her tired, brown eyes. Gregorio had commanded her to guide him to Logos itself, but that journey might have taken a week or more. Raveka proposed a less taxing plan. She would take him to the nearby town of Akar, from which an airship could transport them to the city of the Techno-Prophet. The sorcerer had agreed, though his distaste for flying machines seemed rather menacing.

So they set out across the rugged coastland and had not stopped since. Despite the harsh circumstances, Raveka enjoyed the stoic sights of home. Yet her heart felt an insistent pull toward the north, where trees conquered the landscape and magic swirled like storms in the sky and knights and ladies wooed each other beside moonlit crystal falls.

Abruptly something scuttled across the rocks in front of her. Sparks leapt from tiny metal feet. Raveka spotted a mechanical rodent glinting as it dashed away into the hills. The creatures were manufactured as utilitarian scavengers, cleaning the landscape of waste and debris and unwanted

life forms. It was the least complex of the many automatons that roamed the wilds of Logosia.

Raveka was glad there had only been one, for in hordes they were known to overinterpret their duties to include humans and Juka among their catalog of disposable organisms.

She chanted a brief geometric litany to clear her thoughts. Then she stopped to lean against a short tree. Akar, she knew, was just over the next hilltop.

Now she would see if her gambit would succeed.

"Why are you stopping?" grumbled the wizard as he drew beside her. "We're almost there, are we not?"

She drank a sip of water from a bottle in her pocket, then answered, "Indeed so. Akar lies just beyond that ridge. But I do not believe it would be wise for you to go there in haste. You've expressed contempt for our machines. My bolt-thrower contained but a single spring enchanted with the Techno-Prophet's alchemy. If that tiny component was enough to raise your ire, how then shall you cope with an airship containing thousands of such mechanisms? No, I think it would be wisest to rest here first, so that your mind may reach a calmer state."

He scoffed and shoved past her. "I am not interested in your analysis of my mental condition. Let me see this town you speak of. If the captains of these airships know the way to Logos, then it may well be that I am finished with you altogether."

Raveka detected an ominous undertone in his final sentence. She clutched her elbows against the wind and watched him hobble toward the edge of the bluff, beyond which lay Akar.

During the course of their journey, she had observed the old man with great care. Under Father Gaff's tutelage Sister Raveka had learned how to gather subtle evidence to determine the framework of a person's thoughts. Gregorio, she had calculated, was a man of rash actions. Senility had damaged his potent ego, making him coarse and belligerent. Yet he had supreme confidence in his sorcery and a fearsome hatred of his enemies.

Raveka had applied Father Gaff's formulas to the variables at hand. From the results she had derived a particular mode of speech and behavior calculated to nudge Gregorio's thoughts in the direction she wanted. So far her techniques appeared to be working.

The final test was at hand.

The wizard stood at the lip of the bluff and gazed at the land beyond. As she stepped beside him Raveka heard him mutter, "In the name of the Lost King, what horror is this?"

Akar was a modest town compared to others in Logosia. Its geometric buildings of granite and steel comprised not more than a handful of streets. Yet it lay at the edge of a broad plain, which had its own usefulness to the Technocrats. Presently it acted as a staging area for the vast Logosian military.

Dozens of airships sprang up like metal towers from the flatness of the heath. Each craft was a complex architecture of copper and iron and steel components, arranged in a vertical disposition. Giant gears and pistons hissed and churned. Tall pipes billowed smoke and steam. Windmill propellers gently stroked against the breeze, steadying the airships as they hovered just above the broad, dry plain.

Strewn about the moored airships were the black, teem-

ing hordes of the Logosian army. Thousands of human and Jukan soldiers collected in blocky formations, bearing armor and weaponry of intricate mechanical designs. War machines moved among them on barbed wheels, brandishing exotic armaments of frightening size and ingenuity. Wagons drawn by fleshy beasts were loaded with ammunition.

Strangest of all were the half-living drones and juggernauts interspersed in the muster. Grotesque conglomerations of organic and mechanical bodies, these beings clanked and rolled about with odd, jerky mannerisms, hefting metal limbs tipped by lethal implements of countless spinning, clashing, flaming varieties. Even the most elite Logosian soldiers maintained a careful distance from them.

The entire army of the Techno-Prophet was methodically packing into the airships, in preparation for invasion.

Sister Raveka narrowed her eyes in a cold smile, of a sort she had not indulged since leaving this land. She had calculated that an invasion would be staged from here. This day and time carried the highest probability for witnessing the deployment. And so she had delayed their arrival, at the cost of sleep and an endless, exhausting hike. The effort had been worthwhile.

All that remained was to see how Master Gregorio would react.

When his face grew taut and red, she knew she had succeeded. Her spirit leapt with relief.

The archmage growled under his breath and arranged the satchel he carried on his shoulder. Then he raised his hands, interlocked his fingers and began a chant that the Technocrat recognized.

Without a thought she dashed away from the edge of the cliff, as Master Gregorio unleashed an earthquake.

Great, throaty cracks leapt up from the plains below. A jarring rumble vibrated the air. Raveka braced herself against a tree but the ground under her feet did not move, except to conduct the sounds that crackled up from the heath. When the tumult subsided, she ventured back to the side of the sorcerer and observed what had happened.

The Logosian muster was in shambles. Fissures jagged across the plains like dark bolts of lightning. A dusty haze blanketed the vista. Several airships listed and billowed unhealthy grey clouds. The troops scrambled with frantic purpose, like ants over a broken mound, pouring into the undamaged vehicles.

Master Gregorio cursed in a clattering language Raveka could not place. He snaked his gnarled hands into the air. Rivers of serpentine light gushed from his palms, streaming into the sky and punching holes in the dirty, low-lying clouds. Flashes cascaded within. Then the clouds ruptured apart and rained thunderbolts as if they were hailstones. Thousands of blinding talons gnashed the brittle earth. Flames and explosions sparkled across the Technocrat formations.

Amid the brutal lightning storm, the flying warships began to rise. Despite their mass and towering height they ascended with an ease that was almost tranquil, like smoke lifting into a calm sky. Their spidery metal workings crawled inside. Furnaces glowed like monstrous eyes. The airships turned toward the cliff upon which Gregorio stood.

The sorcerer resembled a terrible, fiery demon, commanding light and thunder from the clouds and the earth.

On the nearest of the floating vessels, Raveka spotted soldiers preparing catapults and pneumatic trebuchets. The heavy ammunition twinkled like spark stone. She decided that the time had come to leave Gregorio to his fate.

She found a footpath she knew was close and sprinted away as swiftly as her aching legs would manage. The sky behind her flickered and blazed and shook with raging explosions. Her own shadow danced like a phantom over the rough terrain in her path. She struggled for even more speed.

A violent detonation tossed the ground from beneath her. She slammed hard into a patch of toothy stones. After rolling for many yards she kicked out her legs and halted, then looked up at the surreal battle.

