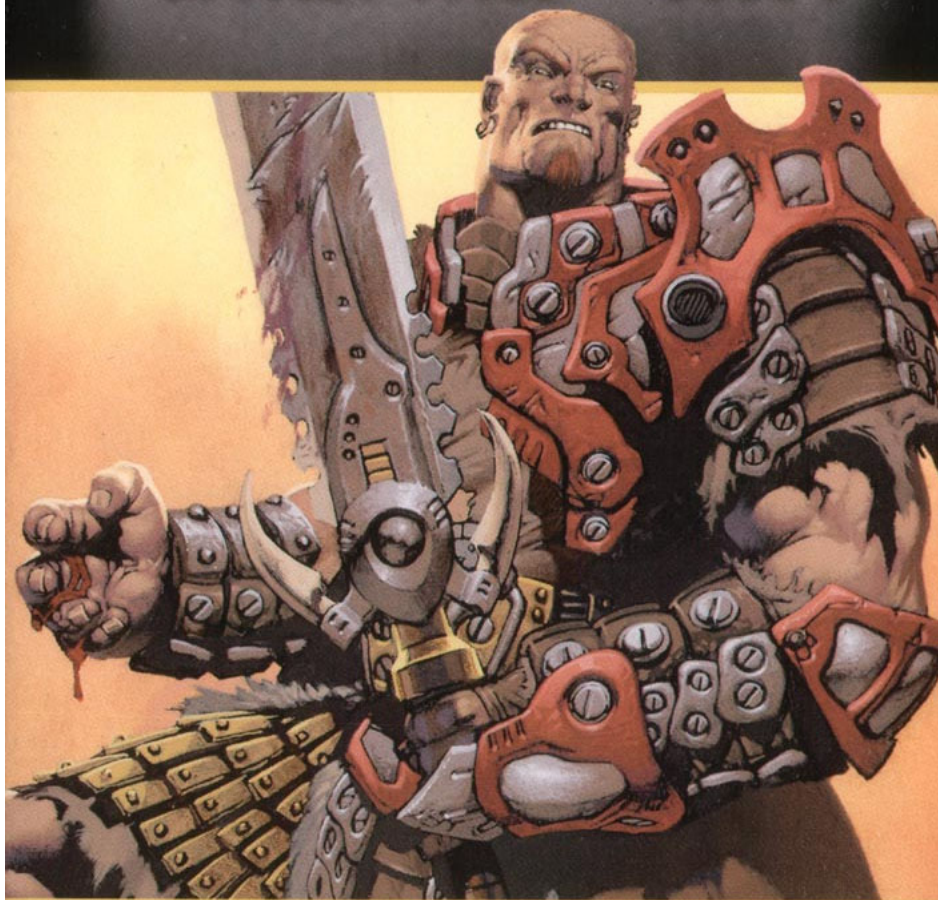


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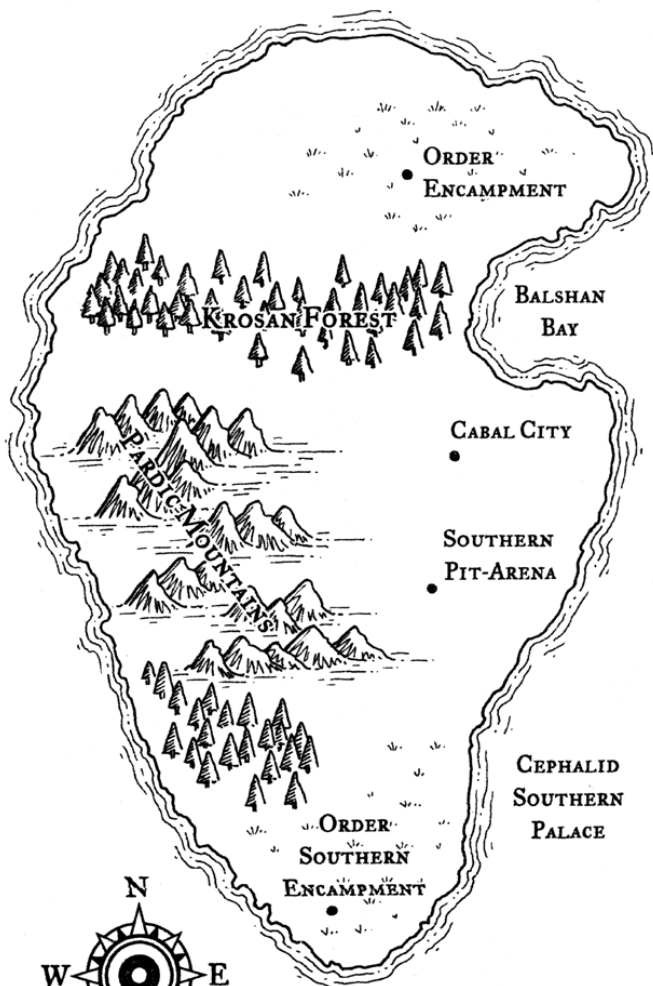
ODYSSEY CYCLE • BOOK I



Vance Moore

The detonation rocked Kamahl back. The light was bright enough that he could see through his eyelids as the edge of the energy brushed him. The crowd was stunned into silence. The magic ignited the spore cloud and the explosion sped back to the mole, devouring it as the molds detonated in sympathy with Kamahl's attack. The dementia caster rolled on the ground, unable to stand. She had been flung back several yards, and the sand stripped most of her clothes off as well as much of her skin. Her teeth bared and bloody, she stood, gathering herself to summon more monstrosities.

OTARIA



CHAPTER 1

The sun lay sullen to the west. Hovering on the horizon, its rays cast the hills in shadows. The pits lay ahead. Finally he was drawing near after months of travel. Kamahl looked at the heart of the games and saw only a gaping hole of darkness. The twilight prevented him from seeing the city that lay in the hollow. Even as he watched, torches were lit, the dull red light illuminating the site of Kamahl's future triumphs. From mountain obscurity he traveled toward his destiny.

Cabal City was the largest in the continent's interior, but only a few signs of its size were visible from Kamahl's vantage point. He could see just the roofs of a few buildings and the residential quarters' laundry hanging in the still air. The city was held in a huge rocky crater, its sides uneven but highest on the western outskirts. The glow of torches and the streetlights near the great dome of the arena began to color the walls of the buildings as Kamahl moved closer. The flare of both ordinary fire and magic lit the streets, but the dark shadow cast by the crater walls shrouded most of the city in darkness.

The barbarian started down the shallow incline at a slow run. He breathed easily, even with the armor in his pack and the great sword strapped to his back. Skin the color of brass showed no flush of exertion. His smooth beardless features were calm. No sweat dampened his inky hair, and his violet eyes were clear. Living in the mountains had given him good night

vision, and he looked through the increasingly dim light to the town's gate. The road began to rise, and he breathed harder as he neared the city limits. The crater walls were notched, and the entrance reminded the barbarian of a pass through mountains, though far smaller in scale than the peaks of his childhood home. Drovers hurried a string of camels into the city, their whips snapping as they moved the animals through the high gate. Merchants from across the continent come to satisfy the tourney crowds, the warrior thought.

Kamahl breathed deeply, the prospect of the games exciting his blood more than the run. Years mastering the fighting arts lay behind him, and now he rushed to show his skills before the wider world. Veteran of many a duel in his home mountains, he wanted more than the championship of an alpine valley. The best fighters on the continent converged on this tourney, and he belonged here.

His stride lengthened as he left the hills, his boots pounding into the road's surface. The guards waved the merchants through, uttering only a few threats to increase the bribes offered. They turned their attention on the jogging figure. His light throwing axes softly rubbed against Kamahl's wallet. He had run for days approaching the contest and lost what little fat he might have had. The strict regime of exercise had refined him down to his essence. He pulled up to the gate without any sign of exertion except his deep breaths.

"Another jack," muttered a guard as he took a firmer hold of his halberd and moved out from the gate, Kamahl frowned, for the soldier used the term

for an arena fighter as if it were an insult. He was a champion, and only the obvious inferiority of the speaker prevented a demand for satisfaction. The man looked nervously at a stack of orders. The rest of the troops had withdrawn inside to the guardhouse. Two stout men-at-arms slowly lugged a crossbeam to brace the gate when it closed for the night. The road lead directly into town with only a portcullis to bar the way. The wall was only twelve feet high and the guards served more to collect tolls than defend the city.

"Why have you come to the pits of the Cabal?" intoned a guard who drew away from the gate as if to duck behind the wall.

"I have come into my own," Kamahl said absently, looking to the city beyond. The guard was confused and unconsciously gave way as the massive barbarian came closer. The fighter drew his attention to the minor servant before him. "I will compete in the tourney. Where would I find the Master of the Games?"

The guard blinked at the bald statement but regarding the warrior seemed uncertain how to respond. Shouting broke out on the road behind him, and he turned from the barbarian to the commotion. There were several wagons backed up the causeway leading down to the pit. Kamahl could see soldiers gathered in a clump in front of the waiting vehicles.

"As you can see, the road is backed up due to a wreck." The guard said, drawing a little confidence from the sight of his fellows so far away. "The elevator cable snapped and killed a mule." Kamahl just strode forward, ignoring the guard's outstretched arm.

"No profit from crazy men anyway," the soldier muttered as he stepped away from the barbarian.

The road's decline prevented horses hauling fully loaded wagons into the city. An elevator dropped cargo from the staging area just inside the guardhouse to the bottom of the depression. Once relieved of their loads, merchants could then safely take the horses down the slope. Traffic headed into the city rode the brakes all the way to the flat at the bottom, using the animals just to steer. The elevator had just broken, however, and the snapped cable had beheaded a mule, overturning a wagon and blocking the causeway.

Kamahl drew a dagger, holding its blade against his arm. He used the hilt to prod people out of the way, ignoring angry words. The decapitated beast lay tangled in its traces, its blood pouring down the steep roadway. Kamahl gathered a whisper of power and wrapped it around the dagger's blade. He shoved aside the owner and guardsmen and skimmed his blade along the beast's side with a single stroke. Harness leather and chains parted like air before the blade, singing as tension released. Kamahl shoved the corpse hard with his boot. The barbarian's physical power became plain to the angry guardsmen. The donkey shot down the ramp lubricated by its own blood. The animal hit the railing, wood coming apart in a spray of rotten timbers. The remains of the beast and fence fell to the ground below with a heavy thud. Kamahl withdrew power from the blade and continued down the road, walking just along the bloodied skidway.

"The Cabal pit masters bought that carcass!" bellowed someone. Kamahl's ears picked up the conversation even as he continued away.

"Leave it alone," he heard someone else hiss. "Jacks are all crazy; just consider the meat tenderized."

* * * * *

Fighters from throughout the continent moved in the streets. Kamahl saw races of all descriptions—faerie, human, dwarf, centaur, and others that he could not name. They came to the pits to compete for their own glory and the prizes offered. Everywhere in the land the contest between warriors played out every day, but it was in the pits that jacks of known mettle found opponents worth the sweat of battle. Kamahl came for worthy adversaries and to prove his mastery. Most of his opponents were there for more.

The Cabal had opened up its vaults to supply the prizes. Booty from centuries of collecting and a thousand battlefields was available. Sages and historians were nearly as prevalent as fighters in the city. All converged to see the treasures drawn from the rock deep below the pits. With the fighters and the learned men, an influx of gamblers and enthusiasts filled the avenues. Moving among the throngs worked pickpockets, whores, and sellers of the forbidden. The barbarian sauntered over the cobblestones, seeing unfamiliar sights. Tents stood with ragged and dirty men calling for custom. Though from the sparsely settled mountains, Kamahl was completely civilized in his cynicism. False wonders filled the streets as the hopeful went from stall to stall, determined to find the lucky prize that surely must be hidden in all the chaff.

Torches flared and some burned brightly with magic enhanced lights. Kamahl took a second to feel

the warmth of the energy with his mystic senses. Stretching forth his mind and spirit he felt the beat of power and dissonance as contesting magics fractured against each other. It could only be the pits that called to him, and he hurried through the collected throngs to take his place.

* * * * *

The crowd roared its approval as two men moved into the arena, the masses calling encouragement. Kamahl had bought entrance with a small nugget of gold from a mountain stream. He imagined the Master of the Games would be in the arena, and the barbarian was determined to find him. The building was huge, seating thousands. The walls leaned inward overhead, evoking the feeling of an underground cavern. Huge torches flared continuously behind reflectors, directing the magic light onto the floor of the stadium. Red and black sand covered the circular fighting area. Inside the wide ring were obstacles and a few obvious trap doors. Despite himself, Kamahl was impressed. For the first time he was in a building that made him feel closed in even though it was several spear-casts across.

The two men on the sand moved together, and Kamahl shook his head. The opponents were hesitant, and the barbarian wondered how any could find such a match interesting. A young man standing close by noticed Kamahl's mild contempt and spoke.

"Do not give up hope just yet, sir," he said, shuffling near.

His clothing was dark and loose, the tailoring and richness of the fabric suggesting a person of means, yet he was young and had no attendants. Kamahl thought

him likely to be a lord's servant though he saw no obvious crest or standard to announce his affiliation.

"The name is Chainer," the man said, moving closer. The pair are partners against Lieutenant Kirtar, a champion from the Northern Order."

"Kamahl," the barbarian said, glancing briefly at the youth and then to the stands, "here to win the tourney. Where do I announce myself?"

Chainer's eyebrows raised slightly at the boast, and he smiled. Kamahl turned more of his attention to the young man.

The youth still had a trace of innocence in his face, but already the fighter could see some of the hardness and cynicism that characterized city toughs. The boy's hair was in tight corn-rolls that grew down over his eyes. His only visible weapon was a large, ornamental dagger that he wore at his side. As Kamahl considered him, Chainer's fingertips lightly brushed the hilt in an apparently unconscious gesture.

"You'll want to speak to the Master of the Games then," Chainer said. He pointed across the enclosure to the box seats across the arena. "There's the master now, talking to the Mer ambassador."

The other side of the building held a host of individual boxes, most of which were empty now, these being only the early elimination rounds. Kamahl could see separate floating pods hovering over the boxes, clustered around doors and a narrow platform high on the arena wall.

"Those are only used by high officials and wealthy patrons of the games." Chainer said as he followed Kamahl's eyes. "Usually the Master of the Games oversees from there, but with so much work still to be

done, he is holding court where messengers can easily be received and sent."

At the mention of a court, Kamahl turned his eyes down and looked at the official's box. There sat the arena's ruler, rotund and covered in drapes of expensive looking cloth. However, it was his companions that fixed the barbarian's attention. Two figures stood out against the backdrop of aides, guards, and servants. Kamahl's teeth clenched as he considered the Mer seated at the right hand of the Cabal official.

The ambassador looked remarkably human. Kamahl could see two small silver-capped horns against the blue skin. The different skin tone was barely worth mentioning. The barbarian had learned something of the greater world during his years in the mountains. Those born of and allied with the sea were well known for their monstrous and bizarre appearance. The only oddity except for the blue skin was the ambassador's clothes. The wraps of cloth lay plastered against his azure flesh. While Kamahl looked on, a servant slowly poured liquid over the limbs of his master. The ambassador absently presented a leg for additional treatment, never turning from his conversation.

The massive figure off to the side fitted Kamahl's idea of what a Mer citizen should look like. A sideboard piled high with food lay open to the box patrons, but only one person took advantage. The barbarian could think of two reasons for the single eater.

First was the dangerous look of the diner. Kamahl was reminded of a giant frog. The hulking

figure would have overtopped the barbarian by at least a foot, but until Kamahl compared him with the other patrons of the box, he thought the frog quite short. The amphibian was a mass of muscle, so wide that the mind made the creature shorter than it was. The creature's brilliant blue and yellow skin was dotted with short growths that reminded the barbarian of spikes on a mace. The mouth gaped wide as the frog swallowed an entire leg of lamb with a single gulp.

The second reason that others might forego the repast was the thick slime dripping from the frog creature's webbed hands. The excretions covered the food as the amphibian grabbed up more to eat.

"The ambassador's champion, Turg," Chainer offered, a hint of distaste in his voice. "He competes for the prizes and the ambassador's glory. It is said his race is one of complete savagery. The frog is a testament to the money and time the ambassador has spent training him."

Kamahl looked to the arena floor where the two novices shifted uncertainly. If such as these can compete, he thought, then I should have no trouble. The city man saw his look of dismissal.

"They may not look like much, but those willing to risk certain death are sometimes in short supply." He pointed toward the posted standards and gates. "Whether or not quarter may be offered is posted by where the standards hang and which gates the opponents use. Kirtar always passes through the gate of no quarter. The Master of the Games must be flexible in scheduling opponents for the lieutenant in the opening bouts. Experienced fighters are usually closer to the final round before they chose death

matches. The arena also tries to save death matches for the final days of competition lest a capable fighter be killed off too early. You could find a death match easy enough, but to be considered a serious competitor you must be known or impress the officials with your power."

The growing murmurs of the restive crowd drew Kamahl's and Chainer's attentions back to the arena floor. The team of mountain mages was looking more confident now as cries of "forfeit" began to rise from the stands. Their opponent still had not appeared, and Chainer snorted in disgust at the lack of a champion to oppose the pair. The chants stopped as a near naked figure moved onto the field.

"He shows his contempt for the games," Chainer muttered as catcalls rose from the stands. "Trust a member of the Order to belittle the honor of the tourney."

Kamahl was no worshipper of pageantry, so Kirtar's failure to obey the forms did not upset him, but the arrogance that the figure showed as he walked nonchalantly toward the opposing pair put his teeth on edge. An aspirant to the victory circle, Kamahl ached to show Kirtar that he should show respect for the other fighters if not the venue. As the barbarian took in the warrior's pale skin, he became more irritated. Kirtar was a bird warrior.

Centuries before, a race of three peoples had fled from other planes to Dominaria. All were descended from ancestors who could fly, though most had lost their wings. The furthest from their winged forebears were the elen. These giant humanoids stood nine to ten feet tall with massive legs of near solid bone. Slow

and ponderous, they provided the muscle for the society, though in war they served only as massed troops with little status.

The raypen lay at the other end of the size spectrum. Dwarf-sized creatures with withered legs ending in prehensile feet, they could still fly with their innate magic. Magical feathers covered their long distorted arms giving them, for short periods of time, the freedom their ancestors had known.

Kirtar's milky skin and massive hands identified him as aven. The warrior caste of a militant people, they had joined the Northern Order en masse. Though not prolific, they rose to many positions of power in the north and many a party riding into the western mountains was led by bird warriors. Mountain societies respected strength, but that respect must be individually earned and honor conferred on the basis of personal achievement. The Order advocated the submission of all to the movement's leaders. Kamahl—by birth, training, and inclination—bowed only to those more powerful. His whole life was dedicated to proving that, now in his prime, no one could order him about with impunity. To give up your will to others, all of whom lacked the power to beat you or claim your respect with their own deeds, grated. Kamahl regarded the bird warrior narrowly as his possible opponent in the tourney walked into battle.

The two mountain mages attacked simultaneously. They separated in a fast shuffle, their movements slowed as they called upon their magic. Neophytes, thought Kamahl.

The one on the left appeared to be a shaman. Furs and small amulets fluttered as he scuttled to one

side. The boy's dark skin contrasted with his blond hair. The spell that followed was slow to form. Eventually it congealed into reality as the universe created a creature in response to the youth's wishes. With a roar, a slavering troll stalked toward the bird warrior.

The emaciated monster approached warily, showing a degree of cunning unusual in the breed. The head darted from side to side, pausing to take in great gulps of air. Seemingly satisfied that nothing threatened, it jumped at Kirtar. Kamahl realized the bird warrior had not even bothered to raise power until the monster actually leaped. Golden energy erupted from his skin, coating his head and upper torso. It solidified into armor even as the mouth of the troll opened wide, the teeth and jaws of the monster seeming to leap out of the massive mouth. The beast stooped down to devour the warrior, but the bird warrior's armor did not give at all. Vainly its jaws clenched, and its claws scratched. Like a dog worrying at a pole, the beast tried to throw Kirtar to the side or gnaw through.

Now the other young caster entered the fray. Clad in piecemeal armor, he was shorter than his companion. As if he were his partner's negative, his dark hair contrasted with his pale skin. Spiral tattoos traced out magic sigils on his face and upper arms. He gripped a war hammer with both hands, but he did not use it to assail the bird warrior. Rather, he directed his summoned minions, who entered existence at a run. Dwarf warriors charged Kirtar and the troll.

Pick-axes and hammers rose and then fell. Kirtar rolled to the side; one blow driving through the armor

that now encased the warrior's lower legs. The troll howled in delight at the fresh blood, and Kamahl believed the aven would pay the ultimate price for his arrogance. The bird warrior did not freeze, and he reinforced the power of the magic encasing his limbs. Then the lieutenant struck with his bare hands.

The huge fists were encased in energy, and Kamahl could hear the troll's jaws being pulverized. Teeth sprayed across the ground, digging furrows as they buried themselves. The beast screamed with pain, striking out blindly and falling upon a dwarf. The diminutive warrior's sturdy metal armor proved unequal to troll claws. Chunks of flesh and blood fell to the sand as the dwarf was eviscerated. The audience booed loudly as the shaman tried to redirect his beast.

"The pair has lost the crowd," Chainer said, shaking his head sadly. "For allied creatures to fall upon each other is an unforgivable amateur mistake."

Kirtar was on his feet, weaving from side to side as the rest of the dwarf troop tried to take advantage of his reduced mobility. At first, his movements seemed forced, almost stumbling as he retreated. Kamahl watched as the bird warrior grew stronger. The barbarian realized that what wounds the lieutenant received healed even as he fought. The aven's opponents could heal too, and the troll stood up, gore from his mistaken victim covering its face and chest, the dwarf's blood mingling with the flow of foulness from the beast's own wound. The wound diminished as the troll reentered the fray. The deformed jaws moved back into position, and Kamahl could see new teeth glinting in the torchlight.

Kirtar attacked the surrounding dwarves, killing and maiming as the troll reached for him. The lieutenant's fists were swollen balloons of power as golden energy armored the bird warrior's flesh. Heads collapsed under the aven's blows. Shields and weapons shattered as the dwarves struggled to bring the bird warrior down. Kirtar leaped, whether flying or merely by enhanced muscles, Kamahl did not know. He soared through the air toward the dark-haired mountain mage. Kirtar's bent legs absorbed much of the energy of the landing, but the armored youth still fell—a bag of broken bones. The barbarian thought the mage might survive with proper care, then Kirtar batted the man's head with a slap. The new corpse was not decapitated, but the mage's head lolled off one shoulder, leaving no doubt of the man's death.

The troll ran at Kirtar, a high cry of bestial rage sounding as the few remaining dwarves vanished at the death of their master. The shaman coaxed fire from the air, and a few small balls of flame hurtled toward the bird warrior. Most of the spell wasted itself upon the open ground of the arena. The aroma of cooking meat carried everywhere as the fallen mountain mage was devoured by the ill-aimed magic. Burning flesh and charred leather fought with the odors of the food vendors making their rounds of the stands.

A flock of birds soared from the lieutenant's hands. The small castings were brilliant, and Kamahl forced himself to look at them directly. Slightly translucent they rose up into the air, drawing near the upper booths. Patrons fell silent as the small energy spirits turned. The flock dived toward the floor of the

arena, converging on everything still alive. Like ghosts, they slipped into bodies as all stood still. Bursts of light shone forth from eyes and open mouths. The troll's rays cast a giant shadow of the bird warrior against the far wall of the arena. The last mountain mage was a fallen star, shafts of light erupting from his skin. All except Kirtar collapsed. There was a moment of silence, and then thunderous applause filled the arena.

* * * * *

"So you think you can compete in the games, do you, my boy?" the Master of the Games said.

Kamahl restrained his irritation with difficulty. The man was fat and festooned in bolts of garish cloth, like some monstrous jester taking his ease at a party instead of entertaining. All of the Cabal members that he had seen were subdued in color and outward demeanor, but the Master of the Games showed a flamboyance of color and style that assaulted the barbarian's eyes.

"You might be powerful enough to compete in the games, but you will have to satisfy me." The official stood with some difficulty and walked toward a room off to the side of the box.

Guards drew themselves to attention only to be patted familiarly by the figure strolling by. Kamahl followed, flanked by another set of guards. Kamahl appeared weaponless. His great sword and axes lay in the entry chamber "as a matter of security." Only his mild amusement at the guards thinking him disarmed prevented him from laying waste to the Cabal's servants. His amusement was passing, and the

effrontery of the official made him rethink his participation in the tourney. To allow someone of such low character to stand in judgement of him was nigh unbearable. Kamahl came for the glory of combat against equals. How equal could his opponents be if one such as the official controlled their entry into the games? Kamahl became more and more convinced that he would withdraw beyond the city and challenge the winner of the tourney, that is if the barbarian did not return to the distant mountains instead.

"Only one who is worthy should have a chance at these," the master said, slightly out of breath as he moved to the side of the doorway and gestured over the trove of treasures.

Kamahl heard nothing but the pounding of his own heart for several seconds. A mound of gold, a few jewels, and numerous artifacts filled the center of the room. Mechanical limbs of ancient war machines lay next to charred books. Open scrolls showed letters that the educated barbarian could not even identify much less read. Leaking bags of coin lay against a massive breastplate worn by some forgotten giant. The room contained wealth, history, and shards of power from past wars, but it was a dull metal orb that locked Kamahl's gaze. It lay partially concealed by a fine sword blade, which Kamahl ached to throw away that he might better see this treasure. The rest of the room was filled with dross to the warrior's mind. The orb appeared to be no larger than his fist, yet he was mesmerized by it. His interest grew greater as he thought it responded to him. The light reflected by it seemed to grow brighter. The metal surface hinted at restrained power rather than the dull glint of common

metal. Kamahl's line of sight was broken as the Master of the Games entered his field of vision.

"Speechless, eh." The fat man chuckled. "A shy barbarian. An uncommon sight, but one which is still not special enough to have in the ranks of the tourney."

Kamahl's jaws ached as he restrained himself. This corpulent fool was nothing, but now Kamahl burned to enter and win. The metal sphere called to him still. The barbarian thought briefly of just taking the item, but he was a warrior, not a common thief. The official drew breath for another taunt, but Kamahl had heard enough. His hand dipped into his pouch at his belt. He could feel the guards drawing closer. Chainer, who had stayed far back during the entire conversation, came forward. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the young man's concerned face drawing nearer, perhaps to defuse the situation.

Kamahl drew out a single copper coin, worn thin with age and clipped by the truly desperate. The official's already florid face grew darker at the perceived insult of the pitiful bribe, but the barbarian had no intention of trying to buy his way into the tournament with any currency other than his own power. Kamahl's muscles relaxed as he channeled force to his hand. The copper brightened as the patina of age and wear sloughed away from the metal. The coin grew brighter as the guards moved in, their spear points poised to open up Kamahl's back. Like a tourist casting into a wishing well, the barbarian tossed the copper over his shoulder. The stone wall proved no barrier. Like a hot knife through butter, the red-hot coin melted its way through. Shouts of surprise

sounded as it exited through the box wall as well. The sound of the cooling slug hitting the arena floor was lost in the confusion of the guards and the white face of the Master of the Games. Looking at the deflated official, the barbarian knew he would have no problems entering the tourney.

CHAPTER 2

"I assure you, my lord, that no such displays of arrogance would be permitted in the palaces of the emperor. Such a boor would be summarily executed, especially one who lacked a suitable patron." The merman tried to sound sympathetic and outraged, but it was hard to feel much empathy for the fool who sat in front of him. The Master of the Games came to the fete in high dudgeon and had released a spew of bile, detailing the attack on his honor and dignity. Ambassador Laquatus thought such a pig had no dignity. Moreover, a man of true power either acted or waited to act. The pointless railing grated on the ambassador's nerves.

The merman might be mistaken for human with the exception of his coloring and the small horns that lay half hidden by his hair. Of course, under the sea, his ancestry was much more obvious. At a mental command, his legs transmuted to a great fish's tail. The long couches he favored recalled the decadence of lost civilizations but also allowed him to recline when transformed. Long gilded nail extensions flashed in the subdued light as he spoke and gestured.

"I assure you, Laquatus, that your sympathy and hospitality at the end of this difficult day will not be forgotten." The Cabal official almost gushed as he relaxed and turned to consider the temporary court that the ambassador had established. The merman offered only a nod before looking back upon the revel before him.

The embassy to the Cabal had procured a house that butted up against the bluffs surrounding the city. A huge cavern had been dug out and expanded. In the middle of the excavation, a huge pool was filled with salt water and sea plants carefully transplanted. The ambassador could feel the waves of energy that moved through the water, warming it and sending gouts of mist into the air.

The life in the pool relied on constant infusions of power from the ambassador's mages to live and even flourish. Brilliant coral and anemones lay in the waist deep water, their color and motion suggesting beds of flowers. The soporific compounds they released acted as invisible poisons to the minds of those not rendered immune, yet the revelers in the pool showed no signs of ill health.

The large lagoon was full. Competitors moved in the water, dangerous but temporarily safe to all. Like carnivores after a full meal, they appeared logy. One fighter saluted his host as Laquatus's gazes swept over him. Burly and covered with scars, he waved a prosthetic arm in greeting. The metal arm ended in serrated pincers that rasped together softly as the athlete picked another goblet from the circling waiters. His companion for the evening only cooed appreciatively as the arm gathered her in. For the amount of money the ambassador paid for the escorts, he expected nothing less.

The mechanical limb of the fighter was nothing unusual. Laquatus could see many other examples of grafted limbs and skin. Pit fighting was dangerous, and those lucky and powerful enough to survive often left the floor of the arena with less than they entered.

Mechanical parts salvaged from ancient war machines were used along with limbs and hide from exotic beast and fallen warriors.

A few Cabal sponsored fighters circulated as well. Laquatus curbed his pout of distaste. Many of the local champions sported limbs from zombies and the dead. The rotting stench was almost completely covered by the perfumes filling the air, but nothing could curb the disgust many of the guests showed. The Cabal fighters relied on a steady supply of shattered bodies and dismembered fighters to supply them with new parts as the ones they reclaimed eventually failed.

The pit frog Turg lurked in the shadows, crouched behind a miniature reef with only his bulbous eyes showing above the water. The ambassador's champion had stuffed himself to the point of immobility, and Laquatus cursed his personal failure to curb the creature's insane appetite. It was so easy to be lost in Turg's simple pleasures of the flesh. The official noticed Laquatus's lack of attention and cleared his throat loudly.

The merman's manners and style automatically equated him with the nobility in the eyes of his guests. His background in fact was not distinguished, and the human good looks were a strike against him in the Mer kingdom. The emperor and the empress resembled the octopus on their house flag. Their malleable bodies and eight limbs were the standard for the court, and he was far from the current definition of beauty. He was banished to the land like a malformed child hidden from sight. He felt the injustice of his exile and contempt for the land-locked with which he must interact.

Laquatus speared a small fish that swam past. His long finger extensions were often filled with poison at the undersea court, and it amused him to use such deadly devices for harpooning snacks. The small blood slick lightened his mood, and he regarded the boor next to him.

"How terrible you say," Laquatus drawled. "The barbarian destroyed the wall of the vault."

He had of course already received a full report from his spies. Kamahl's casual display hinted that another powerful champion had entered the contest. Perhaps new alliances were in order.

"I am terribly sorry, but I do see Caster Fulla over in the corner alone." He interrupted the official who had continued to drone on like an inconsequential insect. "I would be a poor host indeed if I did not look after all my guests. Why don't you join me in extending greetings?"

"No, no," the official said hurriedly, rising and moving away quickly enough to leave a wake of disturbed water. "I have things that must be done," he tossed over his shoulder.

Laquatus was not surprised at the swift withdrawal. He transformed back to his legged form, his fins absorbed back into his body, and his tail splitting to form the limbs he must use away from the sea. Small fish swirled around his submerged limbs as scales and destroyed flesh temporarily fouled the water. He rose with initial care and waded across the pool.

Turg rose from concealment in response to a mental command and moved toward the ambassador's back. Dealing with dementia casters was often

dangerous. Their grip on reality could become quite tenuous as they grew more powerful. Caster Fulla was very powerful indeed.

"Hello, my dear," the ambassador exclaimed. "I am so glad that you accepted my invitation."

The caster turned, and he waited for her eyes to focus back on the present.

Caster Fulla "Braids" appeared a weathered thirty years. Her dark skin and clothing seemed in perpetual shadow, and Laquatus felt a faint increase in tension as she looked on him fully. Her right arm brushed the short sword at her side before extending toward the ambassador. Kissing a woman's hand was a ridiculous piece of theatre most of the time, and it was particularly ridiculous now. Fulla's right arm was misshapen with scars and chunks of missing flesh. Leather and iron bracing showed conspicuously as he lowered his head to the misshapen claw that she must call a hand. He brushed his lips against the tainted flesh and slowly straightened. For her profession, Fulla was really quite comely.

Dementia casters, like many mages, called forth monsters to fight for them and serve their purposes, but even the dark magic of their Cabal brethren was twisted in bizarre ways. The trances that dementia casters fell into seemed to open the dark recesses of the mind, bringing forth hideous monsters. Many only existed in insane dreams before the power called them. Some used drugs to alter their thoughts and perceptions to bring forth ever greater horrors until they lost what remained of their sanity. Then instead of using drugs to free their minds, they engaged in a pharmacological war to retain some connection to

reality. Laquatus hoped that such a fragile grip on existence would offer the handhold he needed to twist her into his service.

"It was something to do," Fulla said in a dead tone. The beads woven into her hair clinked together softly as she moved. "But it is only the same party. I've been here a hundred times before and since." Boredom filled her voice, and her eyes were focusing back into her internal world to the ambassador's irritation.

"Surely something must interest you." Laquatus hummed, a low thrum began to pick at his ears as the merman fed instructions to the magic plants and springs feeding the grotto.

The corals released bursts of drugs into the water. The ambassador felt a curious mixture of energy and languor even though he and his personal servants regularly dosed themselves with antidotes. The party seemed to grow quiet as the guests succumbed to the chemicals in the water.

"I think that we should work together." The ambassador said, crowding closer. "The bouts offer us a chance to realize tremendous profits if we could just cooperate." The merman put his hand on her maimed arm, controlling his expression at the touch of the gnarled flesh.

"I hope we might become something more than partners."

Laquatus breathed more heavily as he tried to suggest seduction. He had less than no interest in the women above the sea, but he had set this hook before. Fulla showed only irritation and broke his grip easily.

"You're boring," she said flatly. "Everything is boring now. I am going back to the Casters' Quarter. At least it is never boring."

Fulla started wading toward the steps leading into the pool. She moved surely and with purpose, showing no sign of being affected by the water. Laquatus realized that, as a dementia caster, she dealt with shifting reality often. The Casters' Quarter that she was headed for was notorious for the monsters and dark passions that gripped its inhabitants. Fulla's being was far too vicious a battlefield for the gentle persuasion of the grotto's waters. Turg, feeling his master's irritation, cut through the partygoers to grab Fulla's arm.

Braids swung around, curling inside the pit frog's arm and breaking his grip. Her sword was in her hand, and Laquatus felt a burst of pain as her blade slapped along the frog's side. The ambassador could feel the bestial rage of his champion surging to dramatic levels, and he tried to force the beast to calm.

Laquatus and the frog were tied together on many levels, feeding off of each other's emotions. The frog supplied a dramatic amount of muscle the ambassador used to cow his enemies, while the merman supplied the intelligence and drive to make Turg more than a savage animal. The pain and snub eroded his control and Turg acted to hold the caster.

"At last!" Fulla exalted. "Something interesting in this sewer."

Laquatus paused in his attempts to restrain his champion. A sewer! He was sick of insults from these land-bound simpletons. Turg attacked as the ambassador's pique weakened his hold. The frog skin

grew mottled as the amphibian forced more foulness into the water. Turg leaped to the side, plowing into a crowd and sending a spray across the pool.

The ambassador could feel the fresh chemical assault against his senses. Colors seemed to strobe as the mind-altering chemicals fought his will for control of his vision. Fulla's eyes seemed to gleam as she went into a trance. The screams of the other guests began to waver as well as Turg's indirect attack merged with the suggestive chemicals of the pool. Laquatus could see an escort flailing at hallucinations.

"Close the doors!" he screamed to the servants at the gate.

The guards slammed the decorative doors shut as one pit fighter ran for the exit. A huge minotaur, it lowered its head and charged. The expensive facade cracked over the armor beneath as the giant humanoid went down, blood flowing from its nose and ears. Other guests began to stumble out of the pool.

Turg erupted from the water beside Fulla. His skin was silvery, and he was almost impossible to see. Like the octopus and cuttlefish of the ocean, the frog could blend against many backgrounds. Fulla was a veteran of the pits, and her skewed mind edited out the madness surrounding her. The frog's attack met a summoned creature that threw the combatants apart as if a bomb had exploded.

The eel that wrapped itself around the frog showed bones and frayed flesh. Turg spun to throw it off, but its weeping skin seemed to glue the creature to the frog. The amphibian's wild gyrations threw gobs of rotting meat across the chamber, which rained down on the guests and struggling servants. The

ambassador could see blackjacks plied freely by his mercenaries as they struggled to contain the growing riot. Only their fight with imaginary demons prevented a total bloodbath as pit fighters went down under the swinging sacks of lead shot. Laquatus felt Turg's pain as the eel struck again and again, pumping venom into the humanoid's frame. The frog tore off portions of its own hide but hurled the writhing eel away into a group of musicians the ambassador had hired for the evening.

"Enough!" Laquatus snarled.

A bolt of energy erupted from his hands, and a ribbon of power connected the merman to the eel. Flesh boiled under the attack, and the popping of exploding bones could be heard over the cacophony of screams and curses filling the chamber. The hired servants trembled, and their bones cracked as the overflow of energy created a circle of death. Laquatus ignored them as he destroyed the last of the eel. Their cooked bodies fell beneath the waters as the ambassador cut off the stream of power.

Fulla gaily laughed from the side of the grotto, her knees drawn up like a little girl's. "A wonderful party!" she yelled as she toed a drifting corpse away. "You must invite me again." Laquatus heard his teeth grinding as he restrained himself and the amphibian warrior who crept behind her, his fists raised high.

* * * * *

"I will send over a supply of the oysters you so enjoyed," Laquatus said, his eyes locked with the confused merchant's. "I am sure a regular shipment can be arranged within the month." The eyes slowly

cleared, and the man looked down at himself. He was dressed in waves of sea silk, the draped cloth more appropriate on a young maiden than a stocky man of fifty.

"Thank you for the loan," he mumbled. "I can't believe that I fell in the punchbowl and ruined my clothes. I promise to pay for any damage."

His eyes were clearing, and he looked at the outside of the embassy gate. The ambassador could see him trying to remember what exactly he had done. The merman sent another tendril of deceit into the man's mind, reinforcing images of drunken debauchery.

"Keep the cloth as my gift. I only regret that I ran out of clothes for the other guests." Laquatus forced out an indulgent chuckle. "A party without a little damage is hardly worth going to. I am sure everything will be shipshape by morning."

His jaw clenched as he shook the man's hand and sent him on his way with an escort. His mind drifted back to the grotto. The decomposing eel had killed off the coral and filled the cavern with an indescribably foul odor. The dead were packed into sealed barrels which must be disposed of immediately. Worse, the entire cavern must be rebuilt into a completely new environment. Laquatus was sure the false memories he implanted in the survivors would withstand most reminders of the violent episode, but it made no sense to tempt fate. The expense would be tremendous, but he could afford no flashbacks by guests at future affairs. His face grew forbidding as the last guest left his sight.

He started back to the cavern, but near the entrance he drifted off to the side. The pulse of energy

he directed at the tapestry activated the quiescent spell, and he drifted through the wall. He could feel the defensive spells slamming back into place as he stepped into the small room.

Laquatus was alone with his thoughts, his ties to Turg cut. The amphibian was sleeping off the exertions of the fight and the pain Laquatus had inflicted on him to prevent the amphibian from killing the dementia caster. Fulla had proved entirely resistant to the merman's attempt to change her memories. Only the full attention of the Cabal — should such a powerful figure die — had prevented Laquatus from ordering a full scale attack to kill her. She was completely insane, but she showed no agitation and seemed in good spirits when she left. However, she was a chink in Laquatus's armor of deceit and must be dealt with in the near future. Perhaps the pits would prove particularly dangerous in the next few weeks.

The room was crudely mined and showed none of the fine workmanship that formed the rest of the embassy. Its construction had been long and laborious as Laquatus procured a stream of disposable workmen. He was forced to install the winch and thick trapdoor in the center of the room himself, with only Turg providing the muscle to ship the equipment. The merman cranked the heavy cover up, the rust falling like red snow. The remnants of some long destroyed fortress gate, its metal shielded the swirling pool of energy beneath. Without a double system of safeguards, magic users throughout the city might sense the power of the portal. It was vital that he keep his true strength hidden as long as possible. Laquatus removed his ambassadorial robes; glad to strip himself

of the rags that landsmen expected him to wear. He dived into the pool.

The shock of hitting the icy water surprised him as always, and his entire frame shivered for a few seconds before he could take stock of his new surroundings. The darkness of the environment glistened with the bioluminescence of various creatures. Many of them came from the depths of the ocean and had been transferred to the deepwater caves underlying much of the continent. The shimmering pool of light that he dived into was replicated as a glowing vertical portal. The magic bridged a gap of nearly a thousand feet. Here, unknown to the city above, an army gathered to sally forth in the name of the

Mer Empire. Laquatus floated blissfully for a moment, relishing the fact that only the emperor carried more rank than the ambassador in these caves. Above he played the exiled noble, but here he was the state.

"My lord," a quiet voice seemed to whisper behind him, the tones swirling through the water. "You were not expected for some time."

Laquatus turned in the water, careful to show no surprise. A small humanoid moved from the darkness of an overhang. Long whiskers twitched, searching the waters for scent and movement. Its body was small and its limbs spindly. For a moment, it appeared harmless as it moved into the light. Then the ambassador again saw the cruel claws on its hands and feet. Their sheer size always startled him, but it was the head that was most disquieting. Huge and stuffed with glassy spearlike teeth, the mouth

beckoned his gaze. There in the center danced a tongue, endlessly undulating and shifting color. Blank eyes without pupils looked blindly at him as the creature swam closer. Laquatus tore his eyes away and looked to the side. The tresias and its people were common in the underwater caves and formed a substantial portion of the ambassador's guard. Captain Satas was a loyal officer, perfect for command of the subterranean force, but his appearance was a constant source of revulsion to those who swam the sunlit seas.

"Events on the surface may require action sooner than anticipated," the ambassador answered. "We will need more soldiers stationed for assault on command." The tresias's tongue shifted faster though there was no other sign of agitation.

"My people are slow to trust and slower to travel; we will need soldiers from the empire." Satas signaled to an aide.

The warrior who swam over resembled a giant octopus caught in the process of becoming a man. The tentacles and its great bag of a head floated and moved freely in the water, but signs of an underlying structure of bone and horn peaked through. "You will carry the ambassador's words to the emperor."

The soldier left in a jet of water, his body sliding through a narrow crevice in the side of the cave. The ambassador hoped that more cephalids and other soft-body troops would be available. With malleable bodies, they could move easily through the caves and take the shortest routes. The advantages of such a heritage and its beauty made him jealous as he watched the trailing tentacles disappear. That the emperor should be

blessed with such a form while the ambassador should look so ... human.

"How have the tunneling crews fared?" he asked Satas, focusing on the unsightly captain to occupy his thoughts.

The engineers of the empire were continually opening new routes in the natural caves that underlay the entire continent. Connecting the largest underground rivers would allow for the rapid movement of the large bodies of troops and the giant warriors from the open seas, but the secret ways were twisted and full of dead ends. The mapping and connection of suitable caverns was a meticulous and slow process.

"Weeks before the way clears," Satas said, drifting back to the wall. "However, two more mages have mastered the door spell." The tresias moved suddenly, his whiskers whipping as he struck at a blind crayfish swimming out of a small crevice. "When more soldiers arrive we can open enough portals to flood the city with troops," he whispered and devoured the tender morsel alive.

CHAPTER 3

"I will need the winnings before the matches end tonight." Kamahl said seriously, maneuvering through the crowds around the arena. Chainer crowded closer, raising his voice to be heard.

"Why not tomorrow?" the young man asked, slapping a youth whose fingers reached for his purse. The gesture was casual, but the boy fell down under the feet of the crowd. Kamahl could hear slurred cursing growing fainter as they moved toward the preparation rooms.

"The price of my lodging is due tonight and I dislike arguments about money," the barbarian responded.

His massive metal gauntlet nudged a too eager fighter who tried to enter ahead of the pair. A cool stare by Kamahl forced the warrior back into the milling crowd as they entered the fetid air of the common preparation hall.

The barbarian entered the city with enough money for normal times, but the tourney had inflated the prices of food and lodging far above what he expected. The last of the fighter's funds were totally expended in placing a bet on the matches today.

"What will you do if you lose?" Chainer asked with concern. The young Cabal employee had warned Kamahl of the dire straits that the destitute could be forced into. The pits devoured a steady supply of the indigent to perform jobs too disgusting and dangerous for workers with any means. There were darker

rumors that Kamahl heard hints of, but Chainer had not commented on them. "You are in a multiple party match. The other fighters could combine against you."

"I never considered losing," Kamahl said. He smiled and motioned the Cabal employee to leave and place the bet they discussed. "I also failed to consider a Phyrexian invasion destroying the city."

The barbarian chuckled slightly as he moved to prepare. Losing in the preliminaries, before the champions even entered the lists? He laughed at the implausibility of it as he moved toward the entrance of the arena.

The screaming and cheering crowd was a continuous background noise, overridden as the last competitors staggered in and were carried from the field. One lizard man lay on a stretcher, laid open like a butchered animal. His hands grasped the wooden poles with desperate strength, and Kamahl could see the life ebbing from the grip in time with the pulses of blood. The fighter expired as he was ferried past.

"A shame to die so badly," a deep voice commented. Kamahl turned and could see only a wall of fur.

He stepped back, his eyes rising to look at the speaker's visage. A centaur looked down on him, smiling with his lips closed in apparent friendliness.

He was huge, towering over the other competitors waiting for their matches. He stood at least half again as high as the barbarian. His features were simian with glimpses of fangs showing as he breathed through his mouth. The lower body was catlike though in sheer size it reminded Kamahl of a dray house. The fur over the body looked short and coarse. The barbarian could

see the play of huge muscles under its hide as the creature shifted. The gigantic club in the centaur's hands was a mass of wood and banded iron. A small granite boulder capped the end, and the warrior lowered it to the floor as he offered a hand in greeting.

"I am Seton, from the Krosan Forest."

The barbarian gripped the massive hand, showing no hesitation or fear even as he felt the power in that grasp.

"Kamahl is my name," he answered. The barbarian gestured to the dead competitor being carried out. "Death comes to all. The lizard man lost and defeat often exacts the ultimate price." The centaur squeezed hard but seeing no response released Kamahl's hand.

"Defeat is often terrible, but the lizard man was the victor of the round."

The centaur held his weapon tightly, twisting his hands as he watched Cabal servants clearing the arena of corpses and raking in fresh sand. The smell of old blood and rot wafted in through the lower entrances to the fighting area. Kamahl dropped his pack to a bench along the wall. Other fighters, some almost green with fear and dreadful anticipation, made room. The barbarian undid his cloak and put it in his pack. A massive armored belt went around his waist as he moved his purse and nonessential items into the pack.

"A victory that leaves you dead is no victory," the barbarian opined, moving his massive sword from his back. The sword was a remnant of a massive artifact from the invasion. The fighter he had defeated swore it was part of Urza's staff, but Kamahl had his

doubts. Still, the double-edged great sword channeled power exceptionally well. Its only flaw was the lack of a good stabbing point. "Better yet is to leave even your enemy alive to grant you homage and spread word of his defeat. Dead bodies feed only crows."

"Dead bodies do much more in the hands of the Cabal." Seton spat to the side, the spittle running down the wall and across the Cabal symbols on this side of the doors. "Unless you have made special arrangements, the necromancers will raise your corpse or feed it to their monsters." "If you fall, I will make sure that you don't end up depending on their tender mercies," Kamahl answered, his confidence such that he felt compelled to relieve the other's mind. "Why do you care what happens to me?" the centaur demanded, anger displacing the worry in his tone. "Do you make some claim for me?"

Kamahl was calm as he sealed his pack and kicked it under a bench. The Cabal servant overseeing the room caught the barbarian's eye, and he pointed to his gear with a forbidding expression. Power flowed from Kamahl's hand and danced over the wire interwoven with the cloth of the pack. The centaur was almost snarling as Kamahl finally turned his attention back to Seton.

"I came to fight the best," Kamahl replied, checking the fit of his armor. "I want to beat the best. Victory

would be less pure if my opponents worried about what would happen to them after they lost."

The centaur swelled at the sheer arrogance and effrontery of the barbarian and then exploding in laughter.

"You are confident, hero," Seton laughed. "If you fight one tenth as well as you boast you will walk away with every prize."

Kamahl only smiled slightly then straightened. The gatekeeper posted three tiles. One of them was the crossed axe and sword that Kamahl was assigned upon entering the games. Another was the Cabal house tile, stating that the Cabal would have a representative in the fight. The last tile showed a branch gripped by a hand. The barbarian watched Seton move toward the arena and knew the forest warrior was now his opponent. The centaur pushed through the thin screen of fighters in front of the door.

"Both against the Cabal fighter first, Kamahl," the centaur called to him. "After the undead are dispatched, you and I can discuss who should be the winner."

Seton spun his massive club like a light baton, sending others scrambling away as the small boulder seemed to whistle through the air. The barbarian smiled and nodded, moving up to stand by the mighty forest dweller. He showed no concern as the club began to spin even more wildly as they were directed into the arena. The crowd noise heightened, and Seton put on a show for the crowd. Kamahl attracted little notice, as he preferred to save his energy for the fight. The Cabal opponent entered from the opposite side, heading for a platform. A dark and tattered pennant drooped limply from a metal flagstaff.

The barbarian remembered Chainer's recitation of arena practice and how it echoed the ceremonial fighting practiced in the mountains. The Cabal fighter was fair game during combat, but the simple act of

taking the flag would expel the house fighter from the match. The rule allowed overmatched house fighters to retreat and lose a flag rather than their lives. Several matches Kamahl saw earlier in the week involved the Cabal fighter losing to a stolen flag as they were overwhelmed and forced to protect themselves first and foremost. One novice Cabal fighter pulled the flag himself as he was overwhelmed. The fighter lived, but the shame of his cowardly act would undoubtedly make his life a living hell. The contestants not with the Cabal had no flag to lose. Only total defeat or humiliating surrender awaited them should a Cabal fighter prove superior. The barbarian heard many complain that the Cabal lost flags more often than lives, but he planned to win, so not having an alternate way to be defeated did not bother him.

Kamahl ignored the Master of the Games' speech. The light from the flaring torches along the rim of the arena made it almost impossible to see the crowd. The viewing pods floated down from high above the wall as a few of the important game patrons watched the bout. Kamahl could see the ambassador from the Mer Empire and his champion taking their ease. The ambassador gave him a languid wave, and the barbarian gritted his teeth, feeling his color darken. The Order champion Kirtar was in the box as well and laughed at Kamahl's discomfiture. The lights brightened as Cabal mages fed more power to the torches, and the crowds and boxes were washed away in the flood of light. The barbarian focused, ignoring the sound of the crowds, blocking out superfluous noise until it seemed as quiet as the highlands of his youth.

The Cabal fighter was a woman, her hair braided with beads and bones. She looked disinterested even as Seton bellowed a challenge, waiting for the fight to commence. Whatever the signal to commence the bout had been, Kamahl missed it in the charge of the centaur. His club spinning, the giant advanced in great bounds, hoping to close before the dementia caster could react, but his charge proved too slow as groups of fighters congealed in front of the Cabal fighter and her flag. Though humanoid, the creatures showed buglike qualities. Their dark exoskeletons rasped, and Kamahl could hear their pincers and mandibles working as he closed at a run.

Seton arrived first, the club falling like an avalanche on an evoked fighter. The armor broke with a wet crunch that reminded Kamahl of a lobster he saw devoured at an inn. Seton was tearing through the defenders, his club squashing them like the bugs they resembled. More and more flickered into being even as their unnatural ichor discolored the sand.

Kamahl arrived, and his massive sword cut out a great half-circle among the defenders. The barbarian did not even call forth energy to feed the blade, husbanding his power until more worthy adversaries appeared.

The Cabal magic user began to appear more interested, her eyes growing brighter as Kamahl and Seton approached, coming closer together as they neared the stand. The centaur swung his club less wildly, though the creatures still exploded at every strike. Kamahl cleared the caster's minions from his path with the same amount of energy and speed, his smooth swings showing no signs of slowing. The caster

motioned, and the creatures tried to close on the pair of fighters from behind. Her tactics proved futile as the centaur roused himself and with great leaps and bounds prevented any from closing with him.

The barbarian responded to the new attack with wider swings and footwork. His mind and spirit cleared, and he appeared almost to dance inside the lethal circle of steel. The creatures drew closer but died before they could close. The barbarian worried more about tripping over a smashed or dismembered corpse than one of the monsters breaking through his defense. Seton was proving faster as his great leaps took him around the fighters, who then closed on Kamahl. The centaur's breath could be seen as great gouts of vapor blew out through the giant's nostrils.

Now the Cabal fighter smiled slightly, and new horrors issued from her mind. Kamahl could see a delicate and beautiful face coming into being. The eyes opened as the rest of the summoning took shape. The eyes were slit like a snake's, and from the torso down, that was what the monster appeared to be. As more of the creatures flickered into existence, the first attacked. The upper arms appeared normal, but from the elbows down, her arms were great blades of bone. The leader attacked, and Kamahl dodged one strike and blocked another. Though his sword cut through the insectile drones like a knife through butter, this new creature's arm rang like fine steel. The scrape of the edge along the bone made Kamahl's teeth ache. His return strike left only a small cut that began to ooze an oily liquid even as Seton joined the attack.

The centaur seemed to swell beyond his already prodigious size, muscles writhing under his fur. The

club whistled through the air, the head a blur as it struck at the monster in front of him. Bone cleavers, raised to intercept the blow, were amputated as the forest giant literally disarmed the summoning. Seton turned to another enemy, but the first was not yet done. Pulses of blood jetted out of the form, covering the centaur's chest and head. Seton's manic energy leaked out of him as he screamed in pain.

The barbarian ran to intercept the caster's minions falling upon his temporary ally. His sword ran with power, the metal glowing as Kamahl fed it more energy. He struck at the creatures' backs, the enchanted blade once again shearing through his enemies. The limbs that fell did not release streams of corrosive blood, for the fire of his blade burned its way through the creatures' bodies. The corpses piled up; streams of fire burning through the skin as they raced through the veins and arteries.

Seton slowly rose as the barbarian protected him. The scream that he gave was deep and filled with pain, but the centaur could move. The club rose and fell weakly, but it freed Kamahl to act more aggressively. He chopped his way through three of the demons and came back to protect Seton's flank.

The centaur wove like a drunken horse, the fur on his chest slowly growing back through bloody strips of skin. But it took too much time, and Kamahl realized that centaur was a liability. The fight needed to end soon or the centaur might yet fall to the Cabal warrior. Kamahl looked to the platform. The flag flapped loosely as a new creature came into being.

It was the smell that hit the barbarian first. His nostrils curled, and he breathed through his mouth.

The creature was enormous, taller at the shoulder than the great buffalo that roamed the plains. In appearance, it reminded Kamahl of a great mole. Its sharp snout quested in the air even as it moved toward Seton and the barbarian. Kamahl ascribed the hesitation to its lack of eyes. Empty sockets set in rotted flesh and exposed bone left the monster without a means to see. Whether it had ever had fur Kamahl could not tell, but it had none now. Its skin seemed gone, leaving only rotting meat and a thick layer of mold. Each step of the creature left a mark of foulness.

Seton performed his own summoning. The whine of insects could be dimly heard though cries of the crowd and the movement of the Cabal castings. A cloud formed, growing thick as insects came into being. One landed on the barbarian's arm, and he flicked it away before it could do any harm. The green locusts fell upon the dark minions. The barbarian absently killed the few creatures still in reach as he considered the centaur and the Cabal mage. The bodies of the fallen were covered in a moving carpet that flattened as the insects devoured the flesh. Bone peeked out briefly, but the enchanted mandibles of the insect swarm ground down even that.

Seton raised his arms, his giant club held loosely in one hand. The cloud of locusts rose together, then fell upon the giant mole. The centaur moved toward the platform, ready to kill. Kamahl came as well, walking around the locusts that orbited the main mound.

The attack on Seton was unexpected by the two allies. The insect-covered mole lurched into action, leaving a trail of twitching bugs. The creature humped

itself up, its spine breaking through the layer of dead flesh and dying locusts. The huge animal left the ground in a prodigious leap that equaled anything Seton had shown so far. The shock of the bodies meeting sprayed the remains of the insect swarm across the arena. A thick cloud hung around the pair as the centaur tried to grapple. The claws of the mole carved hunks of flesh from the shoulders and flanks of the forest dweller. Showing unexpected flexibility, Seton ducked under the attack, scrambling clear. But only a few yards away he fell, his features slack with astonishment.

The mole twitched, each shake spraying spores into the arena. The remaining locusts cascaded from the air with each gust of the agents of decay. The spores came from the thick ropes of purple on the mole's back. The locusts' attack had served only to unmask a more deadly response. The mole swung its head from side to side as it made for the fallen centaur.

Kamahl stamped his foot loudly, sending an irregular rhythm into the sand. The monster paused, its head swinging and its feet shifting. The Cabal caster took her ease, and the barbarian could see her discounting the centaur and focusing on him. A smile lit her face as Kamahl drove his sword deep into the sand. The shock of the tip striking into the rock of the arena floor was a signal to the creature. It charged, each lunge releasing another cloud of death. It passed the platform as the barbarian stamped his feet. The Cabal fighter ignored the spores as her summoning closed. Kamahl's hands blurred as he moved—but not for the sword stuck into the ground.

The barbarian plucked a throwing axe from his belt and cocked it back to his ear. Like a great sigh, power poured into the steel and leather-wrapped handle. The head flashed brilliantly, and then, as a comet, it flew toward the mole. The metal glanced off the massive skull, and Kamahl saw the Cabal warrior becoming still, summoning additional creatures. The barbarian closed his eyes as the axe reached the apex of its deflected flight.

The detonation rocked Kamahl back. The light was bright enough that he could see through his eyelids as the edge of the energy brushed him. The crowd was stunned into silence. The magic ignited the spore cloud, and the explosion sped back to the mole, devouring it as the molds detonated in sympathy with Kamahl's attack. The dementia caster rolled on the ground, unable to stand. She had been flung back several yards, and the sand stripped most of her clothes off as well as much of her skin. Her teeth bared and bloody, she stood, gathering herself to summon more monstrosities. Kamahl did not take his newly gained advantage, though his other axe was in his hand. He pointed to the platform with the metal head. Scraps of the flag still fluttered to the ground, signaling the Cabal fighter's defeat.

* * * * *

"You won more than five hundred!" Chainer said excitedly. The young man gripped the bag of coins tightly, proclaiming to all in sight that he held riches in his hand. Kamahl only smiled thinly as he waited with the other victorious fighters in the winners' box. The arena attendants seated those victors needing no

medical attention. The winning fighters watched the remaining fights and were observed in turn by the crowd. A steady stream of visitors and dignitaries cycled in and out, some of them obviously trying to steal some of the fighters' glory. Chainer had come from the bet-monger with Kamahl's winnings. The barbarian held out his hand and was surprised by the weight of the purse. It felt much greater than the victory that had won it.

"The bettors know you now," Chainer said. "You will get much lower odds now that you have won."

A voice interrupted the pair.

"That is because the servants of the Cabal mistake luck for skill," taunted Kirtar. The lieutenant strode arrogantly through the other fighters, pushing some out of the way. Kamahl noticed how the others took it and realized that the Order champion must be even more powerful than the barbarian thought. Perhaps the lieutenant's lop-sided victory had prevented Kamahl from seeing the bird warrior at his best.

"Most of the fighters here don't realize how lucky they are to be competing with their better," Kirtar continued. His pale skin flushed as he drank more deeply from the goblet of wine in his hand.

"I am surprised that you fight at all in these contests," Kamahl said slowly. "Surely you must realize how unequal you are to those who fight here."

Kirtar nodded his head and then realizing that the comment was more easily read as an insult advanced angrily. A massive webbed hand deflected his path. Turg patted the champion on the back as he

led him over to the food, the ambassador smiling at Kamahl and Chainer.

"You must excuse our friend," Laquatus said. "He fights out of duty. The Order considers it their task to rid the world of the symbols of past evil. Many of the prizes that he wins will be destroyed at the Order's headquarters."

"He is not my friend," Kamahl said flatly. Chainer nodded slightly, a grim look on his face. "And when he faces me in the arena, he will discover that I don't need luck to win."

Laquatus, still smiling, bowed his head, but his eyes were serious, not merry. Kamahl turned as he felt a threat directed at him. Across the room Turg looked at him even as he shepherded Kirtar toward a bar. The amphibian's eyes held the same look of deadly concentration as the ambassador's.

CHAPTER 4

"Hail the conquering hero!" Seton bellowed, ignoring the catcalls that quickly followed. Kamahl only nodded, as if accepting his due. The centaur snorted as he saw the shadow of a smile on the barbarian's face. The other patients in the hospital could not read the mountain fighter, and their catcalls continued.

Seton had been taken to the hospital to recover from his wounds. Though the druids of the forest were known for their healing skills, the punishment they endured to access those energies reserved them for life-threatening injuries only. Though the poison mold laid the centaur low, Cabal servitors administered an antidote within minutes of the fight's end. Those who survived the games were taken to the healing halls behind the waiting chambers. Kamahl was told to return the next day.

The centaur lay in a shallow pit, his side against a move-able board that allowed him to lie as if on a hillside. Other than a tendency to turn one's head to match up with the patient's orientation, it allowed for ease of access for the nursing staff. It also made conversation more convenient.

The barbarian's eyes swung over some of the patients, and his worries for his friend continued. Amputations were common and many fighters lay as if dead, their stumps leaking blood around the seams of their new limbs. Metal seemed the most common substitute, though mismatched furred limbs suggested

other sources. Mold covered the wounds of some. Kamahl watched a caregiver spreading thick mud over the weeping sores of a dwarf whose eyes wandered with pain. The barbarian hoped the Cabal was trying to help instead of preparing a fresh round of victims for rumored rituals. He renewed his vow to avoid injury or at least care for himself.

Seton looked well. His coat was clean, and the patchwork of new fur covered the worst of the stitches. The forest dweller still made few movements, and Kamahl realized the giant was in pain despite his apparent high spirits.

"I am surprised that you have not already escaped," the barbarian quipped awkwardly. He wondered how the centaur stood the enclosed environment.

"I will leave here as soon as her 'majesty' says that I may," the forest dweller said, rolling his eyes. The barbarian turned, seeing an approaching healer. She stood wrapped in armor, and her haughty stare curled his lip. She went past, her robe clinking softly with the sound of chain mail.

"I am surprised to see a representative of the Order here," Kamahl said, turning his eyes away from the martial maid back to his acquaintance.

"As healers, some of the Order's party feel compelled to offer their services here," the centaur replied. "Though we pay a stiff price for their services, being constrained to listen to them rail against the pit fights." The centaur spoke with some amusement, but Kamahl remembered the snubs offered by the lieutenant and now one of his retinue.

"Rather self-serving to urge competitors of their champion to withdraw," the barbarian observed. "I am surprised that you do not tell them so." Kamahl came to win honor and respect. That other fighters would belittle the contests was extremely irritating.

"We all come for our own reasons," the centaur said. He rolled further against the support board. He tripped a lever, and the clink of the mechanism sounded as he brought his side down. "The Order fights to destroy the prizes. I fight so I can meet the Masters of the Games." Seton lowered his voice.

"I am not here on a lark," he said darkly. "What drives me is serious." Seton looked to see if any were listening.

"The forests are violated and their inhabitants stolen to feed the pits." He said softly. "Creatures vanish from under the trees and nothing is done to stop them." The centaur shifted to bring his head closer to Kamahl.

"The forest will not suffer these raids forever. I know that one day the pit system will have to change, or it will fall. The wild will not allow itself to be bled dry."

"I respect your convictions," Kamahl said, keeping his voice even. "But I am not here to become part of your crusade. The pit provides the opponents I need to test myself." He turned and gestured to the crowds of injured.

"I have no wish to be hurt, but it is a risk I take to win a place in this world." The barbarian lowered his hands and hooked his thumbs in his belt. His eyes looked inward as he paused. "The mountains became too small. Winning a duel meant that a village or a

family gave you your due. Victory is sweet, but the portions were too small." Kamahl shook his head sadly as he thought of his many victories.

"And you think the repast will be so much better in the pits?" Seton said crossly. "You think that the crowd will remember you for longer than your next fight?" The centaur's voice grew louder and other recuperating fighters looked toward the pair.

"I think that it is better we each do as we think best," Kamahl said, his voice growing tight. He did not believe his victory meaningless.

"I apologize, Kamahl," Seton answered. "I should not let my current injuries make me rude." The centaur waved his hand and only lightly groaned at the pain of the movement. "I have you to thank for the all this." He laughed. "But truly, I owe you my life," Seton said seriously. "I was paralyzed and sure I would die when you destroyed the mole. My debt to you is more than gold or words can pay."

Kamahl nodded, accepting the gratitude with same equanimity he had accepted the crowd's adulation.

"I fought for myself, but whatever debt you owe to me can be repaid by your friendship." The barbarian extended his hand, and the two gripped arms, united as they were in the arena.

* * * * *

"Over here, Kamahl," Chainer called.

The barbarian looked to the front of the champions' box. He had returned to the arena to see the Mer champion fight. There was no posted

opponent, and the barbarian wondered who would battle the dangerous-looking amphibian.

"The match hasn't started?" he asked, taking a seat next to the Cabal minion. Chainer was eating olives and cheese as he sipped from a cup. The barbarian nodded to a servant who supplied him with a small loaf of bread and a goblet of wine. Kamahl drank, noticing a sour taste and looking toward the servant. Chainer noticed his look.

"Someone delivered lower-quality food to the kitchens stocking the boxes," the young man explained. "They're scrambling to find decent food for the important patrons." He snorted and gestured around as if to comment that the actual pit fighters were obviously low on the list of the powerful. Kamahl drank the wine without further comment, though deep inside the slight rankled.

"It's all maneuvering to embarrass the current Master of the Games." Chainer said, sounding conspiratorial. "Someone is trying to displace him and his connections."

The barbarian listened with little interest.

The crowd stirred excitedly as the fighters' gate opened. Turg strode forth, the massive Mer champion glistening as if his skin had been freshly moistened. The placards naming the opponents were not posted, and Chainer straightened as the frog stalked the empty pit. A concealed gate opened, far from the crowd. With a wild bray, an ass ran into the pit, its hooves flying with wild kicks as it tore around the sides of the arena.

The crowd exploded in laughter as Turg swelled up, his hands closed up in fists. The amphibian shook

with rage as the audience continued to laugh. Many of the Cabal servants appeared stunned. The frog ran to intercept the donkey.

"I can't believe someone would try to disrupt the games!" Chainer exclaimed as the Mer champion raced to his ridiculous opponent. "This prank will offend the ambassador and the Master of the Games."

The frog reached the donkey, and it spun and let fly. The sharp hooves laid open the skin, and the laughter increased. Kamahl smiled slightly, though the other fighters' grins showed half-moons of teeth.

Turg darted in and grabbed the ass's skull. He turned, throwing the donkey in a circle. The animal's neck snapped, its body falling limp to the ground. A light smattering of contemptuous applause greeted the amphibian. He kept his grip on the head, and his muscles bunched, rotating the skull and tearing it free. Blood poured onto the sand, splashing up against Turg's legs. He cocked back his arms and hurled his opponent's head up into the crowd. The spells that protected the seats flared, and the lights dimmed as power flowed to intercept the bloody projectile. The skull rotted away, diminished by the forces of accelerated decay until it fell over the seats in a spray of foulness. The sound of retching competed with nervous laughter. The ambassador was standing in his box, outrage visible on his aristocratic features. The Master of the Games gestured wildly to the gatekeepers down in the pit.

"He's sending out another beast," Chainer said, settling back into the seat. "He'll try to write it off as a mistake, but the patriarch will have a head before the end of the day."

A six-legged reptile rushed into the arena, soldiers driving it forth with jabs from tridents. Its legs churned, and it froze in the center, its head turning in quick jerks.

"A Krosan dragonette," Chainer said, clucking his tongue. "A decent fighting animal but not one with stature enough to balance the insult of the ass."

The dragonette saw the amphibian but did not charge. "They need to be driven to battle," Chainer said sadly as the Master of the Games went into a new spat of shouting and arm waving. The gates opened again, and more animals spilled into the arena. Great hounds milled, their foamy jaws hinting at madness as they bit at each other before the sight of the dragonette and the frog set them running.

The six-legged beast tore into the pack as they came close. The reptile jaws snapped at the leg of a dog several times, leaving it a bloody mass. The rest of the pack piled on, but the beast thrashed. Howls of pain echoed in the arena as the dragonette's rough hide stripped fur and flesh away. The amphibian closed, and half the pack turned on him. There was a wave of magic, and the frog seemed to fade. Around each of the hounds the outline of the mer champion appeared, his legs dragging as if hamstrung. The pack fell on each other as the spell turned their instincts against them. A biting, dying circle spun between the frog and the reptile.

The dragonette bled from multiple bites, the blood pulsing down its hide. Its long whip of a tail rose and then lashed into the dogs. A high yelp sounded as the reptile struck again and again. Each strike left an animal with shattered bones. The cripples were killed

in an instant as the other ensorcelled animals fell upon them. Soon only the dragonette, frog, and a single bleeding hound remained. Turg snapped into focus and struck the last dog, his heavy fist destroying the skull. The dragonette lashed its tail, but the amphibian leaped to the side, once more fading as multiple images moved away from its landing place. The dragonette roared in bestial fury, its cry echoing up over the arena walls. Its tongue flickering widely, it stalked one image exclusively, ignoring the others even as several versions of Turg made short rushes against it.

The illusions faded as the mer warrior realized the beast's sense of smell made the illusions useless. Catcalls rose from the benches at the turn of events. The frog crouched, its arms spread wide. Power crackled along its arms, and small streamers of lightning trailed from the tips of the frog's claws. The two monsters leaped at each other, the crowd rising to its feet. The reptile caught the skin of Turg's thigh and lacerated it as hands closed over the beast's eyes. Both the frog and dragonette screamed now, but the cries of the ocean warrior's opponent were full of pain and despair. The calls grew shriller as the six-legged beast tried to escape, its bellows becoming more plaintive and fearful.

Kamahl's magical senses could detect Turg's power forming a circuit between the reptile and the amphibian's own flesh. The frog's own magic made its flesh shake, but the surge of energy increased as the frog cooked its enemy from the inside out. The Mer champion shouted its triumph as it fed off its own pain. The ambassador across the arena shook in

sympathy as his champion bellowed in a self-inflicted orgy of pain.

Some of the crowd threw down tokens of appreciation, the valuables reaching the sand floor as the Cabal servants curbed the defensive spells protecting the stands. Turg ripped a hunk of steaming flesh free and swallowed the meat, reaching for another handful as the applause slackened. The mutter of the crowd asking for the next fighter was heard as Cabal minions posted new placards. Then a cry was heard.

Kamahl stood, and the bellow repeated. The echoing call was filled with rage and came over the arena wall. The sound beat against the barbarian's skull as it grew louder. He looked to Chainer, but the youth seemed as confused as any. The barbarian made his way for the exit, pushing his way through the other fighters, the cries continuing unabated. Kamahl slowed as he recognized the sounds. Though louder and far deeper, they were much like those Turg's dead opponent gave forth. Though the dragonette lay dismembered, a response to its dying cries filled the arena and perhaps the rest of the city.

CHAPTER 5

"Something is breaking into the city!" screamed a voice in the ambassador's ear. Laquatus struggled from the depths of his trance, his senses assaulted by the troubled noises of the crowd. The merman shook his head, still confused. On the sands below, Turg bellowed and fell into a feeding frenzy, losing any sign of civilized restraint. Again a cry filled the air. The rage and despair in its tone gave the ambassador's spirit a little burst of joy. Something was in great pain, and Laquatus could always smile at the pain of others. The erstwhile town crier moved on and shouts continued down the line of boxes. "See what the noise is about," the ambassador said to a guard standing nearby. The mercenary nodded and left at a run. The merman stood, shaking the stiffness from his muscles. The amphibian continued to eat voraciously and Laquatus saw the difficulty in reining Turg in. Better to let the amphibian feed. Usually, the ambassador lost himself in the frog's sensations when the opportunity presented itself. However, the tumult outside continued as crowds drifted out of the pits.

"See about getting the arena gates open," he directed a Cabal servant who came into the box, looking for a way to please the ambassador. "Tell the Master of the Games that while I blame him for nothing, I want my jack allowed to leave the field." Laquatus paused for a second.

"Right now," he said emphatically as the servant stood there stupidly. The servant left at a run, his sandals loudly drumming on the stone floor.

"I wonder if the fools think I will forgive the insults offered me?" Laquatus asked himself pensively. The assault on his dignity burned, lying like a bed of temporarily banked coals, ready to flare up at any moment. Whoever drove the ass out onto the field would pay a hideous price. As would the person that gave the order, their households, and any with close connections. Laquatus idly wondered if the city should be razed to assuage his honor?

Perhaps not, after all he had plans for the Cabal and the pits. But the image of burning buildings and corpses seemed very attractive. Turg's savage appetite bled into his consciousness. Perhaps a minute passed before new events broke his reverie. Messengers returned with news, the one sent to the Master of the Games speaking first.

"The official is gone, and all the Cabal servants are called away," he explained, bowing in humiliation. "There is no one with authority to order the gates opened on the arena floor." Laquatus smiled slightly and walked to the refreshments laid to the side. A variety of seafood imported at great expense lay cooling in shaved ice. Laquatus reached for metal tongs used to crack claws. He grabbed the man's hand and grasped a finger quickly. The muscles beneath his aristocratic facade showed themselves as he broke the finger like a twig. The servant went white as the ambassador stepped back to the table. Laquatus picked up a lobster claw and some bread to feed the echo of his jack's hunger.

"I sent you to get Turg out," he said merrily, cracking the chitin to get to the meat. The servant turned even paler at the sound. "I have confidence that you will get my frog free before I run out of fingers." The man swayed, and Laqua-tus's personal retainer gave him a wide berth, waiting for him to go down.

"Now, now, now," Laquatus clucked, lightly rapping the man's cheek with the metal tongs. "You don't want me breaking more bones to wake you up."

The servant shook his head rapidly, bowing and backing away as he stumbled to the door. The ambassador smiled and motioned to the retainer. The man smiled as nastily as his master, his bald head flushed with excitement at the cruelty.

"Follow along, and if he collapses make sure he receives medical attention." At the disappointed look Laquatus chuckled and waved the man away. How could he punish someone for failure if he died from shock? These landmen were such unthinking brutes. They had no sense of style. He invited the other messenger forward with a wave of his hand.

"And what is the commotion outside?" the merman asked. "A riot? A revolution? Come, come," he said, as the Cabal servant gathered his composure. "Use your tongue, or I'll have it out."

"A monstrous beast has broken through the city wall and is making its way through the town," gushed the man. The ambassador briefly considered using the crushing tongs again, but business before pleasure.

"Why the excitement?" Laquatus asked. "The arena teems with monsters every day. Surely one more should not provoke such disarray."

"The beast, my lord," the servant said quickly, "is huge. It overtops buildings and can be clearly seen from outside the arena."

The ambassador nodded, intrigued enough that he decided to see the monster for himself.

The runner screwed up his will enough to speak once more before making for the exit. "It also resembles the beast your champion just killed." Then his nerve broke, and he left at a run.

The guards made as if to block him, but the ambassador stopped them with a barely perceptible motion. The messenger was of no importance though his words were intriguing. He waved to a skybox, calling it down. The pilot promptly complied, and the merman soon stepped into the small floating craft with a single guard. He looked to the rest of his household. "Go back to the embassy," Laquatus said and dismissed them from his mind.

The skybox was one of the smaller ones but any affording such luxury were rich and important. The seats were of the finest leather. Though it had no buffet, there was a collection of rare liquors stowed against the side. The mage directing the craft was clad in black regalia while the obvious patron of the box wore an understated tunic and trousers of deep purple and black.

"I am so glad I could give aid," the owner said, moving to the side to grant the merman more room. "I am Toustos, an importer of animals for the games."

"I thank you for your courtesy," Laquatus smiled back, wondering if he should send the two over the side. "I am the ambassador from the Mer Empire. In the excitement there seems to have been a mistake.

My jack, Turg, has been abandoned on the field of victory." He shook his head sadly. "If you could direct this box to pick him up, I would be very appreciative." The importer nodded and, with a look, directed the box down.

"There is a chance," he said, "that the protective field over the fighting area may be quiescent. If not, your fighter is trapped until the guards let him out." The ambassador nodded in agreement but thought that Turg could escape if he must. The box slowed suddenly as it neared the field.

"Warning spell," said the importer unnecessarily. The merman could detect the roused energies waiting to destroy anything that trespassed their vigilant watch. The amphibian below tore more flesh from the dragonette, and some of the six limbs lay amputated. The frog had eaten itself nearly immobile, and Laquatus cursed the indulgence of appetite.

"There's no way we can get through the stand defenses, Your Excellency. Is there some other service I might provide?"

Laquatus curbed his temper. "There," he said, pointing to the open air above. "Lift us up that I might see this beast that draws the rabble so far from their posts." The box began to rise toward the opening. The curving galleries and conduits of power loomed over the field, and the conveyance drifted further to the side. The rate of ascent slowed as they neared the limits of the arena. Finally they peeked over the wall and saw the madness outside.

The merman enhanced his senses, his suddenly sharp eyes and ears bringing the scene into crystal focus.

"Krosan dragon," whispered the importer at the ambassador's side.

Laquatus slapped the patron, his burning gaze demanding absolute silence.

The dragon was Turg's opponent grown one hundredfold. The six-legged beast looked down on the buildings it passed. The city guardsmen ran screaming before it, breaking down doors to hide inside. Its head ducked, and the monster gulped down a flagging sergeant as a snack. The other guardsmen put on another burst of speed. They slowed immediately, exhausted from their crazed run from the city walls. Laquatus could see soldiers converging from other parts of the city, but he doubted that many would arrive in time. The dragon's huge tail lashed behind it. A steady rain of debris from tumbling walls filled the street as the beast came on.

The area in front of the arena was bedlam as carriages and palanquins disbursed. Patrons rushed to waiting bearers, the servants trembling with fright and frustration. It said something for the brutality of the city elite that transport waited. But the outskirts of the crowd were fraying away; some chased by their screaming masters. A clump of officials rallied the Cabal arena guards and handlers into formation. It seemed a forlorn hope against the approaching juggernaut.

Laquatus felt satisfaction at their impending doom. A terrible death by monster might salve away the wound to his dignity. He thought of Turg below, a slumbering fool in someone's scheme, and he hoped the entire Cabal would be slowly eaten alive.

A dementia caster below opened reality to her madness, and a stream of undead stumbled up the street. They formed a parade and advanced laughing, their clothes trailing rags showing hints of past color. Rusty bells rattled, and a chorus of tinny horns sounded as more approached the dragon. Unholy mirth dragged sodden laughter from their rotting chests.

One bellowing voice overrode the noise below, and the ambassador looked down to see Lieutenant Kirtar directing the action. The Order representative oversaw the retreat of those patrons still trapped back into the arena.

"If necessary escape through the rear exits," Laquatus heard through his enhanced hearing. The officer waved pit fighters to join the city guards as noncombatants retreated inside. Down the avenue, the corpses' merriment reached its peak as the parade met the beast.

The street opened into a square, and the zombies surrounded the dragon, throwing themselves at it. The monster's tail began to sweep in rapid strikes, each movement leaving a trailing bundle of rotting flesh. Some zombies seemed to explode as they thudded into thick building walls. Others disappeared inside weak facades, though the sound of collapsing walls suggested they were not spared destruction. Those undead that missed buildings entirely skidded along the cobblestones, shedding flesh and bones until the remains looked as tattered and strewn as the moldering grave-clothes. Some avoided the tail and reached the beast.

The giant body thrashed from side to side as a wave of guardsmen followed the undead and reached

the great reptile. Spears leading, they charged in support of the merry corpses. They appeared to battle their way onto the monster's hide, and Laquatus for a second increased his sight a magnitude before it blurred back to simple enhancement.

The green fur that seemed to cover the reptile was in fact a blanket of vines. Wrapping the huge beast in innumerable strands, the greenery protected it by a thick covering of long thorns. The figures Laquatus saw clinging to the animal's side were nailed there as solidly as any crucified slave. The zombies tried to crawl to the dragon's head and left a trail of their few remaining threads, then what remained of their skin. Still the summoned corpses laughed and trembled in crazed mirth.

The lieutenant and his supporters advanced, power creeping along their limbs and armoring them against thorns. Axes and swords glowed as they were enhanced, golden flames running along the metal. Spears and javelins arced high in the air, then pierced the dragon's hide. Enchanted metal cut deep, and the monster paused.

Its mouth gaping wide, it poured out a green mist, the emerald haze flowing down the street. The ambassador could still see, but the scene was blurred. Only the frog's ground-hugging nature and his high vantage point allowed him to view all the combatants. For those on the street, everything was lost in the attack. The head of the dragon swung skyward, and the ambassador realized that the monster could still see. It came forward as the lieutenant hurled forces into the air.

Burly warriors threw small raypen, their spindly legs trailing as they spread their deformed arms wide. The magic flowed, and their arms doubled in length, feathers spurting from their skin as sorcery gave them the wings that their ancestors gave up millennia before. Four bird warriors climbed higher and began shouting reports to the lieutenant below. The ambassador swore as the Order forces moved forward. The destruction of his host's city would have pleased Laquatus greatly.

Shouts of surprise sounded from the fog below. Like the tropical jungles of the south, ivy and kudzu spread over the buildings and streets. Wild growth exploded out of window boxes. Plants and vines unfamiliar to Laquatus curled around windows and doorways as thick grasses and brush tore through cobblestones. The street swiftly became impassable.

Weapons once ready to battle a dragon tried to cut a path. The fallen zombies vanished as plants tore apart what remained of their bodies. The Krosan dragon forced its way through the street, its tons of armored flesh finding the plants only slightly less navigable than the fog that preceded them. Its tongue searched the air for traces of the now hidden troops.

The raypen called out reports, and the Lieutenant responded from below. The bird warriors banked and swooped toward the dragon. Long darts fell as they pulled up, the projectiles slicing into the animal's head. The creature bled profusely, one of the attacks tearing open the scales near the eye. Weeping red tears, the giant blew forth a geyser of green mist. It swept through the sky, its concentrated green a

verdant club that swatted at the flyers, hiding them from sight.

The raypen climbed out of obscurity, wildly pumping for clear air. Then they screamed, their limbs flexing spasti-cally. Their cries choked off, and Laquatus could see them coughing up gouts of green as they went into seizures. Their magic failed, and they plummeted, diving into the tall grass covering the street and vanishing from view.

The ambassador felt the lieutenant drawing more power as the Order warriors reacted to the deaths of the flyers. The figures blazed gold as they tried to protect against infestation, but soldiers collapsed as the green fought against them, the invisible seeds of destruction sown in the first moments of battle.

The barbarian Kamahl advanced from the arena, his sword a long whip of flame that burned a path through the brush. Bursts of searing red light emanated from his body, wilting the plants nearby. Laquatus hoped for his death as the jack cut a channel through the fog. The sweeps of his weapon burned others free as he reached Kirtar's position and continued past, ignoring the bird warrior's shouted orders. He trailed supporters in his race up the street.

The dragon's head dipped to devour the impudent barbarian, but the sword's long flame charred a line of flesh over its nose. Fresh gouts of the mystical growth hormone washed over the street, but a spreading cloud of flame burned out a circle of safety. The beast tried to maneuver, but fiery knives arced up and exploded on the dragon's side as it turned away. The fires swept away stretches of the thorny vines protecting the animal's hide. Cabal armsmen who had run to the

roofs of surrounding buildings found their courage, and a few arrows and bolts sought the gaps in green armor. The huge tail brought down more structures, whipping in painful frenzy as rubble cascaded into the verdant growth. Clouds of dust set the combatants choking as they disappeared from view.

There was a fresh bout of screams, and Laquatus watched the dragon's claws hooking a hapless fighter into the cloud. Unable to see into the green haze, he summoned a wind. It took precious seconds, but the mass of dust blew over the rooftops, completely blinding those archers and spearmen with the courage to be exposed. The merman ignored them as the cloud began to clear the street. He saw the dragon whip its head, catapulting a screaming soldier through the air to intercept the barbarian as he came into view. Laquatus clapped with delight.

"Good show," he called, ignoring the looks of the importer. The barbarian and his humanoid projectile sailed into a faceless building, which shot out more dust as internal walls collapsed. The roof pitched sharply, and refugees of the street battle screamed as they slid off and fell to the timbers and stone blocks below.

The lieutenant ordered a retreat, driving the fighters and the few remaining observers at street level down other avenues.

"We'll hamstring it as it tears into the arena," he shouted. Laquatus started as he saw the beast coming closer. The skybox began to drop, cutting off the view of the action.

"Take us back up!" he ordered the importer, furious at the interruption. It was the merchant's servant who answered him.

"The energy to the transports is being redirected to the defensive shields," the pilot explained, directing the craft to a cradle against the opposite wall. "They must be planning to drive the animal into the decay field to kill it." The ambassador could feel the deadly spells below growing more powerful.

"Why would they think the beast headed here?" he asked. "Surely it will chase the cowards running away rather than attack an empty building."

This time it was the importer who answered him.

"It comes to answer the cry of distant kin," Toustos explained. The merchant was nervous, and the merman could tell the human tried to control his own fear by showing his superior knowledge. "It will break its way in and kill whoever it finds when it sees and smells the corpse of the dragonette."

The ambassador looked to the sands below. Turg lay as if dead, stuffed to bursting on wild ass and the monster's caller. There was no way to raise him from his slumber, though Laquatus sent command after command to the amphibian's mind. His enhanced hearing could hear the slamming of bolts as every gate closed in an attempt to keep the beast inside after it broke through.

"I am sure they will kill it before it can devour your champion or reach us," the importer said nervously. The ambassador grasped him by the throat and with a single motion threw him to the sands below. Maggot-ridden meat struck the floor, and the merman's guard did not even wait for the order,

hurling the skybox attendant over the side of the conveyance. The mercenary retired back, trying not to catch his master's attention.

"I will trust these incompetent animals to protect me?" Laquatus said to himself. "These dry, ungainly fools, unworthy of all responsibility!" he screamed as the guard tried to make himself smaller. "I spit on these air-breathing tube worms!"

The ambassador sent his call forth again, compelling absolute, immediate compliance. But his demand did not split open the skull of the comatose pit frog. Instead the orders passed through the rock beneath the arena, resonating in the caverns below. Laquatus felt the surge of power as his waiting armies prepared to attack.

CHAPTER 6

"Bloody hell," rasped Kamahl as he opened his eyes. The fighter ached over every portion of his being. His mind fuzzed, and he tried to remember where he was. It came back to him as he coughed up dust and smoke. The fight with the attacking monster, the concealing clouds of dust, and the impact of the thrown soldier. All of it surged into focus as he pushed his way to his feet. Plaster and lumber sloughed from his back as he looked to the gaping hole that his flight had left. The small fires started during his impact were growing and at his stern glance died down, the smoke whistling through every crack in the houses structure as his will compelled the flames.

Kamahl looked for the soldier who had rammed him. A congealing pool of blood leaking from another pile of debris told the barbarian his likely fate. He shoveled away wreckage with his hand and exposed a dead face. A support beam nailed the corpse to the floor as firmly as a mountain. The mage could hear cries of the beast and stumbled outside, his steps becoming firmer with every second. His sword hung from the outside wall, the blade sunk deep in oak. Kamahl threw power into the steel and ripped it free in a hail of splinters. Armed and aware, he cut his way to the street.

The grasses and bushes that blocked his way had grown only a little after his unexpected withdrawal. Rubble from newly demolished buildings covered a lush growth that continued to push its way toward the

sun. The barbarian climbed carefully up a slope of debris, accepting the risk of a fall for a better view. The tail of the dragon lashed across the street, each beat bringing fresh destruction. Kamahl saw no sign of the other fighters and wondered if the beast had killed them all.

The monster reared up against the wall of the arena, its front two legs digging at the stones. Thin panels of fine rock fell, revealing the brick that formed the walls. Kamahl knew the beast would claw its way through in minutes. Whether any yet remained inside was unknown, but they would surely die when the dragon pushed its way through the ramshackle structure. The barbarian sheathed his sword on his back and walked up the street toward the stadium, the grass and brush grasping at his legs.

The mountain warrior stopped and concentrated, ignoring the caresses from the growing plants. Kamahl hurled a continuing barrage of knives drawn from his mind. The blades burst into red and orange flame, casting shadow as they spun before sinking into the waving tail of the monster. The dragon's reflexive movement from the pain batted aside some of the projectiles, imbedding them in buildings. The weapons started fires as they discharged into walls and new trees, the smoke promoting fresh cries of panic as those guardsmen hiding in rubble and out of sight found their sanctuaries set alight. Despite the secondary damage, the dragon's tail dropped limply to the ground as Kamahl's attack burned through bundles of nerves.