A dozen airships hovered at varying distances above the cliff. A tempest of artillery pounded the bluff with sheets of liquid fire and squalls of generated lightning and clouds of exploding spark stones. Yet amid the brilliant holocaust moved a tiny figure, from which discharged mighty streaks of light and fire. When Gregorio's attacks concentrated on a single airship, within seconds the vessel boiled with scarlet and orange flames. In its ghostly, gentle way the craft toppled onto its side and fell, breaking open against the base of the hill. Then the archmage launched his devastating sorcery at another ship.

Raveka lost her breath. It was not possible that Gregorio was winning.

Two of the warcrafts touched down halfway up the slope. A surge of mechanical troops disgorged. As they lunged up the hillside, Raveka sensed the earth begin to shudder.

She scanned the area for some measure of shelter, but time ran out. Another quake thrashed across the ground.

This time it cast her into the air, then pummeled her like a hammer until everything was swallowed in a thunderous, agonizing darkness.

"Venduss and I must return to Garron as quickly as possible," announced Thulann to the council of lords. She stood before the three nobles in a narrow but opulent hall. "The longer it takes, the more damage Bahrok can do."

Regent Salvatore waved his hand from where he sat at the long table. "Worry not. We know that the warlord had no interest in this alliance. But the Senate still has great interest. And if your Shirron concurs, as you say he does, then Bahrok's interference shall be nothing more than a temporary delay."

"But the situation is worse than that. Shirron Turlogan is already in a delicate political position. Many of the stronger clans would support Bahrok to replace him. And when news reaches Garron that the alliance has failed and Venduss is supposedly dead, Bahrok may well exploit Turlogan's moment of weakness. If he becomes Shirron, you can be certain he will be your enemy in the end."

The distinguished Lady Mariah of the House of the Griffin smiled at the Way Master. "We understand that. But our seers tell us that Bahrok has only just arrived on your shores. Revolutions take time."

"As do return voyages to Jukaran!"

Lady Mariah shook her head. "Not this one."

Thulann tilted her head with confusion, then widened her eyes. "Ah, I see," she replied to the sorceress, then sat down to hear the details.

\* \* \*



The pulse of the fireplace cast a haunting paleness across the marble walls of the room. The sounds of the Royal Palace echoed from distant doorways, though this parlor was mostly still. Only the presence of two warriors broke the quiet. They stood among the opulent appointments of the room, keeping a stark distance between them.

Thulann murmured, "The Order of the Magus is going to conjure something called a 'moongate,' which will transport us to Garron. Without traveling, as I am told, though it confounds me how that can be possible."

"There are legends of temporary moongates," said Montenegro, "though I have never seen one created. They must think very highly of you to cast that kind of spell."

"I am asking you to come to Garron with us."

He chuckled without sound. "That is unlikely."

"Please, Montenegro. I will guarantee your safety. I need you to bear witness against Bahrok. The clan chieftains must be told of his behavior, or my Shirron may be usurped."

"You have my sympathies," said the knight, "but not my complicity. What does it matter to me who rules your people? I am through with affairs of state."

"I ask you as my friend and ally."

He shot her a hard glance. "You deceive yourself."

The Juka glared back. "Then come to Garron because Justice demands it. Do you think Riona Lynch has any cause to remain here? She and her partner are surely on their way back to Logos by now. You shall never avenge Lord Valente by sniffing around on these foreign shores. Garron has spies in Logos. We may be able to find them for you."

Montenegro's eyes flashed. "Damn you, old woman! Why must you always strike at my weakest point?"

"Because this old woman wants to win for a change! I am through standing in the shadows. I have relied upon trust and hope and faith in others, while the world is overrun with wickedness that feeds on those traits like a ravenous predator. But honor survives, Montenegro, and I intend to nurture it. With my own hands and my own sweat, I shall nurture it."

He stood with a violent motion. "I don't need your nurturing, Thulann!" he hissed, "and I *shall* go to Garron. Damn you."

The burning logs snapped and spat embers into the parlor. The bone-white marble walls blushed hot for just an instant, then greyed behind a veil of loosed smoke.

The House of the Griffin owned a manor in the capital city. Constructed within was a spell chamber that looked to Thulann like something from a children's tale. The walls were painted with fantastical designs in exotic colors and shapes. The floor was inset with an exquisite mosaic, depicting a whirlwind of mystical symbols and runes and spirals. A ring of braziers splashed the room with copper light. The air lilted with a garden of incense.

Thirteen wizened sorcerers of the Order of the Magus formed a circle and murmured in preparation for the coming labor. Their faces were grave with concentration.

Thulann stood next to the wall in her full armor and weaponry. Most of her other belongings she had given away to curious humans, partly to grant cultural knowledge to new allies, but mostly just to lighten her burden. She intended to insist that Turlogan provide her a new wardrobe upon her return, in payment for sending her on this particularly hellish enterprise.

Her heart beat strongly at the thought of reuniting with the Shirron.

At her side was Venduss, wearing his full regalia. He and Toria had polished the fine armor as best they could, to remove the stink and tarnish of the troll king's dungeon. The minstrel herself had abandoned her leather tunic in favor of Thulann's oversize blouse, as she had worn when she first stowed away on the Jukan ship. A multicolored scarf girdled her waist and another tied back her lush curls.

Thulann kept the teenagers separated, one on either side of her. The time had come for propriety again. Venduss must not be distracted from his studies. The Way Master was taking a chance even bringing the little human to Jukaran, but when the girl had pleaded, Thulann could not resist her jade-green eyes. The old Juka resolved to break Toria of the habit of pleading.

Montenegro wore his traveling plate mail. He was a stern figure standing apart from the others. The black shape of Starfell dangled on his hip. He had pledged that it would taste the blood of Valente's assassin before he returned it to the lord's family. The House of the Lion approved.

Fairfax was present as well, hovering in the chamber doorway. "This is a predicament," the ranger muttered to Jatha, who was assisting with the spell. "I want to accept Thulann's invitation to Jukaran. I'd enjoy telling the story of the rescue to her people. After all, what better reason to travel than to transmit one's glory to the world at large? And it will improve mighty Venduss's standing among the popinjays who govern that noseless land. And yet . . ."

"And yet," said Jatha.

"And yet one thing troubles me. This whole affair, my hir-

sute companion, is beginning to reek of a *cause*. What good is adventure if it must be bound to a purpose? How can we pursue true nobility when our path must wind through the serpentine coils of political imbroglio?"

The Meer chuckled. " 'Imbroglio!' I like that one. But you forget a basic tenet of our philosophy. The world will always trumpet its stable of petty causes. Our duty as champions of the sensual truths is to disregard that trumpet. If someone tells us we are fighting for a cause, we must not listen. Rather we must inform them that we fight because we feel like fighting. In short, Fairfax, fight more and listen less. I would think that would be easy for someone whose ears are as tiny and shriveled as yours."

The ranger grinned. "So it should be. You are astute this morning, my friend. Perhaps your old mistress has cast a spell."

The last to arrive was Regent Salvatore himself. Thulann had never seen the gray-haired statesman dressed in anything less than extravagant formal robes. Today he wore a black traveling cloak over a plain doublet and breeches. The difference was startling. He was even carrying his own bag.

Thulann nudged Toria. "See to the regent. He ought to have a servant before I do."

"But mistress—"

"You will serve the regent or stay behind! Choose. In silence."