The beast, maddened with pain, spun in the square before the arena. The monster's hips brushed

against the exposed brick core of the pit walls. The masonry fragmented and stained the creature's upper legs a dark ochre, matching its dusty claws. The beast slowed as its dead, trailing tail robbed it of speed, dragging through the rubble and catching on exposed beams before the monster's power tore it free. Kamahl continued his assault, more magically forged knives spinning on their trajectories toward the dragon. City guard corpses were still impaled on the creature's thorny armor, and the barbarian's attack thudded into the cooling bodies. The monster's thorny armor and the dead began to burn as the mystic metal vanished in gouts of flame. Kamahl knew the impromptu funeral pyres were the only ceremony the guardsmen were likely to receive in Cabal City.

The dragon recovered, finishing its turn and roaring at the barbarian, its teeth red with the blood of those already slain. Kamahl drew his sword, waiting for the beast's charge.

A new flare of magic lit up the street, surprising beast and barbarian. The combatants froze in the glare, the monster blinded and the city guards diving for cover. Kamahl stretched out his mind, trying to trace the origin of the power rippling through the ground. He felt for the stability and strength that he knew from his home mountains, but from the depths an alien magic seemed to poison the very street he stood on.

Pools of light expanded out of the ground, their blue radiance growing stronger and attacking Kamahl's eyes. Frothy ponds formed, stilled, and dimmed, and creatures erupted into the upper world.

Giant crabs surged from the holes, spreading out in a red tide. Their massive frames broke through the welter of brush. Claws tore out the dragon growth by the roots, revealing the cobblestones that had vanished under the beast's attack. The snapping of small tree trunks sounded across the battlefield as the crustaceans cleared a beachhead, their pincers shredding those obstacles they could not simply uproot by sheer strength.

The dragon blinked at the sudden activity, frozen in surprise. Then a building front, damaged by the battle, cascaded into the street and broke its trance. The monster breathed out a cloud of green mist, beginning a new bout of berserk growth. The potent breath swept up the street, settling over the scuttling crabs then reaching the barbarian. Kamahl closed his eyes and concentrated. Small flames leaped up from his clothes and gear, then grew until his entire body was encased in the pale flame. The sound of the fire was echoed in the hiss and crackle of new growth sprouting everywhere in the street. Cobblestones cracked as trees and bushes forced their way to the surface. The flames leaped from Kamahl's clothes to the ground and new tendrils of growth withered. The warrior started forward, the fire of his will burning a path through the resurgent vegetation. The flames lit the mist, and he moved as if in a fog.

The barbarian used his sword now, his fiery armor thinning, leaving him more exposed to the mist. The energy clung to his sword and each swing of his weapon cast a scything whip of power ahead to clear his path. The blade opened the way to the crabs' clearing.

The pools were still lighting the fading mist with their radiance. Kamahl felt immediate antipathy to the light. Its color pierced the eye, and his weapon's flame curled back behind him, expending his irrational hate into the vegetation at his back. The dragon was coming into view, and he could not afford distractions now.

The sea walkers showed no reactions to the barbarian's emergence from the new jungle, continuing to cut back growth. The dragon breathed again, its concentrated wrath billowing over the clearing. Many of the crustaceans were covered with growing plants, but they continued working, their claws now trimming grass and bushes from their fellow workers as well as the clearing's edge. A new surge of mer forces began to crowd the clearing. The crabs moved on, their claws now raised and threatening.

Kamahl cut his way along the perimeter of the encampment. The warrior surmounted a mound of rubble enabling him to look over the crab's clearing. New creatures dragged themselves from the pools, and the crustaceans charged the dragon. The giant reptile reared up, four legs waved in the air as it spun, its tail skimming through the crabs. The sea fighters were thrown up against a building front, their shells fracturing with a series of crackling sounds. The dragon's dead tail still had mass, and the reptile used it like a club, slamming it into the structure's facade. Rubble cascaded down over the broken shells.

The giant monster moved into the arena's square, the street's buildings blocking the barbarian's view. Kamahl now had to skirt the new forces creeping out of the pools. Small humanoids with huge heads

crawled out onto the surface gingerly, their whiskers trailing on the ground. The barbarian recognized the amphibians. The tresias were sometimes found in highland caves. The street was filling with these new arrivals, and Kamahl swore as they blocked the way. The blind creatures' great claws scraped over the rubble and slashed mounds of mown grass into mulch. The barbarian was nearing the square, and his lashing flame blade scythed away the undergrowth. The dragon screamed and came back into view. It stomped a crab into jelly, and pounds of meat squirted out between the animal's clawed toes. It began to move up the street.

The amphibians' oversized heads rose up, orienting on the giant monster. A surreal and hypnotic radiance pulsed out toward the common enemy—faint in the sunlight and dust of battle but commanding all the same. Kamahl caught only a brief glimpse, and it mesmerized him. The battle faded away as his mind lost itself in a play of color. His training strained to break the silken mental bonds, to reassert his mastery. The barbarian's struggles cleared his mind, and as his sight came back, he found himself turned around, facing down the street, away from the dragon and toward the tresias. He shifted his eyes away, avoiding the hypnotic trap that tried to ensnare him once more. From the corner of his eye he could see more crabs coming forth, these falling upon the rubble and vegetation to expand the beachhead.

As the hypnotic power of the tresias seemed to dim, a new wave of reinforcements crawled from the depths below. Kamahl shuffled to the side in atavistic reaction as the new marine fighters rolled and oozed

over the landscape. The cephalid soldiers hauled themselves by their tentacles out of the pool. Bags of flesh, they left a trail of slime as they slithered over the cobblestones.

Though they lay like dead jellyfish cast up on the beach by a storm, each grasped a weapon. Spear guns and tridents dug at the dirt as the invaders rested for a few precious seconds then resumed their drive on the still-bemused monster. The hypnotic tresias light vanished as each amphibian collapsed, hanging their heads and starting to crawl back on their fragile limbs toward the pools to the underworld. The cephalids and crabs parted as their blind compatriots returned, their manner showing the same disquiet with their allies that the barbarian felt.

Kamahl scaled the side of a building, his bruised hands leaving a tacky film of blood as he swarmed up the side. The sea forces had cleared a path, but he would not trust their company. By the time he reached the third story, the dragon sounded again, fury in its voice as it overcame the amphibians' spell. The barbarian chinned himself to the rooftop and turned to run toward the giant monster, finally free of the undergrowth and mer warriors below.

The cephalids attacked the dragon, propping their projectors on rubble and bodies from the battle. The shafts flew wildly, and Kamahl congratulated himself on seeking higher ground. Incompetence and inexperience could kill as quickly as malice. A few bolts from spear guns snapped into reptilian flesh though most landed on rubble and cobblestones. The projectiles discharged showers of sparks, and the barbarian detected the same energies that fed

lightning storms. The mountain warrior conjured an axe of flame and threw it with all the force at his command. The conjured weapon spun through the air and slammed into the shoulder of the convulsing dragon. A charred circle expanded as the magic destroyed the thorny armor to show the hide beneath.

"There's an aiming point!" Kamahl shouted to the forces below. The cephalids were silent, their tentacles locked around their projectors as they compacted springs and loaded new shafts for another volley. The barbarian forgot the clumsy fighters in the street below as he heard the battle cry of the Order.

Lieutenant Kirtar maneuvered on the rooftops as well, ceding the ground to the invaders from the forests and seas. Kamahl could see city guardsmen coming up other streets from his four-story vantage point. The dragon was clawing down brick and timber over the cephalids and the remaining crabs. The sea fighters scrabbled to get clear as the monster tried to bury them. Another barrage of bolts sputtered and arced, but the huge beast seemed to not notice the pain. It hopped from foot to foot, crushing the cabs.

Kirtar was a fountain of energy as he crossed the roofs. The Order champion's attack slammed into the giant creature's hip, tunneling its way to the bone. With a crack audible throughout the street, a joint gave way, and the creature's rearmost leg spasmed and dragged. The giant tried to breathe more fog, but only a few wisps came out. It tried to back out into the square as everyone closed for the kill.

Kamahl was accelerating as he jumped to the final roof and conjured another weapon in his free hand. He hurled the axe at the creature's side, aiming

for the thickest remaining patch of the beast's thorny armor. He was in the air in a long leap when it exploded, devouring a broad swath of the deadly vegetation in a wave of flame. The barbarian's sword smashed into a mound of muscle as his jump landed him on the beast's side. His plunging sword burned a deep wound, and the dragon screamed again. The giant tried to scrape the mountain warrior off against a building, inflicting even more damage to itself in an instinctive response to the attack.

Kamahl levered himself up and over the rise of the animal's spine, his sword and an axe acting as pitons. The rumble of cascading rubble drowned out the barbarian's angry cry as a barbed tendril of the creature's remaining armor sank its thorns into the fighter's thigh. One hand held his buried sword as the other tore the vine free. Below him, the beast heaved and pitched as the warrior cupped his hand and drew flame into the world. He clasped the summoned fire against the wound, hissing at the pain. A wave of cold swept his body as his flesh tried to shrug off the burn. As he lay panting, the mer forces attacked again.

Soft-bodied sea warriors raised their spear guns, discharging magical projectiles to little effect. The dragon's head dipped, and its claws scrabbled, tearing apart some of its tormenters. The mer eeled their way into mounds of rubble, and others suctioned their way up the outsides of buildings. The forest creature took advantage of the ascending invaders and snapped them down from the buildings. Even as it devoured its foes, the crabs made a run for its flanks. Though most died under the dragon's heavy stomps, some scuttled

under the massive frame, and now giant claws nipped at the injured leg and tail.

The barbarian saw the crustacean warriors moving wildly below, their claws shearing at the huge tendons. The middle leg on the left collapsed, and Kamahl jumped for safety as the animal went down, rolling to crush the sea fighters. The mountain mage's sword lashed into a building wall, and the pull of gravity dragged the steel down. The power of the blade left a trail of smoking brick as Kamahl arrested his slide. As he slowed, he pulled the weapon free and fell the remaining distance to the street. His leg protested, but he ignored the shallow wounds. The back of the beast lay toward him, and he could see the street coming apart under its pounding mass. He closed with the downed beast.

Lieutenant Kirtar called for all forces to finish the monster. A mer fighter finally showed some marksmanship and shot a charged spear beneath an armored eyelid. A shower of ocular fluid soaked the fallen grasses, pouring from the empty socket as it writhed. The few remaining crabs began to climb the body.

The barbarian watched the cephalids retreat back to their pools, then he could see only the monster. It filled his vision as it tried to rise to its feet. Kamahl raised his sword and plunged it near the spine. The beast somehow got its legs under its bulk, and the barbarian was nearly catapulted free. Only his grip on his sword allowed him to stay with the monster. The dragon was stumbling away from the arena and up the street, headed for the sea fighters and their pools. The crabs tried to climb the slack tail, but they failed as

the giant swayed from side to side. The beast was killing the warriors almost by accident as it crushed both hard-shelled and soft-bodied fighters from the sea against the broken bricks of Cabal City.

Kirtar stood opposite Kamahl on a building roof, surefooted despite the slope of the crumbling structure. The barbarian saw a predatory grin as the aven unleashed another flight of his conjured birds. The mountain warrior swore and breathed out a cage of flame, concentrating even as his uncontrolled mount tottered beneath him. The golden sparrows swooped down and swept over the great reptile, their wings of light shaving away the remains of the dragon's thorny armor before rising to the sky. The spell wrought creatures threw themselves as living knives at the beast's head, vanishing in concussive bursts that carved away hide.

Determined to get the kill, Kamahl forced power into the long blade of his sword. Inside the monster a scalpel of flame cut its way to the backbone. Massive vertebrae parted as the barbarian's will sought out the thick cable of armored nerves. New magic impacted on the dragon's flanks, but Kamahl was locked in directing his final attack. Bone and nerve sundered under Kamahl's lethal surgery, parting the spinal cord and killing the beast.

The mountain warrior turned to jump clear, but he was crushed against the beast's back as a huge crab came from the rear in a wild rush. A crustacean had finally managed to climb the dragging tail, and now its vain attack only put the barbarian at risk. Kamahl was bowled over and barely avoided the huge claws, which clutched for something to hold on to.

The dragon fell and the barbarian could hear Kirtar shrieking victory. New attacks impacted against the already dead flesh as additional surges of magic burrowed into the slowly collapsing corpse. Fighters left off their attacks, running for their lives as tons of flesh gave up life.

The barbarian snarled, trapped under the crustacean. He forced his way through legs, the spindly limbs landing like clubs as the mer fighter panicked, and the pair began to fall free. The barbarian and crab were directly under the beast and both bolted for the closest bit of clear sky, trying to race under the beast as the wall of descending flesh loomed over them. But the panicked crab yanked the barbarian back, its claws gripping his armored belt as it tried to pull itself to safety. It only doomed them both. Pressure threatened to smash Kamahl like a bug, and his breath exploded out his mouth. Pain flared all over his body, and he fell into darkness, his senses fading as blackness smothered all.

CHAPTER 7

The stench of burned flesh and destruction was sweet in Kirtar's nostrils. The aroma was nectar the bird warrior savored as he stood with his eyes closed. The crackle of fires soothed his hot blood, the destruction of the Cabal structures an unexpected benefit. The beast had torn a great wound in the city's fabric and like draining blood, the citizens flowed into the streets. The attack had caught him deep in the arena, and it had taken precious minutes to force his way through the crowds. The plaza had been a madhouse, bleeding guardsmen forming defenses to manage the crowds. With his warriors still lost in the clearing stands, the lieutenant took control, instilling order into the fleeing cowards, clearing the way for the coming battle. True, he was forced into a tactical retreat and the sudden arrival of the mer empire forces turned the contest. But it was his own blow that laid the beast low when all was finally done.

The bleating of the wounded irritated him, and he directed those of his order with healing skills to ply their trade among the injured. He pointed to the mer forces to receive healing first. The monsters of the deep at least were brave fighters and far more worthy of aid than the corrupt gamblers of the city. The lieutenant moved down to the street level as he saw his orders being relayed. The few Cabal officers he saw looked thoroughly cowed, and none disputed his authority.

"This is the natural order of things," he whispered to himself.

The crabs dragged away the corpses of their dead, despite the Cabal servants' furtive attempts to secure the bodies for the city's use. The crustaceans sorted through the rubble, their immense strength allowing them to move all but the largest beams. The exposed corpses not from the mer realm were discarded on the rubble piles to be snared by guardsmen. Kirtar made a note to have his own forces collect their dead in Cabal territory.

A centaur staggered to the street, the simian face visible over the high grass. He started toward the Order officer, carefully trying to find a clear path. Kirtar's mystic senses detected a change in magic. The arena defenses, still unbreached, were coming down. Servitors slowly walked toward the growth obstructing the streets holding staves. One took the lead and his staff of black wood and iron passed among the stalks. The plants withered into brittle husks as the lieutenant watched. The other Cabal reinforcements joined in.

"Ware the street cleaners," the champion called out with derision. A few of the workers bristled but none challenged his appraisal. Kirtar expected nothing more from such cravens.

"Lieutenant," called the centaur, moving into the cleared street, barely avoiding a "mistaken" swing of a withering staff wielded by an angry guardsman. The centaur bared his fangs and shook the huge club that he used as a walking stick.

Kirtar recognized him as the fighter allied with the bar-barian. The injuries he had sustained appeared half-healed, and the officer assumed that was the reason the forest fighter had not joined in the

battle. He confessed to himself that the warrior, Kamahl, had at least shown rash courage during the fight.

"What is it?" he asked. Then trying to explain his short-**ness**, he continued, "As you can see there is much to be done, and our hosts seem incapable of doing it." Kirtar ignored the efforts of the Cabal to clear the streets and the stream of carts arriving to haul away the rubble.

"The beast was a Krosan dragon," the centaur said. "It is found only in the forests of the far northwest." At the signs of the bird warrior's exasperation with the lesson, Seton made his point. "It has absolutely no business being here. Something is wrong, and this attack could be only the sign of greater troubles."

"I appreciate the information, sir," Kirtar said, speaking with excessive courtesy, "but what am I to do?" He waved to the destruction caused by the single beast. "How does the destruction of a pit like this concern the Order?"

"For the dragon to appear this far east, the reverberations of whatever is disturbing the forest must cover leagues." Seton explained, his voice showing offense. "As an officer in the Order, sworn to protect the Northern Reaches and hoping to extend your authority south, I thought you would be grateful for the insight. Excuse me if I misunderstood your seriousness." With that the centaur moved away, the haft of his granite-capped club beating a tune of anger on the cobblestones.

Shaking his head at the vagaries of forest warriors, Kirtar turned back to supervision. But there

was little to do, as an army of Cabal workers fell to work in concert with the remaining crabs.

"Of course they are ready now," the lieutenant mumbled to himself. More movement caught his eye, and he turned to see Laquatus, the mer ambassador, and Turg, his amphibian champion, coming from the arena. The frog moved slowly, and his eyes were glassy. Kirtar had not paid attention to the arena match and wondered if Turg was injured. The frog squatted on his heels, slowly rocking from side to side as the ambassador came forward.

"Congratulations on your brilliant victory," the merman hailed. Laquatus gave a short bow that good manners demanded the lieutenant return. "The beast would have surely destroyed the city if not for your quick action." The ambassador looked pained as he said it, and Kirtar felt obligated to inquire.

"Did you take injuries during the battle?" The lieutenant had seen nothing, but it must have been a madhouse inside.

"No, no," replied the merman. "The spells protecting the arena sealed me and my champion away from combat. Turg was trapped on the arena floor, and a few others and I were locked in a skybox during the actual attack. I fear the excitement was too much for my companions. In a fit of desperation they tried to leap free and perished in the fields protecting the audience from the arena floor." Laquatus looked quite distressed, reining his voice in with difficulty. "It's desperately sad. One of the deceased was an importer with some knowledge of the attacking beast. He said it was a type of dragon that came in response to the beast my champion killed."

Kirtar frowned.

"A centaur told me that the beast never left the northwestern forests," the officer said. "He was quite convinced that such animals were never here. To come in response to a cry means either the animal was tracking the one killed or that it was in the general vicinity." Kirtar wondered if perhaps the centaur was on to something. There could be a continuing danger.

Another bird warrior flew through the air. The four in Kirtar's party had been killed, so this golden-winged fighter must be a messenger from the north. The lieutenant waved his arms to signal his presence, but the sharp-eyed flyer was already swooping down to him. The raypen folded his wings and shook the still settling dust off his feathers.

"Greeting to my First," intoned the raypen, its high tenor piping as it recited the message from memory. Messengers were specially trained to give messages word for word to prevent written orders from being intercepted. "There have been attacks of forest creatures all along the western borders of the high plains. You are to return north directly, collecting information and offering aid to those whom need it. The villages under the Order must be protected. If necessary you will stay and oversee the southern defense. We must find out what is happening. Pianna, Captain of the North."

Kirtar cursed the bad timing. Fighters from across the continent were here for the contest, and representatives of the other continental powers had arrived as well. Here was a chance to forge new alliances, and the Captain had just ordered him back to the barely civilized plains to protect scores of

nameless villages. His huge hands clenched in anger, but he relaxed them with a conscious effort. The captain was head of the Order, and he must believe that she knew what she was doing. After all, he thought to himself, he didn't want to stay in this pit of a city anyway. There would be other chances to make his presence known. News of his victory would help convince others that the Order's direction was necessary for the common good.

"I am afraid I must leave directly," he said to the ambassador, waving the messenger toward the main camp. "I am sorry to miss the championship rounds, but I am sure Turg will triumph now that I will withdraw from the contests." He looked toward the amphibian, but he had vanished from sight. Looking for the frog brought the officer's gaze back to the sight of the mer forces diving into the pools, dragging their dead behind them.

"I was very surprised to see your soldiers streaming from the ground," he stated, his eyes narrowing as he turned back to the ambassador.

Laquatus seemed huge, his form giving off vibrations that seemed hypnotic. Kirtar could feel his pulse slowing as the violet eyes of the merman expanded to fill the world.

"But of course you knew of the soldiers under the city," a velvet voice insinuated. "They attacked at your orders, being already under your command. Don't you remember?" Kirtar fell into darkness ringed in purple as the ambassador took hold of his shoulders.

* * * * *

"I must therefore leave immediately for forest's edge." The words resounded in Kirtar's head, and he wondered who was saying them. It was with some surprise that he realized that he was the speaker. "This attack is but one of dozens that have issued from the west. The Order is the only force that can protect those villages without the walls and guardsmen of Cabal City," he said to the assembled city elders.

Kirtar stood on a rough platform against the arena, looking over the square. The fall of rubble punctuated his speech as work crews tried to clear the streets. The dragon that he had slain filled the street, and blood from the great corpse slowly drained into the storm gutters, the smell issuing from the sewers under the arena. The crowd of henchmen and ordinary citizen ignored the odor. Kirtar knew them to be used to such odors in this pit. He gritted his teeth in anger.

Why was he giving a speech to the Cabal, he wondered savagely. The city was contemptible. Only the grave breach in civil order had convinced him to fight the dragon attack. Cabal City was a sour taste in his mouth. Only the sight of the mer ambassador, his invaluable advisor, prevented him spitting in contempt onto the arena square. He ignored the growing mutters at his long silence to regard Laquatus, his closest ally. The merman was the first to see the importance of uniting the continent of Otaria, saving its fragmented history.

The mer agreed it was long past time to impose order on the land. The underwater kingdom would lend arms to help the lieutenant pursue his dreams. The guards the ambassador put under his command proved invaluable in defeating the huge beast. It was

the first and richest fruit of the inter-power alliance that the Order wished to form.

How lucky the ambassador had ferried his personal guard to the catacombs under the arena. Kirtar wondered at the expense of shifting so many water breathers. It was fortunate that the drowned caves had been available. Even though the forces proved effective, he still chuckled at the naivete of the ambassador. It showed the merman's inexperience with the dry land that he would bring water breathers as guards against land-bound dangers. After all, how many flooded caves could there be? He nodded to the ambassador, grateful for his support and resolved to do his best in protecting Laquatus from his own foolishness and inexperience.

The officials began clapping after long seconds, and the crowd belatedly joined in. The Master of the Games heaved his heavy bulk up to the podium beside the lieutenant. Kirtar dragged his attention back to the officials of the Cabal, despising them but determined to act politely for his ally's sake. The mer ambassador nodded approvingly, and the bird warrior felt a burst of pride at his own statesmanship.

"We thank you for your leadership in combating the dragon in conjunction with Ambassador Laquatus's guard." The Cabal functionary sent an ill-favored glance toward the water dweller as he mentioned the valiant sea fighters. It was the base nature of the pits that made them so suspicious of such timely aid, the lieutenant said to himself. The speaker turned from the ambassador as if snubbing him and gestured broadly toward the Order officer and his guards behind him.

"Hurry up, you bag of wind," the aven warrior muttered to himself.

"In recognition of such bravery and valor in cause of the common good, we gladly offer the pick of the prizes to Lieutenant Kirtar."

A polite clapping sounded as a representative of the Order went to select a prize from the mound of treasure pulled from the arena. The champion was unable to restrain showing at least some contempt for the proceeding, and he chose an elen to carry the prize. Though the giant bird warriors stood close to ten feet tall, the gray-skinned humanoids were of the serving class. The lieutenant doubted his hosts were intelligent enough to read the insult of the great robed figure going through the prizes like a ragpicker searching a garbage pile. The elen selected an object, the round sphere almost lost in its gigantic hands.

The ambassador and his frog both looked to the prize, ignoring the rambling official. As Kirtar agreed to this farce only as a favor to his ally, he wondered what could be so important about a bauble plucked randomly from a pile. The elen walked slowly, appearing almost introspective as it came nearer the officer. The giant bird warriors were known for their lack of magical talent, and it appeared, outside everything Kirtar knew, that the huge servant tried to use magical senses to probe the metal surface. Intrigued by what would drive such a mystical incompetent to such efforts, the lieutenant stepped forward to intercept the prize bearer. The walker showed no awareness, continuing toward the baggage train where the bauble was to be stored with the other luggage. The officer plucked it out of the elen's grasp,

seeing Turg step forward as if to admonish him. Then all thoughts of the frog, the Cabal, and anything else vanished from his mind.

The sphere erupted in a shout of power. The dull metal surface seemed to burn away, blurring Kirtar's eyes with tears. The magic that called so softly now filled the world. As the flare of energy subsided, the lieutenant held a globe of perfect crystal. The clear depths called to him, drawing his spirit away from Cabal City. The aftermath of the battle and the stench of the street were gone. Purity and glory surrounded the bird warrior. The audience showed its essential stupidity in staring dumbly at him, ignoring the vistas that opened at every side.

Kirtar saw himself striding through a field of enemies, each frozen and impotent against him, and his spells swept them away to oblivion. The banner of the Order flew over the field in victory. The aven's heart sang as he knew the triumph, the glory, that waited to be seized.

The images dimmed until he saw once again the magnificent globe filling his hand. Kirtar heard the exclamations of the crowd but ignored them. They were not worthy to taste the future he had seen. This city was trash and could be ignored now that he held real power. His huge hand closed over the prize, gripping it as tightly as his mind gripped the visions it bestowed.

CHAPTER 8

"Everything was going so well," thought the ambassador, stunned by the surge of magic. "How, by the stormy seas, have things gotten so out of control?" The ambassador was finally able to rouse Turg from his digestive slumber only at the end of the battle. He was required to lay actual hands on the amphibian before he could break the near coma. Seeing the pit fighter too stuffed for any use he forced the humanoid to expel much of what he had eaten. Thankfully, no one witnessed the thoroughly unpleasant scene, but Laquatus pledged the frog would not be allowed such behavior ever again.

Even as Turg scraped his face clean, a soldier from the underground army had found the ambassador and reported on the battle. The cephalid shifted down the seats of the arena and collapsed as it fell from the high walls to the sands below. Laquatus thought the tedious importer would have looked very similar if he had not dissolved away under the then-active defenses.

"My lord," the warrior had said in a muffled voice, nearly inaudible as it tried to speak out of water, "the beast is fallen and our forces clear away the debris. Captain Satas has sent those who cannot live long outside the water back through the portal. He has been forced to retire as well and waits further instruction."

Laquatus cursed the poor timing that found so few warriors able to live long above ground. More amphibians would have to be found for further battles.

The cephalid's tentacles were nearly white from exhaustion, and it needed to get back to the water. "Tell the good captain that there is no need for further operations on the surface at this time," the ambassador said carefully. "Sound the recall of all troops. It is not necessary for our fighters to act as servants to the inferiors inhabiting this land. I will meet with Satas later at the usual place." He paused, wondering just what the situation outside was.

If worst came to worst, he could always find refuge in the deep caverns. It was unlikely that any would be able to invade the dark subterranean rivers. Whatever happened, he needed to do as much damage control as possible. The presence of a secret fighting force must be explained and assurances offered to the Cabal. Briefly Laquatus regretted the necessity of sending the army back below, but further action would undoubtedly create substantial casualties without any lasting gains. If only the cave digging crews had opened up more of the underwater cavern systems.

He returned the cephalid's gesture of obedience and watched the soft-bodied soldier scale the wall. Captain Satas had responded promptly, and it sounded as if the quick action of the tresias had saved Turg and the ambassador from having to contend with the dragon. He resolved to closet himself with the diminutive amphibian in the near future.

The destruction of the city streets put him in a better humor. The rubble and still-visible bodies made him cheerfully overlook the insults he had suffered for the moment. Though whoever made him and his champion an object of fun would someday pay the price. He saw the last of the marine dead being

dragged into the pools as he arrived to talk with the lieutenant. The self-important champion had succumbed easily to the ambassador's spells, and he dragged the officer into a gaping building as his mind overrode the aven's. It took only a few minutes of apparent conversation to set a cover story in place.

Kirtar now believed that days before the ambassador had told the bird warrior of a secret guard foisted upon him by the emperor. Unwilling to insult the ability of his Cabal hosts, Laquatus had hidden them in the secret tunnels under the arena. Realizing that the lieutenant was the preeminent military power in the city, the ambassador offered his troops to the Order as an emergency reserve. The attack of the dragon revealed how incompetent the Cabal was in military matters, and only the lieutenant prevented a complete disaster.

The decision of the emperor to send additional troops showed the wisdom of the underwater monarch. At the conclusion of the battle, the badly damaged marine formation retired back to the deep wells under the arena and the embassy. Laquatus created the fantasy of a temporary alliance that even now worked at the bird warrior's memory. When Kirtar went north, he would take with him the absolute conviction that a permanent alliance was the natural next step with the mer empire.

"Lieutenant Kirtar, we have orders to escort you to a ceremony honoring your leadership." A gravely voice announced almost in the merman's ear. Laquatus broke off his mental manipulations suddenly, leaving the lieutenant to stumble and look about vaguely at the sudden release. A section of city

guardsmen stood at ease, one holding a clean standard that contrasted with his torn and dusty uniform. It appeared that the city was wasting no time in honoring a hero. The ambassador smiled brightly.

"A great honor indeed, Lieutenant," the merman said, gripping the bemused warrior's arm and starting off for the square. He ignored the guardsmen who had to step out of their way or be trampled. The Order's men had been unwilling to interrupt a private conversation, but the city soldiers seemed much too arrogant.

"Perhaps an object lesson is in order," the ambassador said to himself.

Turg was resting somewhere in the surrounding buildings, making himself scarce as Laquatus rearranged the lieutenant's reality. The merman could only make a simple request as he shepherded the avienor to the ceremony called by the city. The aristocrat's usual close mental link with the amphibian was strained by the necessity of keeping Kirtar's mind quiescent. Laquatus had no idea what he was saying as he continued to impress Kirtar with images and ideas under the cover of the conversation. The ambassador received only a split second of warning as Turg acted on his spite.

The wall from an upper story fell out, the heavy cornice and brick an irregular boulder that flattened an impudent guardsman like a overripe fruit. The ornate carving was followed by a rain of other bricks that broke arms and heads and grew a bumper crop of pain among the escort.

Laquatus shouted with loud dismay and pointed to the men, calling for aid. Even had anyone looked up

it would have been difficult to spot the camouflaged Turg scampering away in manic glee. The ambassador knelt by the men as Kirtar called for a surgeon to treat the fresh bout of broken bones. The merman hoped to watch the men as their bones were set, but additional guardsmen came to escort them to the delayed ceremony. This time the interruption was much more polite, and Laquatus curbed his impulse for Turg to create another accident.

"We thank you for your actions," the fat man said, as the Order leader stepped to the stage. "In the hour of our need ..." he droned and Kirtar stood in the background, still lost in the grip of the merman's spell. Laquatus dared not use his magic in the presence of so many. The official was looking askance at the ambassador as the subject of the mer forces came up. The aristocrat gathered himself to respond only to have Kirtar step forward.

"The decision to use the forces was mine," he said, claiming the cover story that Laquatus had implanted. Victory was sweet in the ambassador's mouth as his new puppet played his part. The lieutenant told the assembly that the forces were under his command during the battle. The aristocrat looked on benignly as the farce played itself out on the stage.

The selection of a prize was supremely unimportant to Laquatus, and it was only as the hooded elen brought back the diminutive dull-gray ball that the merman took notice. The pit frog had access to the ambassador's abilities, and he was first to feel the beat of power produced by the sphere. The ambassador started from his machinations and looked on it as well. Then both stared.

The flare of power blinded Laquatus. The metal ball, so muted before, reflected the sun in a brilliant spray of light. The strength of emissions from the sphere blacked out his awareness of other spells, and it was only his grip on Turg's arm that maintained his control. The unbelievable mystic assault died down, and the ambassador tried to cast a spell of detection, just to convince himself that he had not imagined the event. His spell detected nothing but reverberations. It was only when he focused directly of the object in the lieutenant's hands that he sensed something unusual. Like a night animal staring into the noonday sun, all knowledge he might learn was washed away. The confluence of might was too much for even a mage of his ability.

The Cabal officials appeared stunned, and many of the pit fighters competing in the games stood like dumb oxen as the lieutenant mumbled a few words and walked away. A Cabal official's incredulous look of disbelief turned to anger, and he spun on the Master of the Games. The tall, spare man jerked the fat fool back toward the arena, whispering furiously in his ear. The ambassador imagined that quite a few hard words would be said to someone who allowed such a treasure to be given away or offered to all comers. Laquatus smiled even as he quickly walked after the lieutenant. The Master of the Games's head would likely pay for the insults in the arena.

Kirtar continued on, his aides and soldiers gathered around him, their instinct in times of uncertainty to protect their commander. The ambassador tried to close with the bird warrior, but the press of people prevented him.

"Lieutenant, we need to talk," he shouted, but the officer was still lost in his contemplation of the object. Such power was fascinating, and Laquatus ached to peer within the orb for himself. Mastering such power will take time, he thought and waved to a servant.

"Find out where the Order party is going," he instructed, looking to see whom else he could command. "Meet me at the embassy as soon as you have the information. Find one of your fellows to keep watch if there are any changes." Laquatus was almost at a run as he headed for the embassy. The sphere was a completely new factor in his plans, one that upset his machinations in the city. The challenge was exhilarating.

By the time the servant returned with his report of the route, the embassy was a madhouse. Workers rushed about, closing up rooms while the permanent staff was locked over blueprints for new architectural wonders. If the ambassador left the city, he would take advantage of his absence and expand the residence. It was becoming too cramped for his ambitions. In a city of spectacle, his home must be the most impressive.

"A system of waterfalls with a twisted channel of pools is the most interesting," the ambassador said to a harried chamberlain. "You will have to construct a spur to the aqueduct and bribe the Cabal to divert enough water."

"Most impressive, your Excellency," the man said subserviently, "but where shall we procure the funds for such a great expansion?"

Laquatus waved the concern away.

"The coastal shipping fees are being collected by our agents for the quarterly shift to the treasury.

Divert all you need from that source," the ambassador said, feeling expansive. When he gained control of the sphere he would need a dwelling to reflect his new status. And perhaps it was time to accelerate his plans for reentry into the undersea court. He looked over the drained grotto, the artificial reefs being broken by slaves with sledgehammers. He had been chief fish in a small pond for long enough. The horrified look on the chamberlain's face reminded him that he must still win his new status.

"I assure you that it will be cleared with the emperor," Laquatus said and forgot everything as he noticed the servant sent to the Order camp. He walked with the man to the entrance of the grotto. Making sure that no one observed them for the moment, he pulled the man into the secret room. A crab filled the enclosure, a sentry reporting to the caves below. After the ambassador closed the door, the crustacean lifted the cover and vanished into the pool. Captain Satas dragged himself clear moments later. The tre-sias paused for a moment, then moved toward the ambassador and messenger, drawn by their nearly imperceptible movements and breathing. Laquatus shifted as quietly as possible, but the tresias adapted, altering his course. The merman was unimpressed with the tresias's performance during the battle, but it appeared the captain and his kind could adapt well to the land.

"How may I serve, my lord," the small amphibian said in his quiet, dead tone. The ambassador waved the spy to speak, noting that his hand's passage in the air was tracked by the captain as well.

"The Order will be traveling west to the forest's edge to catalog the reported predations of woodland creatures," the man said, opening a pouch and taking out a map. "I bought this off a Cabal servitor able to sneak into the main tent." He laid it on the floor and weighted it down with a dagger and a few coins. Then he looked at the blind amphibian, flustered how to use his acquisition. The ambassador also wondered how the tresias would know how far the cave system ran. To Laquatus's surprise, instead of calling for a sighted retainer, the cave dweller chuckled and drew a stone from his own pouch.

"The sound of paper and mention of routes suggests it is a map lying on the floor," Satas stated, rubbing the dull gem between his hands. "I have always found such methods of little use and came prepared with a substitute."

The short creature tossed the jewel to the ambassador who caught it. A spell whispered new knowledge to his mind. A variant of the false memory spell, it left him with a sensory map of the explored caves and cleared tunnels. The underside of the continent was suddenly more familiar to him than the memories of his childhood home. Captain Satas's skin broadcast his amusement, but entranced with the novel method of information transmission, the ambassador did not even feel anger. He did, however, experience irritation as he pulled his new memories and the map of the lieutenant's path together.

Kirtar's route led west. The underground rivers did underlay the route, but they were unexplored and sure to be nearly impassable. Miners connecting the underworld to the sea would have to be moved farther

inland. The lieutenant planned to swing north and an explored cave system lay nearby. Laquatus could catch up with the party and capture the newly revealed power source.

"Captain Satas, the northern caves allow us to intercept the group of landmen and crush them. It is absolutely necessary that an amphibious force be available for extended action out of the water. Find me soldiers and send them to the Cave of Knives." The memory of sharp stalactites and stalagmites in the north prompted the name.

"I will send what forces I can, but we are very short on long-duration patrols," Satas said in a pun, the unintentional humor irritating the ambassador. "It may be necessary to find air-breathing slaves to meet you and supply bodies to soften up the adversary."

Laquatus nodded reluctantly, regretting the lack of forces able to operate out of water. He dismissed the officer and thought of whom he could meet in the forests. Perhaps the Cabal could be of aid. He smiled and clasped the spy's hand. "Excellent work!" he cried and hugged the man in apparent fellowship. Laquatus raised power and cut into the other's psyche. Experiences withered, and memories grew confused. He worked at the servant's mind, creating a false shadow of drunkenness and nameless female companions. It was hard work, and the fellow proved fairly resistant. It took real effort, and Laquatus wondered if death wasn't a better solution. But as his talk with Satas proved, he lacked walking servants. He continued to mutilate memories, wishing he had the resources to just kill the fellow and swim away.

* * * * *

Kamahl breathed and was struck by deja vu. Buried twice in one battle.

"I am no mole," he muttered.

The warrior coughed and tried to turn over. He could not.

Pressure prevented him from more than breathing. Even his head was locked in position, his cheek pressed against stone. The barbarian could remember the dragon falling and the crab getting in his way.

"I despise seafood," he muttered. More sensations intruded, and he could feel multiple small points of pressure digging into his back. He remembered the crustacean's armor and realized that he must be trapped under it. He tried to move again, his muscles bunching in agony, but nothing shifted. He remembered the great dragon falling as well and with a shock understood that two great beasts lay atop him, their mass making a mockery of even his powerful muscles. It was a miracle that he was not pulped as well. The cobblestones underneath him seemed jumbled, and over the smell of the dragon and the crab he detected strong odors of mold. He could hear the dripping of water and the scuttle of a rat. The street must have collapsed under the weight and crushed a sewer. The stench of filth was the stench of life, and Kamahl laughed before coughing spasms ended his momentary merriment. To owe his life to a poorly constructed drain.

The barbarian wondered if anyone would rescue him. He remembered the disregard of the lieutenant

and the crabs and hoped he could count on the Cabal forces. At the very least, someone would have to take care of the giant corpse.

"Perhaps they will enchant it and have it walk away." The crab might weigh over a thousand pounds, but he was sure that he could get out without the tons of flesh holding the shell in place. He imagined a giant undead monster crushing the crab and the life under it into oblivion as it tried to rise. Kamahl thought of his killing blow. He realized that with no intact spine, it was unlikely that even raised, the monster would be able to move. It seemed colder somehow.

The tremendous ringing of magical energy made him believe that he was dying, and new planes of existence called to him. Then his senses located the source of the power. A locus of exultation, a shout of birth, it lay some distance away. His mind demanded he move, run to the source, but his body stayed relaxed, impotent under the great weight. His thoughts grew hazy as the energy retreated. He had sensed this before, though it wasn't as strong. The treasure room! He recalled the sphere behind the sword. Someone else must have seen its value and called forth its essence. His mind swirling, he tried to imagine what champion might hold it now. It was harder to think, the air thicker. He could not call power, the pressure on his body seeming to squeeze the magic out. Just a few more minutes of rest and then he would cut his way free. After all, a victory without being alive to enjoy it seemed pointless. Just a few minutes more. . . .

The sound roused his attention at once. The rhythmic cuts of a sharp edge into flesh transmitted

themselves through the corpse. He might have been gathering himself for a few minutes or for days, but he shouted loudly, pushing the sound out despite aching, compressed ribs. There was a pause in the beat and then it resumed, louder than before.

The leathery scrape of scales signaled the shifting of the dragon's mass. Pressure spiked and eased as the giant corpse slumped to the side. Shy beams of light peaked under the crab's shell, and the crunch of metal in chitin showed the worker was near.

"Have a care," shouted Kamahl trying to shift the beast above him. It gave a little, though it still seemed pinned down on one side. "The crab is right on top of me!"

A great hand wormed its way under the shell and another joined it. The knuckles went white as the shell lifted a fraction. The barbarian forced his complaining body to lift as well, and the additional force flipped the crustacean to the side. Kamahl reeled at the release of weight, and the light left his eyes watering. Seton stood, his sides heaving, with a bloody axe beside him. As the barbarian moved out of the shallow depression, he could see Cabal servants advance on the crab, sledgehammers falling as they smashed armor and threw fragments into a nearby wagon. Other servants with huge cleavers attacked the dragon's corpse, a steady stream of bloody lumps of flesh falling to the street. The meat went to other carts, and some rumbled toward the arena.

"Waste not, want not." Seton laughed as he came closer to Kamahl. The barbarian allowed himself to lean on the giant.

"What happened?" the mountain fighter asked, speaking with difficulty from his chapped lips. He waved a water carrier over from his round of the Cabal workers.

"What happened?" the centaur replied incredulously. "You are standing in the largest open-air butcher shop on the continent, and you ask what happened? As if you missed a few seconds of a play?" The simian face writhed with suppressed merriment.

"I don't mean this," Kamahl said irritably, dismissing the battle, his triumph, and his near death with a wave. "What force cried out so loudly long after the dragon fell?" The centaur moved away from the other workers.

"The Cabal presented a prize to Lieutenant Kirtar for killing the beast," he whispered. "When he held it in his hands, it released such power that all the city was stunned by it. He left for his camp and soon after went north. Word came of other attacks by forest creatures, and the Captain called him away." The centaur knelt, bringing his mouth closer to the barbarian's ear.

"They say the Master of the Games has disappeared, punished for giving away such power. He has gone to feed the beasts I wager. I heard the ambassador's servants tell a Cabal officer that Laquatus would be leaving the city shortly for 'consultations.' " Seton looked over the destruction and the blood running into the gutters. "What happened here is merely the beginning."

Kamahl thought of the prize that he desired given to the Lieutenant.

"They rewarded Kirtar for killing the dragon?" he said hotly. "They gave him what was rightfully mine, and he has run away north." He began to pace, his injuries momentarily forgotten. He ran to the pit where he had fallen, shouldering aside the workers. Kamahl went to his hands and knees, looking determinedly over the ground, ignoring the complaints from offended servitors. Seton followed and quelled the comments with a frown. Kamahl stood suddenly, his great sword in his hand. The long blade whipped through the air, the dragon blood burning away in a trail of smoke.

"I will go reclaim my prize from Kirtar," the barbarian said, steel ringing in his voice. "I will have my reward though the entire Order stands in my way."

CHAPTER 9

The early morning dew made the grasslands a jeweled vista, the sun's rays glittering off the small droplets. The rider nudged the sides of her steed and set it through the tall grass.

The woman looked alertly over the landscape, the slight fold of her eyes hiding some of the intensity of her observation. Her black hair trailed down her back, bound in a long rope by silvered ornaments. One arm rested on her saddle pommel, encased in leather and steel. The bracer's ancient power was temporarily quiescent. A tall asymmetric bow tilted forward in its case, the fine wood of the box repelling the morning moisture.

The unicorn ran easily, its gait almost gentle but covering ground faster than a horse could run. Its horn glinted, the delicate spiral supported by steel laminated and magically bonded to its skull. The mount's saddle was a tangle of straps, and the rider's legs were half-enclosed by the stirrups.

The need for such careful securing was obvious as the unicorn turned at an incredibly sharp angle, altering its run in response to a nudge from its rider's knee. Dirt showered as the steed accelerated, its enchanted hooves casting pebbles and dirt clods up into the air like slings.

The loudest sound was the jingle of the woman's scale mail and the slap of the long cavalry sword against her back. A field of tall wild flowers lay in a depression, and she directed the steed toward them.

The tension was obvious in her first strokes as she tried to loosen her muscles. The first cuts took great swathes of flowers as she struggled for precision. She turned the unicorn in a tight circle almost peeling her out of the saddle. Again she went through the flowers. Now the sword strokes took single blossoms, and she nodded in satisfaction at her skill.

"If only the forest beasts were as easily understood and directed," Pianna, Captain of the Order, whispered to herself. For weeks, animals from the west appeared and acted unpredictably. Solitary beasts that naturally subsisted alone now roamed in large groups. Skittish herd animals became insanely aggressive. Beasts plowed through the fields and villages of man doing destruction but only sporadically, leaving some settlements completely alone while only a few miles away numberless herds destroyed everything. She sent messengers to druids and other holders of wisdom, but no answer issued from the forest, only more animals that pursued some unknown path or goal. The purposeless attacks were becoming the Order's crucible.