The girl choked back a grumble, then met the statesman with a forced smile.

Lady Mariah called the room to order. The middle-aged sorceress yielded the chamber to Mistress Aurora, who gathered the attending spellcasters around the largest mosaic cir-

cle in the chamber's floor. The conjuring of the moongate commenced.

The ceremony extended well into the afternoon, encompassing repeated attempts to produce the difficult effect. Despite the length of the casting, none of the onlookers strayed their attention from the spectacle. Their minds became ensnared in the web of intricate sorcery. The spell chamber swirled with currents of light and sound and strange, unbidden thoughts; and when at last the pure white glare of the moongate arose, everyone present felt the urge to enter, if only for some ethereal sense of closure to the ritual.

The gate took the form of a bright, glowing rectangle standing on end. Hot air trickled out. One by one the travelers stepped through—Thulann, Venduss, Salvatore, Toria, Jatha, Fairfax, Montenegro, and finally Mistress Aurora herself. Passage imparted a nauseous warmth, the removal of which was pleasant on the other side.

The moongate vanished behind them. Mistress Aurora let out a weary grunt. Montenegro and Salvatore assisted her, while the others surveyed their destination.

They had arrived in the center of a small quadrangle constructed of green and orange granite. Spans of metal arched overhead, forming a vine-webbed arbor. The air had a distinct flavor and crispness which brought a smile to Thulann's face.

The Order of the Magus had executed the spell to perfection. The travelers had reached Garron.

For a moment the Way Master pondered the implications of such a miraculous mode of travel. Ships could become obsolete. The military applications were almost frightening.

Angry shouts collected her back from the reverie. A small troop of Jukan soldiers rushed at them, brandishing halberds. Those in the front bellowed, "Humans! There are humans here!"

Thulann whisked out her sword and yelled, "Venduss! Seven Autumn Stars!" She and her student began in unison to execute the martial form she had named. With flawless synchrony they danced the arduous kicks and thrusts. When Venduss finished Thulann continued, performing the advanced techniques. Her blade became a silver blur.

She finished by sheathing her weapon and glaring at the stunned warriors.

"Way Master Thulann! Master Venduss! Forgive us!" The soldiers dropped to their knees.

Thulann smacked the nearest one lightly on the cheek. "This is not the homecoming I expected!"

"Forgive us! In the attack we thought—"

She pinched the soldier's jaw. "Attack? What attack?"

"Have you not seen?" He pointed to the sky over the far side of the city. "The Technocrats!"

Thulann's mouth hung open. When she saw what the soldier was pointing to, her gut felt hollow.

The air was littered with flying Logosian warcraft. A storm of fire and lightning pounded the far side of the city. The clouds blinked with furious light. The booming was clear now, so deep that her ears had not immediately detected it.

She seized the warrior's arms. "What is this? How long has it been going on?"

"Just over an hour, Way Master! It is an invasion!"

"And the Shirron? Where is he?"

"Riding at the head of the troops, to meet the ground force. The Technocrats have landed their airships at the foothills. Are you not joining them?"

She turned back to her companions. Each one of them gazed with horrified amazement at the onslaught of Technocrat war machines. Thulann bit down an unexpected surge of anger.

"Yes, Venduss and I shall join the Shirron. Though it seems we have arrived far too late!"

"Wake now, good Sister."

Something slithered down Raveka's lungs. She cried out as she roused. Coughing, she bolted from the cold metal floor and swatted at the smoke or vapor that enshrouded her.

The room was dim, lit by a phosphorescence whose source she could not place. The walls were made of heavy steel, connected by giant rivets. The air shivered with a low, steady, mechanical thrum.

She found the shape of her tongue and called out, "Where am I?"

"Home."

She whirled to see a dense curtain of shadow. In its center shone a single red light, like a staring eye.

The chamber did not look familiar. "Whose home?"

"Mine."

The voice had a metallic resonance, as though spoken through a musical instrument.

"And who are you?"

Something creaked in the darkness. Raveka sensed the churn of a levitant engine. "I have a lot of names. I am the

Furnace. I am the Axis and the Axiom. I am the Conclusion of Totality." An object briefly emerged from the gloom. It was a huge, jagged claw made of steel. It flexed casually, as a man might flex his fingers. "Names are important, don't you agree? They are lights in the darkness."

"Your Eminence!" She fell to her knees so quickly that it hurt. She dropped her gaze and squeezed her fists into the folds of her robe. Her mind scrabbled to comprehend what was happening. Only the Lectors could speak to the Techno-Prophet, and then only through the indulgence of Lector Sartorius, Blackthorn's Chosen. Then how did she come to be here? The last thing she remembered was—

A loud, low tone rang in her chest. It was the song of the Techno-Prophet. Effortlessly he incanted a beautiful sequence of calculations. Raveka was drawn into the verse, harmonizing with him, chanting with a clarity greater than she thought herself capable.

When they finished she could hear the smile in his breath. "Splendid. We are the Machine, good Sister. We are a whole. Speak now. Ask the question that trembles on your tongue."

"Your Eminence, why am I here?"

"You came here yourself. Do you not remember why?"

"No, Your Eminence."

"Mmm. Then Sartorius must have brought you. Yes, I recall now. You have presented me with a gift."

She squinted, focusing her memory. The face of Master Gregorio resolved in her mind. "Yes, Your Eminence. I have brought the archmage from New Britannia to see you."

Metal squeaked against metal. The red eye winked. "Archmage indeed. Gregorio is barely an apprentice."

Sister Raveka swallowed. "As you say, Your Eminence."



"The rash little mage who hides behind Sir Lazaro's shield. He does bring a smile to my face. Is Sir Lazaro with him?"

"No, Your Eminence. Sir Lazaro was killed in—many years ago."

"Of course. I murdered him, didn't I? In the Cataclysm. A pity. He was a good chess player and smart with the ladies. He should never have married that dragon."

"As you say, Your Eminence."

"Let's wake the apprentice. He does not look well today, mmm?"

Elsewhere in the room, a geyser of steam flew from the wall. A dark lump on the floor hacked and twitched and crawled to its knees.

"Rise, Gregorio," commanded Blackthorn. "You have waited decades to tell me what is on your mind. Let us hope the information is not stale."

The ancient wizard cast a surprised look around the metal chamber. "By the depths of Truth!"

"Indeed so."

Gregorio stumbled to his feet. "This is far worse than I foresaw. I know your voice, Lord Blackthorn, though it is twisted by machines. See what an abomination you have become!"

"The clock chimes every time the gear is finished turning."

The archmage grimaced. "Have you grown mad as well in this technological prison?"

"I was just telling the good Sister how you always make me laugh. Will you do that dance again? The Where-Did-That-Milkmaid-Go dance?"

"Mock me if you wish! But I have come to extract payment for the ruin you have brought to our world!"

"So that is your aim. You have already extracted five of my airships and half a legion of my soldiers. How many more do you require? I shall give you all you wish. They are expendable. We are all the Machine."

"You must yourself suffer, Lord Blackthorn. I have come to make you suffer."

"Have you indeed? But I think that Chaos has invaded your mind, Gregorio, for you speak madness. There is no suffering in Logos."

A faint glow ignited in the sorcerer's palms. "There is about to be."

Sister Raveka backed against the wall, but neither felt nor saw an exit from the room. Her heart slammed louder in her chest.

Montenegro could not master the lumbering rhythm of his strange Jukan mount. The ridgeback swayed dizzily from side to side. He could not imagine fighting from this position. But the two-legged creature had a sure step over the jagged terrain, and the tall, bony crest that soared over its haunches provided welcome support on steep inclines.

He rode with four companions to a cliff overlooking the foothills. Thulann and Venduss led the group while Jatha and Fairfax traveled behind him. When the battlefield came into view, Montenegro stared with awe.

The airships of the Technocrats spiked the landscape like mobile fortresses. They served as hovering artillery engines, bombarding the troops from Garron while the Logosian ground forces pressed closer toward the mountains. A sea of

Jukan warriors blocked their advance. The distance was too great to make out the particulars of the melee, but Montenegro could see that the Technocrat war machines had a devastating effect on the Garron troops. Flames and smoke rippled over the scene.

Thulann and Venduss did not look pleased about the situation.

Then Fairfax's voice lanced through the windy air: "Look there! I see more troops!"

Montenegro could make out a dark blur on the western horizon. It might have been a small force of men.

Venduss exclaimed, "It cannot be, teacher!"

"But it must be," she answered. "Bahrok has arrived already. I do not know how."

The knight ventured, "Ocean currents. Perhaps the return trip is faster."

"Whether it's Bahrok or not," said Jatha, "I fail to see what difference it will make. There must be thousands of soldiers down there. Four hundred more or less can't turn the tide."

Thulann grunted. "Can they not? Bahrok did not become a warlord by luck or bribery. There is a reason he is a popular leader among the clans. Great Mother, allow him to shine today!"

"Where is the path to the foothills?" asked Montenegro. "Perhaps we can shine a bit ourselves."

The steel walls rattled violently as Raveka sprinted down the corridor. When she charged into a large atrium, several strong arms enfolded her. She heard the hiss and clank of

pneumatic armor, worn by the elite Janissars who guarded the Techno-Prophet's tower.

A tall figure moved in front of her. She recognized the robes of a priest in the Order of Theorists. She pulled out of the grasp of the guards and bowed before Lector Sartorius, Blackthorn's Chosen.

Like Father Gaff, Sartorius's body was intricate with tattoos. They exaggerated his hooked nose and wide, dark eyes.

"What's happening in there, Sister?"

She caught her breath and murmured, "More than any of us can understand, Your Excellency."

"Is there danger? Did the Techno-Prophet issue any commands?"

"No, Your Excellency, no commands. But I suggest that we evacuate the tower. I do not know if these walls can contain the storm brewing inside!"

The roar of melee shuddered the foothills. The shouts of warriors and the clang of weapons became palpable forces rebounding from the craggy rocks. Cutting through the hard sounds were the sharper buzzes and squeaks of Technocrat war machines as they slashed and sawed through the defenders, vomiting fire and lightning and ejecting blasts of steel-tipped quarrels. Where the mechanical noises grew louder, the soldiers of Garron fell in greater numbers.

In the thick of the fearsome battle, Thulann found a single goal for which to strive. She led Venduss through the tangle of snarling combatants, eluding the areas where war machines and automatons tightened the furious crowds. Logosian soldiers who blocked her path fell quickly to her

blades. Smoke and screams fluttered around her, but never did her eyes flinch.

Though Montenegro and the others were following her, her single concern was crossing the field as quickly as possible. The battle was not going well. The Shirron's banner flew on the far side, in the midst of the heaviest fighting.

As they traversed a calmer span of ground, Venduss urged his ridgeback beside her. "Teacher, did you hear? Bahrok has drawn off a third of their mechanized units! He has them pinned in the canyon pass!"

*Great Mother, prayed the Way Master as she drove her mount into denser melee, grant Bahrok one mighty deed and I shall forgive him for all of his others!*

When Thulann burst through the final rank of Logosians in her path, she immediately caught Turlogan's eye. The terrifying warlord, a head taller than foes and friends, shoved aside four Technocrats just to clear room for a better look.

At that moment she had reached home. The crushing fatigue that had been her steady companion now evaporated from her limbs. The Shirron's glance quenched all of her thirsts. His smile made her weapons more lethal. In turn his own fury increased, as if the battle now became an impediment to something more important.

Like a serpent lashing its tongue, the rolling war engine struck the Garron forces with quick forks of lightning. Montenegro watched it inch closer, slicing through the defending troops with periodic electrical blasts. The machine was shaped like a conical tower, plated with steel. The peak contained the lightning thrower, a bizarre mechanical accretion of tanks and gears sheltered behind tall metal crenella-

tions. Montenegro glimpsed the men operating the weapon. They were dressed in robes not dissimilar to the one worn by Riona Lynch. Each time they fired their weapon, Jukan clansmen fell in a geyser of smoke and debris.

He decided to get a closer look.

Fairfax and Jatha rode beside him. He called out, "Would the two of you care to assist me in taming that steel dragon?"

The ranger widened his eyes. "Three of us against that mechanical nightmare? I'm not one to shrink from a challenge, but I've never seen anything quite like that before."

Jatha grinned. "Nor have they seen anything like us, my friend. Now spur that ugly beast you're riding and let's knock that lightning out of the sky!"

Montenegro laughed. "If all the Meer had your kind of fire, Jatha, I'd never sleep for fear of your army. But there's no ally I'd rather have. Let's cut open that beast and see what Blackthorn has sent us for dinner!"

They shoved past the Jukan soldiers, who seemed happy to let someone else face the war engine. The clansmen hesitated when they saw two humans among them, though the garb of the knight and the ranger were very different from the black uniforms of the Technocrats. When they spotted the Meer sorcerer, many Juka fell back in surprise. His kind, apparently, were completely unknown here.

Drawing beside the lumbering steel machine, Montenegro frowned at its armor plating. Even with Starfell it would take an hour to cut through. Since the machine formed the point of a column of Logosian infantry, he did not have that much time. Already the human and Jukan Logosians were pointing out the New Britannians as inviting

targets. Their snarls and taunts mixed with the grind of heavy mechanisms and the smell of grease and dirt, producing a grim tableau that mirrored Montenegro's darkening mood. He looked up higher and picked out the small hatch that must serve as a doorway.

He pointed out the hatch to Jatha and Fairfax, with a look of intense determination.

Then the knight's ridgeback snorted and lurched aside, to dodge the giant, spiked wheel. From his peripheral vision he spotted a small slit in one of the steel plates. A flared tube pushed out into the grimy air. The world exploded in light and pain.

Montenegro felt himself tumble off his mount. Some spell or alchemy in the tube had flung a hundred tiny daggers at him. They burned like small fires where they had punctured his plate mail.

He stood up from the ground and barked, "Jatha! Kill that thing!" The Meer plucked a spell out of the air, which seemed to crackle from the loss. Jatha swirled the spell in his hands until it became a bolt of electricity that snapped forward and smashed the deadly tube. The machine quivered in a blossom of smoke. The armor plating was scorched from the attack. The tube was gone.