For years she had extended the Order's message of new unity, and now it was being put to the test. Unfortunately, it was a test the organization was failing. The raids continued despite her best efforts. There seemed to be no plan or direction to the strikes. Animals and monstrous plants appeared at villages and struck out in frenzy. Sometime the attacks stopped before much was destroyed, even if a hamlet had no real defenses. Other times the assaults continued until all was destroyed and the inhabitants were dead.

The Order-sponsored militias were swept away by the unrelenting aggression. For a second, Pianna regretted the lack of war machines imposed by the Strictures. In the past, mechanisms might have turned such assaults without casualties. Her losses were precious members of the Order.

"But such machines breed more destruction and contempt for life because they are so easily replaced," she reminded herself. The legend of Urza provided a chilling lesson of the madness artifacts led to. Armies of unquestioning automatons fought wars for centuries, stripping the world down to a husk from which it was still recovering. Even after a century, there were still vast fields of machines being found, the rusted and crushed instruments of a world's destruction. Each one an opportunity for evil, to be rebuilt until an unquestioning army might march again. The Order might be beleaguered, but it was still a living expression of noble ideals.

She fingered the sword at her side, her hands running over the pommel worn smooth by generations of commanders. It had belonged to one of the original members of the Order, a symbol of authority transferred from leader to leader, its steel in service for hundreds of years. But it acted on the choices of its wielder. It was an extension of her soul, not a free-ranging engine of destruction. Her skill was what controlled it, and before every fight she dedicated her life and ideals to the Order. If it could act on its own, such a servant would dilute her involvement in her soul's journey.

In such a case, she would throw it in the crusher that very second.

The crushers were devours of the past, great engines the size of a manor, their interiors filled with swinging hammers and blades. Their power derived solely from the great wheels turned by knights and squires. The engines were an extension of the individuals like a sword, or so the captain told herself. Pianna hoped that the machines were not corrupting the Order even as they tried to save the world. Those artifacts and instruments of the past, which had led the world so astray, were committed to the bowels of the device, ground between wheel until only small scraps remained. What was left was sold to blacksmiths and tinkers. What corrupted the world was devoured by the forge and rendered into simple blades and pots. Those items of unusual lethality were melted down and cast into ingots, the metal bars hidden in Order fortifications or dropped into the deep waters of the ocean. Better to rely on one's own humanity than sacrifice it for soulless fighters.

The unicorn's hooves carried her far as she ruminated, and her shadow on the ground lengthened. On the horizon a line of trees was visible, stretching several miles across. The mount accelerated as the captain used her heels, her hands checking her equipment as they leaped forward. The wood lay in a section of the plain, exposed like an outrunner of the forest. The copse was only a few miles across, but the trees soared hundreds of feet into the air.

Villages grew nearby, and races of all description tried to make a living through the forest's bounty. Those brave enough harvested the wood, depending on the isolated nature of the grove to prevent attacks from dangerous animals found in the forest proper.

But Pianna had recently received disturbing reports of animal attacks and missing villagers. A small detachment of the Order followed behind her but farther west. The captain continued alone to question the heads of the villages about these recent occurrences.

The forest was a wall, and she still saw no sign of the villagers. Where was the smoke from cooking fires or signs of timber wagons working the forest's edge? It had been years since she came this way, and perhaps her trail sense had misled her. The road might have shifted or the loggers moved to new ground. She doubted such rationalizations and drew her bow from her case. The laminated layers of wood, horn, and metal were smooth in her hands. She checked the tension of the string, and her pluck sounded almost lyrical as the various components vibrated and provided a rich tone. Her spirit settled, the single note calming her worries. Her quiver was full and her bow strung, her mastery practiced and ready. She moved laterally along the forest edge, the sure hooves of her steed laughing at fallen trees and gullies. Still no sign of life, and she nudged the unicorn to a faster pace.

Howls seemed to rise from the ground as she rode around a green peninsula. The stumps in the clearing revealed a deep cut into the forest. Dozens of dire wolves ran from the forest, joining the giant pack that surrounded an isolated tree. In the branches of a giant pine, a group of loggers waved their distress. A grove of whisper trees sighed softly in the breeze, their branches swallowing the yells of the men and the screams of the horses.

Whisper trees grew in small numbers, and somehow the movement of their branches muffled sounds. Such groves were notorious for traps, but a lively market in paneling that absorbed noise was in high demand in the larger cities. Men of wealth lined homes to cut off the bustle of the town, introducing pastoral quiet in the most densely packed markets. Plotters and conspirators paid a premium to line rooms where their councils might be kept from prying ears. Prisons were said to have rooms where the screams of starving and tortured souls were never heard.

But now the loggers might pay the price of their craft. She knew that there would be guards to protect the loggers somewhere nearby. Harvesting trees from the forest was dangerous and often disturbed creatures that only well-armed fighters could discourage. Her own troops were across the forest, and Pianna doubted they would arrive in time. Only the vagaries of the afternoon air had allowed her to hear anything at all.

There were still loggers scaling the lone tree, trying to get out of reach of canine teeth. Ropes swarmed with men as a circle of wolves around the trunk contracted. The rotten gaping wound on the tree's trunk explained why it had not been harvested. A lurch of the bare branches suggested that it could not bear its current crop of panicked men for long.

Most of the wolves seemed little interested in the men, rooting through the wagon scattered and overturned in the clearing. Red jaws howled silently as the beasts rose from feasting on the draft animals still in their traces.

Members of the pack leaped from the tumbled wagons, dragging away equipment as they worked furiously. Whatever the animals were looking for, Pianna could tell that they were not finding it. Now the mass of animals seemed to find new energy and converged on the few men still fighting on the ground. A few loggers swung their axes and heavy chains, giving their fellows time to ascend the ropes.

The number of men on the ground shrank, but each successful retreat made the rearguard's job more difficult.

Her arrow was laid and launched in a heartbeat, the shaft driving through the ribs of a wolf to drop it in its tracks. Others followed, her shoulder muscles rolling as she sent missiles flying. The wolves did not turn as she killed the rear animals. The whisper trees masked her attack, allowing her to slaughter at will. However, the wolves did not cease their attack, and she watched a logger get dragged down. The dire wolf was the size of a small pony, and the man came apart like a sickly rabbit as the canine head tossed his body. Pianna could hear no screams thanks to the surrounding trees.

Power flowed through her veins and into the threads of metal in her bow. Her bracer glowed brightly as she let loose another arrow. This one flew to the head of the pack, and its discharge was blinding, the flash leaving wolves writhing as their eyes tried to adapt. The loggers were blind as well, and one went down, tripping over a rolling wolf. The animal did not attack, but the man's own axe laid his leg open. His enemy's lolling tongue lapped at the blood as everyone's vision cleared.

Pianna drove the unicorn closer, more magic singing through her bow. Now the projectiles swelled until they seemed javelins, nailing the wolves to the ground. The animals still did not react, bizarrely intent on the men on and around the tree despite the ample carrion everywhere. The captain drove her steed into the rear of the pack. The unicorn's horn dipped and punctured sides as the pair tried to turn the attack from the loggers. Finally, her slaughter made the wolves react in self-preservation. The beasts spun and tore at her, but the Order leader's magic rose as a shield.

Golden light encased Pianna's legs and the unicorn's sides as she tried to draw the pack away.

Her steed was a kicking and screaming demon, its hooves shattering skulls and ribs as the wolves tried to overwhelm them. The captain swore as she saw there were still loggers on the ground. She rose in the saddle and fired back toward the tree, killing a beast tearing off a logger's leg. Two wolves leaped as she provided covering fire to the final men. Power still flooding her bow, she swung it like a stave. It struck, destroying the animal's ribs. The other beast's jaw stopped inches away as the unicorn twisted its neck with a sinuous grace, stabbing its horn deep into the wolf's side and piercing the heart. The weight of the forest hunter nearly toppled her steed, and the equine weapon flared with power as it shook the corpse free.

The pack was converging on her, and Pianna spun the unicorn on its rear legs to ride free. She killed an attacker as it tried to duck under her steed. Another wolf tried to hamstring her mount, but the invoked armor defeated its teeth. More converged, but

the unicorn's acceleration stopped them from being buried by the pack. One beast nearly defeated the captain as it clambered on top of its fellows and leaped to snatch Pianna from the saddle. The unicorn reacted to the captain's sudden signal and turned again, flattening into an all-out run. The wolf's outstretched paws hooked her quiver and tore it open. It was only the strength of the unicorn and the semi-locking stirrups that prevented the leader of the Order from being dragged to the ground.

The unicorn's pace took it out of danger, but Pianna hauled her steed about, looking to see if the pack still followed. The wolves were turning back to the men at the base of the tree. The branches looked overloaded, and desperate loggers cut the ropes to the ground, spilling a few straggling climbers. One person in the crown had a light crossbow and loosed a bolt. The projectile did nothing more than return the wolves' attention back to the encircled woodsmen. Pianna cursed the man's vain attempts even as she circled her steed and raised more power. She was not as strong as her lieutenant in the mystic arts, but bursts of power left her bow despite her lack of arrows.

More of the canines dropped, the shafts of energy burning away limbs and exploding inside the animals. Many of the crippled animals were torn apart by their fellows as the beasts raged out of control. In a second, the circle around the tree was breached, and the men on the ground died, despite the captain's flurry of arrows and rain of impromptu weapons from the loggers above.

The animals were insane killing machines, snapping at everything. Pianna turned her steed to

ride out of danger now that the men on the ground were dead. A branch broke, and two men fell to their deaths. Each extracted a measure of vengeance as they crushed the wolves they landed on, but they died by the jaws of the others. The captain's arrows swept the successful killers away, but the pack did not turn. The animals threw themselves against the tree, which shuddered, revealing the rottenness at its core. Pianna saw the despair on the loggers' faces and sent the unicorn forward once more.

The captain's bow shot shards of pure energy, but she paid a steep price for each shot. Pianna's skill as an archer created arrows that enhanced her power in concert with her spirit, bow, and bracer. Now the magic flowed like a river and drained away the mystic armor from her legs and steed.

She was surrounded now, using her magnificent bow as a club until it was dragged away by foamy jaws. Her sword arced out and cut down the wolf that thought her helpless. Now bare steel carved into the pack as Pianna directed all her power into armor. The mesh of power over her and her steed grew as tattered as lace as her last reserves of strength drained away. The silence of the battle made it seem a dream as she readied herself for death.

A shower of javelins and spears fell from the sky, promising life like spring's first rain. Pianna drove toward the tree, her sword cutting through the snarling wall as more weapons plummeted from above. At last she was through and turned her steed, backing into the rotting cavity of the trunk. The armor on the unicorn flanks evaporated. Now only a thin web of armor on the unicorn's neck and fore-quarters offered

resistance to the dire wolves' teeth. But that thin protection was enough as an Order aerial unit came to the rescue.

Griffins dived from the sky, their shrieks of rage lost in the whisper trees. Another flight of javelins stabbed into the wolves as the soldiers used the last of their throwing weapons and closed with the pack. Talons flashed. The fliers snatched up the maddened animals. Beaks and swords were red with blood, and the flying steeds and their riders pulled clear. Other griffins landed out in the clearing and advanced on the tattered edges of the pack.

The elite soldiers swung long flails and maces. The wolves turned to overwhelm the reinforcements. Bones exploded as the enhanced weapons swatted the animals away. Some of the animals tried to run, but most closed with the fighters. The fresh mages were encased in magical power and nearly immune to the dire wolves. The detachment reaped the clearing free of their opponents, the furry bodies pinwheeling away. A few mounted archers overhead unleashed waves of mystic arrows, peppering the wolves in front of the tree that still tried to reach Pianna. The loggers overhead might have screamed with joy, but the captain could only guess, for the whisper trees smothered every sound. Pianna's magic faded away, but the battle was over, and the pack broke apart.

A few remaining wolves fled deeper into the wood, the trees preventing aerial pursuit. Many of her command dismounted, but Pianna sent her tiring beast in front of her rescuers. Using battle sign, she directed them to help the wounded woodsmen. They

obeyed, the power that armored them fading as they prepared to heal those still hanging onto life.

She waved for the leader of the griffin riders to follow and took the unicorn away from the whisper trees, the sounds of the plains once more in her ears as she left their sphere of influence.

"Sergeant Paige," Pianna said, her arms feeling the burn of her archery, "what of the villages nearby?" The griffin riders, due to their speed, were the premier scouts of the Order.

"Captain," he replied, coughing up dust, "the villages have all been set upon by creatures of the wood. Bears and other monsters are common, and there are rumors of great beasts annihilating everything in their way. We escorted those willing to come to the fort before returning to check on you." The soldier showed the irritation that all sergeants had with too-brave officers. "You were fortunate that we arrived to . . ." He paused, his lined face working as he considered her bland expression. "... support your charge, Captain. I am sure you were moments from victory." "In protecting those under my care, there is no choice, Paige," Pianna answered. "We need to get these people back to the fort if their village is evacuated." She considered the wagons rolling away now from the whisper trees. "But how many we can move away from danger, I just don't know."

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Despite its crude construction, the fort looked like heaven to Pianna. The walls were nothing more than upended logs, standing only fifteen feet high. Clumps of longer trunks provided cover for archers, but it was

nothing compared to the mighty ramparts of other Order fortresses. The fort was on a broad rise, surrounded by a dry moat and the wooden wall. An artificial hill rose some seventy feet, and it was capped by a large tower providing the final refuge from assault. The tower was constructed of treated timbers, and the Order's sigil flew from the top of pole.

Any cover would be welcome, for madness seemed to grip almost every animal of the forest. Large predators attacked, even though instinct should have sent them miles from such a large gathering. Groups of normally solitary hunters erupted from the grass and were fought off only when almost all were dead. The villagers' accompanying herds of livestock were ignored, their owners the targets of tooth and claw.

The gates were open, and Pianna and her party rode into the fort. It became nearly impossible to move, the numbers of refugees filling the enclosure. Soldiers stood on scaffolding along the walls, runners moving on the elevated paths rather than daring the tangle of people. Many of those seeking shelter inside the walls were woodsmen and loggers. Their glassy faces showing the shock of being driven from their homes. Children ran and played among the tumult with the easy care that youth could bring, while their parents and guardians were too numb to rein them in. Traders and merchants of all descriptions sat with their goods piled high. Pianna resolved to cache such cargoes outside the walls. A group of hunters stood by, their clothing and manner marking them as Cabal minions. They laughed at the crowd, and each shocked face going by provoked a new burst of merriment.

The keys and chains in their stack of gear told the captain they were pit hunters. The Cabal paid well for a fresh flow of creatures from around the continent. Pianna had, in scouting the forest edge, come across the leavings of such beast caravans. Starved and sick animals were abandoned without even the benefit of death. The predators trailing such columns lost their fear of people and associated them with food.

The group noticed her regard and grew silent, then turned and looked in other directions until her attention was diverted. The Order was pledged to protect all peaceable people on the plains, and the Cabal was careful to obey the letter of the law.

Orderlies made their way through the crowd, moving toward the wagons of wounded to conduct them to the healers. Pianna wondered bleakly how many had died on the way to the fort. Her warriors tried vainly to magically heal wounds when the bulk of their training was inflicting them. She was unable to have a healer flown out because of the current crush in the other Order holds.

The captain dismounted, her hand pressing against her steed's side as the unicorn was finally led away. The stables were full of refugees, so the animals were being picketed outside. The griffins screamed, so all could hear their displeasure at being refused their own stalls.

Pianna headed for the gatehouse. The officer in charge of the fort rose to his feet, giving her a salute that she returned absently. A sack of beer lay on the table, and she filled an empty flagon and washed down the dust of the road.

"Sergeant Sumer," she said, her voice raspy from herding a column of refugees, "what news?" She wiped her eyes, clearing away dirt and wondering if the bathhouse was plugged with asylum seekers as well.

"Not much of a change since this morning," the sergeant answered, a long scar down his face created the illusion of a leer. "The refugees are still coming in, and all reports confirm widespread attacks." He turned to the map behind the table, a cluster of pins showing attacks and sightings of animals. It appeared random, and the sergeant tapped the blank spaces representing the forest's interior.

"These attacks might presage an attack by the western tribes," he opinioned. Pianna's snort of disbelief punctured the soldier's theory.

"I see no benefit to the forest folk in arousing our defenses and clearing the villages of hostages against our behavior," she said, reining in the temper which the journey had roused. "The random nature of the attacks mean we are looking everywhere. Whatever is directing these attacks is doing so for no benefit other than destruction." She walked around the desk and considered the map more closely.

"The only pattern these attacks have is that they radiate from the Krosan forest." Pianna thought of the patrols that scoured the edge of the woodlands. "Perhaps the focus of these troubles lies elsewhere." She looked to the southern reaches of the map.

"Is there any word of Lieutenant Kirtar?" she asked, thinking how valuable he and the other aven would be.

"There was a dragon attack which he defeated, and he says he will be back after sweeping the

southern sectors." The sergeant's faint tone of distaste reminded Pianna that many considered Kirtar and his bird warriors to be arrogant and abrasive.

"He is your superior officer, and he and his people have power we need." She regretted that most of the lieutenant's people were far to the northeast and insular except for those taking service in the Order. "He should be able to rally the south. I know that he hoped to impress the Cabal and Mer Empire in the pits, but we need him here. Once again she considered the map. The concentration of her forces along the forest was drying up her information sources.

"Maybe Kirtar will discover something in the south," she said finally. "We need to know what is going on, but for now we must protect our own."

CHAPTER 10

"I hate the forest," Laquatus snarled as he exited the transport pool. Days swimming through caves and river systems under the continent had left his eyes unprepared for the light and heat of the upper world. Turg came out of the pool behind him, his arms hurling sodden luggage. Crabs scuttled and set up a tent for shade as Captain Satas sat in the sun. The amphibian's blind eyes sought the orb's warmth even as his skin burned, exposed to light nature never meant for his people.

"I trust you will be available should I need aid," the ambassador said as he walked to a chair parked under an awning and settled into it. The blind officer tracked his movements.

"I serve your will, but I must travel slowly as we map out routes through the underwater caves," Satas announced, clicking his claws together as he gasped in the heat. "Until more warriors and miners arrive from the sea, you must depend on hirelings," Satas said, his skin beginning to peel away. His eyes were growing dim and sunken as he stayed in the hot, dry air.

"Turg can handle any small difficulties, my good Captain."

Laquatus sipped from the goblet left by the chair. How unfortunate that decent attendants must be left underwater. However, it was a willingness to make sacrifices that defined great leaders, he thought to himself. Besides, a trail of dying servants would have attracted far too much attention.

"Stand ready to reopen the portal should the mercenaries prove unable to meet my needs. You are sure you can open the portal directly beneath me?" Laquatus asked as Turg slunk into the tent and settled in a sullen mass. The large amphibian's skin was already looking dry, and the frog would be difficult to control if the situation went badly.

"The stone calls out to those who know it, Your Excellency," Satas replied, having given the merman a tresias stone. "Finding you will never be difficult while you bear it. It is reaching you that will be hard. Once you begin traveling, I cannot guarantee immediate support."

The ambassador only nodded before remembering that Satas was blind and dismissed him and his men.

Though he appeared at ease, in reality Laquatus seethed with anger and frustration. The lieutenant's path kept him from the explored system of caves and the underground rivers. Those that did exist were clogged with falls and tiny diverging passages. To truly develop the underwater roads would take decades of effort. So instead of leading an attack by mer forces, he was condemned to once more work with drylanders.

The lands were hilly and dusty, a buffer between the plains and the forests to the west. No buildings or civilization as those above water considered it. Turg moved in the tent, and Laquatus heard breaking glass. The gurgle of pouring liquid told the ambassador the jack had found his cache of seawater. He considered disciplining the frog, but the heat of the day drained away all initiative. His hatred festered as he wondered how long it would take the mercenaries to arrive.

The first scout into the camp surprised the ambassador, interrupting the merman's sulk in the heat. The man was small and covered in more warts than the aristocrat's jack. He dismounted and bowed. "Your Excellency—" he began.

"Surely there is a spokesman less repellent than you," Laquatus interrupted, looking back the way the scout had come. "I paid for the best, not the worst." The merman watched teeth grind as the man reached for a sword. Actually, the discolored skin reminded the ambassador of certain breeds of fish, but he was bored and needed entertainment. "I will return with my captain," the red-faced mercenary ground out. Laquatus waved and watched the fellow jerk himself into the saddle and start up the trail. The ambassador went into the hot tent to rouse his protector. Turg lay somnolent, broken glass all around him. Laquatus found an unopened bottle of salt water and smashed it against the tent pole bracket, ignoring the shards that fell on his champion. The merman took a long draught and poured the rest over his body. Already the frigid waterways down below seemed a dream in this heat. He kicked Turg viciously in the ribs, driving him up and outside. Laquatus saw the broken glass slash the frog's feet. He followed, resigning himself to only petty cruelties until he could once more call upon mer warriors.

* * * * *

The village was only a wide spot in the road, completely overwhelmed by the caravan camped around it. Laquatus hammered his heels into his steed and sent the long-suffering mare forward. The brisker

pace cooled the ambassador down, his sodden garments losing heat as they dried. The mercenaries leading him watched sourly as he passed, water dripping down to the ground. The aristocrat had appropriated and emptied most of the column's canteens. The fighters' drinking water dribbled down the ambassador's back to the dirt as he passed. The mercenary leader was lost in a cloak, trying to seal off the heat. Laquatus could feel Turg closing from behind as he sprinted from a mud hollow to get to the camp. The hot breath of the amphibian seemed to fill the merman's lungs as he crowded against the column commander.

"All the hunting parties bring their captures here," the man said pointing to the swathe of activity. The encampment was swollen with the cries of animals and people. Bears, cougars, and wolves were caged, as well as fauns and Krosan dragonettes. A huge elk, nearly the size of an elephant, was secured to a stake by a nose ring. Though the noise enveloped them, it was without the frenzy expected from wild animals. Many seemed docile, even lost as they lay within the enclosures of steel. The hum of controlling spells called to the ambassador. The merman felt his champion slowly entering the camp behind him and drifting toward the pens. Laquatus broke the spell, and Turg started at the surge of will. The amphibian ran to his master, goaded by the aristocrat's bad humor.

"Sorry ambassador," called Laquatus's escort as the mercenaries peeled off for other duties, leaving him and the amphibian with only the company of their

baggage. "It takes some effort to avoid the magic controlling the animals."

Laquatus nodded in recognition. The Mer Empire special-ized in spells of control and illusion, and a profitable business was made in training and equipping the hunters who entered the forest.

"Without the spells provided by the empire it would be impossible to manage these animals," the ambassador muttered, taking control of the giant elk. His mental bludgeoning sent it rampaging across the camp, its painful cries of no interest to the ambassador. Despite its matted hide and sores, it still had enough power to rip the stake out of the ground. He nodded at the ease with which he could hijack the spells.

The leader of the caravan approached. At least Laquatus thought him a leader in his finery. The man was tall and slender, his clothes of sturdy leather dyed in subtle hues with fancy stitching. A sword with a jewel-encrusted handle hung at his side, and in his hand he carried a quirt made of bone or ivory wrapped with many shades of leather. The merman could feel the quiescent magic humming in the tool as the man came closer.

"How may we serve your Excellency," he said, bowing and sweeping his hat low as if at court instead of a dusty camp. The mercenary knew Laquatus as the backer of the caravan, having been hired in Cabal City.

"A valuable bauble has mistakenly come into the possession of the Order," the ambassador said carefully. "Lieutenant Kirtar received a prize that

belongs to the Mer Empire. The officer was called west before I could retrieve it."

"Indeed, the Order can be most troublesome about baubles," the man said and nodded to a group of wagons. Laquatus could see the loot of many a rediscovered battlefield. Such expeditions must be hidden lest the Order take offense. The Order routinely fed almost all recovered artifacts into great crushers. The ambassador feared that the prize might be destroyed in the name of such stupidity.

"If you are as determined to reach Lieutenant Kirtar as your earlier communications indicated, you might find this of interest." The mercenary led the aristocrat to a wagon. Chained by the foot to a wheel and lying in the mud was a Knight of the Order. Burns and knife cuts recorded the camp's hospitality. An arm was torn off, the stump wrapped in blood-soaked bandages. He was feverish and mumbling in delirium.

"He's perfect," breathed Laquatus, considering the miserable prisoner. Kirtar would welcome him anyway, but a present always made a guest more popular. This rescue would also diffuse some of the nastier rumors that the lieutenant's men might have heard during their time in the city. With a lot of coaching and an array of false memories, the fallen knight would make a splendid passport. The only question was whether the miserable tool could survive reaching Kirtar's forces.

"How far is the good lieutenant?" asked the ambassador, irritated that he must be dependent on these mercenaries. "I would bring this pitiful wretch to his commander as soon as possible." The mercenary captain looked at Laquatus kneeling down and laying

soothing hands on the captive. The merman saw a flash of pity on the mercenary's face as the ambassador opened the shirt and inspected the wounds. His wounds were nasty, but he might survive a hard ride in the saddle with proper incentive.

"Kirtar is at least five days' ride west," the caravan leader said, turning to stare down the road. "In these conditions, I could not guess how long it would take you to reach the aven."

"What do you mean?" said Laquatus, already impatient to continue.

"The creatures of the forest lie in your path," the mercenary explained, gesturing to the ranks of animals captured in the camp.

"Creatures are no threat," Laquatus said with a snort. "You capture the dumb animals wholesale."

"But something disturbs them," the mercenary said worriedly. "We followed in the Order's wake, hoping to capture what remained, but the beasts circle ahead of us. Moving continually, they block the way and sweep across our path. My men and I have hunted for years, and never have I seen the beasts so disturbed save during a fire or sudden storm. The animal world is in upheaval, and I have no explanation. Something west drives the beasts to a frenzy."

"Yet you control your camp," the ambassador said acidly, standing up. If this was an attempt to extract hazard pay, it would go hard for the mercenary. Turg raised his head from a supply wagon he was stealing from at the merman's pique and began to move closer, anticipating violence.

"The spells of the empire close their minds," the captain said, fondling the carved ivory wand. "They move in a paradise that we control and mold. But out there, a continent is on the move, and no one knows who shapes events."

"I need a small band of attendants to bring my knight with me," Laquatus said, nudging the wounded man with his foot.

The ambassador let his silence at the mercenary's wild outpourings show his contempt. If the animals of the wood posed a danger, he would handle it. If only Satas had explored more of the western caves instead of forcing him to deal with these fearful idiots. The mercenary called to an aide and gave orders for a small group of riders to accompany Laquatus and the prisoner.

"Does the Order know you are in this village?" the mer aristocrat asked, looking beyond the camp to the few houses.

There were no signs of the inhabitants save for the smoke from the chimneys. The caravans had a bad reputation. The ambassador knew that on occasion his employees took slaves for use and sale to the pits.

"Kirtar's scouts are oriented west. I doubt they know we are here," the mercenary captain said, looking toward the men selected roused from eating and sleep.

"This brave member of the Order will be useful in earning the organization's trust," Laquatus said, licking his thin lips. "But the risk of witnesses telling how he chanced into my hospitality ... No, I think it best if this village and its inhabitants die now. Unknown and nameless."

Turg leaped toward the houses. The amphibian pushed camp workers out of the way as he raced to the closest cottage.

The stone-and-timber structure was covered in moss. It hunkered down in the plain, the heavy walls stubbornly resisting the elements and those who would attack. The windows were small, and heavy shutters shielded the inside from view.

The door was seasoned wood, thick and hung with care—the builder's attempt to keep the dangers of the world outside. Turg summoned his power, drawing on the ambassador's magic. A thin stream of lightning flared, blinding those foolish enough to run after the amphibian. The jack closed his inner eyelids, cutting the glare as he looked through the thin shield of flesh. The lock and screws holding the door shut glowed as power arced over the door. An agonized scream sounded as someone in the house tried to brace the panel. Rock-hard boards sundered in quick succession, coming free in a series of concussions.

Turg, impatient to get inside, smashed into the door, his hide smoking briefly as it touched the charred wood. Laquatus stood, lost in the rush of violence, savoring each death as the amphibian rampaged through the structure. The mercenary's distaste was plain, but he called to his men.

"Clear them out!" he shouted, pointing to the remaining houses. He drew a short sword to lead squads in the unpleasant task. Animals started at the noise, and the ambassador felt the animal herdsmen increasing the strength of the spells calming and misleading the beasts. Death and deception played out in the caravan and the village, and Laquatus stood in

appreciation as the jack and the mercenaries began to kill off anyone who might derail his scheme to lull the Order once again.

An explosion shattered his contentment. What fool was employing such spells in a simple bout of murder?

The merman looked to the perimeter. Bodies popped as flame burned its way free of fighters in his employ. As the mercenaries fell, Laquatus could see two riders charging. No, not riders, but instead a centaur and his mounted companion advanced on the camp. A glimpse of brass-colored skin placed the pair. Seton and the barbarian fell upon the caravan, killing without hesitation as the village was massacred.

"Destroy them," the ambassador bellowed, dragging Turg away from the easy slaughter with a mental command. The guards left off their half-hearted killing to face the attackers entering the camp.

"A rich reward to whoever brings me their heads!" the merman called. Greed and self-preservation sent warrior converging on the pair. The merman laughed, sure that murder would solve most of his problems.

CHAPTER 11

Kamahl closed his eyes as the axe exploded in a ball of flame, the pulse of magic leaving an afterimage even through his eyelids. His horse shied, nearly toppling him despite his precautions in turning the mare's head away from the spell. Seton roared and sprang, his apelike features furious as he raised his mace and swung at a caravan guard. The man shattered under the force of the blow, blood spraying and spotting the centaur red as he moved toward a new target.

The pair had tracked Kirtar and his forces west for days.

The Order rode hard, and the barbarian and the forest warrior had closed slowly, if at all. Then the tracks were obscured by a caravan. Seton had sworn loudly as wagons and herds of animals obscured the trail. Casting along the road to see if Kirtar had left the western highway consumed even more time. It appeared that the caravan followed the lieutenant, and Kamahl stopped tracking and rode hard, gambling that Kirtar would not change his path until they passed the obscuring travelers. They had hit the outer perimeter, and Seton watched the frog, Turg, break into a building and other guards from the caravan advance on the villagers. Such evil would not go unpunished.

Kamahl hurled flame. The magic congealed into dull red globes that sank into the bodies of the cowardly murderers. The caravan guards laughed at

their apparent immunity to his attack. They came a few steps closer, then stopped and gasped as the barbarian's spell began to burn its way out. Kamahl felt a wave of weakness as the mercenaries charred to ash. His anger was drawing too much power into the spell, and he paused to control his rage. His horse shifted under him, and he jabbed his heels, sending the mount into the fight.

Seton rampaged through the camp, his club spraying his opponent's brains each time it landed. The caravan guards tried in vain to corner him, but the centaur's prodigious leaps carried him free. Seton then turned to take mercenaries from behind. He pushed his way through the herd of captive animals to reach their tenders. The barbarian could see his club raising high, then falling again.

Kamahl's horse froze, then began bucking under him. The beast that had stayed controlled through so much tumult went wild and spun. The barbarian could feel the horse dropping and beginning to roll. He threw himself from the saddle, drawing his sword in midair. He landed at a run, turning to see what creature attacked his mount. There was nothing tearing at the beast, though it screamed in rage and fear as it twisted in the dirt.

A leather-clad mercenary charged toward him, an ivory baton raised in the air as he regarded Kamahl and his horse. The leader waved as if in introduction and turned toward the animals closest to the barbarian. A herd of simple cattle stopped chewing their cud as one.

Kamahl knew that magic controlled the animals, for these cows were huge with heavy horns that

stretched more than three feet from side to side. These were not dairy cows or animals being driven leisurely to the butcher but animals with fighting spirit. Whatever spell had kept them docile ceased, and he found their attention focused upon him. The cattle bellowed and charged, three bulls forcing their way to the front of the herd in their rush to close with him.

Kamahl spun a pillar of flame around himself, but the maddened animals disregarded it. He threw himself to the side as a long horn hooked through his shield and scored his armored belt. He gasped, his air knocked out by the impact. The barbarian did not want to play the butcher to livestock, and he ran under a wagon as the rest of the herd closed. The cows collided with the freight wagon, and he hobbled farther into the camp, gaining new strength as he shook off the bull's blow. A mercenary considered him an easy target as he struck from the rear. Kamahl's sword sheared through the falling club and cut the man's arm free. The stricken guard could not even scream as Kamahl's return stroke set his head free as well. Guards closing with the barbarian slowed, waiting for others to converge on the mountain warrior.

Seton broke into the ring of guardsman, trailing his own clump of pursuers. The centaur's club was covered in gore, and every swing sprayed blood wide. He moistened the club's head anew using Kamahl's opponents, smashing men down in three quick strokes before leaping. The barbarian could see the forest fighter's fangs clearly.

"Too slow!" the centaur shouted, raising his club like a standard. Blood ran down it and drenched his arm. "Where are your nets and snares now, hunters?"

He swung and knocked the wheel off a wagon, the oak and iron flying away in pieces. The centaur's arms fell again and wrenched the other wheel free. Seton jumped to the side as the heavy freight bed tipped over and spilled a load of furs and hides over the ground. A heavy skin reminded the barbarian of the centaur's own hide.

"Murderers!" The cry was bestial in its fury. The giant dropped his club and leaped upon a guard, grabbing him up in two hands. Seton tore the man apart, hurling limbs.

Kamahl threw fiery knives into the stunned guards, reaping a deadly harvest before they turned to respond to this new attack. The outmatched mercenaries were caught between the barbarian and the crazed centaur, and Kamahl thought they stood no chance. Then they seemed to disappear, sidling into nonexistence. The mountain warrior shook his head violently and loosed a barrage of darts. Wails of pain sounded, and a guard faded back into existence, screaming as the projectile burned its way to his heart. Then silence fell again.

Kamahl threw more darts as he dove for cover, scrabbling behind an overturned wagon as he considered what was happening. Malign magic pulsed in the encampment. A mage was clouding his senses, hiding his enemies from him.

An opponent might be running to stab him from behind at this very moment. Kamahl hurled more darts behind him, but there were no screams. That meant nothing. Wild sprays of weaponry could not long protect the barbarian, and Kamahl focused, trying to see past the spell. He shoved his sword into the

ground, taking strength from its solidity. He must see his enemy before he was struck down.

His vision wavered, images fading in and out of focus like a mirage. For a moment, everything was clear, and he could see the mercenary in the fancy clothes stepping carefully over the corpses of his men. The ivory wand was raised, and Kamahl focused on that as he willed the magical tool to combust, to explode into flame. The barbarian reached into the center of his own innate magic and brought it forth. The mountain warrior had to prop himself up with his sword as the ivory began to char. The panicked captain threw it away, and it blossomed into flame as it left his hand. The force of the magic took the man's arm, the fancy leather shrinking under the fierce heat and closing off the amputated limb. A fire elemental rose from the wand's remains.

The summoning grew greater; the inferno seemed to float a few feet off the ground, its colors pulsing. Shafts of ruby red flame danced in the heart of the creature. The center of the elemental was in constant motion, and a tendril of fire dipped down to the earth. The dirt fountained up as it burned, throwing off ash and clinkers. The soil had sand, and glass began to form. Obsidian began to solidify and merge with the debris orbiting the flame. The barbarian could feel his creature and its appetite. The elemental existed to burn, to devour substance. His hate, rage, and even fear had called with uncommon strength, and the fire creature crouched, ready to sweep away the enemy. Kamahl watched it drift, and a lick of flame reached out to a guard. Before he could make a sound, the elemental was on him. Flesh shrank away, and bones

flared as the mountain warrior's summoning grew a little larger. Within seconds only ash remained to merge with the volcanic glass that hissed and popped as it fell away from the creature.

The cattle that chased Kamahl still followed the caravan's leader commands, and they charged from the wagon they had reduced to splinters. The elemental jumped to the herd, and the smell of cooking beef filled the air. There was only the sound of searing fat as tendrils of the creation pierced the thick hides and destroyed internal organs in an instant. The elemental grew larger still as it rendered the animals down and sucked up their bones and horns. These danced inside the flame as hunger temporarily gave way to curiosity. The remains of the bulls dwindled away, shards of hoof and bone becoming encased in glass as the fire weakened, then strengthened in new hunger.

"Such a marvel," Kamahl said and groaned in frustration. It was too strong! A creation to fight armies, and he had called this chaos. The barbarian looked around. Seton still bellowed, now some distance away, his club turning mercenaries into clumps of broken bones. The caravan animals were waking from their spells, and they voiced their confusion. A few houses in the village still appeared intact, but who knew how much longer that would be the case. His creature was hungry, and there were too few meals for its appetite. He caged it in its current place, ready to send it away. Regret at banishing so fine a creature filled his heart.

Turg jumped from a crowd of animals, his fist drawn back as he swung at Kamahl's head. This time

the barbarian was not mired in spell, and he dodged. The mountain warrior's sword swung as he dropped, and only the amphibian's wild contortions in the air kept the monster from spilling blood onto the ground. The jack seemed to vanish as it landed in a pack of wolves. The beasts circled uncertainly, giving confused cries. Throughout the camp animals vented their confusion, and Kamahl vaulted to the top of the freight wagon to see if perhaps Seton was responsible.

There were few living guards anywhere nearby. Kamahl and the centaur had cut a bloody swathe, and no one seemed brave enough to close with the pair. Seton was standing amongst stacks of cages. The barbarian could see him ripping locks off to release the confused animals inside. He looked for signs of Turg, wondering where the treacherous frog lay hiding. As his eyes swung back to the village, he saw the ambassador and a group of mounted mercenaries.

Laquatus smiled. The merman waved, and Kamahl looked around, trying to see whom he was signaling. Mounted next the ambassador was a knight of the Order. The figure swayed, and the barbarian could see the man was missing a limb. He wondered why Laquatus would include such a wounded man in his party.

"I see you and your companion decided to join our little expedition," the aristocrat called mockingly, his horse shying as more and more of the captured animals vented their distress. "It appears the centaur has found one of his relatives," he called. Kamahl turned to see Seton back at the wagon reverently lifting the pelt of one of his people from the dirt.

"You will die," yelled Seton, laying aside the hide and grabbing up his bloody club. The few mercenaries not with the ambassador were running from the camp, leaving everything behind to avoid the coming battle.

"There are more important matters than you to attend to," the ambassador called back. "Besides, you will be far too busy taking care of all these animals to worry about me."

The ambassador was casting a spell, and it echoed over the encampment, redoubling in strength as old commands combined into new purpose. Kamahl felt it coming and crouched into fighting position.

The animals that had milled so uncertainly minutes before turned toward the barbarian and the centaur. Bears that Seton had freed from their cages snapped at the druid. Kamahl could see the surprise on the giant's face as beasts turned and saw him as an enemy.

Animals screamed in the remaining cages as Seton moved away. The malign spell picked up intensity, and a giant elk charged the centaur from the side. Its sore-matted hide still covered impressive muscles, and it threw itself at the druid with horns lowered. The line trailing from a ring in its nose caught a wagon wheel, and the heavy oak circle skidded through the dirt as it came at Seton. The centaur threw himself sideways, his flanks heavy with effort after the fight and his grief.

Kamahl threw spears of fire that formed a barrier against the approaching animals, covering the druid's escape. The barbarian looked to his penned elemental, the boundless hunger of the primal being perhaps the

only answer to the carnivores that struggled from the cages and pens.

Bears, cougars, and wolves moved together toward the pair. Two Krosan dragonettes struggle from their enclosure, the six-legged reptiles ignoring the surrounding carrion as they closed.

The mountain warrior eyed the ambassador. Perhaps killing the merman would end the unnatural animosity. But the aristocrat and his escort had already disappeared, lost behind some piece of landscape or illusion. He readied his sword and the elemental—the coming slaughter of spellbound beasts a foulness to his soul.

"On my back," Seton commanded as he threaded through the flaming barriers Kamahl had formed to stop the animals. "If we stay, we only do the ambassador's will."

The barbarian looked for his horse, but it was lost in the madness.

"We can return once the spell has run its course, or I have turned it, but for now we must be away."

Kamahl paused only to free the elemental from his call. "Another time you will feed," he promised the flame. The ruby shafts in the creature seemed to pulse in agreement, and then the glass and ash collapsed to the ground in a superheated pile of debris. The barbarian sheathed his sword and swung himself up on Seton's back. The centaur's muscular body was as wide as a draft horse, and Kamahl resolved to reclaim his mount as soon as possible.

"We will meet again, Ambassador," he promised.

The animals came around the flaming barriers.

Seton left at a run.

CHAPTER 12

There was a stillness to the air around the camp. Lieutenant Kirtar sat in his tent wondering if he dare look into the orb he had won in Cabal City. The globe brought visions, dreams of glory and control. He had imagined such possibilities throughout his life. He ached to smash the power of the Cabal, to finally order the restless mages of the Pardic Mountains to the southwest. Everything seemed possible if he just had time to investigate the orb, experiment with it. His huge hands clenched as he restrained himself from digging through his baggage for it. The visions became so compelling that he lost himself, and he could not afford the time—these meaningless patrols along the forest.

Kirtar stood suddenly and went outside, breathing deeply to calm himself. A fragrant breeze brought him a whiff of the forest, and his face pinched at the smell. Give him the cold, clean air of the plains, he vowed. He moved to the camp perimeter, absently accepting hails from his soldiers. The forest had always been chaotic, unstructured. He regarded the line of trees with a deep ambivalence. The tribes and races of the forest interior cut themselves off from the rest of the world. Kirtar felt contempt for such behavior. The world cried out for a firm hand, he thought, and his knuckles cracked as his fists tightened once more.

"Lieutenant," said a soldier bringing wood in from the trees. The fires for the night were being laid. Another day spent here.

"I saw bison moving deeper in the trees," the soldier volunteered uncertainly, obviously new to the unit. Kirtar wondered that the sergeants had not beaten such hesitation from the new recruits. Let the lower ranks police themselves, he thought to himself.

"Bison are no danger except when surprised or in breeding season," Kirtar reassured the soldier.

The sentry still looked nervous, but the bird warrior ignored him and walked on. The anxiety in the lower ranks was quite disgusting, the aven thought. He must admit that the sheer number of attacks, sometimes from animals well known for their timidity, was unsettling, and the frequency seemed to be increasing. Nevertheless, it was no excuse to be a coward. Nature was chaotic, and it was only natural that it must, occasionally, be curbed.

The rumble of thunder made him look to the darkening sky. No sign of rain clouds. The rumble became stronger and more continuous, never breaking. He turned to the forest. The soldier he left dropped the gathered wood and ran for his gear. The bison came out of the trees, a dumb relentless tide.

"To arms!" Kirtar yelled, echoed by others throughout the camp. The Order tents and animals were atop a small rise, and the lieutenant could look down to the forest's edge. As far as he could see in the dimming light animals were coming out, not driven by the weather or any sign of fire.

"Stand your ground," Kirtar bellowed, as he move to the line of men and bird warriors forming in the

path of the bison. The beasts were coming up the rise, slowing but still advancing. Why, he wondered. A raypen launched himself into the sky, his wings spreading in the setting sun as he flew over the camp.

The sergeants in the line began chanting, a song of the Order's glory. Magic flared as warriors united their will and cloaked themselves in power. The bison slowed but still came closer, the leaders not pushed by those behind but advancing on their own.

"They are only dumb animals!" Kirtar cried as he strode to the head of the line. The mass of animals seemed a personal attack after his words to the sentry, and he responded as he would to any attack. The magic flowed to his hands and left them as golden birds. The power flew to the leading bison and struck like a catapult burst, killing the animals instantly. There was a moment of silence as others looked at him.

"Attack!" Kirtar yelled, and other projectiles followed. Arrows and javelins arced into the air, but the dead were lost in the mass of new animals, and Kirtar howled in anger, determined to stop the assault. Perhaps if the ground were better, he might have succeeded, but the animals lapped around the growing bulwark of corpses.

Kirtar's cries to his men were lost in the noise and confusion of battle. Bison circled through the camp, their humps more than eight feet off the ground. Calves bawled and tripped, finding their feet with difficulty as the torrent of animals ebbed and flowed like a river.

Kirtar wondered how thousands of animals might remain unseen in the forest. They continued to leave

the trees, all apparently aimed for him and his men. The beasts were disorganized and showed little of the frenzy of previous attacks, but the sheer number of bison made them dangerous.

Ten-foot-tall elen stood with long pikes set, a steadily growing wall of corpses protecting the hooded bird warriors. The massive soldiers were proving useful, despite their lack of magic. Simple muscle might carry the day.

The line of soldiers contracted as sergeants tried to form a perimeter. Now relentless pressure spilled bison into the lines. Trapped bulls gored the men who turned to oppose them. Kirtar watched a soldier fall to the ground, the sudden thrusts of the heavy horns splintering the man's chest. The lieutenant leaped forward, his fist encased by power, and broke the bull's spine. He called out in triumph as he stood over the beast he killed with a single blow. However, the victory was lost in the unrelenting tide of animals

In the skies above, the raypen swooped and dove. Kirtar could see them exulting in their flight. The flyers swept down and plied their long maces and lances before rising again, untouched by the sprawling chaos below. The rumble of hooves made speech impossible as the animals milled, fresh reinforcements constantly coming to test the camp's defense. Aven were lost in the midst of the herd, occasionally appearing atop animals they killed, but soon disappearing back into the crush of bodies. Kirtar felt a thrill of pride at how the bird warriors succeeded while the other races vanished under the milling hooves.

A group of bulls threw themselves up a pile of bodies and forced their way among the elen. Now long axes rose and fell, two feet of heavy-edged steel hewing its way through bone. The raypen congregated over their land-bound brethren, and darts showered down more heavily. The giant bird warriors rolled the bulls back down the pile of corpses surrounding their position.

The lieutenant saw it all from his perch at the center of the camp. Poised on top of a light wagon, a steady stream of power flowed from his hands in the shape of golden sparrows. He directed the magic to support his fellow aven, a flock falling suddenly to create barriers of cooling flesh. The buffalo still flowed over the rest of the plain, their numbers seeming endless, as he was forced to direct more attention to protecting himself.

Kirtar had been fighting and patrolling ever since leaving the Cabal. Most of the attacks were over in seconds, and the monsters that destroyed towns were rarely sighted. A series of pickets and militias pushed the incursions back, but these waves of buffalo were unprecedented. Now he received reports of vast herds washing over positions, their numbers absorbing all the power that the Order could bring to bear.

Lines of small trees along the forest's border cracked and were trampled as more of the bison came out of the woods. The raypen swooped and trailed flails behind them. The iron bars rang against the bony skulls, but the stampeding animals came on regardless.

"Use your magic," he cried, and a single bird of power flew to take down a small cow. The raypen

wheeled in the air, their feathers dim as they exhausted most of their energy in enhancing their attacks.

"We will bring back aid!" they cried and flew away east. Kirtar cursed them tiredly, though he knew they had spent themselves into impotence. At least the elephantine elen still fought, but he could tell by the turning of their hoods that they watched their brethren flying away.

A fresh surge of beasts threw itself against the wagon, and it tumbled to kindling as the lieutenant fell. His magic now armored his flesh and his fists. He fought his way through the maelstrom to the piles of dead animals killed before they could reach the wagon. A bull took him to the ground, the heavy skull battering at his shield, threatening to crush him. Two strikes of his dagger marked the animal, and it was swept away.

He threw himself between two huge corpses, wondering for a moment if he should just hunker down, wait out the attack and protect only himself. The snapping of tent poles changed his mind in seconds. He should have been unable to hear the sound of breaking ash staves, but some portion of his being had waited for the sound throughout the battle.

The lieutenant's tent had been erected amongst a clump of boulders and by happenstance the silken walls withstood the tide of animals even as warrior mages fell. Now its respite ended, and the structure collapsed, shrouding the bull that had torn its way into the tent.

Fresh strength thundered through the bird warrior's limbs as he thought of the sphere, the

wondrous ball whose power inspired such visions. The Order's future—and his as Knight Champion—was in danger. He came out of hiding like a striking snake. A lance of golden power burgeoned from his fists, and the point parted bone as it stabbed relentlessly. Without the power of a steed behind it, the golden spindle still exploded through ribs, the showers of blood churning into the soil as still more buffalo swirled into the combat.

He held the lance high, calling for his warriors to rally, but his brothers were trapped behind the walls of corpses. He was alone, and the herd still tore through the camp. As stubbornly as any bull, he forced his way closer to his former pavilion. The long lance slapped against the ribs of animals in the way, the enhanced spear breaking ribs as Kirtar beat his way closer to his objective.

Then he saw it. His prize, his destiny was being kicked by the wrapped bull. Like some monstrous pillow, the bull inside the tent's fabric rebounded off the ring of boulders, its splayed hooves tearing at what remained of a knight's pavilion. More animals spilled into the ring of boulders, and Kirtar flew to a low stone. The metal sphere, which had glowed with such promise, was duller, its glory muted.

"You've soiled it!" cried the lieutenant and threw his lance through the trapped bull and pinned it to another animal. He dived into the scramble, the sphere tucked behind his feet against a rock. The attack seemed to be dying down, and there was less noise, but he stood furious and with bare hands beat the animals trying to escape. His blows, which once shattered boulders, rebounded from simple bone and

hide, but still his arms rose and fell. The ring of corpses trapped the animals. Kirtar's opponents soon dripped blood from their noses and ears. A cow tried to crush the bird warrior against the boulder, but he grappled still, his power healing broken bones even as he killed the animal with an especially frantic blow that shocked the heart into stillness.

A figure blocked his vision, and he almost swung before recognizing the massive form of an elen. The robe enveloping it was torn, and the gray skin was bruised and swollen. The long axe cut the spines of wounded animals, the pain of their broken bones washed away by death. Cries for help sounded throughout the remains of the camp, a surprising number of soldiers still living despite the length of the assault. Kirtar stooped and tucked the sphere into his purse, taking a moment to regard it. It was less brilliant, but the echoes of his former visions lurked in the corner of his soul as he tried to will it to its previous glory.

An aven bird warrior strode over the hills of dead flesh, coming to deliver the report on the survivors. "Sir, the mounts have returned. The outrider managed to save the string and brought them back."

The company's steeds had been hobbled some distance from the camp, and a quick-thinking guard managed to herd them to safety as waves of buffalo swamped the camp. "The wagons and most of the equipment were destroyed though efforts to salvage what we can have begun. The wounded are stabilized and await the efforts of the more powerful mages."

Kirtar laced up his purse and strode away toward the steeds. "We have no time to waste healing bruises,"

he stated to the officer, who gaped as the lieutenant raised his voice.

"Men, we have triumphed over the forest in spite of its attempts to destroy us. We have lacked only the will to seize our victory."

Most of the soldiers were stunned, but Kirtar could see the lingering battle madness in the faces of his bird warriors.

"It is long past time that we took action against the beasts that disturb our dominions," he announced. "We must recognize our duty and destroy the forces that would overwhelm us!" He pointed toward the disappearing buffalo.

"The herd could not sweep us aside and withdraws to renew itself in the hidden glens. Would you fight it again?" He swept his hand over the destroyed encampment. "Would you fight twice as many beasts when someday there are half as many of us?" The bird warrior drew himself up proudly.

"Tired and exhausted as we are, I know that only by continuing the attack can we win this war." A feeble cheer went up, but it was magnified a thousandfold in Kirtar's visions.

"Mount up and ride into the forest," he commanded. "We will kill until nothing remains to oppose us!"

Ignoring frantic signs from the healers, he took those warriors who could move to the steeds and mounted. He led the charge against the retreating herd. A bestial sea flowed before him, and he vowed to empty it, one sword stroke at a time.

CHAPTER 13

"It is like a picnic," Laquatus decided, as he shifted in the saddle, directing his mount around another clump of dead animals. "One is invariably bored and must create one's own amusement." The horse shied away at the scent of blood, and he sawed the toothed bit in the animal's mouth.

The plains were thick with destruction as the Order and the forest's forays clashed. After a week of piled corpses and devastated towns, Laquatus ached for a change. The death of drylanders was always enjoyable, but even a favorite dish might lose its appeal if sampled too often.

Turg felt the ambassador's lack of interest, and the amphibian did its best to enliven the journey. Forbidden from attacking the villagers along the way and banned from assaulting the mercenaries, it took a few days for the frog to act. Laquatus could feel his champion drawing on the merman's cunning though he lacked enough interest to interrogate his servant.

A horse's scream made the ambassador look up, wondering if they had fallen into an ambush. One of the pack-horses fell and thrashed, a caltrop sunk deep into its hoof. Laquatus could see iridescent glitter on the metal and knew it to be a deadly poison. A mercenary ran to care for the beast, stooping to draw the iron from the leg. But Turg seemed to appear, blocking the way.

"It appears to be poison," the ambassador called as the hired servant hesitated to force his way past the

frog. "If you touch it, you will be too weak to walk within the hour. If you cut yourself, you might as well dig a grave." The frog nodded emphatically and turned to the downed horse. Borrowing a knife, he slit the beast's throat, moving slowly as if expressing grief. The ambassador would be ill at the mawkish sentiment if he were not sure that Turg had dropped the caltrop into a pouch.

The mercenaries patted the frog awkwardly on the back. They expressed that night their gratitude for his quick thinking. They saved him the first cuts of the dinner. The merman sneered at their stupidity. They neglected to ask how an aristocrat from the depths of the sea might recognize a poison on sight, especially one volatile enough to be deposited for contact use. Did they think him a sage to know every toxin? He knew the deadliness of the concoction because he carried a good supply of it secured in the depths of his luggage. The frog was cheered at dinner, and the ambassador wondered what else might happen.

A mental command reinforced his previous orders. He could not afford to lose any of the men, though the steeds were expendable as long as there was a surplus. Perhaps this game might keep his attention until they reached the lieutenant.

The frog did not use poison again, and the ambassador was glad. It could be an indiscriminate tool, rather like the amphibian. Instead the jack amused himself and the merman by daring the mercenaries into dangerous lapses in judgment, primarily by example. The frog took to taunting the forest animals who were gripped by the strange compulsion. He seemed to turn his back on them with

unconcern. Laquatus knew the champion's peripheral vision was extraordinary, especially in seeing movement. But to the ignorant, and there were few air breathers who were not, he appeared oblivious.

The frog also took to helping with the horses, always quick to step in when a strap came undone or a stone was in a shoe. The animals shied away from the champion, showing better judgment than the fools riding them. However, even Laquatus was hard-pressed to see the camouflaged frog sabotaging the packs and saddles. The merman wondered at the ingenuity of the amphibian. The race was known for its savagery, not playing petty tricks and doing small injuries. It could only be the mental link, the ambassador decided. With other things to control and plots to tend to at the Cabal pits, Laquatus was the overwhelming dominant partner. But now his aggression and deceit flowed in ever-increasing amounts to the jack.

It doesn't matter, he said to himself. Joining spirits was a difficult task, but surely his control would prevent things from getting out of hand. If only they could reach the lieutenant. He forced himself to look at their prisoner. The knight smiled absently, the stench from his wound strong enough that none cared to ride close. In camp the confused man was left alone.

The knight was already broken, and it was the work of a few minutes to invade his mind, inserting new memories. Now he could only babble that the ambassador was his savior, his rescuer from forbidding odds. Occasionally he would lapse into spasms and blurt out the names of his supposed tormenters. Laquatus amused himself by inserting the names of

fighters who had irritated him. Kamahl and his noxious partner Seton had prominent roles. But like a pie, the situation's humor grew more stale every day. Furthermore, he must force his temporary minions to care for the madman.

The next morning the knight was still alive, though Laquatus doubted he would last the day. A perfectly good plan ruined by the lieutenant's stubborn insistence on staying hidden. There were villagers, but the ambassador wanted a performance for the Order. A preview was performed for the cheap crowds, but he moved on before the man could say more than "He rescued me," and name a few names.

He stopped only one time at a village. The headman, seeing the poor condition of the knight, offered hospitality. The ambassador was forced to influence his mind and leave a cover story with the others.

"The messenger," he explained, "suffers from an infection of the blood. Only healing magic might offer a chance."

So they continued. The merman opened his kit of poisons and drugs. Some elixirs were deadly but in miniscule amounts could give temporary strength. The knight rallied, his eyes growing brighter. No longer did he lie strapped like a sack to the back of his mount, his arm tied to the bridle. He tried to sit up, to move with his steed. But it was a feverish energy that gripped him, and Laquatus knew they were running out of time.

Turg was free of scrutiny as the ambassador worked on his project. The malice that the merman

planted in the jack took full flower and blossomed as Laquatus mixed another stimulant for the knight.

The mercenaries set up the midday camp, making a bed at Laquatus's orders for the knight. The dying man was cut from his saddle. The ropes parted to let him fall to the piled blankets.

"We must continue," the wounded warrior insisted, trying to rise, only to fall back. He attempted to push himself up with his hands, forgetting somehow that he only had one. The stump bled once more, even through the heavy cushion of bandages.

"Perhaps a sedative or a smaller dose of the stimulant," Laquatus muttered, boiling water to prepare an infusion. All that he carried was deadly, and he tired of trying to make poison give life rather than take it. Rarely had he worried his potions might be too effective. Laquatus tried to calm the knight's spirit even as he worked to rebuild the body. False memories and commands were increasingly useless as the captive's mind lost itself and could not remember the impulses he implanted. He mixed more powerful drugs, knowing that he was buying hours without sustained rest or magical healing.

The merman needed time to mix the potions properly, and he went to the perimeter of the temporary camp. He concentrated, tying a spell to the line he traced around the tent and mounts. With each step Laquatus took, a subtle cry sounded from the ground. "Look elsewhere," it seemed to say. "There is nothing here," the magic whispered. The wards were based on misdirection and would keep beasts away from the camp. The ambassador had grown piqued at being unable to command the bizarre attacks of wildlife. He

could no longer command the animals by his magic, but he could mislead them.

Turg and two of the hunters made for the perimeter, watching for signs of danger. Laquatus mixed the poisons inside the tent. He wielded the mortar and pestle, selecting the herbs and sealing everything into a porous bag. Then he went to the fire; to the eyes of the ignorant he was brewing a healthy tea. He wondered how long they would survive if he invited them to share with the patient.

His champion watched a swarm of insects pass, their buzzing creating background noise. Like a rolling cloud, the tiny warriors dipped and flew over the plain. Sometimes they moved with the wind and at other times against it. Barely aware of them, Laquatus measured out a cup of the tea.

Screams sounded from the perimeter, drawing everyone's attention. One of the soldiers was outside the wards, twisting on the ground. A mercenary ran outside to help him, then swatted at the air. Stinging insects boiled from the ground, settling on the would-be rescuer and pumping venom into his body. The first man down convulsed. The rest of the soldiers took a few steps to help but stopped, unwilling to risk death for one already doomed. The warrior still standing turned and came back to the camp in a drunken stagger. The mercenary's face swelled until he was blind. He called for help, his bulging throat choking off the cry in mid-word. Turg grabbed a spear and put out the butt end. As the dying man came closer he pushed him, the jack's muscles sending his victim reeling head over heels backward. Unable to stand, the man crawled. He set off away from the camp, having lost

his bearing in the fall. After only a few yards he collapsed and was still.

"Stop!" commanded Laquatus as other mercenaries grabbed weapons, closing on the frog. He poured the tea down the knight's throat ignoring the sputters, sure his minions would hold until he finished the unpleasant chore. Swords whispered from scabbards, and he stood up, livid, seeing a few fools edging closer to the champion. Turg stood hunched over with arms spread wide. The ambassador could see the gloating on his face. The merman threw the filled teapot at the bravest fools, the hot metal burning a man, putting him down.

"I said, stop!" Laquatus bellowed. He stalked to the edge of the wards, slapping armed men out of the way. "Leaving the camp is death!" he shouted. "The moment those two men stepped outside they were dead!"

He stalked to the leader of the mercenaries and hissed into his face.

"If your incompetent minion had crossed back into the wards, they would have fallen. We would all be kicking our last!" he said, inches from the warrior's face. "Now tell these fools to sit down and wait until the insects pass."

Fear and loathing was in the other man's eyes, but he nodded curtly and stamped back to the fire, his hands holding an animal prod. Those still standing against the frog saw the hatred rising off the man and slunk away, not wishing to call attention to themselves.

Laquatus moved back to his tent and put away his poisons. Once his equipment was packed he called

Turg to him with a mental command. The moment the amphibian let the tent flap close the ambassador bludgeoned him immobile with a mental assault.

"You have had quite enough fun for one trip," the merman whispered, looking into the frog's spirit. The flow between them had changed the jack. The amphibian's intelligence had soared, and mentally he bore little resemblance to the near animal he once was. Laquatus pondered the champion, wondering at the signs of familiarity the new creation showed.

"Why, it's me," the ambassador said. His murderous impulses and controlling nature had bonded with the frog's savagery. Like a baby taking its first steps, the amphibian was manipulating the people around it. Like a proud parent, the ambassador admired how far his offspring had come in luring the mercenaries to their death. But sadly, like a child, the frog had no grasp of the larger plot. With a faint sigh of regret, Laquatus channeled power along their connection. Turg screamed, his body thrashing as a flood of energy scoured his mind.

"Just stay out," the merman said to panicked questions from the mercenaries at the tent flap. "I am working with Turg on a question of discipline."

The mental constructions giving the amphibian its independence and reasoning power melted under the assault, dissolving like sandcastles before an incoming tide. Laquatus scarred the frog's mind, crippling its ability to grow mentally. Even as he attacked the mind he could feel the frog vainly trying to repair its shattered spirit.

"Strong, aren't you," the ambassador chuckled, bearing down a little harder. "We'll just have to make

this a daily ritual then." He tore at the soul, pleased by the jack's agony.

* * * * *

It was a somber expedition that moved through the plains. The casualties kept the mercenaries close to the ambassador, scared to leave the safety of his wards. Turg was as he used to be, a sullen mountain of muscle. The frog could barely restrain himself from attacking anything that moved. The ambassador devoted more attention to managing the jack, amazed at how much more work it required, but the extra effort engaged his attention. The boredom that plagued him vanished under the workload. The soldier was in a coma, drugged to near-death in the hopes that they might find a healer. Laquatus regretted the delay Turg had created, but he must have absolute control.

The cries of battle sounded, and the ambassador stood in his stirrups. The forest was closer, but most of the land was open ground. The ground was dry, and the merman could see only the dust of the melee. He cursed the mercenaries' newfound timidity. If they were to be useful, his guards should be scouting ahead. The noise was dying down, and he feared the fight might end before he could join. The chance to finally receive accolades for rescuing the dying knight riding behind him was too great to resist.

"Attack," he ordered with a great cry, unleashing his champion as he spoke. There was movement from ahead. Mounted figures becoming visible as a breeze began to clear the scene of dust. The mercenaries broke into a charge and echoed a battle cry. Turg was obvious as he ran toward the fighting, and the guards

knew that if the amphibian left the ambassador's side then the wards protecting them from observation were gone. Laquatus waved the laggards forward, his frown driving them to overtake their fellow. Fear could create as bold a fighter as courage, the ambassador said to himself.

It was an Order detachment, the ambassador realized with glee. The mounted knights maneuvered against reptilian beasts that gathered in a circle as the soldiers dressed their ranks. Laquatus's mercenaries drew near the formed ranks, but except for a few glances, the soldiers ignored the rough irregulars racing to join them. The merman kept back, wanting disposable minions between him and any dangers. Besides, he must tend his captive, who showed signs of life as he approached a detachment of his fellows. Laquatus's passport gave a feeble cheer before lapsing unconscious. Only the straps and webbing kept the man on his horse. The merman drove his horse and that of the sick man faster. All his hard work could not expire within sight of the finish line.

The Order finished dressing its lines, and boots thudded into mounts' sides. The knights moved forward, lances dropping to ram home. Their opponents were great lizards, their sides heaving in the sun. Dust settled over their scaly bodies, making it difficult to count them despite their size. The knights shifted their angle of attack, their lances tearing at weaving heads and opening up necks.

Laquatus's mercenaries arrived in a disordered mob, but their attack did more damage. Doubtless this was due to their experience in gathering animals for caravans, the ambassador said to himself as he slowed

and tried to appear more solicitous of the wounded man.

Familiar with the species, the mercenaries dodged strikes and unleashed blows to the joints and fragile bones at the back of the head. Despite their size, thousand-pound creatures fell as easily as cattle in the slaughterhouse. The Order forces swept back to attack again, but this time they cheered the irregulars as the last reptile fell. The ambassador led his passport forward, interrupting the victory cries as he struggled to get the Order's attention before the knight could inconveniently die.

"I have a man in desperate need of healing!" he cried out, his face flushed in apparent fear for his prisoner's life. "He might die any minute!"

A sergeant of the Order threw himself from his horse, rushing to the wounded man's side. He drew a dagger and cut away the restraining cords.

"Bring blankets and erect a tent!" he ordered his men, easing the patient to the ground.

"I prayed to find someone who could help," the merman said, trying to sound relieved. "I am Ambassador Laquatus of the Mer Empire. Can you do anything?"

The sergeant ignored him, already falling into a trance. The energy rolling from his hands was almost invisible in the sunlight. Used to the rich golden color of healing, the ambassador wondered if he misunderstood the sergeant's intentions. But the one-armed man's breathing seemed to improve by a miniscule amount as more power soaked into the body. "The sergeant is exhausted," a soldier explained, coming from a packhorse with a bundle of wood to

start a fire. "We've been marching for days, slaughtering anything we can find." He dropped the fuel and began cutting a circle of turf away for a fire pit. All the Order soldiers looked exhausted. Some stood with still bloody weapons, too tired to clean them.

"I am Corporal Vale," the soldier continued as he stacked the wood, laying down the kindling, then the heavier pieces. The warrior was twisted as if a healing had gone wrong, but intelligence glinted from the slack face.

"Why are you here so close to the forest?" Corporal or not, there was suspicion in his look.

"Attacked," came a gurgling cry from behind them.

The corporal spun, his dirt-covered knife ready to stab.

"I was attacked," the wounded knight repeated, his eyes glassy as he looked toward the sky.

The corporal crowded closer, his knife still ready but his attention on the wounded man.

"Who attacked you?" Vale asked gently. The knight's face was flushed, and the corporal motioned for one of other soldiers to continue the fire building. "How were you injured?"

The sergeant was deep in his trance, his face growing hollow as he poured more healing power into the wounded man. Laquatus watched with interest, for the stimulants and poisons he had poured down the knight's throat were nearly as deadly as the seeping wounds.

"A metal-hued barbarian and a centaur," came the implanted answer. "They fell on us behind a wave

of animals, killing everyone before I was rescued. A frog carried me away," he gasped and passed out.

The ambassador restrained a wide grin, all the work had been worth it. He tried to look concerned.

"He means my jack, Turg," he said, pointing to the battlefield where the amphibian tore away raw flesh and gulped it down. "I was coming after Lieutenant Kirtar when we happened upon the ambush. We were only able to save the one man before being forced to flee. We were lucky to make it to you alive."

The corporal grunted, then knelt to catch the sergeant as he toppled. The healer looked as wasted as his patient, and Laquatus wondered if they would both die. Vale looked lost as he held his superior's head, already tucking blankets around the drained figure.

"Kirtar is five miles farther in the forest," he said distractedly, "Follow the main path, and you will come upon his camp." He turned to the ambassador. "If you could leave a few men to help protect the wounded, it would be greatly appreciated."

"Of course I can," Laquatus said expansively. He waved three mercenaries over. "I will leave these guards here with supplies and food if you could give me one man to lead me to Kirtar."

Vale nodded, exhaustion catching up with him. Even three unknowns would be an infusion of strength to the weakened command.

"Toltas," he called. A soldier stood up from the fire building. "Escort the ambassador and his men to the lieutenant. Tell him of the aid they provided."

The soldier made no protest, looking like a sleepwalker. Laquatus accepted the guide, for the rest of the command looked like the walking dead.

The detachment appeared asleep as the ambassador's men and their guide left for the lieutenant. As they proceeded, the ambassador looked for further signs of the forest's aggression. He kept a ward up to deter attacks from whatever they might meet. Scattered groups of animals lay piled, killed by the Order. The guide took them around the corpses, too tired to speak. Turg jumped to inspect each mound, but Laquatus kept firm control over the frog's appetite.

They came to the main Order camp, nearly abandoned except for five guards. They did not even challenge the ambassador and his party, their faces dull as they ate. The distant sounds of battle could be heard, and Laquatus and his mercenaries drew weapons.

"Where is the lieutenant?" the ambassador barked. A soldier eating beans gave only a vague wave toward the noise.

Laquatus looked at his guide, who was glassy-eyed and swaying in his saddle. "Stay here. We can find Kirtar on our own."

Too tired to argue, the soldier dismounted and slowly walked to the cook pot.

"Come on men," Laquatus said loudly. "The lieutenant might need our help." He put his heels to his steed's side and moved out at a bone-jarring gait. Once they were out of sight of the camp, he slowed down. "Pull up, you fools," he said to the mercenaries. Caught up in the moment, half of his riders forgot he was no friend of the Order.

"We will slowly scout out the situation, and if Kirtar truly is in trouble, we'll finish him off," Laquatus said coldly. "If he appears to be winning or there are flying messengers, we will act in support. But do nothing until I give the order."

At a mental command, Turg faded from view. His camouflaging skin mimicked the small undergrowth on the border between the forest and the plains. Laquatus fed more energy to his wards. The mercenaries and the ambassador moved slowly ahead while the frog sent mental pictures back to the merman. Laquatus threw his reins to a mercenary and slumped in his saddle as his champion's visions filled his mind.

There was a clearing in the brush, and inside it the Order laid siege to the herd of giant animals. They appeared reptilian, as large as dragons, though without wings or signs of magical ability. They sounded cries of distress like mighty elephants, as the lieutenant sent mounted squads against single animals.

The knights lowered their lances, the wood and steel flickering as magic flowed through the weapons. The horses approached at a slow gallop, closing obliquely with the group. The hills of flesh shifted, trying to retreat farther into the herd, but there was no more room. The points cut into the belly of a huge reptile, tearing through the hide. Blood poured down, gallons soaking into soil. The final lance tore through the ligaments of a leg, sending the animal down. Turg was overwhelmed by the smell of hot blood, and Kirtar sent another squad after a different animal.

The ambassador came out of his light trance, disappointed at Kirtar's strength. He must come in as an ally, he realized. He drew his personal weapon, a trident, and called softly, "We will support the lieutenant, men."

They came out of the concealing brush nearly opposite the Order. Laquatus sent his steed around the perimeter of the clearing to link up with the lieutenant, seeing little point of charging into a battle before making sure the effort was appreciated.

Over the bellow of the giants, the screams of griffins carried on the wind. A flight of Order soldiers came down, their weapons ready to be unleashed. However, instead of charging the herd, a woman dismounted. Kirtar saluted her, and Laquatus realized this must be Captain Pianna, head of the Order. He enhanced his senses and drifted back to the brush.

"Captain, you are just in time to join us," Kirtar said, the bird warrior standing proud. In contrast to his men he seemed alert and eager.

The captain drew off her helmet and handed it to a mounted subordinate. "I need to speak to you alone," she said, her voice flat.

Kirtar looked to the animals, as if to mention the lack of time.

"I am sure your butchery can wait." She walked away, her sword of command sheathed over her shoulder providing an easy way for Laquatus to track her movements through the detachment. Finally they were far enough away that she stopped and turned to Kirtar.

"What, by all the stars in the sky, are you doing here Kirtar? What insanity drove you to attack into

the forest? I directed you to scout and protect the western villages, not initiate a war." She looked over the slaughter and the dead animals.

"The forest and its creatures are part of the natural order. Why would you order needless killing that goes against our basic ideals?" she asked passionately. Laquatus focused his attention on Kirtar hopeful that he could use the answer to good effect.

"To protect the plains, the enemy must be destroyed," the aven replied, his tone growing hot. "These attacks are only a symptom of the chaos deep in the forest itself. It is long past time something was done to tame the west and its beasts! For now, only destruction can protect our land from the contagion here."

Laquatus chuckled to himself as the captain stood stock still. "Rank hatred and insanity," the ambassador whispered lovingly. "I can make use of that."

Pianna rallied and pointed to the lieutenant's men.

"Setting aside your unique views of handling the current problems," the captain said carefully, "there is still no excuse for the condition of your men. I just came from your camp. After a flight of griffins landed, I was forced to wake your guards to find out where you were. Your men are completely spent, their magic dissipated in these pointless attacks." She pointed to the few remaining herd animals in the clearing. "You have dragged your pickets so far forward you are beyond support. You have nowhere to fall back to in an emergency. We should be back where the militias can act in concert, not driving for the depths of the forest!"

The few remaining animals broke their instinctual response to band together for protection and started for the woods. The lieutenant's men moved to attack, sending their mounts in pursuit of the giants. Their lances dropped parallel to the ground. Pianna called out for the men to stand, but only a tired blood-thirst remained in their minds, and they did not obey.

Laquatus thought quickly, the captain might obey the Order Strictures and destroy the prize. He sent Turg to find the sphere in Kirtar's camp, burning the need to stay concealed into the frog's mind.

He raised his trident and shouted, "Kill the animals!" The mercenaries followed.

The ambassador sent his troop to head the beasts off. Only after the charge began did he realize the true size of his opposition. Just the whales and great sea beasts were larger, and he wondered if the mercenaries could do anything with their swords and spears. But these men hunted the forests, and they were ready for such foes. A few nets flew up, trailing long ropes, to land against the reptilian sides. They stuck, the throb of magic bonding them to their targets. The entangled beasts trailed long lines behind them as they bolted. The nets tore trees from the ground, but the lizards fell as they became tangled with massive rocks. The Order followed, and their lances pierced the unprotected bellies, letting out rivers of lifeblood.

The ambassador swung his trident, power snapping among its tines. A lash of lightning danced along the lead beast's side, the current destroying nerves and locking muscles. Tons of flesh piled up as

the Order and the mercenaries worked together in the slaughter. Laquatus turned toward the leadership, the lieutenant and the captain already mounted and closing. The griffins spread out in a half circle behind their leaders.

"Always glad to be of service," the ambassador called out, enjoying the rage threatening to boil out from the captain's demeanor. "We met a detachment of your men after rescuing one of your knights. Arrived here just in time to help you deal with these animals."

The captain visibly forced herself to be polite.

"Thank you for your aid, Ambassador. We are thankful that you could come, but it would be best if we adjourned back to the base camp," Pianna said with a tight smile.

The merman still had no response from Turg as to whether the prize was located. He needed to keep the leaders out in the field.

"Surely the best thing is to continue killing your way into the forest," Laquatus said, swinging his trident to point west. "The business of the Order is to end the threat of attacks."

"The business of the Order is what I say it is. Ambassador," Pianna said, interrupting any comments that Kirtar might have had. "We have lived with the forest for generations. It is foolish to risk everything when we do not even know why these attacks have begun or how we can stop them. We are not the Cabal to believe that death is the final answer and first response."

She turned the horses and started back to camp, forcing the rest of her troops to follow. The merman could see the rebellion in Kirtar's face. He could race

after her, but that lacked dignity. A spurt of animals showered from a cluster of brush.

"Beware," Laquatus cried, and a bolt of energy arced from his trident to the bushes at the side of the trail. Soldiers drew weapons as small animals flowed out and up the legs of their mounts. They were stoats and shrews, and Laquatus cursed the fates that supplied him with such diminutive foes. He needed some great menace to impress the Order and help cement an alliance, but only vermin presented themselves.

The Order steeds pawed the ground, starting in fright as the small animals tried to scramble up their legs. The lieutenant swung a long flail with gusto, the heavy ball tearing its way through the creatures as his soldiers and Laqua-tus's mercenaries maneuvered to give him room. Swords and lances swung, and creatures died, though their numbers seemed undiminished.

The captain and her officers dashed the ambassador's hopes for any victory by summoning their own creatures. Several of the griffin riders concentrated, letting their steeds snap up mouthfuls of the furry foes. Huge single- and double-horned beasts set the ground shuddering as they stamped their way into the flow of sharp-toothed vermin. Gray rhinos dipped their heads and swept the small animals away. Tiny teeth worked at their gray hides in vain as the Order-directed creatures shattered the flow of small beasts.

Laquatus, however, was not willing to give up. He raised power, but the blasts that ripped from his trident barely stung the stoats. That was not where

his power had gone. The merman's sly summoning drew greater beasts from the brush, attracting creatures that had fled Kirtar's murderous attacks.

Great cats leaped at them from cover, throwing themselves on the rhinos. The horned beasts rolled and tried to scrape their feline attackers off as larger teeth worried at their hides. A few giant bulls thundered out, shoving panicked rhinos and goring the gray beasts' sides. Laquatus ceased his call, concerned that he might destroy himself in calling up more dangerous animals. Predators, large and small, attacked the Order, and the ambassador watched as his mercenaries aided the beleaguered knights.

"Hold them for a few seconds," Pianna cried, a bow in her hands. The captain's arrows flew low to the ground. The missiles were for cutting harnesses and standards, but the curving blades instead dismembered the stoats and badgers. Then the razored half-moons lodged deep in the legs of the bulls coming from the forest.

The small animals were so easily killed, the ambassador lamented, and not even poisonous. Laquatus threw arcs of energy that leaped from small animal to small animal, stunning them. He drove his horse among the unconscious creatures, cursing his horse as it failed to trample enough.

The lieutenant and his men had dismounted, swords killing the last of the small creatures before they closed with those slyly summoned by the ambassador. The rhinos returned, finally free of the great cats. Huge horns sundered ribs, and the bulls died quickly. The Order knights killed off the last of their attackers and turned to help the mercenaries.

A lion leaped at Laquatus, pulling down his horse and spilling him to the blood-soaked ground. His guards tried to spear it but missed, allowing the lion another chance to kill Laquatus. He laid his image over his horse, sacrificing the beast as he rolled away. The gaping jaws locked on the equine throat as the merman's steed did him a final service. The ambassador called for his champion, regretting that Captain Satas and his dependable minions were far to the east, still mapping their way to the Order's Citadel.

CHAPTER 14

Kamahl and Seton drove themselves hard up the road, pursuing both Kirtar and Laquatus. It took days to finally flush themselves of the ambassador's animals. They had been relentlessly pursued, the beasts continuing long after the merman and his party departed. Only the combination of the barbarian's flaming barriers to impede pursuit and the druid's constant effort to break the spell finally won them through. Each time the druid erased the implanted commands, he turned the creatures back to the forest. The repetitious contact with the animals led Seton to suspect that something beyond the ambassador and his lackeys was affecting the creatures of the west. Riding in the wake of

Kirtar's forces confirmed that something was wrong.

They returned to the village where they had battled Laquatus and his minions, but the site was deserted. Kamahl found his horse grazing in a deserted field and moved to a narrower mount, much to the relief of his legs. They continued west, looking in vain for the ambassador and his minions. Whether by magic or good trailcraft on the part of Laquatus's mercenaries, they could not track the aristocrat and his murderous cronies.

Soon enough they did find the trail of Lieutenant Kirtar. Dead animals and markers for fallen Order soldiers began to appear. Within a day of leaving the village they came upon a gravestone. The marker was

nothing extraordinary, a simple boulder with the sigil of the Order and the troop name.

"The warriors of Eiglin," Seton said, identifying the unofficial symbol of the lieutenant's command. The soldier was interred in frozen ground. The dirt was enchanted to be as resistant as iron, denying scavengers an easy meal. The resting place would be recorded for eventual reburial in the mausoleums of the Order or the graveyards of the soldier's people.

Filled with hope that they would soon meet Kirtar and their search would be over, the two continued on. Instead they found more of the Order's passing slaughter.

They followed long runs of animals hunted down by soldiers until there was nothing left alive. The barbarian and the centaur were forced to backtrack as the trails ended in piles of dead flesh. Soon they neared the edge on the plains and entered the realm usually ceded to the forest.

The killing of animals continued even as the villages were left behind, angering the druid to greater and greater heights.

"There is no sign that these animals threatened anyone. The Order destroys anything in its path. Perhaps," he said darkly, "the waves of animals are right to kill, with such enemies waiting to come within the trees."

The barbarian rode with his axes loosely tied to his saddle, instantly ready at hand. Such destruction seemed pointless to the mountain mage. The Order had the right to protect itself from attack, but such indiscriminate slaughter must provoke a reaction. Seton assured him that the peoples of the forest were

not behind the current attacks. The killing would not curb further animal incursions, for the beasts lacked the intelligence to react to such dangers. To kill every dangerous creature would be the work of decades. Even though the barbarian had spent his life in the mountains, he knew that one roused the forest at his own peril. The random attacks could change into a real campaign of destruction.

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The dust and the cries dragged the pair onward, both desperate to see at last the events whose aftermath had filled the land for days. Seton went forward, his face sick and angry at the slaughter. Kamahl followed hoping to finally catch up with Kirtar or the ambassador. A camp with exhausted Order soldier appeared as they rounded a corner of the road. The centaur charged through, drawn to the combat beyond. Kamahl followed, knowing that both of those he sought were more likely to be near the tumult of battle.

The barbarian looked to the camp as he passed, seeing the line of wounded stretched out. His heart raced as he saw the face of the injured knight, the fighter he had seen with Laquatus. But the man was down in the dirt, a surgeon and orderly working on his wounds. The knight's shirt was cut away. Festering sores and weeping gashes lay open to the dusty air. Kamahl directed his steed forward more strongly, trying to regain the time lost due to his pause.

Seton slowed unexpectedly ahead, allowing Kamahl to come closer. The big centaur crowded a man on a horse, fear and strain plain on the guard's

features. The druid's club was in a carrier strapped to his body, and rather than waste time fumbling at the straps he used his hands, as he had back at the caravan.

"Murderer." Kamahl heard him growl as he swept the mercenary off his horse and turn his head until the fellow could see behind him. The dead man's steed stood placidly, apparently accustomed to death in close proximity. "Take a centaur's hide and die!" Seton spat. Kamahl assumed that the centaur had found another member of the ambassador's party. The druid dropped the corpse in the road and reached back to draw his club. Kamahl looked, but no one else saw the killing, and the dead man faded into the background with the other corpses.

"Such a criminal deserves death," the barbarian said as Seton breathed deeply. "But perhaps vengeance might wait when we find the others. Especially if they be in the company of the Order."

The giant grimaced but nodded reluctantly. The pair advanced more slowly, the detail of the fighting beyond becoming clearer as they rounded a clump of trees.

Animals of all sorts, both large and small, moved chaotically between riders and infantry. Seton turned his head, waving off a bobcat as it ran at him and tried to climb to higher ground on his back.

"Sheer madness!" he exclaimed, and Kamahl agreed with him, turning his horse from a badger headed for the trees behind him.

The druid moved tentatively into the confusion. The mountain warrior could feel energy hum as the druid neared a pack of wolves. The beasts snarled, and

Seton snarled back, reinforcing the sound with a wave of the club. Kamahl stayed close to his friend as the druid tried to drive the animals away from the killing field.

"Difficult," huffed the druid as a bull elk threatened him with its antlers.

The centaur tried to nudge the animal on with his club, but the beast fenced the stone-tipped weapons with its velvety antlers. Kamahl whipped a fire lash into the ground at the animal's side, and it broke away. The centaur grunted and tried to control other animals as the barbarian raised a line of flickering flame that began to prod the animals to the side. Kamahl ached with the effort of controlling himself, but the druid wanted to stop the battle, not join it, and the barbarian felt constrained to honor his friend's wishes.

The pair worked their way through the animal refugees, turning those outside the fighting back to the forest. Now they crowded the Order soldiers. Kamahl stayed the peacemaker, though more and more he ached to smash a profane soldier to the ground. This fighting was wrong, and they must stop it. The barbarian's frustration mounted higher, and it was with relief that he found another member of the ambassador's party.

Turg announced himself by springing from ambush, as he had so often before. The faint flames Kamahl used to herd animals roared higher, drying the amphibian's skin as the creature came at him. The barbarian ducked as the frog's hind leg thudded into his mount's shoulder, his sword out of position. The jack threw himself onto the centaur. The frog was red

with blood and gore from the battle. Kamahl wondered if the champion's fury was directed at him for following the ambassador or attempting to quell the slaughter. Regardless, the amphibian jumped to the druid's back and tried to rip his throat out.

The centaur showed the flexibility of his kind, turning around at his humanoid waist to fight the frog face to face. Kamahl saw them gripping arms, and he waited for parts of the amphibian to fly over the battlefield. As massive as the frog's muscles appeared, they were dwarfed by the forest warrior's mighty shoulders. He turned to his own defense as he left the centaur to his.

Without Seton's will, the animals swung back to fight. Two bears and dragonettes converged on Kamahl, and now the barbarian's fire lash burned away fur and scales. Other animals came closer, some fleeing battle, the others seeking it. The Knights of the Order came together, and a new summoning burned through the magical ether.

New creatures shimmered into being. They seemed huge mounds of crystals, some over twenty feet high. For a moment, Kamahl wondered if the Order forces were trying to construct a fortress. Then the apparent masses of rock began to move. Ponderous legs swung into new positions as the creatures started across the field. Light began to glimmer inside the crystal, rotating wildly before leaping out to engulf animals. The magic congealed, slowly trapping its victims in glowing layers. Bison and great bears struggled as if in tar until the bands of golden light hardened and left the victims immobile. The monstrous creatures knew their allies and rhinos ran

freely among the trapped creatures, trampling and goring the helpless animals.

The megaliths moved their crystalline masses over their captives, both the living and the dead, and settled down for a moment. Then the legs raised the crystal bodies, and new bands of magic jumped forth to trap fresh prey. A cow kicked and thrashed as the energy tightened and locked it rigid, waiting for a rhino's killing thrust or a crushing death from the advancing giants. The megaliths had moved far enough that Kamahl could see the lane they left behind. Every drop of blood, morsel of flesh, or sprig of a plant was gone. A floor of corpses lay in front of them, and the crystal grew rosy as the mineral creatures helped the Order sweep the field clean.

"The drive is broken," Seton croaked from behind Kamahl. The barbarian turned to the centaur. The druid's face was black with an oily liquid, and water wept copiously from his eyes. Of Turg, there was no sign.

"The ambassador's jack vomited his bile into my eyes as we struggled," Seton said, peering myopically into Kamahl's face. "I wrenched his shoulder and would have pulled his arm off but for the burning of its juices."

The centaur tried to wipe his eyes clear, and Kamahl pulled a canteen from his gear. The forest warrior tilted his head back and poured the water directly into his eyes.

"I think the battle is done," he gasped and handed the nearly empty container back to the barbarian. Animals fleeing the conflict proved the centaur's word good. A bear lumbered by, giving only a glance in their

direction before continuing on its way. However, there were other creatures on the field. A rhino stabbed its way through the flow of animal refugees and headed for Kamahl. His axe spun into its skull, dropping it into the bloody mud. Others converged on him, and he drove his horse forward, trying to get away from the approaching beasts. The megaliths reversed course, and energy folded over the barbarian despite his horse's efforts to outrun the spell. The mare's gallop suddenly stopped, and the horse tumbled to the ground. Kamahl threw himself free before he could be trapped beneath the body.

He rolled, the sword flying free from his grip. He came to his feet with knives of fire in his hands. Seton swung his club, snapping a rhino's horn free as he struggled against the megaliths' magic. Kamahl ran to his aid, his power severing crystal as he turned to destroy the mineral giants. But the battlefield held only the victors and the dead. The creatures of the forest merged back into the trees as the rhinos and megaliths began to fade away.

The barbarian hobbled to his horse, a deep gaping wound on her side telling him that a rhino had attacked while he scrambled to his feet. He knelt and laid his hand on her side.

"Thank you," He whispered, then stripped the saddle and gear from the corpse.

"My friend," Seton said tremulously, "I can't see you—" The centaur collapsed, rolling up against the other corpses in the field. Kamahl paused for a second and threw away everything, racing to find a healer.

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Kamahl did not know how long he searched before he found someone willing to help his friend. He was sure that the exhausted sergeant came more because of the barbarian's sword than belief in his story. Once he checked to see if Seton was alive, the Order soldier fell into a healing trance.

The mountain warrior struggled to clear the centaur's eyes, scouting for water among the fallen to wash away the poison and quench the druid's raging thirst. Kamahl waited, wondering if he should fetch others to help, but the cries of the wounded could be heard in the distance. The barbarian counted himself lucky to have found the sour sergeant.

"I have done what I can," the Order soldier announced suddenly, standing up and moving away from the patient he had lavished so much care over.

"I do not know how to repay you," Kamahl started to say.

"Don't bother," came the gruff reply. The man stretched, his back crackling at the movement. "I saved the eyes. I don't know if he will be able to use them. Bring him to the main camp when he feels able to walk."

"I will thank you as soon as I can guide him up the road," Kamahl said. "I will do it right before I speak with Lieutenant Kirtar."

The sergeant laughed harshly. "I won't be seeing you then. Kirtar has been recalled. The captain was going to haul him back to the citadel to explain his conduct. If I know Captain Pianna, he was on griffin back within a minute of the battle's end."

All that riding and he must have missed Kirtar by only minutes. The barbarian stood rigid, wondering how he would catch up with the lieutenant now.

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Kamahl sat in his camp, eating a piece of travel bread. Despite the tons of meat lying in the field, he had gathered none of it. Besides being no scavenger, he could not afford the trouble a fire might bring.