Both the Juka clansmen and the Logosian soldiers stared in awe.

Montenegro seized the lull with a hearty shout: "Capture the machine!" He led the assault by climbing up the war engine, using oversize rivets as footholds. Jatha and Fairfax came at his heels, followed by a surge of enthusiastic Garron soldiers.

He found the hatchway barred from inside. A quick

stroke from Starfell bashed a deep groove in one of the hinges. He was satisfied he could get through quickly.

Climbing underneath him, Jatha and Fairfax held off the Logosian defenders. The wizard summoned a veil of rushing air between the knight and the Technocrat troops, which deflected most of their bolts and quarrels. The ranger cast a torrent of arrows into the crowd, concentrating on the best marksmen he could discern. The Garron clansmen engaged the enemy hand-to-hand at the foot of the tall war engine.

Montenegro raised Starfell for the final stroke against the iron hinge. From this high vantage, he realized he could see the lay of the entire battle. Warlord Bahrok's small force had drawn away a large number of the Technocrat regiments. The change in Logosian tactics gave an advantage to Garron. Already the Shirron's cavalry was circling around the slower mechanized units, pinching them off from the support of their deadly airships. While the flying vehicles drifted slowly toward a better position, they would not arrive soon enough to stave off the Garron offensive.

For the first time, Montenegro imagined the Juka Clans might be victorious.

He smashed his enchanted blade on the damaged hinge. It screamed sparks. The hatch tumbled free, onto the heads of the protesting Jatha and Fairfax. His companions were unhurt. Montenegro was bursting with the fire of combat.

The man on the other side of the hatch was a Logosian Juka. He twirled a small trident in his hands. Just before he thrust it at Montenegro, he paused. When he recognized a human, he held back and laughed.

Montenegro laughed with him. The Logosian did not realize that humans fought for Garron. The knight could not



fault him for ignorance, so with his shield hand he snatched the trident from the Juka's grip and then pulled him out of the war engine. The soldier bellowed as he fell into the midst of his own troops.

The next Juka inside the war engine did not make the same mistake. Montenegro was glad. He parried the warrior's short spear and jammed Starfell into his leg. The Logosian hissed and clapped a skillful hold on the knight's sword arm. Montenegro stabbed him with the trident. As the weapon struck it spat a puff of steam. Then its tip shoved out from the haft an additional two feet, piercing the Juka's armor on both sides. The Logosian collapsed.

Montenegro let go of the trident and stared at it for an instant. A steam-powered weapon? What kind of people was he fighting?

Jatha climbed into the cramped space behind him. The ranger let fly a hail of blows from his hand axe. They now faced a clump of both humans and Juka. They were pinned on a small platform inside the war engine, underneath the floor that held the lightning thrower. Montenegro hacked his way toward the ladder on the far side, happy that Starfell did not balk at the weird array of Technocrat armor and shields, while Fairfax bolted shut the trapdoor that led below, to the place where someone with a tube had knocked the knight from his ridgeback.

Montenegro burst out onto the summit of the machine. Three men in black robes aimed bolt-throwers at him. He thrust his shield in the way and lunged out of the trapdoor. With one stroke he realized that these Technocrats were armored underneath their raiments, but they were not hand fighters.

Their bolts punched straight through his shield, but not his plate mail. He pirouetted between the Technocrats, cutting each one down with two or three rapid cuts. When they had all fallen, he lifted one of them over his head and presented the body to the soldiers of Garron.

A great cheer erupted from the ground battle. When the war engine was clearly lost, the Logosian troops pulled away from it. The clansmen gleefully helped them to retreat.

Montenegro carefully laid down the body of the dead Technocrat. Fairfax wrinkled his brow. "Such care for an enemy, sir?"

The knight tugged off the Technocrat's hood. Underneath was a young human not even as old as the ranger.

"Look at them. They're our cousins, Fairfax. I've fought thieves and bandits before, but never an actual kingdom of humans." He sighed and stood to his full height. "Who are these people?"

"They're damnably complicated," answered Jatha, who was poking around the strange lightning thrower. "I can't fathom this contraption. If there's magic inside, it's better hidden than a woman's logic."

"Can you operate it?"

The Meer laid his ears flat. "No. Neither would I want to."

"Then destroy it. If it does us no good, then it's only a liability that could fall into their hands again."

"I hoped you would agree with that sentiment."

The wizard fashioned a stream of bright bolts from his hands. The war engine shuddered with thunder as he tore the lightning thrower apart. Fairfax and Montenegro shrugged against the impacts as they gazed out from their new perspective. The momentum of the battle now favored

Garron. When the ranger pointed out this fact, Montenegro replied, "It is Bahrok's doing. But he must have led those Logosian divisions into a bottomless pit. I haven't seen either a Juka or a Technocrat come out of that canyon."

"Who would have guessed? That obnoxious troll does have his uses, after all."

"Victory is not an altogether pleasant thing. By Thulann's accounts, this could give him political momentum. Assuming he survives."

"Then let us wish him a glorious demise."

Montenegro shook his head. "I shall not. Honor, not glory, bestows purpose upon death. I wish him an honorable victory."

Fairfax chuckled. "You're always one to split hairs, aren't you?"

The war engine rocked with a sudden explosion. The two men were shoved against the metal-plated crenellations. Behind them, in a cloud of smoke, Jatha walked away from the dismantled lightning thrower with a look of disgust on his smooth-coated features.

"That was more satisfying than I expected. Why don't we go find another one? These sweetmeats will be leaving soon, I suspect, and I am feeling especially peckish just now."

Not since the Cataclysm had the skies over Logos blazed so brightly. Titanic thunderbolts struck from the clouds, hammering Blackthorn's tower, which hovered like a spectre above the floating city. Great misty winds sailed in from the surrounding desert, swirling about the tower and shaking it back and forth. Frequent explosions shook the walls, sending out shockwaves that caused the rest of Logos to quake and tremble.

As if in answer, the giant machines in the innards of the city roared and clanged violently. Smokestacks belched flames of indistinct color high into the air. Huge wheels and levers churned.

Sister Raveka could not guess the purpose of the machines which the Techno-Prophet had awakened. She knew that they had not been activated in her lifetime. Blackthorn called upon power he had inherited from the Overlords themselves. She had the sensation that the entire city was his weapon.

The Mathematician hunkered down behind a cement wall. Her body shook. She reached out for the hand of Captain Shanty Lynch, who sheltered beside her. The old buccaneer winced at every blast of thunder.

"Brought back an archmage, did ya?" he had commented when she found him waiting outside the Techno-Prophet's tower. "Blackthorn's britches, there's no man in New Britannia more fearsome or strong than an archmage! This is one duel I hate to see!"

Captain Lynch cowered from the forces unleashed in the city. He was slurping from a bottle of liquor, his eyes glazing and his face reddening with every swallow. Raveka squeezed his rough hand, as a way to comfort them both.

A third figure was present. Father Gaff stood beside Raveka. With stoic eyes he watched the terrible battle. He neither hid behind the wall nor flinched at the explosions. His robes billowed in the savage gusts of wind.

Raveka marveled at the man's calm, until she saw his lips. Though his voice did not rise above the wrenching clamor, she determined that he was chanting litanies of the same sort that Blackthorn himself had sung when she was in his presence.

Her chest tightened. A familiar paradigm sprang into her

mind: *Discipline is courage*. Watching Father Gaff's mouth, she picked up the chant herself. Then she stood beside her mentor, the fury of the Techno-Prophet's duel whipping the hood around her face. Her expression eased into a cold, somber frown.

Her hand still clutched Shanty Lynch's, nor did her grip slacken.

In a sudden swell the winds increased and the thunderbolts struck more savagely. Then it all ended. The lightning vanished. Flames disappeared from smokestacks. The air settled around them, dust and fog and debris from the tower filtering to the roofs and streets of Logos. The great machines slowed, their clanks and squeaks creeping to a gentle, deliberate halt. A hush befell the city.

Father Gaff heaved a deep sigh. "Let us see what the day has brought us, calamity or vindication."

Near the Techno-Prophet's tower, Raveka could see Lector Sartorius and the Janissar guards converging again. She was glad they would arrive before she and Father Gaff. She dared not imagine what they would find within, but it comforted her to think that Blackthorn's Chosen might shield them from the details. That was the proper structure of Technocrat society. At that moment, Sister Raveka craved the rigid, familiar structure of home.

At her feet squatted Shanty Lynch, drunk on Logosian brandy and uncontrollable fear. Raveka heard him mutter, "Don't make me go back," as he fought down the sobs that rose from his gut.

Strange horns bellowed from the peaks of the Logosian airships. Amid the echoes of the blaring signals, the

Technocrat troops commenced a quick retreat. The sky darkened with hovering vessels returning from the bombardment of the city. The invading forces clambered to get aboard.

The Garron soldiers leapt and snarled with restless hunger, anxious to rout their enemies, but the clan commanders kept them leashed. With so many airships now lurking overhead, to pursue the retreating Logosians would be far too costly. Instead they formed a defensive line across the mountain passes that led to the city. They watched with rising impatience while the Technocrats drifted away in their flying, mechanical towers.

Not until the last airship vanished in the distance did the trumpets announce the end of the battle. The cheer that erupted shook the hills to their roots.

Montenegro stood before a narrow mountain pass. Gouts of billowing smoke heaved across his field of view. The stench of charred remains lent claws to the bitter air.

Inside lay the canyon where Bahrok had lured several divisions of Technocrats. A miracle had taken place there. Jukan soldiers were gathering now to behold the aftermath.

The knight listened as they recounted, in voices pitched with awe, the tale of the warlord's triumph. Somehow, on this claustrophobic battleground, Bahrok and his troops had defeated four times their number despite the Logosians' lethal technology. Ruined machines were strewn in fiery pieces along the pass. The onlookers conjectured that the narrow path had hampered the plodding, heavy weapons, allowing Bahrok and his warriors to overwhelm their crews in quick, skillful blitzes.

As the winds swept away more and more of the haze, Montenegro understood what had occurred. He remained silent as he stepped between the colossal walls of the stern, rugged crevasse.

Bahrok's victory had cost everything. His men had been decimated. The floor of the canyon was submerged in bodies. Already the crows were starting to descend.

A giant silhouette materialized in the smoke. Bahrok strode from the battlefield with shield and mace in hand. His muscular body was bathed in red. His eyes captured a glassy sort of fire.

As the fierce Juka approached, Montenegro tensed. He hoisted his shield to its ready position. Starfell balanced willingly in the shell of his gauntlet.

Then he lowered his weapon.

Though Bahrok looked directly at the knight, the warlord did not seem to recognize him. Instead the chieftain of Clan Varang stumbled onward, gazing ahead, avoiding the slain who clustered underfoot, with his weary strides chasing away the black carrion feeders that squawked and fluttered in noisy gusts. A bedraggled stream of survivors followed him, though the tail of their parade appeared soon after.

The audience of victorious soldiers muted their reactions, observing in somber amazement.

Montenegro looked on with a sober expression as well, though he sensed a different kind of gravity. Warlord Bahrok had accomplished a feat that might become legendary. If the Juka clans required such measures to defend Garron, their mightiest stronghold, what hope could they have of winning a war against the Logosians? The Technocrats had retreated with their forces largely intact, as if strategic considerations,

rather than tactical ones, had demanded the withdrawal. The battle could well have endured for days or even weeks.

He appreciated now the persistence of Thulann in negotiating an alliance with Britain. Such an arrangement might be their only path to defeating the strange armies of Blackthorn. Even more so, however, Montenegro pondered the mechanized strength of the Technocrats themselves. What sort of kingdom produced these marvels that were at once so intriguing and so deadly? How terrible was an opponent whose cunning manufactured a tool like Riona Lynch and whose military hurled thunderbolts like a legion of flying gods?

And most important, what destiny might befall New Britannia if the Senate were to make such an enemy?

The seers claimed that a war with Blackthorn was inevitable. Montenegro did not often put his faith in greater magicks, and now he hoped more than ever that the predictions were wrong. The alternative might well be devastating.



## CHAPTER

# 13

### The Black Scarf

A small group sat around a table in the Shirron's music gallery. Evening light beamed through a series of metal-framed windows. The walls were lined with Jukan instruments, perched upon ornate stands. Thulann could almost hear their echoes in the vaulted ceiling. Yet no musicians joined them today. This discussion was for very few ears.

Shirron Turlogan paced at the head of the table. "So, Regent Salvatore, you have witnessed for yourself the might of Logosia. You can see why I ask for your government's support. Our enemy possesses a black ingenuity for which we have no answer."

The New Britannian senator nodded, his fingers steepled. "Indeed. What I saw today was nothing less than horrifying. I cannot imagine what it must be like to face war against such a terrible enemy. And yet I may just find out. My decision pivots upon one final determination." He faced the white-braided woman sitting beside him. "Mistress Aurora, based upon what you have observed, were these the forces of Blackthorn, our enemy of old?"

The ancient sorceress narrowed her eyes. "Yes. We saw the airships in our visions."

"And do you believe that a war is inevitable between Blackthorn's kingdom and New Britannia?"

"Without question. It is as certain as the phases of the moons."

Regent Salvatore banged his fist on the table as he stood. "Then it's my honor, Shirron Turlogan, to accept your offer of alliance. Let us stand together against the threat of this mad 'Techno-Prophet.' "

Turlogan smiled. "Despite the terrible losses we suffered in the attack, this is perhaps the most joyous day Garron has known since my father and mother founded the city seven decades ago. I am honored to be the Shirron who first entered into a treaty with your great kingdom. May it be remembered as my greatest achievement."

Salvatore responded, "Respectfully I disagree with that sentiment. Rather let history remember you as the Shirron who defeated Blackthorn and ended forever his reign of darkness! Mistress Aurora will begin to teach our healing magic to your physicians, while I shall collect our military as soon as your ships can carry me back to Britain."

"Everything has been arranged, though you must stay in Garron a few days. We must write down the terms of the alliance, and it is only fair that you allow me to spoil you with my hospitality."