Seton recovered some, and the barbarian was able to lead the centaur to the Order camp perimeter, though he did not follow the druid to the healers. He left the giant and returned to his solitary tent.

He waited for a day, eating dry travel food and ignoring the stench. The barbarian meditated, but the core of his anger made his attempts to find peace meaningless. On the second day, Seton returned.

The druid's face was discolored, the apelike features splotched with what looked like blue-and-black dye. His eyes seeped a steady stream, and he advance slowly into the camp, watching where he stepped.

"It looks worse than it really is," the forest warrior said. "The healers believe that with time my sight may improve." The giant tried to sound cheerful, but it was obviously difficult. The barbarian came closer, gripping his friend firmly by the lower arm.

"I have not wasted my time in the Order's camp," Seton explained, lowering himself gingerly. "The lieutenant was called to the Citadel to explain his policy of slaughter.

"The captain sent word that all forays into the forest would cease pending further information. There

is talk that the bird warrior might be demoted or transferred far to the East." Seton paused, speaking more seriously. "The Mer Ambassador and his jack have also left for the Citadel, 'hoping to resolve the current difficulties,'" the druid repeated, the bitterness plain in his voice.

"The quest must not end here," Seton urged. "Reclaiming the orb or foiling the ambassador's plans, your journey must continue." The druid stood and picked up Kamahl's gear.

"This was not my first stop after the Order's healers released me," the woodland fighter said. "I was able to secure you another steed. Come and I will introduce you to him." The centaur picked up Kamahl's gear with a single hand and headed into the forest, not bothering to wait for a response.

The druid walked through the trees, his huge strides tentative but still forcing the barbarian to step rapidly to keep up with him. They arrived at the foot of a tall cliff after a long walk, one that obviously taxed the giant's strength. The vertical rock face climbed hundreds of feet, the limbs of trees seeming to peek out over the top of the ridge.

"Unless this steed can fly or is invisible, I do not see it." Kamahl quipped as he reached the centaur's side. The druid chuckled painfully as he dropped the barbarian's gear and looked blearily to the sky.

"Emerald!" he called. "Your rider is here!" A head popped out over the top of the cliff, eyes swiveling separately to peer down on the two below. A lizard stepped onto the side of the sheer wall, standing vertically a moment before it started down.

"Emerald volunteered last night to provide you with transportation. He fed this morning and should be ready for days of hard riding."

The barbarian moved back, nervous to be under a creature of such size descending with no visible means of support.

"Do not worry," said Seton. "Emerald's kind can walk on a ceiling as long as the surface can hold the weight."

The lizard was at the bottom of the cliff and stepped to the ground. Its body stood as high as a horse, though it was much longer. Emerald's long tail beat against the rock.

"Exactly how am I going to ride it?" Kamahl said as he approached the beast. The centaur said nothing, swinging the saddle onto the animal's back. A long tongue darted out of the gecko's mouth and worked along the underside of the saddle. When the druid settled it all the way down, it squelched and then locked solid.

"That will hold you and your gear even if you are upside down," Seton said with satisfaction. "Though you might want to grip with something besides your knees. Now climb aboard, and tell me how it feels."

Kamahl approached cautiously and, using the saddle horn, pulled himself up. The lizard was huge, but the barrel of its body was close to the same width as a horse's.

"How do I care for it?" Kamahl said uncertainly.

Seton laughed. "Emerald is as smart as you are, even if he can't talk," the centaur explained. "When you want to get the saddle off, just tell him and lift. That tongue will smear something on its back that will

break the saddle's grip. When you want to start out again, just do as I did." The druid lifted the rest of Kamahl's gear to him and helped secure it. "Emerald knows the way to the Order and how to avoid trouble. Just trust him to know where he is going."

The forest warrior stepped back and settled down to rest. Before Kamahl could say anything the gecko started with a jerk.

"Good luck in your quest, Kamahl," Seton called.

The barbarian could only wave, hoping the druid saw him as he concentrated on adapting to the lizard's gait.

CHAPTER 15

"The air is no place for a merman," Laquatus muttered as he held tightly to the soldier's waist. The ground was distant, and he was reminded of long swims in tropical seas. The clear water revealed the ocean floor far below. However, the air would not support the ambassador as he drifted down. He felt his jack's fears and knew only his unbending will and orders kept the frog from panic. He wondered how bruised the amphibian's companion would be when they landed again. He had convinced the captain his contacts with the Cabal and other continental powers would help her in discovering the source of the disturbances. Laquatus hoped to get her alone and work his mind-altering magic, but she gave him no chance. The strain of controlling Turg and his own fear sapped his energy throughout the griffin ride. Now the final destination was in sight, and he could hardly wait for the feel of dry land beneath his feet.

Laquatus regretted his diminished power. He had been forced to abandon the mercenaries. Pianna was barely willing to allow the ambassador and his champion to accompany her. The merman hoped the underwater explorers had finally reached the Citadel. The promise of sea warriors and competent minions made the loss of the mercenaries bearable.

The Citadel was a massive conglomeration of stone. The castle itself was on top of a rocky hill, the only visible road to the gates exposed to attack from above for its entire length. Double walls of stone

reinforced with dozens of towers enclosed the top of the mesa. The central keep was less martial, the fineness of the stone work contrasting with the crudely worked blocks of the outer walls. But however brilliant the white rock appeared, Laquatus still noticed bars on the windows.

There was a town at the base of the hill, tucked between the living rock and a stream flowing down from the north. The slate roofs of the tall houses nearly hid the cobblestone streets. The avenues looked crowded, and the ambassador could see wagons and tents in the town squares. The griffins had often soared over long caravans of refugees headed for the Citadel. The merman wondered where the additional people could be placed. The courtyard that the griffins aimed for seemed clear of any but Order officials, and Laquatus tried to guess how much longer that would be the case.

The landing was a blur as the ambassador closed his eyes. The skybox had felt rock solid in comparison to a living steed, and he wondered if his sudden fear of heights would be temporary. The griffin landed with a lurch as it stumbled to a halt. Laquatus turned and watched Turg's ride land. The moment the flier's claws touched the ground the frog was off, running his hands over the solidity of the cobbles. It took the merman several moments to dismount, his legs locked with cramps. Finally, he commanded his champion to aid him to the ground. The Order soldiers showed disgusting ease as they hurried to unload their steeds of cargo, saddles, and harnesses.

The stablemen moved slowly, as if listening for news. They looked at the pit frog and the ambassador

with wide eyes, and Laquatus wondered what wild rumors would be circulating by the day's end. The officers and their guests stepped to the main keep, the several-story building looming over the merman like a cliff.

They moved into the darker room, Laquatus's eyes adapting easily to the dim light coming through the narrow windows. Food was laid out on trestles. It was an example of the journey's hardship that Turg did not immediately fall upon the buffet but squatted down at the ambassador's side. The hugeness of the hall seemed to siphon the noise of its few inhabitants away. The ambassador carefully enhanced his senses and ached at the sudden cacophony. He carefully reined in his energy, hoping that the casting of his spell was undetected. The journey had taken quite a toll on him as well.

The officers were off at an isolated table, small portions of food set before them, though neither ate. The merman's enhanced vision could see the irritation on both of their faces. The rest of the griffin scouts gave them a wide berth, and the server left a flagon of wine at the table rather than standing ready to pour. The ambassador was assaulted by thunder, and Turg stood with a threatening gesture. A serving man stumbled back with a tray of bread and wine.

"Give it here, and then leave me alone!" Laquatus grated out. The impertinence of the man to disturb him while he was concentrating. Only the importance of eavesdropping prevented him from calling for the servant's supervisor. He made a note of the man's face for punishment at a later date. His attention shifted back to the officers in mid-argument.

"I did not return to stay behind these walls," Kirtar said with obvious exasperation. "The fight is to the west, against the creatures of the forest." The bird warrior looked at the captain as if the stupidity of the original question could not be believed.

"I ordered you back to oversee the deployment of militias. Your fighting has changed nothing except to strew corpses amongst the trees." Pianna drank quickly, trying to gain breathing room, to the ambassador's eyes. "Ever since your entry in the Cabal tournament you have lost interest in the Order. Have you succumbed to the lure of wealth and prizes?"

"Wealth is a tool we can use to build the Order," Kirtar said, hammering down a goblet with a peal that split Laquatus's ears. "As for the prizes, I procured one that was worth any number of villages that fell while I competed."

The lieutenant ignored the captain's indignant gasp and opened his pouch. Pianna looked down into the pouch, her eyes locked on the sphere. The lieutenant's fingers cupped it and raised it before her. The room fell silent as Order mages detected the throb of contained power and looked to the officers. Laquatus felt a surge of envy as the lieutenant pushed the sphere back into his pouch. The ambassador was surprised by the sour expression of the officer's face and could barely hear him mutter, "It's dimmer still."

"Impressive enough," the captain said agreeably. "And I can understand your fascination with it. But what have you done since you received it?" The silence seemed to echo in the merman's ears.

"I see," continued Pianna as several seconds passed without response. "Your prize was not used nor

provoked any response other than influencing you to ignore your recall and engage in indiscriminate slaughter." She shook her head sadly.

"You are less than you were when you left," she stated emphatically. "You had plans, but once you held that power in your hands you could only use violence. It corrupted you without doing anything but offering you magic you had not earned." Bitterness and resolution filled her tone. "I have never seen a better example of an artifact curbing and shrinking a soul. You must give it up."

"I will not!" replied the lieutenant hotly. "It is only that I don't know how to use it," he confessed, his pale skin flushing in the dim light. "It was bright with glory once, but every time I look at it, the visions grow fainter. I don't know what to do. I know only that this is valuable, and it represents the salvation of the Order."

"It is a chain that is dragging you down. You speak of what you can do, what you know," she said gently. "You must give it up, even if it must be destroyed."

The bird warrior started but with visible effort stifled his initial response and nodded.

"The Order and the Strictures must come first," he said reluctantly. "Only give me time to examine it a little more. You are right that I have done nothing with it other than let dreams of glory lead me astray. Give me a chance to investigate it a little more before we give it up to those who use the crushers." The captain nodded doubtfully as Laquatus tasted his heart in his mouth. Give the orb to the fanatics who thought the past should be erased? Those who spurned

objects of enchantment and condemned wonders to the grinding wheels of their one sanctioned machine? He would see the Citadel ground to dust before he allowed the orb to be damaged.

Kirtar excused himself and left. It took a moment for the ambassador to break his trance and send his jack after him. Perhaps it would take an obvious intervention to take the sphere from these fools. He hoped the underground explorers would find a route soon.



Turg lurked behind a pile of heavy canvas, waiting for the lieutenant to speak. The frog had followed the officer and stayed at a distance. Laquatus soon begged off any further talks with the captain or her representatives, citing his exhaustion from the journey. Now the ambassador rode the frog's spirit, nudging him closer to hear the conspirators.

At least that was merman's belief. The bird warrior left, but instead of retiring directly to his room he spoke to several knights before visiting the armory. Laquatus had a bad moment when he saw the shape of a great crusher filling a building's interior. Several squires pushed a capstan, driving the interior mechanisms. A robotic bird was thrown into the machine's gaping mouth, and a series of smashing collisions sounded, then died down as tiny pieces of the forbidden technology came out the other end. A pile of mechanical limbs and less definable work filled a basket that the presiding officer continued to empty.

Laquatus very nearly sent his champion charging for the orb at that moment. Kirtar had shook himself

and left the crusher with a look of fresh determination on his face. Once more he stopped to give a message, and this time Turg was able to hear.

"The dungeon just after midnight."

The frog spent hours waiting in sight of Kirtar's quarters, but the bird warrior did not come out again. Dinner came and went, and the frog's belly grumbled.

In camouflage, he raided the remnants of the evening meal, then headed for the dungeon. Rather than the vast cavern that Laquatus expected, just several empty cells in a tower's base served as the Order's prison. Only the distinctive smell allowed the frog to find it without asking for directions. Laquatus was heartened that even the Order's ideals could not negate the need for small rooms reeking of despair and filth. The frog breathed the odor in deeply before hiding behind stores in the main room.

Kirtar arrived first, inspecting the chamber carefully. Laquatus fed a minute portion of power to Turg, and the spell, combined with the champion's natural camouflage, prevented his discovery. Other knights arrived until five moved to a table. Laquatus noticed with little surprise that all were avian bird warriors. Kirtar spoke, and the others listened silently. The door was not whisperwood, so the lieutenant talked softly.

"I and my fathers have served the Order loyally. You have all been warriors in the Order without any blemish on your service. None may say otherwise."

Turg could hear the rustling of nods and crept out a bit beyond the bags to see the conspiracy.

"But to be loyal to the Order means that sometimes the Strictures must be disobeyed, ill-conceived commands must be ignored."

There were fewer signs of agreement, but there was an affirmative air about the group,

"I won a great prize while competing in the tourney," Kirtar continued. "While defending the helpless, even in that evil city, I defeated a dragon."

Another nod of assent and a bit of pride showed among the warriors at one of their own overcoming such a beast.

"These are difficult times for the Order," the lieutenant said quietly. "The forest has risen and assaulted our lands as never before."

"Aye," said a grizzled voice as one of the others interrupted. "So many refugees have arrived that they are filling up the town. The captain says that soon we will have to start bringing families within the Citadel walls."

"Exactly," said the lieutenant, showing irritation at being interrupted. "The captain has a good heart and believes in the Strictures, but that is not enough in these difficult days. It will take boldness, and while Pianna is no coward, she is not bold. The best way to protect the refugees is to stop them from being displaced." A murmur of agreement filled the room. "We must take the fight to the forest."

The dead silence through Turg's ears told Laquatus that this extreme step was not popular. The lieutenant seemed to know that and quickly continued.

"The prize that the rumors speak of I have with me," he said, opening his pouch. The thrill of power shook everyone in the room. Turg's camouflage

flickered, but such was the group's fascination that no one saw. "The captain saw its strength but in blind obedience to the Strictures wants it destroyed. She would not consider using it and never held it. Touch it now," Kirtar said and laid it on the center of the table.

Each bird warrior stroked it, and one and all were lost in some interior vision. Turg tensed as Laquatus wondered about attacking the gathering while they were stunned. But they shook off their bemusement, all except the lieutenant, with reluctance. Kirtar looked dissatisfied.

"Once it filled the heart with peals of glory, but now it is only a ghost of what it was." Disbelief showed on the other faces. "I know what the problem is. I have let my own reluctance to use this power destroy the potential that originally resided in this prize. I can afford to wait no longer. The magic must be used, and we must take the Order in a new direction." The officer looked each warrior in the eyes in turn.

"Tomorrow I will take the captain's place, and you must all act to support me when I do."

Turg retreated as the members of the coup left.

"Treachery, always a popular choice with subordinates," Laquatus mused as he directed his jack away from the plotters. This betrayal might be just what he needed.

* * * * *

"There is no reason for these attacks, your Excellency," the captain said to Laquatus. The ambassador had begged an audience with Pianna, hoping to find some other angle to grasp advantage. Besides the excellent news of a power struggle within

the Order, Laquatus had felt a whisper from the tresias stone during the night. An explorer had finally proved a path to the Citadel through the underground rivers. Further reinforcements followed to give Laquatus enough power to take action against the Order.

The ambassador sent Turg below with the stone, telling

Satas all that occurred and that he must bring soldiers as quickly as possible. It might be possible to pluck the prize right from the Order's fingers without any of the knights being the wiser. While he waited for the frog's return, he sat in the captain's office offering his services to the Order.

"The lieutenant's incursion into the forest seemed to provoke even more of a response," she said as she showed the merman her intelligence maps.

"I always believed that he might be exceeding his authority," Laquatus said in a sweet tone. He waited for a response to his overtures, but Pianna was looking at the map. Then she grabbed a set of reports and began rifling through them, checking something.

"Yes, yes, yes," she cried out, relief plain on her face. "I couldn't see it before because we never put down the dates of the attacks." She grabbed up a pen and put a series of broad arrows on the map. She ignored the rattle of pins falling to the floor. "We never saw a focus to the attacks because the center pulling the attacks shifted over time. Kirtar was what the forest reacted to."

"The lieutenant?" Laquatus said nonplussed. "He can be irritating but surely not to an entire forest. Do not give him credit for being more than he is."

"Not the lieutenant," Pianna said. "It's that damn prize of his. He was awarded it where we saw the strongest attack, and the rest of them seem to be moving in his direction when he rode to the southern plains. We need to destroy that orb immediately."

"I knew that would be your thinking," Kirtar said as he moved into the room. Laquatus could see the bird warriors lining up in the room beyond. "Anything that violates the Strictures must be destroyed."

"It has nothing to do with the Strictures, Lieutenant," Pianna replied, drawing herself upright as she heard his insolent tone. "I believe your prize is what provokes the forest. There will be additional attacks in this direction even as we speak. We must destroy it or dispose of it immediately."

"Get rid of it?" laughed Kirtar. "Even if I believed you, why would I want to throw it away?" He put his hand in his pouch and drew the orb forth. Its power once more struck the ambassador.

"Anything that can rouse the entire forest can be used to tame it," Kirtar stated. "That is what the Order is dedicated to, is it not? Curing the world of its wildness and chaos?"

The captain moved around the table, her face calm. "But what about the villages destroyed and the refugees made homeless as you search for a way to use the orb?" Pianna walked slowly toward the door and Kirtar. "As a knight, you took an oath to protect them." She raised her hand as if to pluck the orb from his oversized fist. Energy flared and coated her, locking her in place. Laquatus could see her expression slowly starting to change from determination to astonishment only to stop halfway through the shift.

"Unlike you, I know it is sometimes necessary to make a sacrifice," Kirtar said as he retrieved Pianna's sword, her symbol of Order authority.

Power poured from the orb. A growing mass of purest crystal shimmered into being as Laquatus stood, feeling for his soldiers below. The throb of ocean magic reassured him as the lieutenant turned his attention toward him. The orb's magic seemed to light up the bird warrior's features, and the ambassador bowed slightly as if to acknowledge the aven's superiority.

"I trust there will be no problems, Laquatus."

The merman nodded, thinking how he could take advantage. The power continued to grow, and the ambassador wondered if the lieutenant was preparing to destroy him. But Kirtar's look of victory changed to one of confusion and then fear. The crystal around the captain pulsed and began to grow, inching across the floor as the bird warrior gripped the orb tightly, concentration freezing his face.

He seemed to collapse inward, panting. Cries sounded beyond the room. "Mutiny" and "Save the captain" could be heard as the lieutenant once more tried to force his spell to stop. He fell, and his supporters rushed into the room.

"I can't control it!" he gushed, stricken with fear. The bird warriors looked at Laquatus, threats in their eyes, and one started toward him, murder plain in his face.

"There is no time," another soldier exclaimed. The crystal grew faster, and the ambassador unconsciously retreated.

"Let the spell take him!" With that they plucked the lieutenant up and retreated through the door.

Laquatus tried to follow, but the crystal was already too close to the wall. The stone began to sparkle, and then it too was engulfed in crystal. The merman was trapped with no way out, the spell expanding in irregular spurts. He tripped over a chair, holding the seat out as if to halt the effect. The wooden legs froze in place well above the floor.

"Turg," he called to below, "Captain Satas! Open a portal! Immediately!" He backed up against the wall. Could he cut his way through the stone? He was trying to raise power when he felt the tickle of the portal forming at his back. He fell through the wall screaming, "Close it! Close it now!"

CHAPTER 16

Once more Kamahl ran to a city, his legs pumping. But unlike the roads to city, Cabal people were everywhere, packing the trail to capacity. He threaded the crowds as he once threaded razor shards in the mountains during his training. The travelers were refugees from the western border's violence. Ever since he left the giant gecko, Emerald, he had run through despairing crowds. As he approached the Citadel, there were expressions of hope in the faces about him. However, the crush in front of the gates seemed to press out the travelers' optimism. The low wall surrounding the town was unguarded except for a frustrated soldier trying to direct the incoming traffic. He never saw the metal-hued barbarian with the great sword, his eyes nearly blind from staring at the constant flow of refugees.

Running was impossible now, but Kamahl persevered. He shoved his way through the masses, aiming for the great castle on the hill. If there were guards in the city, they were lost in the crying crowds. It seemed the entire world tried to reach a place to eat or sleep. Large men with clubs stood before every inn.

"There is no room, move on. Move on," they called to those trying to enter. The staves were not used except to prod the persistent away. Kamahl wondered how much longer that would be true.

The road up the side of the hill was thick with people. A steady stream of Order uniforms came down to the town to help with the crowds. A few refugees

struggled up the path, pressing on to the greater safety of the castle walls. Despite all their martial posturing, the Order compromised their defenses, so those on the road would not fail to find shelter.

Kamahl continued through the multitudes, confident that he finally had his bearings in the narrow streets. He arrived at the bottom of the road and there tasted the ambassador's duplicity.

"Hold!" a sentry cried. More guards converged on the mountain mage.

"It is the barbarian!" yelled the corporal commanding the lower detachment. "Take no chances with him!"

The people around Kamahl tried to retreat as the soldiers formed up, their spears still in the air as they jockeyed for room to maneuver. On the walls of the fortress above, the barbarian could see other soldiers drawing weapons. Should he try to lose himself in the crowd?

He was sick of retreat, and if the prize were truly his, then he would fight for it. He threw his cloak back and revealed the armor and bracers on his wrists. Before he could give formal challenge, a guard raised a crossbow from behind the spear wall and discharged it.

His hand threw out a line of fire, and he turned during the split second of the missile's flight. The flame ate through the bolt, withering the shaft and melting away the head. What was left of the cowardly attack shattered on his armored side. He looked at the detachment, his rage radiating in all directions. The refugees continued to retreat as far as they were able, the Order tensing for his response. He took gobs of wax from a pouch at his side and stuffed them in his

ears. The cries of the crowd and whatever commands issued from the corporal were cut off.

Knowing that false accusations might be made against him, Kamahl was prepared to batter his opponents into submission. Tiny black globes flew from his hands and began to detonate. The explosions occurred well in front of the spearmen, but the concussions spilled them back with each throw. The barbarian quickly glanced up the road. No reinforcements coming yet.

Another bolt came at him, but his magic was fully energized, and it seemed to dissipate in midair. Kamahl threw more globes, and these exploded inside the enemy ranks. Soldiers tumbled to the sides, deafened by the noise. The crossbowman lay on the ground, his entire body bruised from the close detonation.

Kamahl watched his back, but the tight press of refugees prevented guards from getting through. Signs of panic were everywhere as civilians tried to flee, and the mass of onlookers crippled the Order's response as surely as it manacled Kamahl's own actions. The barbarian started up the road.

He jogged, his footfalls thudding in his ears as he passed people cowering on the road's surface. A man bellowed, and Kamahl thought he heard, "The forest, the forest," but he swept by before he could be sure. If the town believed there was an attack from the west, the mountain mage was in no hurry to correct them.

Even through the wax he could hear cries, but none seemed to mention him. He slowed and twitched his trailing cloak back over his gear. The hilt of his sword peeking over his shoulder proclaimed to all that

he was no helpless refugee, but perhaps the guards at the gate were as confused as those in the town. He spared a look behind him. A wave of people was coming up from the city. The jostling masses had no idea what was going on, and he realized they sought the safety of the castle.

Even at his reduced pace he reached the gates well before the refugees from below. The passageway through the defenses was unbarred, and he carefully walked through. He dug the wax from one ear, the cries of the crowd behind him echoing off the stone walls. He moved farther into the Citadel, ready to wrap himself in flame, but there was no one. He turned a blind corner into the courtyard.

There he found the Order. They fought among themselves. Bands of knights and men-at-arms squared off. A few bird warriors stood before the combatants, wrapped in magical armor. Glowing like the sun, they called for peace, but appeals for discipline were useless. The bands of soldiers met in hand-to-hand combat. Flesh and fists reinforced by mystic will assailed foes wearing a shared livery. Bones shattered, and the fallen were dragged free without regard for allegiance by the Order's healers.

The combatants bludgeoned each other but abstained from plying their blades. Only their open hands were enhanced. The Citadel made war upon itself, but a brotherhood of centuries could not be overturned in a single day.

Individual soldiers began to come at Kamahl. He drew his sword and slapped the fighters away. He advanced along the courtyard's edge, careful to use the flat of his blade. The roar of explosives would unite the

fighters and would surely bring them against him. He circled, aiming for the central keep. He knew in his bones that Kirtar would be at the center of this struggle.

Magic assaulted his senses. The spell should have been lost among the contesting mages, but Kamahl felt it, like a cold stone lodged in his gut. The power was muted, but it grew. What he felt was surely only the first stirrings. He knew not what magic peeled forth, but he knew that the orb must be involved. The purity and purpose of the spell lifted it far above the crude castings in the yard. He needed to reach Kirtar and the prize.

Disdaining the low profile he had kept so far, he ran for the keep door, black pellets flying before him. The explosions wiped the guards away, leaving only the gate to oppose him. The great door had a smaller entry in one panel.

His sword arced high and then cleaved its way into the iron-reinforced wood, cutting through latches. Through his one clear ear he heard the cries of the crowds coming through the gates only to be confronted by a civil war within the walls. Another blow sliced the final latch, and he jumped through.

The orb's spell grew louder and more strident in his mind. He looked for Kirtar, but the main hall was empty. His peripheral vision caught a shadow of movement, and he raised his arm. Claws shrieked on the iron bracer, and he half-spun at the impact. Another strike fell on his back, ripping through his cloak and scoring the studded leather over his shoulder. He swept his sword in a circle, slicing

through the air. The scrabble of feet led his eyes to his foe.

Turg crouched just out of reach. Kamahl lunged forward, his sword a ribbon of flame, but the frog jumped to the side, seeming to vanish as the blade curved to skewer him. The amphibian was gone, hidden, and Kamahl dug the other gob of wax from his ear. He listened but could hear nothing besides the noise of the crowd outside.

A movement close by registered on his senses, and he darted toward the foe. But the signs faded away, and his boots suddenly lost traction. Feet flying from under him, he fetched up against a wall. Turg flickered into view right over him, the amphibian's hands reaching for his calf. Kamahl's dagger punched into the frog's thigh even as the claws started to shred his muscles. He tried to extend the thrust, aiming for arteries, but the amphibian vanished, a trail of blood leading to tables of food. A loaf vanished from sight, and the spatters stopped. The barbarian's own leg bled freely. He sent fingers of flame crawling over the gashes, sealing the injury as he screamed in pain.

The hall was huge, and the frog might be anywhere inside it. Kamahl threw showers of flame into the upper reaches, burning brighter until the barbarian's eyes stung.

A cluster of odd shadows appeared, and Kamahl knew where Turg was. The barbarian charged an axe and let it fly, trailing magic as it sank into the stone floor. It vanished in a globe of destruction. Turg leaped, an arc of lightning streaming toward the barbarian. The power grounded against the wall and charred an arc to the floor as Kamahl threw himself

away. He rolled several times and came up with his sword ready. A crater showed where his axe had detonated. There was no sign of the frog.

The mountain warrior looked for shadows, but the flares above the floor were dying out, his magic leaking power. A bank of clouds seemed to extinguish them, and Kamahl saw the illusion of rain sweeping across the hall. He tried to detect the frog's energy but the orb's spell still shrilled behind him. Fighting the mer champion was not his goal, and he moved into a corridor toward the source of the magic and Kirtar.

A barrage of metal plates rang against the sides of the corridor. They skipped off the floor and glanced off his wounded leg. He sent fireballs arcing up the corridor in response.

"Dinnerware," he snorted, the amusement breaking his concentration, as pain had not. More projectiles flew, and he knelt, holding his sword before him. Kamahl created an intense shield of flame to devour the iron plates that might be launched against him. Instead he smelled charred fish, and a stream of bodies vaporized in his protection. He looked to the side. A sea creature with long limbs flopped on the floor. The flying fish expired as the shield's heat dried it out.

"Find Kirtar," Kamahl growled to himself. The shield broke into shards, and he sent them flowing up the corridor slowly, blocking the amphibian's advance. The barbarian hurried, remembering the orb and listening to the spell's strength. He reached a cross-corridor and at last spotted the lieutenant.

Kirtar looked nearly dead, his pale skin somehow appearing transparent. The bird warrior was being

carried by other aven, and his eyes swept over the barbarian without recognition. His hands cupped the prize. Kirtar, once so arrogant and proud, was dying before the barbarian's eyes.

"It's still spreading!" called a soldier looking back the way they had come. "We need to get out the postern gate before it cuts us off!"

The soldiers started forward again, carrying the warrior's destiny away.

"Kirtar!" Kamahl bellowed. A door opened onto a stairway, and a gaggle of servants surged into the corridor. The leaders screamed as the barbarian thundered forward, forcing him to slow lest he crush the innocents in his rage. A circle of lightning flared, stopping him in his tracks.

The servants stood frozen. In the corridor beyond, Turg flickered back into sight, the frog laughing at Kamahl through the screen of dead civilians. He vanished from sight as illusion surged over him, and the servants collapsed to the floor.

"The frog must have raced past under the cover of the fish," Kamahl swore. He drew power, grounding it to his sword. The steel danced with flame, and he prepared to send it streaking up the corridor to flush the amphibian out.

"Murderer!" came the cry from behind him. Members of the Order stood, fury evident as they looked at the barbarian and the circle of dead innocents. All were armored, and Kamahl could hear more soldiers crowding behind them. The front rank raised maces, their heads wrapped in deadly golden light.

The barbarian threw an exploding pellet of flame, the concussion echoing off the walls and sending him tumbling back. The narrow corridor acted to concentrate the blast toward him. His ears ringing, he got to his feet. The explosion had spun him around, and he could see Turg bent over in amusement, his wide mouth a gigantic smile. A shaft of flame sped toward the amphibian only to shatter in mid-air. A wave of magic seeping through the wall had already cut off the corridor. It resonated with the orb's magical signature, and Kamahl knew he had found the source of the magical call swamping his senses.

The frog blew him a kiss and vanished from sight. Shards of fire impacted uselessly against the magic as the mountain mage realized himself cut off from the amphibian and Lieutenant Kirtar. Trapped, he turned to the coming soldiers. They were not dazed by his concussions. Completely armored in light, they only shouted with derision at his explosions. He could not hear them, but he could see their faces and knew they were beyond reason.

Pillars of fire rose up to char the plaster, cutting off his sight of the Order knights. He turned to the crystal wall, wondering if he might somehow tunnel through. A shoe had come off one of the dead servants, and he kicked it toward the barrier. It struck the border and stuck there, becoming frozen even as he watched.

He could feel his spells dying, and he saw the enhanced swords and maces smashing through the curtain of fire. Contempt was in every figure stepping into the hall, and he acknowledged his defeat. He must

kill and escape the Citadel before being slain by the massed opposition of the Order.

Kamahl lifted his sword and once again the brilliant fire that could devour iron shimmered off the blade. But instead of attacking the knights, he sent the pulse of flame into the walls. Rock ran like water, and wood vanished in explosions of gas as fire gutted the Citadel's structure. Supporting walls were cut, and timbers burnt away leaving nothing to support the walls and ceiling over the men coming to kill Kamahl.

Rubble cascaded over the soldiers, burying them in a sea of dust and stone. The barbarian held his cloak over his face, unable to retreat because of the crystal wall at his back. The dust started to clear, and Kamahl could see a sloping ramp of rock leading to the upper floors. He started forward only to be caught short as his cloak held him in place. The tattered train of his garment was already frozen in the crystal wall. He cut himself free with a knife, leaving the cloak to be preserved in the crystal. He scrambled up the ramp, the stones settling as he neared the upper floors. Suddenly reality quivered, and Kamahl froze. The orb, its echo familiar to the barbarian, was active, but its ambiance had changed. The new tone set his teeth on edge. The orb was different, and Kamahl started up the ramp again, determined to find out what had happened.

CHAPTER 17

Laquatus fell screaming through the portal, the icy water ending his cry as his body shivered through its transformation. Turg swam forward—due to the merman's subconscious demand or of his own free will, the ambassador had no idea. The shock of the water cleared his mind. He thought of the orb in Kirtar's hands. The lieutenant had been weak, barely able to stand. The Order fought among themselves, and the town was bursting with refugees. This was the moment of maximum chaos. Should he attack in force?

A look at his soldiers revealed this to be an impossibility.

The transport mage was present and a few treasures, but Captain Satas and his squads of fighters were nowhere. They must still be travelling the last few miles. There was no time! He must act before the prize was destroyed or transferred to a more powerful person.

"Open the way to the surface," Laquatus ordered the transport mage. "Just inside the castle walls would be best." He began to concentrate, building on his link with Turg.

"I cannot, your Excellency," came the reply behind him. The merman spun, his composure broken as he bore down on the mage.

"Why not!" Laquatus grabbed the amphibian's whiskers, knowing them to transmit pain, and pulled them viciously. The mage hissed in agony until the ambassador loosened his grip.

"The spell that you fled touched the portal and drained my power," the mage said, pulling its whiskers through the merman's fingers. "It will be some time before I may cast another spell."

Laquatus wondered if the universe itself was against him.

"There must be another way to the surface," the merman raged, twisting in the water wildly, trying to think of a way through the rock above him. He felt trapped, dependent as he was on another to cast the spell.

"We created a permanent opening outside of the city," the mage said as its shivers of pain stopped. The blind cave dweller backed away as if to deny the ambassador further opportunity for violence. "Captain Satas ordered a permanent pool to be opened in the rough country to ease the placement of spies and travel of messengers."

"Why didn't you say so earlier?" the merman said. He gathered his champion and what guards were available and left for the permanent pool. Perhaps there was still time. In short order they exited to the upper world, the ambassador racked with momentary disorientation as he transformed into a walker once more.

Laquatus appeared at the foot of the citadel near the lower wall. Gullies and heavy brush backed the hill on which the castle sat. The thick growth made movement difficult but infiltration fairly easy. The ambassador was surprised that the Order had not placed traps or at least planted poisonous shrubs. However, he was willing to take advantage of the situation.

There were no roads or paths around the hill to the castle gates. Knowing that time was of the essence, he sank into a trance, preparing to act once more through the jack. The camouflaged amphibian worked his way to the winding road, careful to be unobserved as he dropped from above. A surge of people ascended the path below him, and soldiers came down from above. The ambassador sent pulses of illusion and misdirection, reinforcing the jack's camouflage as he climbed to the main part of the Citadel.

Explosions shook the air, and Laquatus sent the frog up at a run, tearing through the gates. He saw Kamahl force his way past the guard. Covering the intervening courtyard without becoming involved with the fighting was nearly impossible, but he did it. The jack threw himself rolling past the barbarian as the metal-hued warrior turned back to look outside. The frog made quite a bit of noise, and he ran ahead lest he be caught in close quarters. But the barbarian gave no sign that he noticed the sea warrior through the web of deceit, and Laquatus resolved to attack.

His attempt to ambush the mountain mage failed, and Kamahl forged ahead of the mer champion, blocking Turg's path to the lieutenant and the prize. Petulance at his opponent's poor timing sent the ambassador and his frog into a rage. He grabbed every thing he could from the tables to throw down the hall. Goblets, platters, and bones whistled through the air, only to be rendered harmless by the barbarian's defenses.

Laquatus reigned his temper in. Kirtar had the real prize, and time wasted on Kamahl took true power farther away every minute. Besides, who knew

how far the crystal wave might travel? The castle might be uninhabitable at any moment, and he was having a food fight.

Realizing how trivial the barbarian really was, he unleashed a school of flying fish as a distraction, passing the barbarian in a cloud of deceit. The frog shied away from the white flame surrounding Kamahl, the heat drying his skin, making him dangerously lethargic.

Once past, Turg wondered which way to go, confused for a moment as to where Kirtar might be. Seeing a stairway he moved into it. A barrel of water for washing the floor delayed Turg as he drank the filthy water down, his primitive instincts overriding Laquatus's sophistication.

The ambassador reestablished control with a burst of will. He must find the prize. While he wondered where to go, clattering footsteps descended the stairs. He faded into the shadows. He glimpsed Kirtar, the object of his quest, carried past by three guards. He moved to follow, only to be blocked by a group of servants retreating from upstairs.

"I will not be denied," thundered Laquatus in Turg's skull, and lighting arced from his fingers, slaying those in his way. He ran after the lieutenant, seeing the wave of crystal already coming through the wall.

The jack moved silently, running after the warriors retreating from their master's disastrous spell. The aven stopped as the lieutenant called out.

"I must try again," he insisted in a hollow voice, the words barely audible even to Turg's excellent ears. The bird warriors kept moving until he weakly

swatted at their hands, the palest glow surrounding his fists. "I command the Order, now stop!" The three did so reluctantly.

"Sir, you have tried so many times to turn the spell," one said, his eyes signaling that he wanted to run. "Why should you succeed this time."

Kirtar folded himself around the orb.

"Because I must," he said. The lieutenant's frame shivered violently, but he regained control. "The crystal devours me. Find out what is happening." The mage lost himself in a trance.

The retainers separated, one going to check on the advancing spell, the other going ahead. Laquatus watched through the amphibian's eyes as the bird warrior looked back, hesitation plain in his face. Then he turned abruptly and walked away.

Once the lieutenant has a single retainer, Turg ran down the corridor, a lance of lightning surging from his hands. The ambassador put everything into the link, the electrical arc growing until it was arm-thick. The stroke continued through the soldier's body, burning away the plaster on a wall ten feet away. The frog collapsed, his spells exhausted as the last barrier to the orb fell.

Kirtar's eyes were clear, jolted out of his trance as the amphibian crawled closer. The leader of the Order lay slack, shock visible on his face. He began to tremble once more and pushed out his palm as if to command the world to halt. Turg glanced behind him. The wall of crystal was advancing faster. Laquatus knew it was time to claim the prize.

The lieutenant cried out as Turg plucked the sphere from the aven's hand. The bird warrior faded

even further as he lost touch with the sphere. The ambassador ignored everything as his champion gripped the prize. The bright mirror finish of the orb darkened, the reflected light from the spreading crystal lost as the prize changed. The ambassador forced the pit frog to retreat, lest it be entombed with the others. Rousing the will to move was as difficult a battle as any Laquatus had ever fought.

Turg blindly stumbled away, still looking at the wonder cupped in his hands. The sphere was the color of the seas, constantly shifting and changing. The blue of the tropics gave way to the gray of the northern reaches. The ambassador looked through the frog's eyes as the prize continued to change. The sphere became a globe of water—endless tides sweeping across it unhindered by the land. A world that hinted at wonders hidden under its surface.

Turg tripped and tumbled with none of his deadly grace. Only the terrified shout of Laquatus's spirit prevented the prize from spinning out of the pit frog's grasp. The globe still called to the ambassador's mind, but he resisted the urge. There would be plenty of time to plumb its depths after the amphibian was safely back in camp.

A call came from below, the calm voice of Captain Satas speaking through the ether. "I have arrived with new mages. Do you wish to return to the underworld?"

"Yes!" shouted the ambassador's spirit. Turg fell into a pool of swirling energy as the tresias, and his mages reacted to the apparent source of the call. The shock of passage pulled the ambassador's spirit back to his rightful body. He shook himself awake and looked around. He was out of the gully, his clothes torn and

bleeding from abrasions. The travel mage held onto his arms and bruising covered the minion's face.

"Why am I out here?" Laquatus demanded, slapping away the blind hands as he felt his minor pains.

"You left the entrance at a run, lost in your trance. You would not stop or respond," the mage said wretchedly. "The others were afraid to restrain you physically, and my weight was too slight to stop you. I tried to ensnare you in an illusion, but you went right through them. You moved without direction, dragging me through brush and bouncing off trees. I don't know where we are." The amphibian wailed, lost in the world beyond his caves.

Laquatus had driven Turg often enough to realize that his link with the jack was bleeding back to him. As the aristocrat's spirit concerned itself solely with directing the frog, his own body responded to echoes of those commands. He would have to exercise more care in the future. But even with blood dripping from his face, the ambassador was in a good mood. Who cared where he was. He had captured the prize.

"Do not worry," the merman said. "I have succeeded in everything."

The ambassador must have come hundreds of yards in his blind rush. Now a squad of griffins fell from the sky, their shrieks of anger reminding Laquatus that the Order considered itself attacked from without and within.

"Satas," he called through his stone, "hide all signs of the portal and prepare to take me away." He waited precious seconds as the Order landed in a clearing only yards away.

"I cannot," the tresias said sorrowfully. "Like his companion before, my transport mage is spent in pulling your champion away. We cannot rescue you at this time."

The merman thought quickly, trapped with only his own resources.

"Send Turg to me through the permanent portal now," he cried through the mental plane. "Keep the orb safe until I return."

He commanded his champion to come. The frog resisted, still entranced by the sphere, but the ambassador owned his soul. With a despairing cry, the jack came through the portal, running toward the ambassador.

"What incredible luck," Laqautus cried, stepping rapidly to greet the griffin riders as they came through the brush. "Now the traitors are doomed," he said confidently. Confusion replaced the hostility on the riders' faces.

"What are you talking about?" a soldier snarled, rage burning through his bemusement. "The traitors are trapped in the Citadel. We came to question you," he added, driving his steed closer.

"Monstrous!" the ambassador howled, as the sound of Turg breaking through the brush made the riders turn. "My champion has been chasing the brigands, trying to cut off the barbarian's allies." Turg was torn and bloody, his wounded thigh once again seeping.

"We saw Kamahl meet with warriors dressed in hooded robes less than an hour ago. We then informed Lieutenant Kirtar of the notorious murderer and his confederates. He assured me that he would act to

protect the Order," said the ambassador. At the news, a few soldiers sympathetic to Kirtar took it upon themselves to heal Turg.

The detachment head appeared lost, uncertain of everything,

The news of the mutiny must have been unbearable to most of the Order, the ambassador knew. The captain was very popular, and Kirtar was a fool not to kill her secretly. However, he knew any organization would accept outright lies to preserve the respect for its leaders.

"Take me to Kirtar this instant," Laquatus demanded, betting on the bird warrior's death.

He and his champion were mounted once more on griffins, and they flew toward the Citadel. The ambassador fought his fear of flying by dreaming up contingency lies. People streamed down the road from the castle, a few soldiers rushing from entrances. A hole was blown out the upper stories.

"Damned barbarian," the sea mage heard his rider mutter.

They landed, and Laquatus and Turg were rushed to the current leader of the Order, Pianna's sword in his hand.

Laquatus stepped forward to spin his tale, confident his story would be confirmed.

* * * * *

Laquatus rode through the city gates, accepting the accolades with a dignified nod. The knights and soldiers of the Order were drawn up and saluted him and his champion as they started their brave ride for the sea.

The new captain was very understanding of the ambassador's need to leave, not trusting anyone as he struggled for unity with soldiers still reeling from rumors of murder and mutiny.

Officially, the barbarian Kamahl and unnamed conspirators infiltrated the fortress, and Kirtar had discovered it too late. The lieutenant took control, rushing to protect Captain Pianna who had already fallen to internal betrayers. Kamahl fought his way through the protective guards to join the murderers. Kirtar fell in personal battle with the barbarian. The mountain warrior cut his way out of the castle to the plains. There was no sign of Kamahl, and Laquatus doubted the new captain would waste time looking for the barbarian when he had traitors to root out. The ambassador wondered if the lie would hold. But what matter the fables of the plains? He had captured the orb, and the Order could believe what it wanted.

After an hour they stopped, the merman anxious to leave his new retinue behind. Laquatus conducted a series of personal interviews, and the convoy continued on without him and his champion. The ride back to the portal was tortuous, the road seeming far longer. Turg moved in camouflage, while the merman rode in a borrowed cloak. Selective illusions took them past soldiers and regular travelers.

At last they left the path and headed for the portal open outside the city. It was dark as they made their way through the brush and into the gully. The pool gave off a feeble glow, the light caught by the overhang above. He reentered the underground, sliding through the transformation with ease. Only a

small squad awaited him, and he wondered where Captain Satas might be.

"Where is the rest of my escort?" Laquatus called as Turg swam for a cache of supplies and fell to eating. A tresias approached and the ambassador noticed the heavy bruising that he himself had inflicted hours before.

"Captain Satas has gone ahead to the emperor, carrying your captured prize," the blind amphibian said, keeping away from the merman. "He decided such an important artifact must be conducted to his Imperial Highness as rapidly as possible." The small creature swam backward and crowded against the wall, fearing an angry explosion.

Laquatus did nothing. The captain led him by hours and with his smaller stature and better routes could not be intercepted before he reached the sea. The tresias formed the backbone of the officer core and messenger system that he used to communicate with his forces. There was no way to reach his personal retainers. Perhaps he could fly overland and beat Satas to the sea? But he did not know the Captain's route and access to the underground was under the bastard's control. He might be unable to even reenter the subterranean rivers.

The prize had slipped beyond his fingers once more, and worst of all, it had fallen into the hands of the emperor, his master.