Salvatore grinned. "I shall be honored and delighted."

The two leaders bowed to each other. Unsure of what further gestures to make, the human returned to his chair.

Turlogan continued to pace the floor. "I shall call a feast for the clan chieftains tomorrow night, where we can

announce the alliance. I shall try to coax Warlord Bahrok into coming, though I understand he is quite traumatized by his ordeal. We must indulge his privacy, if he so wishes. He has earned it. Some say his involvement alone granted us victory today. I do not concur, but at this moment the priests and the crows are fighting over the bodies of his dead soldiers. His sacrifice must be honored."

Thulann leaned forward and drew a deep breath. "Which of course brings up the issue of my grievances against him."

The Shirron turned sympathetic eyes upon her. "You have worked hard to bring witnesses against him. I should understand if you wish to proceed."

She shook her head. "I shall not pursue an answer to my complaints. I disapproved of his sabotage of the alliance and his hand in Venduss's death. Yet the alliance is now sealed and Venduss yet lives. This changes his transgressions to a somewhat more personal nature. Given that today's victory will bring the clans closer together, I shall not threaten that accord with a personal grievance. Under the circumstances I hereby withdraw my complaints against him."

Thulann choked down more bitter words. To unravel a personal grudge was not so simple. Yet politics commanded her decision, and she had, after all, made a silent oath to the Great Mother on the battlefield.

And in any event, if in the future she felt the urge to condemn Bahrok in public, she did not doubt that he would provide her with ample rationale. Though he was not for the moment a threat to the Shirron's throne, his part in today's victory would increase his popularity among the clans. He would be even bolder in the coming months and years.

She hoped she would not become impatient waiting for their next confrontation.

When she glanced at Turlogan, his glimmering eyes revealed a clear understanding of her thoughts. It helped.

"Let us praise all of our warriors today," said the Shirron. "They have all made sacrifices for the common good. In the end, honor shall determine the final victor."

The four allies grunted agreement. There was much more to discuss, terms and timetables to devise, documents to script; yet for the moment they nurtured a span of silence, made calm by the first feeling of security any of them had felt since Sigmhat had landed on the shores of New Britannia.

Thulann preferred to think of history as composed of such peaceful moments. In diplomacy, as in music, what mattered most was the silence between the beats.

Two nights later, the feast of chieftains grew lively as the night aged. Shirron Turlogan's Great Hall brimmed with music and loud conversation. The Jukan leaders filled long, narrow tables crowded with food and wine, attended by a swarm of young servants. A great fire washed the room with welcome heat.

Warlord Bahrok had not come. His presence was felt, however, in the excited discussions of his devastating triumph. His esteem had unquestionably risen in the eyes of his fellow chieftains.

Among the boisterous Juka sat Fairfax and Jatha, trading stories with the clansmen and happily availing themselves of every local brew. The chieftains seemed fascinated by the exotic strangers. The wizard and the ranger were presently

unfolding for them the saga of the Hunt for the Black Goat. Though this was the second recounting, the audience listened with rapt attention. It was just the sort of frivolous glory that somehow legitimized their own hard-won victory.

Yet when she heard the story, Thulann's mood was not so carefree. She quickly scanned the Great Hall. Her face was drawn into a frown.

Turlogan leaned into her ear and murmured, "Perhaps a slice of good news might bring back your beautiful smile."

The Way Master emitted an incoherent noise in acknowledgment.

He continued, "With all the excitement I neglected to tell you. While you were gone we received news from the expedition in the west. They have made contact with the Meer government. Perhaps we shall have two alliances before the winter is through."

Thulann pursed her lips. "Jatha claims they have no interest in fighting a war. Yet we must make the effort, of course."

"I was thinking of sending you along to expedite the negotiations."

"Only if you want to receive my scarf, old man."

Turlogan let out a laugh and jostled her shoulder. "Come now, Thulann! Stop searching the crowd for my son, like you are a hungry gulbani. Venduss is old enough to look after his own affairs. And his father has missed your company terribly. Your return to me is like the ribbon of sunrise after a cold night. You warm my body and light my world."

Thulann winced and shook her head. "There is no hope for you! Might I suggest that your attention would be better turned to helping me find Venduss? You may not be con-

cerned about him now, but then you have not noticed that Toria is also missing. The persistence of youth must never overcome diligence of wisdom."

The Shirron smirked. "Do not presume what I know. I am allowed my gentle indulgence. Why should he be denied his?"

"Because your 'gentle indulgence' is trying to fashion him into some semblance of a chieftain. In your care he is liable to become nothing more than an extremely bad poet."

Thulann's eye fell across a face in a window. Montenegro gazed at her with a heavy, beckoning look.

She patted Turlogan's hand. "Please excuse me. I am summoned out into the darkness once more."

She strolled through the courtyard outside of the Great Hall. The twin moons shone brightly in the sky. The windows of the hall threw patterns of golden light across the silver-laced walkway.

No one occupied the open square. She approached a carved pedestal in the center. Upon it she found a single black scarf.

She closed her eyes and lowered her head.

"It is an invitation," came Montenegro's voice from the shadows, "the same one you gave to me."

"I know. What is it you want from me?"

"Satisfaction."

"When will this end?"

His tall form emerged from the blackness. "Tonight, if you please."

She stroked the silky fabric with her thumb. It was a cool, pleasant sensation. "Very well. But only if you accept my condition."

"Which is?"

She sighed. "To the death."

He snorted and furrowed his brow. "You must be joking."

"I am not. Because I do not believe anything short of death will calm your spirit. Fire burns until it is nothing but smoke."

"You are a patronizing old warhorse, you know that? I don't want to hear your platitudes anymore. Duel me."

"Accept my terms."

"No! Fight me tonight and let this be done."

"Accept my terms."

"Stop saying that!"

"Then you are a coward, Montenegro."

He snatched her collar in his fist. She did not blink.

"Very well," he growled, "I'll call your bluff. To the death, Thulann."

She nodded. Without meeting his eyes, she lifted the hem of her overcoat and knelt on the granite walkway. She laid her hands on her lap and fell still.

The knight grumbled, "When will you be prepared?"

"It is already begun."

He grated his teeth together and snapped, "How can you mock me in the middle of your own ritual? You insidious old witch!"

"The Duel is begun. I shall remain here until you kill me or surrender your complaint."

The knight threw up his arms in disgust and stormed down the path. Then he spun to face her again, lunged forward and whisked Starfell into the moonlit air.

Thulann did not move.

With one thrust he jammed the enchanted sword deep into a granite flagstone. "Get up, Thulann."

"Do you surrender your complaint?"

"No, damn you! You're not going to trick me like this."

"Then I shall rise." When she stood they were of an equal height. Their eyes met. "But until you resign this antipathy, the Black Duel continues. You may kill me at any time. I shall not stop you."

"You sorely tempt me."

"That is the idea. Unless you control your hatred, you will never be as skilled as a Way Master."

He blinked at the rage bound inside his eyes. "Someday we'll put that to the test."

"No, we shall not. Good evening to you, Montenegro." She started back toward the Great Hall, her overcoat swirling in her wake.

From the courtyard he called out, "I shall not stay here. I'm leaving for Logos tonight, on foot if I have to. I came for a reason, if you recall, and it wasn't for the camaraderie of your people."

Without turning she answered, "The seed of patience yields the fruit of understanding. If you wait, we shall turn our spies loose onto Riona Lynch's trail. But if you must leave so hastily, then take my advice first. Look upon that pedestal before you go. Perhaps you shall find something you are searching for."

She pushed open the door to the Shirron's hall, sweeping out of the watery moonlight and into the warm glow of the fire.

The sounds and smells of the feast tumbled over her when she stepped inside. Turlogan's glance twinkled when he saw her. Thulann inhaled a deep, succulent breath and headed for her chair. Roasted meat beckoned from her plate.



If the ordeal of the past six months had done nothing else, it had surely reawakened her hunger. She intended to indulge herself.

Montenegro stood before the pedestal under the twin radiant moons. Upon it was the black scarf with which he had challenged her. The Way Master had placed it over a small object, forming a hill-shaped lump of silk.

He tugged loose the scarf. The object underneath glimmered in the spectral glow.

It was the golden Dragon's Tear that Damario had stolen. He tightened his fist around it. The icon tingled in his palm.

"Thulann is an infuriating woman," said a languid voice. Montenegro flashed Starfell out of its granite sheath and thrust it toward the speaker.

The Technocrat stopped him with two upraised bolt-throwers. These weapons were larger than the one she had carried at the Black Goat roadhouse. Half a dozen extra quarrels were stacked atop each device. Montenegro could surmise the purpose of the added ammunition.

"Riona Lynch," he growled. "You cannot know how glad I am to see you at this moment."

From the maw of her black hood she replied, "It's only because you'd like to kill *somebody* tonight, but I cannot help myself. I am charmed by you anyway."

"Are you feeling suicidal? Is that why you've come to this place? You know you'll never escape here."

She smiled. "Oh, I shall escape, but I confess the danger is a little bit . . . stimulating."

He lowered Starfell until the tip scraped the ground. "Then you've come to murder me this time."

Her pale lips flew open in a laugh. "Why are you obsessed with the thought of me murdering you? I think you like dangerous women, hey?"

"You came all the way from Logos just to look at my face?"

"It has its appeal, but don't flatter yourself too much. I was delivering something to the city. I wanted to see you while I was here. I promised, didn't I?"

"So you did." He looked over her loose black robe and shook his head. "I do miss Riona, you know."

"She does not exist. My name is Raveka," said the Technocrat with a cock of her head.

He almost smiled. "You want something from me, Raveka. Out with it."

"Not at all. I want to give you a gift. Something that Thulann of Garron is too uptight to let you have."

"What's that?"

"Satisfaction."

He raised an eyebrow. "You're going to let me kill you?"

"It's not me you want. I didn't murder Lord Valente. My associate Pikas did. But he turned against me. I thought I'd finished him once already, but I heard a rumor that he still lives. So I thought you might enjoy the pleasure."

"How kind of you. Was I your first choice for a pawn?"

Her smile looked entirely genuine. "Absolutely."

"You are a dangerous woman. And I'm going to get my hands on you, you know. If not this time, then the next time." He sheathed his sword with a rapid motion, causing her to twitch. "But I shall dance to your tune for now. Where can I find this assassin of yours?"

"New Britannia. I'm not certain exactly where yet. I'll tell you when I know more."

"So this is an open-ended arrangement, eh?"

"Unless you'd prefer not to meet me again."

He bared his teeth in a grin. "I dream of our next encounter."

"I thought you might say that. Let us rendezvous in New Britannia then, say, when Trammel is next full? That should give you enough time to return. What place would you prefer? The cascades?"

"If you're wise, Raveka, you won't invoke those memories again. No, I should prefer it if you came to my estates."

She laughed. "I've seen the place. It's not exactly refined."

Montenegro squeezed the golden icon in his hand. "Give it time. Give it time. There's always hope."

She smiled once more. "As you like. I'll see you there. I shall count the hours, Gabriel."

With a swoop of her robes she vanished into the shadows. The knight took one step to give chase, but halted.

There was no need to rush. His satisfaction would come. He simply needed to give it some time.

Not until the next morning did a servant discover the large package deposited near the gates of the city. Onlookers were unsure what to make of the bundled corpse. The city guards delivered it to the Shirron himself. While the warrior did not recognize the dead human, his New Britannian guests did. Mistress Aurora actually screamed.

Master Gregorio's throat had been raggedly torn open. The wound suggested that the attacker had wielded some manner of large, metal claw, probably of Logosian design. Yet more startling was the extraordinary fact of the archmage's death. Not even Mistress Aurora was able to com-

prehend the scope of power this murder must have required.

The corpse was too old to resurrect. They did not even make the attempt. Master Gregorio took his place among the legends of New Britannia.

The grotesque message conveyed one undeniable fact: Logos was the enemy of Britain. Preparations commenced both in Jukaran and in New Britannia for the inevitable battles with the Technocrats.

Darkness had fallen across the world, and the fog of war rose again.

## Epilogue

“I used to play a lot of chess. Did you know that, Sartorius?”

“Yes, Your Eminence, I have heard the stories.”

“In chess you sacrifice the small pieces to benefit the bigger pieces. But life’s not that way, is it?”

“No it isn’t, Your Eminence. The bigger pieces often fall first.”

“You understand me, then. We lost the invasion of Garron. Who is responsible? Lector Braun? Lector Caleb? Yourself, Sartorius?”

“Lector Caleb’s calculations did not respect a large enough safety margin. Our troops were bound too closely to their respective airships. Their mobility was severely impaired.”

“As I thought. Then it is time for Lector Caleb to retire. Enforce this in whatever way gives you the most pleasure.”

“It shall be done, Your Eminence.”

“Who is next in line to be Lector of the Mathematicians?”

“Father Gaff, Your Eminence.”

“Ah, of course. The spymaster who provided Lector Caleb with faulty calculations.”

"Yes, the same man."

"I like him. He is not afraid to sacrifice to further his own agenda."

"He is indeed a crafty person, Your Eminence. He shall make a skilled Lector."

"The game is much more interesting when smaller pieces are willing to sacrifice larger pieces. Don't you agree, Sartorius? Answer carefully."

"We are all servants of the Machine, and Your Eminence as its living embodiment."

"That is true. Order is the Path to Divinity. Now go, Sartorius. You've got a new Lector to install and a war to plan. And I . . . do not wish to be disturbed. I am in the mood for dreaming."

"As you wish, Your Eminence. Good evening."

"Oh, and Sartorius, my Chosen One, in the morning send Lector Gaff to me. We have matters to discuss. There is danger ahead. I can hear the rumble of its wheels."

"As you say, Your Eminence. As you say."

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A second generation writer and SF fan, Austen Andrews spends his daylight hours as a computer programmer in Austin, Texas. At night he transforms into an author, illustrator, cartoonist, or roleplayer, depending on the fullness of the moon and the proximity of his deadlines. He dreams in the colors of horror, fantasy, and mad, unbridled science.

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