CHAPTER 18

Aboshan, Emperor of the Seas, reclined in his palace listening to a courtier. The cephalid shifted his tentacles, sliding back into the throne. No mere chair, the pile of coral was covered with short growths endlessly moving over his skin. The organisms cleaned and feed small amounts of power to him drawn from the building's essence. He turned and let the multicolored polyps move over another area of his body. The brilliant azure of his skin competed against the array of color on the throne and walls. His eyes idly moved as he luxuriated in the comfortable embrace. Tentacles left vortices through the water as he turned and sent a magic call to the fish colonizing the palace walls. An animal darted around, and he caught it, appreciating its jewel-like colors before devouring it.

The huge room was formed out of coral. The unique species excreted a dense mesh, becoming as tough and resilient as anything in the sea. Two large doors opened out to the ocean, and several gaps in the dome's roof allowed fresh currents of water to flow. The ceiling and walls glowed as tiny plants funneled light through the structure and spilled it out. When the sun disappeared from the upper air, other organisms would feed light through the palace. Aboshan wondered how those on dry land could bear to live in dead structures.

The emperor dragged his attention back to the speaker. The brown fur of the courtier rippled as his

body slowly rotated, the selkie using unusual restraint as he reported about the land. The seal could take on a human's appearance much as Aboshan could form legs. The emperor, of course, avoided such transformations as much as possible. He considered the land contemptible. The fact that the courtier by nature could move among the land bound with ease made him suspect in the cephalid's eyes. He breathed water down, reveling in another advantage. The selkie needed air, and only a special spell allowed the creature to remain at court without withdrawing every few minutes. "The Order is in disarray," the selkie continued, darting his head briefly toward a fish swimming close by. "The new leader is a warrior named Bretath. He conveys his respects and his gratitude for Ambassador Laquatus's aid in the recent troubles."

"As if we took any notice of land-bound troubles," the emperor drawled, his boredom plain to all. "Surely you have some news of interest beside the business of savages and their meaningless tribes."

The selkie somersaulted with agitation before settling down. The emperor yawned, used to the courtier's flighty nature. He firmly believed that air breathers should deal with air breathers, being already contaminated. Some sages believed seals, whales, and others needing air to be refugees from the land. Their ancestors were right to flee back to the sea, but Aboshan shuddered at the thought of such a lineage.

"Of course, your Imperial Highness," the seal answered, his tone hesitant as he searched for a new topic, one likely to interest the monarch. "There are

problems regarding the treasures gathered inside the continent."

The emperor's attention focused on the selkie. The land might be filled with contemptible peoples, but it held the lion's share of past wars' spoils. The battlefields had only occasionally moved over the sea. Many of the prizes were lost in the ocean's abysmal depths where even the emperor's warrant had little weight. His beak snapped as he considered the dry kingdoms' salvage activities in retrieving ships lost at sea. It was only proper that his nation empty the land's treasure troves.

"Our explorers and diggers locate and transport the reclaimed prizes easily enough," the selkie said. "Bringing them to the coast is not the problem. But now that we move more of the discoveries to the court, we are having difficulties."

The seal spoke slower, for a thunderous expression grew on Aboshan's face. The emperor had instituted the policy of relocating the machines and objects of power from above the waves to below them. For decades, isolated stretches of coastline and caves on rocky islands had held the empire's loot recovered from ancient battlefields. The monarch had decided that such potential power must be brought under his direct physical control.

"Many of the mechanisms are delicate, and we find them difficult to repair," the selkie continued. "Fetishes are composed of materials that break down in the water. Worst of all, we have few trained to repair them. Perhaps it would be simpler to trade with the Cabal who is positioned to use them."

Aboshan swam free of the throne, his trident held in two tentacles as if to attack. The selkie froze as the guards became more alert. The trident was the symbol of the emperor's might, but now he used it as a simple weapon, laying the tines against the seal's neck.

"We find your suggestion unacceptable," the cephalid said, his voice freezing the courtier, as previous signs of displeasure had not. "What we have recovered is for our use," he said, the trident's barbed points puncturing the courtier's fur. Blood clouded the water, and small cleaning fish from the walls swam to dispose of the perceived garbage. Aboshan's weapon pulled free of the seal's neck muscles. An electric shock surged into the school, sending the selkie into a series of convulsions as the fish died and floated toward the dome's roof. Hidden guardians appeared momentarily as they struck at the ascending food. The cephalid gripped the seal and pulled him closer, his suckers marking the hide as the frozen selkie quivered in fear.

"The land dwellers have held the keys to the past for long enough. We shall gather hold of power and harness it to our own purposes." He moved his tentacles, and the fur began to tear free of the muscle beneath. "If you are unable to oversee the care of our treasure, then arrange with the Cabal Patriarch for workers to come here. Now go, and let it be done."

The emperor swam back to his throne as the selkie floated, then talked excitably to an aide, which left.

"Even air breathing swimmers are incompetent," Aboshan said to himself.

He regretted asking for workers from the Cabal. However, the preservation of fetishes and totems were

unknown in the undersea kingdom. Most objects of power were living organisms. The care of dead magic was a rare art.

The doors against the wall opened suddenly, a wave of ink surging into the room. The current began to flow faster, pumping more of the darkness among the courtiers.

"Guards, defend your emperor!" Aboshan ordered as he called up power. Huge cuttlefish moved through the doorway, their sides flashed colors so quickly that the eye was uncertain of their shade from one moment to the next. More ink gushed from them, moving into the crowd.

The darkness coiled evilly through the water, its touch paralyzing those who could not evade it. The selkie swam for the upper openings only to contact a trailing cloud. It went into convulsions. Bubbles rose from its frame as it lost control of its body and the spell allowing it to breathe. The seal drowned in seconds, its lungs full of water and then poison.

Sea warriors swarmed through the doors, their skin covered in a translucent gel protecting them from the ink. Their spears and tridents started to work at the crowd as the emperor readied himself for battle.

The throne room's hidden guards responded, surging from the crevices and crannies that lined the walls. Octopi weighing hundreds of pounds jetted toward the cuttlefish.

Their long arms wrapped over the animals' heads as the attackers tried to escape, their hides flaring with panic. Huge moray eels swam out, their jaws closing over the waists and limbs of the attacking mer. However, illusions swam into being, misleading the

beasts' strikes as the invaders continued toward the emperor.

A school of barracuda swept through the upper exits to the open ocean. Directed by exterior guards, they flew into the invaders before the cephalids could react. Limbs separated as the living knives carved apart the attackers and a few of the paralyzed victims. The fish flexed wildly, smashing into the walls in explosions of gore as the diluted ink destroyed their ability to control their direction.

Aboshan gestured with his trident, and the current reversed. The water's speed intensified, and the ink flowed to the outside. The paralyzed courtiers and the bodies of the slain swirled out through the gates. The emperor stopped as he realized his spell prevented reinforcements from reaching the throne room. Two attackers had survived every counterattack and closed on the throne, their weapons raised for regicide.

Aboshan swam toward one, his trident focusing his will. Water surged again but in a much narrower area. A thin liquid thread cut through the rebel's upraised weapon and the merman's torso. The jet dispersed blood and flesh in a huge cloud rolling toward the walls. The ruler turned, his weapon meeting his last attacker. They locked tines, the tridents contesting for supremacy.

Aboshan forced the rebel down, rolling the cephalid and disorienting him. He grabbed the helpless throat, his magic crowding through the enemy's body, rendering him helpless. Reinforcements came through the gates and the upper works, unable to find any living enemies. A few guards began

gathering up the paralyzed, hauling them away to the healers for care and antidotes.

The emperor turned the rebel's head from side to side, studying it in hope of recognition, but he could not remember him. He shook the slack body violently, the eyes suddenly opening in shock and surprise. Aboshan laughed as the rush of surviving sent him into a manic mood.

"Who sent you?" he cried into the still face. "Who is behind this treachery?"

The monarch eased his magical grip on the merman's nerves, and his victim gasped and grimaced as he regained some control.

"No one had to send us," he rasped, his voice husky from the abuse Aboshan inflicted on his throat. "You are everyone's enemy under the sea."

The emperor dragged his trident down the rebel's flank, letting blood into the water.

"You lie," said the monarch, sending the tines deeper into the trailing tentacles. "You came at the instigation of our wife, Llawan. Why did she send you to kill me?"

"The ocean is marred by your armies and forts," whispered the rebel, lines of despair evident in his face. "None may trust the other for fear of informers in your pay." He breathed in polluted water and paused. "The denizens of the upper ocean must bow to your will or flee. The cetaceans suffer from your contempt and whale songs grow bitter. How can any not rise up and strike you down?" The fighter began to talk with more strength, the emperor's magical hold weakening as the offender further roused the imperial temper.

"We are only the first lapping of a wave sweeping you aside," the captive said more boldly. "You dare not leave your palace unless escorted by schools of guards. You cannot hope to chain the seas with your decrees."

Aboshan was bright red with rage, the muscles holding the trident quivering with anticipation.

"You shall fall and Llawan, Empress of the Sea shall reign in—"

The monarch cut the speech short, plunging the bronze barbs deep into the cephalid only to withdraw and stab him again. The emperor's skin pulsed a howl of rage as he executed the prisoner.

"Bring me the captain of the guard," the monarch commanded, letting loose the rebel to drift with the current. The captain was a pale blue as he approached his sovereign.

"I am trying to find out how the attackers infiltrated the palace, sire," he said in a trembling voice. The emperor jettied back and forth, his skin still pulsating in rage.

"I know how the scum came into our presence," Aboshan said and came closer. "The question is merely one of your incompetence or active treachery."

"I assure you that I live to serve only you, Majesty," the captain said excitedly. The monarch regarded him narrowly, the pulses of color slowing.

"We think not. We think you serve the self-styled Queen of the Seas, Llawan." He swam closer to the officer. "We think you would see another on the throne, so take your seat!"

Aboshan forced the captain onto the organisms that groomed the ruler, the soldier jarring against the under lying rock. His taste was not the emperor's, and

the polyps turned upon the perceived usurper. Venom seared into the officer's scales, killing him as broad swathes of flesh swelled and burst. A look of unspeakable agony showed, and the face was washed away by the throne's caress.

"Let him be cast into the abyss," Aboshan proclaimed. "There to be devoured by worms along with his brethren in treachery. Let others of the slain be displayed as proof of our justice and continued power."

The captain's former command gathered up the dead and retreated to do the monarch's will.

It was some time before the next guard commander dared report to the emperor. Finally, a sergeant stationed in the palace came to speak to the monarch in his private quarters. Aboshan had retired to regain his composure, though a clerk to conduct official business accompanied him. The imperial rooms were lit by light pumped from the upper world. Long kelp plants swayed in the currents, and small edible fish and crustaceans scurried over the floors. The emperor saw distrust in the sergeant's face as the soldier regarded the restful scene. Aboshan hoped fear of poisons and hidden guardians would give others pause when they plotted against him. The attendants who usually filled the rooms waited elsewhere until his temper subsided.

"The attackers appeared in the palace through use of a transport pool," the commander began without preamble, anxious to discharge his duty and leave. "The cuttlefish filled the outer rooms with poisonous ink, and the rebels prevented the flow of reinforcements from inside the defenses. Most of the

troops were unaware of any problems until the attack was over. All the invaders perished resisting capture or during the assault on your person. At this time we have no leads as to who might be responsible." The soldier dipped his head, the emperor and his servant half-hidden from sight by the room's growth. He left at Aboshan's nod.

The monarch turned to his clerk. The privilege of serving as private secretary to the emperor rotated fairly often. The civil service assured him that it was awarded on the basis of performance. Aboshan wondered if the ministers overseeing the palace staff really thought him so dull witted. The secretary was a tall spindly crab holding a stylus and a sheet of wax, ready to take down his orders.

"We charge the army to investigate all signs relating to the recent conspiracy to unseat us," the monarch dictated, plucking a tiny urchin from the floor and splitting it open, the pain from the quills spicing the coming meal. "All communications with the southern court of Queen Llawan are to be closely scrutinized and correspondents questioned rigorously as to their connections with our estranged spouse."

The cephalid sucked the urchin's innards down and tore at the flesh with his beak as he considered further actions. His maleficent wife and her pawns had breached his palace. Yet to act against her would provoke a civil war that even in victory would leave the kingdom crippled. He needed uncontested proof of her guilt. The emperor thought of her rumored alliances with the cetaceans and the monsters of the abyss. Perhaps he should increase efforts to infiltrate her court as she had so obviously violated his own.

Aboshan thought of Laquatus, banished to play ambassador to the land because of his unfortunate ties to the queen. Perhaps his close experience with the land might promote sympathy for imperial plans. He thought of the arrogant and cruel merman doomed to scrape before air breathers and land walkers.

"I recall our ambassador from the Cabal to serve our pleasure once more, his successor to be appointed after close consultation with our loyal friend, Laquatus," the emperor said. He waved the crab away to convey his orders to the palace ministers.

Undoubtedly, Laquatus would serve Aboshan to regain favor. Most of the world waited for a ruler's firm hand. The monarch would establish a new dominion over sea and land. The emperor's mirth showed in a shower of colors flowing over his skin, and he rang for his maidens to attend him.

CHAPTER 19

Laquatus looked at the capital as he swam through the water, enjoying the comparative warmth of the ocean after days in the caverns under the continent. Turg swam alongside, his clumsy strokes amusing the merman as the ambassador continued down. The light grew dimmer as the bottom gained definition. From the surface, the city could not be seen, but it filled a huge stretch of the continental shelf. The buildings below lived, straining nutrients from the water to repair themselves and repelling pests. Steady streams of mer people swam through and above the city. A pod of whales called to the ambassador as they herded a school of fish with sonic calls toward the capital. Once a sign of tribute to the emperor, the cries sounded of onerous duty to the merman's ears. But what did he care for the opinion of air breathers? He felt the flutter of his gills to prove his superior nature.

The whales grew silent as mer warriors swam up to meet them, their lack of song more telling than any call. The soldiers' magic now herded the fish, their command lulling the school to an army encampment.

Laquatus noticed many soldiers and a distinct lack of traffic other than warriors. Wondering if some great danger threatened the kingdom, he headed for the palace. Perhaps a great feeding spiral of sharks swept through the ocean. Laquatus remembered that the seas could be suddenly violent as well as tranquil.

He neared the imperial residence and noticed a great dome inscribed with glowing characters. The

huge gazebo-like structure was the exhibition site for traitors. The merman wondered who suffered there now?

He swam below the roof, nodding to the guards who observed him as he neared the dead. Several corpses floated in anchored nets, their bodies in pieces as cleaner fish and crabs slowly snipped off small bits of rotting meat. Unidentifiable parts of several different species were in some nets.

"Imperial justice, as swift and careful as always," he muttered as he swam to the wax placard inscribed with symbols. A guard, stationed to tell the illiterate what the sign said, relaxed as the ambassador looked over the words.

"CONDEMNED BE ALL TRAITORS WHO WOULD KILL THE EMPEROR ON HIS THRONE. THOSE WHO WOULD SERVE OTHER MASTERS ARE ETERNALLY DEVoured HERE AND IN THE ABYSMAL DEPTHS."

"Guard," the aristocrat inquired in a bored tone. "What happened to bring these traitors here?"

Laquatus had left the seacoast having heard just that a message had arrived for him. Fearing that the coastal mission might have orders to arrest him, he continued to the capital, hoping he still might intercept Captain Satas.

He and his champion had swum through the caverns in pursuit, leaving all behind but a single guide for fear of the soldiers' loyalty to their captain. The ambassador wanted nothing to prevent the appropriate action, should they catch the tresias. They had swum without rest through the arteries of the continent. But Satas could travel the more direct

paths, while Laquatus and especially the massive Turg made costly detours. They missed the good captain by days when they reached the coast.

The frog kidnapped a servant whom the merman interrogated before releasing with false memories of what occurred. The ambassador knew that he was recalled, not the reason for it. He and his jack left immediately for the capital. Only the knowledge that doom might await him tempered Laqua-tus's joy to be free of dry land. Now he hoped to hear what news might influence his return.

"These and other traitors appeared in the palace through a transport pool and reached the throne room," the guard related in a voice grown bored with repetition. "The emperor himself beat the attack off. The army still looks for traitors who may have escaped."

Laquatus nodded in thanks and continued on his way. An assault on the emperor might provide opportunities to explain his actions. He could explain fear of enemies intercepting his reports led to his silence regarding the orb. The palace grew closer, and he noted the observers peering from houses along the way.

The homes of nobles were closed up, few signs of the inhabitants visible. Years before the emperor and his wife had split, the cast-off empress had styled herself as queen in her own right. Many nobles, outraged by the emperor's arrogant and arbitrary manner, retired to the southern court. Aboshan became convinced that conspiracies must be in motion against him.

Laquatus had connections in both courts, and while no evidence existed against him, his exile to dry land soon followed the rift. Though the ambassador had no affection for the emperor, he had even less for his estranged wife. Llawan had become a champion of the displaced in Aboshan's rise to power. Laquatus had little use for those without the will or wiles to preserve their position.

His own exile he viewed as a purely temporary state. In addition, the queen opened dialogues with the air breathing races of the sea and the denizens of the deep ocean. Such species had their place, but it was subservient to the mer races and the upper ocean.

The ambassador swam directly to the palace, confident that his reception would be good. He concealed his fear. Revelation of any doubt might doom him if reported to the emperor. The guard recognized him and ushered him through the gates immediately. Laquatus was escorted through the entry halls, amazed at the high number of guards. He reasoned it merely a reaction to the earlier attacks. The interior of the palace hummed as counterspells resonated with the building's very fabric.

Laquatus was no longer as hopeful of his reception. He reminded himself that no mere amphibian could bring him down, Captain Satas be damned. The doorman failed to announce him, and briefly the ambassador wondered if an execution squad waited inside.

The emperor reclined in the nearly empty room with only a few courtiers present. Turg picked up the ambassador's nervousness and began to glower. His master sent him reeling back under a mental barrage.

Though the mer ruler appeared unprotected, the hidden guardians were well known to those familiar with the court.

"Laquatus," Aboshan cried, rising and swimming closer. "How good to see you." The monarch had his trident in hand, and the ambassador decided boldness was in order.

"I am pleased and grateful to be here," Laquatus said and tried to appear concerned. "I was relieved to hear that you survived the attack."

"What do you know?" the emperor growled, raising the trident.

The ambassador reminded himself of the hidden guardians and the ruler's known powers.

"Only what I have heard on my way to the capital," Laquatus exclaimed, lowering his head in supplication. "I saw the bodies of the traitors and came immediately to see that you were well. I ask only how I may serve."

"They invaded our court through those very gates," Aboshan said angrily, pointing his trident. The walls seemed to move slightly as guardians almost revealed themselves at the violent gesture. "We were alone, our guards laid low by poison."

The ambassador nodded without fear, finding it unlikely that the monarch would kill his audience.

"We directed the waters to sweep our enemies away," the ruler said, his eyes lost in a refined memory. "Our guards finally came in, but a half-dozen of the scum still swam for us. We killed them in close combat despite receiving grievous wounds. We questioned the only survivor, but he took his own life

before we could force the queen's involvement from him."

Laquatus nodded, sure that the enemies would become an even dozen before an official account of the event was set down. Perhaps they would be immortalized in a living mural on the palace walls.

"That brings us to you," Aboshan said with a pointed smile. "You have relationships with the queen's court. You might provide us invaluable service in proving her complicity." He swam back toward the throne, the ambassador following.

"I fear that my former acquaintances will not be forthcoming, sire," Laquatus said, careful to stay well away from the emperor's seat. "My banishment to the continent may have convinced them that I am no longer in your confidence or a position of power." A little of the bitterness at his exile leaked through despite the merman's best efforts to hide it.

"Easily remedied," Aboshan assured him. "We will give very public signs of our favor, concurring upon you suitable awards and titles."

"Then I fear those in the queen's court will question my motives," Laquatus replied, drifting in front of his sovereign with his head bent in humility.

"Tell them that your long sojourn on land has made you more amenable to the southern court," Aboshan said as he reclined in the stinging tentacles. "We are confident in your abilities at deception."

Laquatus could only humbly nod.

* * * * *

The great windbag, the ambassador thought, looking back on the interview. The emperor recited

hours of conspiracy theory, searching for enemies everywhere. He called in secret informers who gave the most banal reports, which Aboshan tried to turn into damning indictments. Only the emperor's precarious hold on reality prevented him from unleashing pogroms.

The monarch acted at once to rebuild Laquatus's political stature, awarding him with a gold medallion and the appellation, Friend of the Emperor. The bauble was too heavy, and the friendship would last until Aboshan thought him conspiring with others or of no more use. Finally, the ambassador was able to reclaim his jack and pursue his true mission — locating Satas and the prize.

It was with some surprise that he learned the good captain was gone. He left for the coast before the ambassador even arrived at the capital. Laquatus, using his new status, found the entry logs for the day in question. The guard who admitted Satas to the palace vaguely remembered the little amphibian. He recalled directing the tresias to the treasure room. The ambassador called Turg to him from where the frog lurked and swam to the lower portions of the palace to find the sphere.

Laquatus stopped at the lowest entry way in shock. Instead of a valve or gate there was a soldier planted in front of a shimmering sphere. The guard had a humanoid torso, but instead of legs or a tail, the rest of his body was a long stalk. The lower portion of the column flared out and merged with an outcropping of the palace. The soldier swayed idly, his hands gripping a short spear. He saw the aristocrat and his jack and straightened, his lower body altering color as

if drawing force from the structure surrounding him. Inside the sphere, or more properly hemisphere for it met the ground, was dry rock and a trapdoor.

"Greetings, Your Excellency," the guard said, tilting his body down. "How may I be of service?"

The ambassador still looked at the sight of dry land under the sea.

"Yes, it is something of a surprise," the warrior said, "but it was necessary for the workers from the continent." His body bobbed as he looked at the merman.

"What workers?" Laquatus asked, crowding closer.

"Why the workers the Cabal sent in response to the emperor's order several days ago," the guard said in puzzlement. "The care of the treasure room needed specialized services that the caretaker could not provide. They became absolutely necessary when the previous holder died during the traitors' attack."

"Drylanders, here?" Laquatus questioned, his tone alerting the guard to his displeasure.

"Do not worry," the guard said. "I keep close watch, and none of them can breathe water. The captain of the guard inspected them for signs of the queen's magic, and they all were clean. They are as trapped as surely as a meal in a shark's belly."

"I would inspect the treasure rooms. What should I do?" the ambassador said as Turg tried to slip around to the guard's back. His master warned him off, knowing that those serving in the palace would be inspected for signs of tampering. The waxboard showed Satas's sigil. The amphibian had arrived and left within a half-hour, days before.

Laquatus chuckled at the quick exit. There was every chance that the captain never reported to the emperor or anyone except the caretaker. The merman made his mark and prepared to transform. Turg was already in the bubble and standing up, preparing to pull open the trapdoor. The guard returned his attention to the outside passage. At least Laquatus was spared the indignity of being observed as he grew legs.

The ambassador emptied his lungs of water as the frog opened the trapdoor. Stairs led down the bowed timber from ships' hulk. The floor was covered in muck and sand, and the smell of rotting seaweed rose through the door. Then the merman saw some of the workers inside and included rotting flesh as a source of the stench. The servants were, after all, from the Cabal.

"Ambassador Laquatus," a voice hailed him. A woman separated herself from the crowd of living and dead workers and hurried over. The underground room extended for yards in every direction. Groups of zombies and black-clad Cabal servitors piled garbage into baskets and dug down to rock. More timber waited, and Laquatus realized that they were putting up shelves instead of the matrix of pigeonholes and sealed pillars that sea people usually employed.

"I remember you from your marvelous party. I see you also brought my playmate." With a sinking heart he recognized Fulla, her braids plastered with mud against her head. "I would apologize for the mess, but I did not make it. Besides, I remember the condition of your embassy when I left."

Why did it have to be the dementia caster? Any ordinary servant or mage could be manipulated by false memories, but a despairing Laquatus remembered her resistance to his spells.

"Have I offended you somehow?" he heard her ask and brought himself back to reality.

"Not at all, my dear," he gushed, trying to match her enthusiasm. "I was just thinking what chance brought you here," he finished through gritted teeth.

"Well, I will be here for quite some time," she laughed gaily. She waved to the muck and mire. "I and my staff are retained by your gracious emperor to catalog and repair the treasures. Wonders that are rescued, only to be buried here under your palace."

A sucking roar developed as zombies pulled at a chest, uncovering an opening to levels below. Water and mud cascaded down.

"Your previous caretaker placed items randomly in a series of chambers, of which this is only one," she explained as she walked to the hole, looking down into the water. Laquatus could feel a spell engaging, and the water slowly began to subside. More mounds of muck were revealed with a few gleaming pieces of metal. The debris glittered slightly in the light pumped from the palace above.

"One of your ministers was bright enough to realize that we needed air to work. He also discovered that some of the pieces were damaged by water," Fulla said.

Zombies splashed into the lower chambers and began filling baskets the servants handed to them.

"He failed to realize that withdrawing the water would settle everything to the deeper rooms and bury

them. To be honest, I do not approve of the former caregiver. There is an unholy lode of mud to be cleared away."

The ambassador nodded dumbly, accepting that a servant of the Cabal would be the best judge of unholy. He realized with a sinking liver that tracking down the orb might still be a formidable task.

"Are there no records of where materials were stored?" he asked hopefully. She shook her head in amusement.

"No. Just a record of what the caretaker received," she said. "For example, the last entry is of a sphere that gave an impression of tremendous power."

The ambassador nodded with excitement. The prize was here.

"The logs show what came in and what went out, but the actual locations are a complete mystery. And that was before nearly everything sunk into different rooms when the water was forced out.

"Surely the other workers have some idea?" he questioned her, hoping there might be someone else to interrogate.

"What other workers?" Fulla replied with exasperation. "From the logs, almost everything was handled by the previous caretaker. I am informed that the servants who did work here cannot function in the open air." Baskets of gunk were thrown out of the entry hole to splat into the mud. "If you can call this open air."

She retreated to a stack of shelves with wax boards and paper books open.

"I and my colleagues are cataloging what we find and entering a reference to the original logs and a current position."

She appeared busy, but Laquatus could not equate her new position as chief curator with her career as a jack in the pits.

"How did you end up here?" he asked with a raised eyebrow. She glanced back, and her face filled with the demons that drove her.

"By the same process that cast you to the Cabal's far shore," she replied. Her features calmed, and she spoke without intonation. "What truly brings you here ambassador? I doubt it was a quest for close friends."

Laquatus considered his answer for several seconds. Just for variety he essayed the truth.

"The final object received here," the merman said. "I want it. What will it cost for me to have it my possession, no questions asked?"

The novelty of a straight answer seemed to disarm the dementia caster, and she fumbled for a response.

"A great many pieces were damaged," she finally said, turning to the shelves. "Some of them beyond repair. But even ruined, they might be of interest the Cabal for research purposes." Her face turned sly, destroying any attempt at disguising her greed.

"Done," Laquatus said simply. "Hold the piece for me when you find it. In return I will aid you in smuggling your loot back to the continent." He looked her deep in the eyes. "Cross me, and I will prick this bubble of air. Your bones can be catalogued by the next curator."

She started running her hands over the pieces already gleaned, like a shopper handling fruit in the market. Laquatus turned and walked to the stairs, soiled at the crassness of the deal and having legs once again.

He mounted the stair and dived through the bubble, transforming even as he swam away, ignoring the guard who recorded his exit. He surged up into the palace. He might have been within yards of the orb, but he could not detect its power. It was hidden from his magical senses. Rumor spoke of perhaps a dozen chambers under the palace, and who knew where the fool of a curator might have put it. The ambassador also worried about his monarch. Fulla was a wild card, who knew what she might say if questioned.

Aboshan emptied troves cared for by the empire's mercenaries and selkies, dumping them to decay in his palace. Only the ruler's love of control and hunger for power had brought the relics to the palace. Now the distraction of a simple assassination attempt washed them from his mind.

"Well," vowed Laquatus, "if it is conspiracies that truly engage him, then conspiracies he will have." The ambassador laughed in the bowels of the palace. He would bring new treacheries before Aboshan to conceal his own. Turg followed his masters, grinning as new plans spawned in the merman's mind.

CHAPTER 20

Kamahl rode Emerald east, watching for signs of the ambassador's caravan. The gecko's sinuous gait lulled the barbarian as he remembered his escape from the town.

The mountain mage had climbed the rubble ramp to the keep's upper stories looking for signs of another exit as the cries from Order reinforcements sounded below. Through the dust laid down by his destruction, he could see tracks that led him to the postern gate. The mountain warrior skirted the crystal effect, seeing its rate of advance slowing as it continued to fill the castle. The taste of the orb's magic faded as the growth slowed.

The postern gate led down a hidden path outside the city walls. The tumult inside the town died down as Kamahl rejoined the flow of refugees. A golden coin secured him a spare great cloak from an elen bird warrior. The garment was sized for someone nine feet tall and even after a few alterations with a dagger, it was still all-enveloping. It was a measure of the people's unrest that he did not attract more notice. He moved into the old city, listening for news. But rumor ruled the crowded streets, not the Order. He headed for the Citadel road once more, hoping to find out what had occurred.

Kamahl remembered the swell of power as he felt the orb change only minutes after he saw Turg following after the lieutenant. The mer must hold the

prize by now. The barbarian wondered if Kirtar survived. Somehow he doubted it.

His leg began to pulse with fresh pain from the wounds inflicted by the frog. He moved down an alley, ready for any attacker, but it was a dead end. Despite the city's overcrowding, a momentary break in the traffic gave him privacy and allowed him to seek shelter. He drew an axe and knife and jumped, his leg screaming in protest as he rose. As he started to fall back, he sank his tools into the wood racing of the building's corner. Rot and lack of care allowed his blades to bite deeply, sending sawdust to the alley below. He crawled up the structure's side, his arms burning as he finally reached the roof.

This building was shorter than the others backing the alley. He crawled behind a storage shed and concealed himself from observation. Momentarily safe, he ate what food he had. Thirst led him to raid a rainwater cistern, and he gulped the cool water down. Weary, for even his endurance had its limits, he lay down to rest.

He awoke that night. The city was quieter, the sun set some hours before. He wrapped the cloak tighter around him and drank more of the water. He had no more food. Kamahl squatted to test his leg. Finding himself fit he decided to brave the city once more.

He dropped into the alley, his lower limbs hurting at the strain but healed enough for full use. There was still traffic on the street despite the hour but not like Cabal City, whose denizens never seemed to sleep. There was a different feel to these pedestrians. They were more afraid and more furtive, even as they

stayed close to the lights. Kamahl remembered his friend Chainer who seemed to know most of his city's secrets. The barbarian decided the best source of information might be one of the night birds flitting through the streets.

The first lone walkers proved almost useless. His cloaked form emerged from the darkness provoking two responses. They collapsed in panic or attacked with suicidal bravado. One man continued to fight even after Kamahl slapped his weapons aside several times with his bare hands. Finally he knocked the man out in disgust. Perhaps a more predatory type would be more amenable to conversation.

A group of youths moved in concert through a street. The avenue was barely lit by damp wood burning in a metal basket. A copper hood reflected light to the ground.

The boys split up, settling into positions outside the flow of traffic. Their actions reminding Kamahl of feral cats choosing their prey. The gang looked into the street and not toward each other. The barbarian picked a member off silently, covering the young man's mouth. They disappeared into the night, Kamahl's cloak wrapped around his catch.

The boy was ragged and smelled, a rusty blade thrust through his belt. The dirty pallor of his skin and the color of his clothes hid him from those without Kamahl's night-sight. The barbarian watched him struggle to exude confidence as he stood an arm's length away.

"My friends will come looking for me," the city dweller said, staring hard at Kamahl. The gang

member's hand was on his blade, but the weapon was left undrawn.

"Better for them if they do not," the barbarian said and stepped a little closer, forcing his captive against a wall. "All I desire from you is a little information. Do you know what happened in the castle today?"

The impromptu informant relaxed slightly.

"They say that western barbarian and a group of conspirators broke into the Citadel. They were the ones behind the animal attacks. The swine forced refugees into the city, so they could strike from the cover of the crowd." Kamahl wondered how good his information could be with these falsehoods cast as truth. "The traitors managed to kill the captain and the lieutenant despite all efforts to stop them. The entire Order might have been crippled if not for the mer ambassador's warnings."

"Tell me about Laquatus and his jack, Turg," Kamahl ordered, wondering if he should waylay an Order patrol. Perhaps they might have more accurate information.

"The merman and the pit frog were heroes," the young thug said excitedly. "They would have been feted for days if not called back to the ocean on urgent business." The city dweller paused. "How could you know nothing of what happened? The town has been abuzz for hours." He started forward, and Kamahl shoved him back.

"Why should I believe you know anything at all about the ambassador?" the mountain warrior asked, showing his teeth. "All you seem to know is rumor and innuendo."

"Because I watched them leave the city for the east!" came the hot reply, the injustice of being called a liar seeming to raise the boy's courage. Kamahl's snort of disbelief further inflamed the informant.

"I saw them leave this afternoon," he insisted, drawing his knife. "I watched the ambassador ride out the eastern gate." He waited for an attack, but there was only silence as the barbarian melted away.

Kamahl drifted through the streets, heading for the city walls. The thug's affronted pride convinced the barbarian that the boy had seen the ambassador withdrawing to the east. Moreover, if the orb fell to Laquatus, he would have set out for the sea. Kamahl knew that it might be a false trail, but whom could he question? The merman was as likely to lie to the powerful as mislead the masses. He would trust the word of a direct witness for now.

The walls were low with ramps and ladders leading to the upper walkway. Like most defenses, the guards were more interested in keeping invaders out than townspeople in. He appropriated a coil of rope from a storeroom and wrapped it around a stone. In less than a minute he rapelled down. With a practiced twist he pulled the strand down, leaving no sign that any had left the city. He doubted his informant would share his description. The boy seemed one who avoided the guards whenever possible. Kamahl set off to see if Emerald still waited out in the plains.

* * * * *

Kamahl crept through the long grass, threading between the sentries. Avoiding contact felt strange. However, the barbarian imagined it as a challenge to

see how close he could approach the Order camp without being detected. It took nearly a day to find Emerald, and knowing the Order believed him a bloody murderer, he kept his distance from the road and other travelers. Only the gecko's incredible endurance and speed allowed Kamahl to finally catch up to the ambassador's party despite the rough country and avoiding enemy patrols.

The Order guards and mer hirelings flew the empire's standard. Kamahl's sharp eyes had caught sight of it as he paralleled them on the highway. He infiltrated the camp to see if Laquatus and Turg truly rode with the group. He had no time to waste on meaningless fights. If the orb was in camp, then he would declare himself and win the prize in honorable combat.

Circumstances demanded he fight tonight if he would fight at all. Some distance ahead of the party an empire caravan camped at a crossroads against a set of bluffs. As night fell, he took Emerald on a run, covering the miles in minutes. A large procession of wagons had left deep ruts along the merging road. Dozens of captive animals sent up cries of distress as they moved in their cages and strained at their hobbles. These guards were more aware. Dogs as well as warriors patrolled the camp perimeter, preventing the barbarian from sneaking in. There were signs of nervousness, the mercenaries reacting to every rustle as an imminent attack.

Kamahl heard the men talking. When would the next attack come? How bad would it be with such a long pause between them? The barbarian realized with surprise there were no fresh signs of rampaging forest

animals or destruction along the road. True, they were much farther from the great trees and the animals that sheltered there. However, he understood the problem to be continent wide. Why had an uneasy peace fallen across the two traveling parties and, for all Kamahl knew, the rest of the plains?

Such questions would have to wait until he first completed his quest. The ambassador, if he were traveling with the party, would find reinforcements on the morrow. The barbarian decided to confront the pair tonight.

The tent below the standard was dark with no guards standing before it. Kamahl moved in. Wrapped in his cloak, he avoided the light of the campfires. He made sure that he could reach the weapons on his belt. His sword was secured to Emerald, its length difficult to conceal on the approach. He could detect no life within the tent, but he must be sure. He had watched the caravan settling for the night without any sign of the ambassador or his jack. If they were anywhere in the camp, they must be here. He opened the flap, the rustling canvas seeming very loud.

No one was inside. He saw only a mound of baggage piled on the floor. There was no sign it had even been opened. Each piece was secured with wax, imprinted with the ambassador's sigil, binding the bags' draw-cords. However the merman traveled, Kamahl saw it was not with this detachment. However, the seals on the bags suggested he would eventually meet his luggage. The barbarian reached to his belt and pulled out the rope he used in his escape from the city. He was no thief, however stealthy he might be. The barbarian placed it on the baggage,

returning it to the Order. The camp guards never saw him withdraw through their pickets on his way back to Emerald.

"They were not there," he said in response to the gecko's quizzical look. "We will have to meet them at the coast." The lizard seemed sluggish as Kamahl secured his gear. The mountain warrior seethed at missing Laquatus and especially Turg. Though the night was chilly he removed the elen robe, letting the cold flow over his skin.

"However they traveled I have lost them," the barbarian muttered as he hauled himself up into the saddle. Knowing that the cool air might slow his mount he sent a small surge of power to the gecko. The lizard blinked in surprise at the warm air but did seem sprightlier as he absorbed the magic. Kamahl directed Emerald down the road to the bluffs, planning to use the lizard's ability to handle any terrain. The steed would take them past the pickets over the bare rock faces, riding above the caravan guards' eyes.

The lizard slowed as they neared the large camp, Kamahl vainly trying to direct the gecko's path. The lizard looked through the night at the stacks of cages and hobbled animals. Its body seemed to vibrate in sympathy with the miserable calls sounding from there. The barbarian realized he could not force Emerald to go anywhere.

The gecko stared at the captured creatures intensely. There were no large predators in the gathering but rather numerous cages of small animals. The barbarian undid his sword from the gecko's side, shifting it up to his back. He looked once more back to

the Order camp in the distance with the empty ambassador's tent.

"We cannot spend too much time on this rescue," Kamahl said, pulling small axes from his baggage and slipping them into holsters hung from the saddle. The lizard's long tongue flickered back as if in agreement, then the beast set off for the camp.

The caravan was set by the road, sentry fires out and burning in an attempt to cover the perimeter. Guards stood their posts nervously, talking to each other to reassure themselves. Kamahl wondered how the nightblind chattering fools planned to see anyone. The only danger seemed a pair of dogs that a guard escorted around the perimeter. The barbarian wondered what he would do if discovered but found himself unable to feel concern. The camp looked as deadly as a carnival and easier to move in and out of.

The gecko followed Kamahl, the mount nearly silent, with only its tail sometimes touching the ground. The outer pickets saw nothing as the pair worked through the line, using the terrain. The lizard lowered itself nearly to the ground to decrease its height. The dogs made no alarm, and the barbarian wondered if Emerald somehow stifled their senses. The cages grew closer, the smell assaulting the barbarian as the guards had not. Moving into the circle of cages was challenging, but without the threat of the dog it was only a matter of timing. He crouched by the cages after a slow roll from the darkness. Emerald followed, and the barbarian could scarcely believe his mount had crept into the camp as well. Hunters walked slowly among the captive animals in the cages and pens, lost in their own thoughts.

Suddenly the joke fell flat to the mountain warrior. Loosing the animals silently would take far too long, and he was not inclined to waste the time. Kamahl was tired of stealth.

He drew his sword from a sheath on Emerald's saddle. He mounted, and a guard turned to behold him, a mounted intruder in the heart of the camp. The flat of his blade sent the mercenary crashing down unconscious. The first real warning the caravan had was the long whip of flame arcing down to blaze through locks and bars. The animals were maddened by the fire's closeness. The beasts battered at their prisons as they had done so often, but now the bars fell to the ground.

Mercenaries closed from all points with shouts of alarm, but Kamahl's sword streamed flame over the other enclosures, melting away iron. He ignored the guards as beneath contempt as he shouted and roused the imprisoned beasts to escape. One caravan hunter came at the lizard's side only to be met by the long tongue. The muscle wrapped around his head and yanked him into crushing jaws. Kamahl's steed spat out the corpse as his rider freed more of the captured. A chain holding a group of satyrs parted as he swayed to the side, his sword severing several links.

The humanoids rose on their goatlike legs and fell upon the guards coming to recapture them. Heads down, they charged, their horns impacting the guards' armor. The forest fighters caused no serious injury but knocked their oppressors down. Heavy nailed hands dug into throats and joints as the prisoners fell as groups on single guards.

Freeing the captured is useless, Kamahl thought as he turned Emerald to attack, if they are caught again by these mercenaries. Now he used the sword's edge but with no passion. There was little honor in such easy slaughter, and he looked for another means of diversion.

Wagons were parked opposite the animals, their contents hidden under secured tarps. There were no signs of live prizes. The guards protecting them still waited as the barbarian tore through the cage area. Such valuable cargo must be more important to the caravan than small woodland creatures, Kamahl thought and sent Emerald through the camp's heart.

A creature rose up in the night, its nebulous form becoming a winged dragon. The gecko showed no hesitation, striding straight for the horned beast as it prepared to take to the air. The barbarian threw a charged axe that spun through the enemy. Emerald followed the projectile into the illusion. There was a mage of some power coming against him. The barbarian looked around in interest as his missile discharged into the ground in an explosion of flame.

The gecko paused in its flight, its tongue flickering uncertainly as its eyes followed nothing. The mountain mage felt the hum of hostile magic and sent showers of sparks and embers over the tents to flush out the enemy. Fabric ignited, and the restraining spell on the lizard faltered as the other mage was surrounded by fire.

The barbarian swung his sword, the steel birthing a circlet of flame that cut through the air and the enemy spell-caster's neck, decapitating Kamahl's only worthy opposition in the camp. The gecko started

toward the wagons parked away from the cages. The guards massed to stop the barbarian. The mountain mage simply bypassed them, hurling two axes high over the crowd to detonate among the freight wagons. A twisting pyre of energy and flame lit the sky, secondary explosions spreading destruction through the cargo. The guards were blown down—those not blown up.

The caravan had been transporting excavated treasures to the sea. There were numerous rumors of the Mer Empire acquiring relics and fetishes from past battlefields. Items of true power must have been concealed among the wagons. Fires grew, and most of those still alive in the camp closed to extinguish the conflagration. Kamahl withdrew, ignoring the calls of his enemies.

The satyrs were gone, along with most of the animals. A few hunters looked through the wreckage, but the barbarian wasted no time on them. One stooped to peer into a cage, and a stream of weasels flowed over the man, biting everywhere. The mercenary tried to run as the animals swarmed up his legs and onto his head. His flight ended as the disoriented man plowed into another cage, falling down to die under the small teeth.

Calls sounded from the perimeter. Golden globes soared into the sky illuminating what the fires did not. Guards from the false camp down the road had come to investigate the disturbance. These were worthy opponents but too serious for tonight's light diversion. The barbarian left the camp to the newcomers, Emerald running out of the light and into the darkness. Kamahl's mount surged up the rocky bluff

as the more intelligent investigators from the other camp fanned out to catch the raider. The barbarian leaned forward as the gecko went vertical, pulling away from any possible pursuit. The mountain mage signaled the lizard to halt at the cliff top. He crouched down and peered over the hunters' wrecked bivouac.

The fires began to die down, the knights of the Order using their magic against the flames. Magic flowed as a golden sheet over the burning wagons and tents, smothering the flames. The light died down as blazes were extinguished. The barbarian saw no signs of animals and hoped all of them were gone.

"I hope that satisfies you," he said to Emerald who seemed to nod in agreement. His mount's bloody jowls smiled though Kamahl was unsure if the fighting or the rescue pleased the gecko most. Below, the flames were dead except for the campfires, but more bad luck struck the hunters' camp.

Irritated at being forced to come investigate because of the mercenaries' obvious incompetence, the knights looked through the camp. The angry would-be rescuers tore into the last sealed wagons and suddenly treated the hapless hunters as criminals. The soldiers cut through leather and canvas to display the mounds of forbidden mechanisms. Mercenaries moved to reclaim what remained of their treasure. They were pushed away to sprawl on the ground. A few started angrily forward but stopped as golden maces lifted in warning.

The knights struck at wagons carrying recovered booty. Wheels exploded in showers of splinters as the Order guaranteed through blows that the fetishes

would not leave the camp. A mercenary waved documents before a knight only to be ignored.

The mountain mage turned the gecko toward the sea and nudged it into motion. Perhaps the Order was right in their distrust of the debris of past battles. Kamahl knew his journey to reclaim the orb might be barely begun. Why did he chase after it? Merely for the power it held? Perhaps, but more importantly it was his by right. He would not let it be stolen away. Honor demanded he reclaim his lost prize.

CHAPTER 21

The manor was some distance from the capital, its buildings in deeper water. In the world above, the sun was just rising, the beams starting to filter to the undersea world. Turg held onto a harpoon fish's fin as the attack force surged ahead. The fish weighed thousands of pounds, its lumpy flesh rock hard under the frog's hands. The mouth gaped open and a fish fleeing before the detachment swam too close to the monster. A long tongue darted forth, spearing through its target. The pinned morsel was pulled into the mouth as the predator accelerated. Turg felt a brief burning sensation as they moved through a cloud of digestive enzymes. The harpoon fish forced the caustic liquid into its prey whenever it attacked.

The attack force closed on the target, the estate of a rich noble with ties to the air breathers of the ocean. Whales began to rise from structures on the seabed. Vast hemispheres of coral and stone held pockets of air, allowing the lord's allies to stay beneath indefinitely.

The whales began to call, the sonic pulse of their cries beating against the amphibian's skull. The whales were pale blue and almost invisible in the water. Only their motion drew the eye. The animals were several times the size of the harpoon fish, but Turg felt only contempt for them. The air breathers rose over their ally's home, preparing to meet the surprise attack. The mammals vibrated with magic to the frog's mystic senses. Power was gathering among

the attackers as they raced to slay the whales, driven by the ambassador's overseeing spirit.

Magically summoned schools of barracuda surged away from the attack force. Like living projectiles, the school swept toward their warm-blooded targets. Defensive whale songs sounded, the waves of noise playing havoc among the predatory fish. Barracuda went in all directions, hopelessly confused by the air breathers' magic. Some of the toothy fish were in their death throes, their organs destroyed by the powerful whale song.

Now the singers' voices swept the leading edge of the imperial attackers. Multiple whales, converge on individual harpoon fish, the rocky attackers' nerves burning out in waves of pain. A few imperial soldiers, accompanying the attack tried to lead the whales astray with illusions, to no avail.

Turg let go of his fish as it finally reached an opponent.

The barbed tongue snapped into the whale's body, swelling as a prodigious load of digestive fluid surged into its victim. The air breather cried out, its call soaring beyond hearing. Several cephalids swimming past blurred, their skin rupturing and blood streaming into the water. The feeding fish drew its tongue back and slammed it again into the smooth hide. The whale expired as water filled its lungs. The harpoon fish looked for something else to kill.

The whales coalesced into groups, their cries sounding in all directions, unconcerned with killing their allies as long as the attack failed. On the outskirts of the fight, sharks began to appear, ripping apart the dead and the dying as the blood spoor drew

them from miles around. The harpoon fish closed for the final battle with the air breathers, but Turg was surging ahead, leading a column of infantry now that the whales were engaged.

The frog swam forward as the fighting moved over the estate. Tritons and mermen followed him down as crab forces sprinted across the sandy bottom for the house. The defenders were like mollusks, trying to withdraw into the protection of their shell. The valves of the living structure closed, the tough armor resisting the frog's blows. He called down harpoon fish, the monsters leaving their bloody feast. Tongues lanced into the door, gallons of digestive fluids pumping into the fabric of the manor. The valve ripped free as the fish pulled. They loosed it to drift away.

Spears flew from the gap, sinking into imperial warriors who charged in too soon. The jack cast a spell, and eels swam down the hole. Their bodies were living batteries that discharged as they reached the defenders. Now Turg swam into the house. He ignored the twitching bodies of the slain. The crabs piling through the entrance began to corral the stunned. The house was dark, the defender's trying to use the lack of light to their advantage.

The frog loosed streams of light-emitting plankton that carried in the currents still moving through the house. A triton was a hulking humanoid, its finned limbs sending it around the frog as they advanced. A spindly crab joined them, as they penetrated the house.

The porpoises emerged suddenly, diving from the upper floor in ramming attacks. The frog's hands glowed, and he stabbed into his opponent. The triton's

barbed fins sank into its foe, and malign energy poisoned its system. Mermen defenders thrust tridents at the engaged invaders only to be met by the crab. Though not tall, its claws snipped through weapons and amputated a hand as the crab closed. More porpoises came toward the frog, and Laquatus struck through his amphibious minion.

The counterspell attacked the magic allowing the cetaceans to stay underwater. Tissues suddenly starved for oxygen. Muscles flooded the blood stream with toxins. The defenders started to race for the surface, knowing themselves doomed but helpless against their instincts. Soldiers ignored the retreating cetaceans to fall upon the remaining defenders.

The frog and his companions moved ahead of the fighting, the inner rooms of the manor clearing as the manor guards rushed to the perimeter. A sigil spelled out in the living flesh of the wall told Turg they had reached the noble's private rooms. The crab scuttled forward, its claws making short work of the interior partition.

The quarters were almost stark in their simplicity. Only the huge number of pigeonholes and storage pillars showed the noble's wealth. The frog swam over, a spell whispering against the valves closing off the writing supplies. The container irised open, and the jack leaned over. Turg spat the seals and rings he had carried in his mouth throughout the battle. The planted objects were issued by the southern court, the queen showing on the crest instead of the emperor. The frog's spell ceased, and the container snapped shut, barring itself to one not attuned to its nature.

The crab scuttled over, several cruciform sheets of wax in its claws. Another spell provided by the ambassador's spirit whispered over the old letters, altering some of the strokes as the organic material responded to his will. The crab slipped them into the bottom of a storage column. Turg bled power as he touched the furniture. Growth accelerated, and he could taste the flow of byproducts as the living structure aged, sealing the damning letters under a layer of coral.

The green triton gave a grunt of warning, sending the trio across the room. Living cases lay stacked against the corner, the containers holding eggs and plankton of exceptional quality. The crab cut them open like lightning as the frog and triton grabbed up and devoured fistfuls of the delicacy. When the titular head of the attack force arrived seconds later, he found the group busy enjoying their loot. A snarl of disgust showed, but he dared not discipline the ambassador's jack.

The command staff arrived and began opening the sealed pigeonholes and chests in the room. A pair of soldiers came and searched through the food crates the trio had opened, their contempt plain as the triton growled and the crab clacked its claws.

"Sir," called an orderly, opening up a pigeonhole. A major swam over and inspected the contents. He tensed in excitement, diving in to examine the rings and seals Turg had planted. The sound of a struggle was heard from the hallway. A huge crab eased his way through the door, pulling a tether. A merman came through, his flukes beating to escape as he was reeled in. Another line leading out slackened as a

nearly identical crustacean followed, the aristocrat suspended between the two soldiers.

"What is the meaning of this?" the prisoner roared, his muscles straining in vain against the pair of armored monsters. "You have no right to invade my home! I am a loyal servant to the emperor!" The leader swam over and struck him with one of the seals clenched in his fist, the metal edge tearing the noble's skin.

"Traitors have no rights!" the officer snarled. He gestured to the writing implements and letters being impounded. "You are in service to the southern queen and will die for your treachery. Your alliance with the air breathers always inflamed suspicions. But for the actions documented here you shall die!"

The noble went goggle-eyed with incredulity. "Lies!" he cried, surging against his tether. "It is all lies!" He looked to his luxuries stored in the back and recognized Turg. "Everything is a lie spread by his master! He planted these forgeries."

The major looked at the frog whose face was smeared with stolen booty. The officer's laughter filled the room as the frog swam closer, his face showing no signs of intelligence.

"His master is a beast and a bigot," the prisoner snarled. "So superior to those who breathe though he spent years on the land. Even his chief lackey is an amphibian." The merman twisted on the line attempting to smash the frog with his flukes.

The jack dodged the blow, and electricity surged through the champion's hands into the tail. The attack reduced the noble to a glassy eyed wreck, small globes of blood drifting from an open mouth and breaking up

in the water. The major looked at the amphibian in anger but remembered whose patronage the frog enjoyed.

"We do not need his confession anyway," the attack leader grouched. "We have enough to convince any that he conspired against the crown. The dungeons will soon drag the truth out of him."

He called for the incriminating evidence to be sealed for immediate transport and left his orderlies searching through the rest of the archives. Turg swam back to his cronies and enjoyed the fruits of the noble's larder.

* * * * *

Laquatus came out of the trance pleased with all he had seen. Riding the jack during the attack allowed him to frame the moderate aristocrat. He laughed at how close the merman's raving came to the truth. The drive to find conspiracies was producing spectacular results. Every day brought new arrests and revelations of treachery. The ambassador admired the unrelenting torturers in their efforts to gain confessions. Perhaps they even extracted the truth from someone, but the aristocrat doubted it.

The emperor, feeling more besieged than ever, granted Laquatus more and more authority to pursue his inquiries. Today's raid was the culmination of his attempts to stir up trouble, and he could not be happier with its success. Even the imperial officers started to believe the propaganda he spread. Laquatus had expected them to be much more cynical and jaded. The sprawling chaos was a work of joy.

Sometimes, he even forgot it was only a cover for his thievery. Fulla had excavated five rooms without locating Kirtar's prize. Several loads of "damaged" goods had gone to the Cabal, and Laquatus was obliged to search all of them. He found no sign of the orb and wondered if perhaps she had no plans to betray him. Finding that conclusion highly unlikely, he was careful to document her thievery through exact manifests. Minus, of course, items of power interesting enough for him to steal.

The dementia caster had no contact with the Cabal and was unlikely to complain of thefts from her own looting operation. The emperor engaged himself in touring the army and moving against signs of discontent. The real bonus from his violent flailing against conspiracy was his actions were undoubtedly creating real plots against him. The cycle of violence was increasing, and the ambassador swam at the center, still untouched. He readied himself for court, putting on his finest jewelry.

He swam through the palace corridors, the building pumping light from above to the halls. Aboshan had called a meeting of nobles to go over the reports Laquatus gave him the day before. In the name of preserving theoretical contacts with the queen's court, he was spared from attending except occasionally. The door to the throne room was closed, but the emperor's shouting bled through in a wordless howl.

The ambassador ignored it, waiting for the end of the audience. Aboshan's rants had become distressingly predictable, often ending with a wild accusation that took a noble away to be investigated.

Only the identity of the prisoner changed, and Laquatus thought it best to be absent when the sacrificial lamb was selected. Danger could add spice, but maintaining a fictitious wave of conspiracies provided enough entertainment.

While the ambassador waited, he saw another merman furtively hovering down the corridor. Thinking he recognized the courtier, Laquatus swam toward him. The merman remembered the other with a start. It was Petod, a lower noble who had withdrawn to the southern court years before. He was dressed in palace livery, but Laquatus was sure of his identity.

The noble realized himself recognized and swam into a side room, gesturing for company. Laquatus cast a spell, sending an image of himself down the corridor to his quarters. He vanished into the other room as well, making sure that no one saw him. The door closed behind him as soon as he went through.

"Thank goodness I found you," said Petod in a panicked voice. The merman nervously twisted rings on his finger as he swam to check the door. "I did not know who to turn to." He reached as if to pat the ambassador's shoulder only to stop at a forbidding gaze.

"The court felt too dangerous for me to declare myself," Petod said wretchedly, seeming to collapse internally. Laquatus remembered him as weak willed. "I came as an unofficial representative from the queen. Her majesty is understandably upset at the attempt to kill her husband and wished to reassure him that she was not involved. I hope to serve as a private courier between the two monarchs."

"Llawan sent you?" Laquatus asked in disbelief. Petod was a poor choice from his memory, given to rash judgements and poor decisions. Laquatus thought her a better leader than that.

"Of course not," the self-selected emissary said. "The nobles who fled south would view such a move on her part as unacceptable. I took it upon myself to offer my services," he finished smugly.

The ambassador nodded. Petod was a fool, but he could be quite congenial in social situations. Perhaps he was familiar in the southern court. Llawan would never use a back channel because her integrity would force her to inform her allies.

"Why the disguise?" he asked.

"If I declared myself, I feared being called a spy or assassin," Petod confessed. Laquatus said nothing though sneaking into the palace under false pretense made such a fate inevitable. "I hoped to find an ally that might help me meet secretly with the emperor. I heard of your return from exile and knew you could help."

Two thoughts surged through the ambassador's mind. First, such an action was suicidal with the emperor in his current mood. Second, Aboshan's ridiculous pretense of clemency to a returned exile had indeed enabled him to contact a member of Llawan's court. He soon shook off the surprise. He could not afford any knowledge of the southern plans reaching the emperor. Already he had taken over the emperor's spies who reported from the south. The ambassador recast Llawan's actions to make her appear more hostile to the emperor. Petod must not meet Aboshan.

"I am astounded at your actions, my lord," Laquatus said, his voice filled with warm regard. "Your close knowledge of Llawan's policies and private feelings could alter the history of the seas." The ambassador clapped the young noble on the back, a jeweled ring cutting into the flesh on the shoulder.

"A thousand apologies, Petod," the merman said stripping the ring from his finger. "It is a new piece and far too clumsy on my hand. Allow me to present it to you as a token of my esteem. No, I insist." Laquatus put the ring on Petod's hand, ignoring the young mer's stumbling refusal. The ambassador exercised great caution as he placed and released the ring.

The self-appointed emissary rubbed at the puncture high on his shoulder, trying to accept the gift graciously even as his flesh went numb. Laquatus was in full court regalia and that included poison for his jewelry. The southern noble gasped, water moving fitfully through his gills. He choked and gasped as he realized himself attacked.

The ambassador decided his poison was not quite virulent enough. Too much time away from court had made his venom weak. He used his magic and called a stream of tiny jellyfish into being. The fragile cloud was hardly more substantial than the water in which it swam. He guided Petod to it, and his gills sucked the tiny bags of poison down. Toxins poured directly into his bloodstream, and Laquatus held him steady as his body locked. The torn flesh plugged the organs, and they ceased to supply oxygen. The ambassador banished the summoning as soon as he knew the courier was dead.

He swam back to the throne room, towing his dead victim behind him. He put on a burst of speed wanting to arrive with maximum effect. The valve doors were open, the assembled nobles withdrawing as fast as they dared. The ambassador swam past them as gasps of shock echoed behind him. He swam to where the emperor reclined with a cluster of officers waiting around him. Aboshan looked exhausted, his rage having consumed him during the audience. Guards surged from the walls and stopped, uncertain what threat a corpse might pose.

"Laquatus," the monarch said, looking at the dead Petod. "What is the meaning of your companion?" He waved a moray eel closer, and it snared the body hauling it away from the monarch.

"An assassin from the southern court, your imperial majesty," Laquatus said boldly. "I spotted him outside your very throne room, and when I went to investigate he attacked me."

"Look," the merman said dramatically, pointing to the corpse being pushed back by the moray eel. "Slain by the very ring he plotted to use on others in the palace. Dare I say, including your royal majesty." Aboshan gestured with a tentacle.

"Show me the ring," he commanded. The eel was perhaps too literal, and his jaws snipped Petod's hand off and brought it near. The monarch regarded the offending appendage and threw it to the side.

"Is there no end to this infamy? The rumors you reported are true! Raids on some of our greatest nobles have revealed links to our shark of a wife. Now an assassin outside our very throne room? Why do they plot against me?" he cried, no longer using the royal

plural. He collapsed back into the throne, and the ambassador could feel energy pulsing back into the monarch from the palace.

"Perhaps war is the only answer," a hesitant officer said, looking for support from his fellows. "The queen's forces are not so superior. Surely a surprise attack would put an end to these conspiracies."

The emperor looked up wanly. Laquatus spoke quickly to squash the idea. Open warfare would bring the emperor's interest back to the martial devices buried beneath his palace.

"My Emperor," he stated, striving for statesmanship, "the queen and her alliances make open warfare too dangerous for you both. Her air-breathing allies and the creatures of the deep would surely come to her aid. As deadly as these conspiracies are, they represent the limits of her reach. Her assassin was incompetent. Better security inside the palace is the answer. Llawan dares not attack openly and must strike through traitors and other toils." Laquatus wanted Aboshan consumed by internal problems.

"Moreover," the ambassador continued, "open warfare would drag guards to the battle lines, weakening your security in the palace. We must root out conspiracies and make our own overtures to Llawan's allies. If we isolate her, then we can attack with impunity."

"We are so very tired," the emperor muttered, lying back as more magic whispered into his frame. "Our wife will fall, but our wrath must wait. We shall strip her of allies here and abroad." His eyes focused on Laquatus, decision swimming weakly into his gaze.

"You will consult with our officers on crushing those who plot against us," he stated. He rose and began to swim for his private quarters. "You have our warrant to do all that is necessary to guard our throne."

The officers and ambassador lowered their heads as the monarch passed.

Carte blanche! Laquatus exulted. Current and former rivals for power in the court would sink very soon, the ambassador promised himself. Still, perhaps he should begin reducing the perceived threat lest the emperor strike out in panic against his wife. War would reduce his ability to control the situation and give too much power to the generals.

Laquatus looked at the attentive faces surrounding him and knew hatred and envy must fill their hearts. He had displaced many on his rise to power, and now his enemies grew daily in number. If only Fulla would find the orb. With such an item of power, he might stop serving others' will and fully satisfy his own desires. He drew the officers to him, wondering how much longer he must reign himself in.

CHAPTER 22

Kamahl peered down at the sea. The wooded hillside overlooked the coastal town of Borben on the continent's edge. The town sat at the end of a major trade road, the last habitation before the open ocean. A long peninsula jogged out for the mainland creating a protected bay. Like a single finger of hills, it beckoned to ships searching for port. Waterfowl and a few seals sunning themselves populated the last spit of land.

The barbarian walked to the hilltop along an overgrown trail, soaring above the main road. The joint caravans of the Cabal and the Mer Empire broke apart many miles behind him. The animals went south, and a few of the wagons continued on to Borben. Kamahl had parted ways with Emerald some days before, leaving the barbarian alone to walk into the town.

A few small ships lay anchored in the bay, with only one pier stretching out into the water for the transfer of freight from small vessels. Out on the water, a single lighter accepted a net of cargo from a larger ship. Oars started to row the boat back to the docks and warehouses.

Well back from town, nearly in the surrounding hills, sat a small arena. Nearly oval in shape, it was constructed out of wood, the large logs and rough-cut timbers whitewashed in the sun. It pressed against an outcropping of rock, the interior looking muddy from a distance. Sand was piled outside the fighting ring. The

color told the barbarian it was hauled up from the shore.

The arena stood deserted now, but the mountain mage knew it would be crowded during market days and festivals. The best source of information regarding the ambassador and his stolen prize would undoubtedly be the bars around the docks and the arena. He was no seaman, and he resolved to try the inns close to the fighting ring, knowing he could mix with the jacks.

The town looked still now, but when the fishermen returned to port the docks would teem. He wondered when the bouts would start in the arena, so he could interact with familiar types of people. He considered his own appearance as he thought about poking around for information regarding the troubles in the east. The Order would distribute descriptions, and the ambassador might have left word of him as well.

He wore a gray cloak now, the elen garment gradually shrinking to fit him as he plied needle and dagger. The metal-hued races were uncommon but by no means unknown on the continent. Only two things were uniquely his own: his name and his sword. He drew the weapon, holding it in his open palms as he considered it. Long as he was tall, the massive blade showed little sign of wear. Rings rattled softly on the blade as he rotated it. Ever since procuring it during his quests as a young man, he had carried it. The steel and fire evoked from the mystic metal had cut many an enemy low. But in the mountains, the sword had gained its own reputation, as fulsome as Kamahl's, and was more unique in appearance. Regretfully, he

decided that the weapon must rest here, above the town, to await his return.

He walked to a tree, its roots wrapping around a boulder, as if holding it to the ground. He looked at his sword and called power. It flowed into the steel, the energy streaming fluidly throughout the weapon. He set the nearly flat point against the rock, the shallow edge still cutting the stone. His muscles ached as he pushed. Gradually the metal burrowed its way through the rock. Kamahl strained until the hilt began to disappear. He exhausted more of his strength as he picked up a stone and set it against the hilt. The weapon's advance continued as his hands held rock rather than the familiar leather wrapped hilt. Stone touched stone, and he closed the final inches. The smell of hot metal ceased as his granite pad disappeared into the rocky anvil.

Kamahl walked to his gear. Looking at the pack and several bags, he realized he had grown too dependent on steeds. He separated out the essential from the merely convenient and laid out tarps to encase the saddle and gear too heavy to carry into town. He opened a bag he intended to cache by the boulder holding his sword. Arms picked up during his travels rattled as he searched. Near the bottom he withdrew a weapon found just days before.

Roving bands of Order knights swept the roads looking for signs of Kamahl and the animals whose attacks had been so disruptive. The soldiers also inspected wagons for forbidden objects. News of the disastrous spell in the Citadel drove the knights to new heights in destroying past evils. The mercenaries driving caravans of excavated treasures lacked the will

to fight the Order. During his trek here, the barbarian had come across a few of their abandoned wagons.

He drew forth a massive hammer. The head was black iron. Magic reinforced the metal and the haft. The long handle was white ivory, perhaps from some fallen mammoth or other such beast. The dense grip and over-sized head made it a weapon for a giant rather than someone the size of a man. His muscles bunched as he hefted it. He remembered Emerald's look of momentary outrage when he loaded the hammer. He had found it lying in the open near another cache of weapons. Knowing it abandoned, he had still dropped most of his money in the resting place. Whoever came looking for it would be disappointed but surprised at the consideration of the person who rescued it from destruction by the Order. Perhaps the Cabal or a corrupt bird warrior had his money even now, but it would have felt wrong to take it without any attempt at compensation.

He stuffed his sword scabbard in his bags and hid them and the saddle. He held the hammer in his hands and felt the weight. Only his constant practice with his own massive sword allowed him to swing it with assurance. He took one last look and started through the trees to the road.

It took sometime to reach the highway, even with the barbarian's rapid pace and sure feet. It drew toward evening as Kamahl came into the town. The streets led down to the docks, but he took a switchback trail to the arena. On the bay, the last of the fishing vessels were coming in, the catch being transferred to the packinghouses. Lights came up around the arena as street musicians began to play. Reeds and strings

dueled in melody, as fighters soon would inside. A local inn competed with men selling food on the street, and clusters of fisherman up from the docks drifted toward the bars. Kamahl shouldered patrons aside as he came into the inn.

"What might I do for you?" a barman called, drawing drinks for the house. The light was dim and the room close and crowded. The smell of food cooking in the kitchen and the proprietor's face both seemed pleasant enough.

"I need a room and meals for the next several days," Kamahl said, resting his hammer on the bar. The fighting weapon drew only a few glances. Perhaps they were used to jacks from the arena. The coins he threw down attracted substantially more attention. The barbarian recalled how much he spent at the inns at the tourney in Cabal City. From the respectful glances, the cost of room and board in Borben was substantially less.

"We can accommodate you, sir," the bartender cried, grabbing up a set of keys. He came around the bar, ignoring the empty tankards waved in his direction. The proprietor's bald head sweated from exertion and the heat in the crowded room. He picked up the barbarian's saddlebags and tried to pick up the hammer as well. The unexpected weight left him standing still for a moment before Kamahl lifted the heavy weapon to his shoulder.

"I want a room with a view of the harbor," the mountain mage said as he followed the owner up the stairs. The steps were narrow, and the light peeked over the solid barrister. A single lamp lit the hall. The keys rattled briefly as the innkeeper unlocked the

door. The room was small and the window sealed off. Kamahl's guide dropped the bags and threw the shutters open, letting a salty breeze carry over the sash to the barbarian.

"Best view in the house," the owner said. The makings for a fire were laid in a fireplace, and the linens looked clean. "There are chops and roast for dinner tonight and rabbits tomorrow. We always prepare food for the arena crowd. After that, the kitchen shuts down for the week unless a guest makes private arrangements. I'll send a girl with a coal to start a blaze and bring you whatever you want from the kitchen."

Kamahl waved, and a glowing ember seemed to float through the air to land on the prepared wood. The logs burst into flames, instantly pouring out heat with no showers of sparks.

"I will take my own meals tonight," the barbarian said, laying the hammer on the bed, which sagged. "I prefer my privacy and will have no trouble tending my own fire. If you would give me the key to this room and any spares."

The owner hesitated as the mountain mage approached. He laid the brass in the jack's hand and bowed his way out, eyes flickering from the fire to the weapon on the bed.

Kamahl closed the door and went to the window. The town folk flowed up from the sea's edge toward the entertainment offered behind him at the arena. A few heavy wagons were left on the pier, a luckless sentry standing guard as his friends climbed the hill. The wagons had the

look of long-haul freight, and the barbarian resolved to make inquiries about them tomorrow.

The crowds in the street and bars drained away as he left the inn. The arena was small, and Kamahl was immediately conducted to a box seat with a small tray of refreshments as he entered. Someone from the inn had obviously informed the arena operators of his presence. This was not the reception the barbarian—now a known outlaw—expected.

A porter waited to the side, ready to speak as the entertainment commenced. First was the light and easy comedy of blood sports. Two groups of men, fishermen from their gait, came into the arena. Kamahl looked for an emblem for the fight, and the porter swept forward.

"Just two crews who had a disagreement over boundaries, sir," the servitor explained. "The winner of the bout fixes the new fishing boundaries over the disputed area."

Kamahl turned to see if anyone else received such specialized service, but the layout of the boxes prevented him from observing others.

A piercing whistle sounded, and the crews rushed each other. Men were clad in padded jerkins, and their clubs were wrapped in cloth. They fell to like madmen, flailing at heads and joints. The fishers only disengaged when armed guards dragged away the wounded. Within minutes only one staggering figure remained through most of the others appeared to be recovering off on the sidelines. The winner left with arms held high though attendants came out to guide him to the exit. The next acts were simple acrobats

and tumblers, their antics entertaining the crowd as the next bill readied themselves.

"Here we are too short of fighters and beasts to have more than a few matches during any night," the servant said nervously as he watched the barbarian eat.

Kamahl cast only occasional glances toward the exhibition. Finally the signal was given, and the acrobats somersaulted free, leaving the floor clear.

The servant left as two fighters emerged, each wearing colors of arena staff. One was tall and scarred, wearing a steel mask and leather armor. A short flail with two spiked heads swung slowly at his side.

The other opponent leaned on a staff of black wood, a brazier producing smoke in different colors that swept over him. He was short and spindly, dressed only in tattered clothes that ruffled slightly as a gust of wind swept the arena. The servant glanced in from his rounds of the other boxes.

"Does your staff fight or is it just the fishermen?" Kamahl asked, as hoots began to rise up from the audience.

"We are very small compared to the inland arenas, my lord," the servitor said, projecting obsequiousness in the face of perceived disappointment. "The large gladiatorial companies avoid us, the crowds being too small and the gambling syndicates unable to handle serious betting. We must rely on house fighters for the majority of the bouts."

The signal to begin the bout rang, and the waiting dementia caster dug his staff into the soil. The shaft cast a long shadow, though no bright light existed to throw such a pall. From the depths of the

shadow came laughter. Then several twisted monsters exited the darkness. Their flesh appeared parched, their hands showing bone as they shuffled about in a gruesome dance.

The masked fighter swung his flail as the tall mage called more creatures from his mind and raised the bones of the dead from the ground. The race of the corpses was impossible to determine because the flesh was in such poor condition.

The dementia caster sawed his staff back and forth, the shadow racing over the ground. The black wave coated the flesh of the risen, drawing the moisture out. Their flesh shriveled as tendons and muscles grew too tenuous to keep the bodies together.

The field cleared as laughing corpses fell on each other and dragged food back to the darkness from which they sprang. Some of the horrific creatures called forth from the dementia caster's mind ignored everything and staggered around the arena. Cries sounded from the gate guards as the dead beat on the barriers keeping them inside. Others turned on the masked fighter who began to fall back. The flail smashed bones, but the twisted dead continued snapping at his heels, their bodies coiling and rebuilding into even more twisted fragments of the short mage's imagination.

A few of the creatures even turned on their creator, advancing on the staff. The shadow it cast began to sweep back and forth, the pall forming a cone in front of the mage. The rebelling monsters fell as their limbs spilled to the ground, their frames melting like frost on a skillet. The masked jack fought harder as more of the laughing closed on him.

Acknowledging defeat the fighter knelt in submission, his mask dipping to the ground. The dementia caster withdrew his staff from the ground and knocked the brazier over. The summoned vanished like nightmares at dawn as the short victor bowed to the applause of the crowd.

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The crowd roared in the stands above as workers tried to reassemble the dead. The arena operator and two assistants laid out the bodies of the slain. Some had been dead a very long time, and the smell smashed against the barbarian. Kamahl had left his private box before the next bout to talk to the owners about fighting in their establishment. He found the master hard at work preparing for the next night.

"Make sure you find as many body parts as you can," the promoter told the groundskeeper. The arena owner's pale skin contrasted with the dirt and leather smock he wore. Splotches of blood and caustic burns covered his apron and sections of revealed skin. "There are rumors sweeping the docks, and the sailors are asking for burial at sea again instead of in port." He shooed the servant away and regarded the jack.

"So you wish to join our little family?" The pit boss asked, searching through a pile of limbs for an arm to complete a dead dwarf, preservative fluid dripping from the torn flesh. Kamahl shook his head.

"I wish to compete in the arena against your fighters," he corrected. He looked at the dead being reconstructed for later battles. "Your family appears quite big enough," he said with distaste. The promoter ignored the tone.

"You would be surprised how difficult it is to keep a large enough supply for Enoch and Apel, our necromancers," he said, surrendering in his quest and throwing a random arm in the dwarf's case. "We'll have to bury these tonight in the arena. Apel's zombies always cart off the dead despite how short we are. We used to get sailors, but my brother forgot to alter one's looks. Now it is almost impossible to get them after they die." He moved to the next casket whose contents the barbarian avoided looking at. "The crowds are growing very tired of the same old faces week after week.

"I am offering something new," Kamahl said, stepping around to peer in the mild eyes. "Someone whom your clients have not seen before."

The proprietor waved to his assistants and walked to the back with the barbarian following.

"You understand that we rarely fight to the death here," the official said, hanging his splattered apron on a hook before stepping into an office. "Also, the deal is contingent on my brother's agreement when he comes back from meeting with the bet-mongers."

"I'll not put on a show," Kamahl said, his eyes growing hard. "When I fight, it will be for real. However, I need not kill if your fighters understand that they can surrender when they are overwhelmed."

The owner waved the demand away.

"A jack in a small arena has no use for a champion's airs," he said, drawing forth a piece of paper. "Now, I will need your name for the criers circulating tonight if you plan to fight tomorrow."

The barbarian paused before answering. It would be easiest to give a false name, but an outright lie stuck in his throat.

"Call me the Hammer," he said, sparking the proprietor's interest. "Only by defeating me will someone learn my true name."

The fat man nodded, seeing the possibilities. "You will need to clean your armor, and we must design a suitable emblem ..." the owner continued as he led the barbarian away. A host of functionaries followed, all trying to mold Kamahl to their own idea of what a fighter should be. He was brusque in refusing their offers of advice on how to fight and the proper attire to wear. He did allow the armorer to work on his protective gear, which had suffered during his travels.

It seemed only minutes, and he was standing in the center of the arena, the noise of the crowd merging into an unintelligible muttering. The gray cloak was thrown back, his iron shirt dark against his brass skin.

Kamahl swung his hammer, stretching out the kinks in his muscles. His first opponent was Apel, a short dementia caster. Knowing the reputation of such mages, Kamahl wondered if the house fighter would follow the rules. The barbarian believed the short summoner would soon be surrendering, but he must be prepared for a battle to the death. The crowd began to chant as Apel strode into the arena and lowered his equipment to the ground.

The dementia caster stood on the sand, a burning brazier at his side. Apel threw power onto the glowing coals and a heavy cloud of smoke rose, making his features waver and change. The dark mage dug his staff into the ground, and a thin shadow stretched out

from the shaft, advancing toward the light behind Kamahl's head rather than away. The familiar shuffling figures of the mirthful dead began to appear, cackling perhaps at the joke of life itself. Kamahl wondered how predictable his opponent would be.

The barbarian called forth his own magic, a field of possibility forming over the sand. He would experiment, use the arena to teach himself new methods of attack and defense. Several cougars surged out of nothingness onto the arena floor, their roars stilling the cries of the crowd. The zombies came on, their laughter continuing even as many were pulled down and savaged by the great cats. If any of the dead were reconstructed corpses, the mountain mage did not envy the morticians' tasks in repairing the bodies.

The dementia caster seemed oblivious to the failure of his forces. Ignoring the feasting cats, Apel sent more undead onto the arena floor. A tattered wave threatening to overwhelm Kamahl's spell by choking his beasts under a wave of cold flesh. The barbarian concentrated again, the cloud of his summoning stretching wider as he played a little to the crowd.

A flock of mountain sheep stormed onto the sand. They milled for a moment, their waist-high bodies losing themselves in a blur as the fierce rams fought for position. Kamahl nudged them into action with a mental command, and the beasts lowered their tightly curled horns and stormed forward. The rams struck hard, shattering bone and bringing the dead down. Clawed hands and fangs struck at Kamahl's creatures but could not penetrate the dense wool that defeated

the cold wind of the mountains and the hot breath of timber wolves.

Apel lifted his staff into the air, his face now agitated as his forces fell to mere sheep. In frustration he speared the oak into the sand. Power poured into the soil. Like cobras rising to strike, dark spears rose from the ground. The shadowy weapons bobbed and weaved before falling on the animals that ground up the dead. The wool that resisted the strength of zombies sundered as the beasts were transfixed. The few remaining cougars expired in yowling pain. The rams fell as mutton, the undead rising up as Apel poured new strength to their shattered bones. The bodies tottered toward the barbarian more twisted and cackling than before, but the upright spears of night were straight as they drifted toward the mountain mage.

Kamahl stepped forward, his brow wrinkling as his will contested once more with the universe. Now hulking figures came onto the arena sands, their roars of displeasure shaking the crowd until the mighty monsters choked off their cries with dead flesh. Their white fur grew stained with blood and gore as they tore apart those coming too close to their master. The yetis discarded limbs as they worked their way back to the dementia caster. The enemy mage's black spears dived to spill life to the ground. But despite the humanoids' bulk, they dodged the dark weapons with ease, their agility honed by the mountain cliffs their kind regularly traveled. They wrung their way up the line of zombies, and Kamahl raised his hammer, waiting for the next attack.

The crowd cried out as the yetis approached the enemy, their bloody hands reaching for the weedy mage. The dementia caster dropped, and his body heaved. Kamahl paused, holding his minions in case his opponent was surrendering, uncertain with all the particulars of this arena.

A wave of corrupting flesh seemed to spew from the underworld. The zombies Apel called forth vanished, disappearing or devoured by his newest creation. The mass lunged for the approaching yetis, lifting itself into the air and spreading out in a great sheet of corruption. The mountain apes disappeared under the dark spell as the mound fell with a thunderous retort. The impact ruptured coffins buried in the dirt. Bodies lolled on the ground and were swallowed by the spreading wave.

The crowd called for Kamahl's defeat, cheering for their favorite. The barbarian was done with calling monster and readied his hammer. The iron head fell as the first tendrils reached him. The maul struck the ground, a shattering concussion setting the sand rolling, flinging back the formless flesh. The jack took a step forward as his hammer thundered again. The magic concussion splattered the corruption back, the waves of power shaking the stands. The strength of his attack diminished as Kamahl controlled his power.

He cleaved a path with reverberating blows, working his way across the arena until he stood before Apel. The power assaulted the mage's bones, and he leaned on his staff, too unsteady to remain upright without the support. The barbarian raised his hammer and paused to allow the dementia caster to forfeit. The necromancer bowed his head in defeat.

Cheers sounded as Kamahl nodded magnanimously and offered his hand in a show of sportsmanship. The barbarian turned and bowed to the proprietors in their box and the crowd in the stands. The fighter started for the exit and the alehouse, anxious to wash the stench of the dead from his frame.

* * * * *

The serving girl scooped meat onto the barbarian's trencher, and the gravy started to sink into the bread. Kamahl took a bite, and the juices tasted delicious as he washed the meal down with ale.

The other customers regarded him warmly, despite his defeat of the local fighter. The novelty of a new opponent gave him a popularity he had not received in Cabal City. The hill tavern was full, as new patron came to view the stranger. His deliberate air of mystery was another draw. So far, Kamahl had given no name except that of his new weapon. The ivory and iron creation lay across the table as enthusiasts walked slowly by, caressing it with their eyes.

The dementia caster's defeat and the adulation of the crowd pleased the barbarian. His battle had been the climax of the night. It had been a short bill with only the duel between an unknown and the local champion bringing any crowd. The enthusiasm and respect was heady, but Kamahl remembered this was only single step in his quest for the orb. A group crowded closer to his table, and he looked up. Three young men dressed in armor and carrying brand-new weapons coughed for his attention. None of their gear showed wear, and most appeared of indifferent quality.

Two of them were dark, their skins rough from exposure to the weather. They were fit but were uncomfortable with their weapons. The middle boy was tall and thin, with muscle showing but lacking the calluses of his companions. He wore his clothes and elegant boots well enough. However, he seemed no more at ease with the sword at his hip than his companions.

The barbarian wondered if they were working up the nerve to challenge him or pick a fight to show their own bravery. Many jacks reveled in such fights but not Kamahl. "You have a question?" he growled, his irritation deepening his voice. They jumped back, then two pushed the center of their trio forward.

"If you please, sir," the blond said hesitantly, his hands falling to his belt, "we wondered if you might be available for students seeking instruction."

Kamahl laughed shortly, the boys' faces reddening. His mirth was more at his own expense than the youngsters', but the adolescents were wound too tightly for any hint of humor. They started to withdraw, but the barbarian called them back.

"Your pardon, sirs," Kamahl apologized. "I expected a different question. Please join me." The three drew up stools and sat down. The serving wench brought more tankards at the barbarian's wave.

"I am Ginter, son of a chandler," the blond boy said, giving a seated bow. "These are my friends Wasel and Birten. Their father owns two fishing boats. We hope to learn magic from you," he added bluntly.

"Why me?" the mountain mage asked. "Surely there are others willing to teach, fighters from the arena perhaps." He took a sip as he thought. To be a

fighting master was a serious relationship in the mountains. He had spent years working with his mentor and could not see himself in such a role for now. But he remembered his own stumbling steps in search of magic. Perhaps he could help the boys.

"We want you to teach us because there are few willing to teach. Apel and Enoch will both take students, but we feel uneasy with calling on the dead. Besides, you are the first in quite some time to beat either of them," Girter said, his friends nodding in agreement.

"I do not know my own plans," Kamahl said, playing for time. "I will offer my opinions on the available teachers. I have skill, but you need a master rather than a fighter. I leave soon, in any case. It depends on what I learn about the trade caravans."

"My father is completely familiar with them," Girter exclaimed, flushing with pleasure now, rather than rage.

"Our father sometimes hauls out cargo from the caravans to the freight ships waiting in the bay," one of the brothers chimed in. "Though there isn't much call for his services anymore."

"Yes," said Girter with a frown, reclaiming the conversation. "The number of wagons hauling cargo to the coast plummeted when the Order became more active. They stop caravans across the continent, searching for a stolen artifact."

"They say that an agent for the Cabal stole a magic sword belonging to the head of the Order. She had her throat cut in her sleep." One of the dark-haired boys — the barbarian thought it Wasel — spoke with a certain amount of relish.

"I heard an ambassador from the emperor's court and his fighting frog stole it during an animal attack on the captain," his brother Birten said, determined to speak at least once.

"They even say a metal-skinned barbarian killed the captain and her lieutenant and stole away a great treasure," Girter confessed, glancing toward Kamahl. His friends looked nervously at the mountain fighter, who smiled back.

"I never had the pleasure of meeting the captain."

The three youths laughed uproariously as if Kamahl told a great jest.

"I am, however, interested in occurrences inland. Perhaps I will return that way. I also might travel by ship, so I would appreciate any news of the empire. Please join me, and we will talk more."

Kamahl watched them wave for the waitress and wondered how many rumors and false trails battled with the truth. Perhaps he would stay in Borben a while, finding news sources from the empire. One thing was certain—further travel was pointless without more information.

CHAPTER 23

"Shall we come to order?" Laquatus called as the generals gathered around the table. The delicate murals on the throne room walls twinkled like submerged stars, the emperor's image looming over his councilors and servants. In the continent's dead buildings, the ambassador could take the image down or cover it. However, in the sea, the palace itself would bleed the image through any barrier. Besides, Laquatus could not decide the fate of the emperor's face, not just yet.

Already he had turned the throne room into the command center. From here he directed the action against the supposed rebels and agents of the queen. Aboshan had retired to his rooms in disarray. There he spent his time in debauchery with occasional bouts when he planned paranoid purges. Increasingly, the court relied on Laquatus to deal with the day to day running of the palace. Many decisions, formerly the exclusive domain of the emperor, were decided by him. Best of all, he was able to blame the bolder and bloody moves on the now-isolated ruler.

A general droned on, but the ambassador ignored him for now. Most members of the new ruling body were military, for Laquatus had taken over the government's civilian functions. Ministers who were former rivals or could impede his decisions were already cleared away. The obstacles were removed by denunciation. Some died, and others fled to the

southern courts, proving their treachery or at least their taste for living.

The valuable and respected ministers presented more of a problem. Too many traitors in the government's highest ranks might lead Aboshan to suspect Laquatus. Remembering the effect of his own exile in isolating him, the ambassador found compelling reasons for the highest officials to be sent abroad or to the empire's hinterlands. Embassies opened in dozens of cities, and the reluctant diplomats tried to remove the queen from her undersea allies.

Many of those courtiers remaining in the palace found themselves elevated due to Laquatus's influence and transferred their loyalty to him. Having the whip hand over the civilian administration, the ambassador was considering his next target—the army. It agitated constantly for additional funds, soldiers, and action. Even now, officers looked to him to implement their latest recommendations. He wondered what they were.

"I will hear the next report and inform you of the emperor's decisions regarding your requests, General." He would glance at the wax-covered slate later. He might even secure a decision if he thought the outcome personally favorable.

Another officer began to report, and Laquatus wondered how to gain ascendancy over the army. The problem was proving more resistant to his attempts to weed out leaders. The military had a higher sense of duty and loyalty to its own institutions. Moreover, he could not steer his own candidates to empty positions. Any openings were still filled at the pleasure of the commanding generals.

What he needed was an eviscerating purge of the army's officer corps. Laquatus needed his own armed force to implement it in the emperor's name. A personal guard, he thought, and his eyes drifted to the rear of the throne room. Turg and his lackeys were gathered together, gambling quietly. The killers and scoundrels his jack recruited and led in the raids lacked the strict discipline demanded by the army. However, there were many castes and species in ocean society that could be played against each other. The lower orders had their place, and if a bloodthirsty few managed to improve their lot to the ambassador's benefit, he saw no harm. His jack could find more compatriots while he looked for an excuse for Aboshan to create another army.

He thought of the emperor entombed in his rooms with Laquatus controlling access to the monarch. Expanding the current system of spies and thugs in a serious military force would not be too difficult. He could use subtle innuendo about the military's loyalty to the emperor. However, that course was risky. Aboshan might take personal command of the army leaving no forces loyal only to the ambassador. Perhaps it was time to find avenues to power beside manipulations in the throne room.

"Thank you all for your time," Laquatus said suddenly, cutting another general off in mid-speech. "I believe these problems deserve an immediate response. I will go to our beloved ruler and urge him to act on these concerns as soon as possible."

Many officers could not hide their irritation at the abrupt dismissal, but it was hard to complain of an

advisor moving promptly to convey their problems to the sovereign.

Turg, he commanded mentally, ready to leave for the vaults.

The frog resisted, wanting to stay with his companions. The ambassador swam over, wondering what could be so engrossing. A huge glass cover from the imperial kitchens lay on a tabletop. The amphibian and a triton released fighting fish under the glass, sealing them in. The fish, at first, swelled until one appeared bigger than its opponent did. Laquatus thought of Aboshan's swollen ego as one tried to drive the other off. But the lesser was trapped and could not escape. Both fish attacked, forced to combat because one could not leave. The noble dragged his jack away, sick of resistance to his will. The other scum scattered at his show of wrath.

Laquatus led the sullen champion to a waiting room. He could leave for the treasure rooms in a little while. He could afford a little time to adjust his servant's attitude. The frog's sounds of distress carried into the throne room as his master took pains to educate him.

* * * * *

"My enemies decay in the depths," Aboshan, Emperor of the Seas, chuckled as he reviewed the execution lists. The wax showed his enemies' names, and he rubbed them out in glee, imagining himself rubbing them out of existence. He had erased them. No one mentioned their names for fear of contamination, and the state already held their property, appropriated in his name.

The past weeks had been difficult. He constantly feared conspirators might break in despite the increased guards and secret police. He stopped allowing his attendants into his quarters because assassins might infiltrate them. He had been reduced to looking at the names of his dead enemies. Suddenly he was afraid, perhaps removing them from the death lists would bring them back to plague him.

He rolled in the water several times, trying to shake off the black thoughts oppressing him. His forces were stripping the empire of criminals every day. Arrest and execution warrants traveled with the army and the police. He was growing safer, he reminded himself.

The emperor needed to get out, to make sure something existed outside these rooms. But where could he go where his enemies might not find him. Aboshan suddenly remembered the vaults and the land walkers that he employed to service his treasures. Surely in the depths of the palace he would be safe. Yes, he would go and see what wonders had been reclaimed.

"Guards!" he screamed, wanting to leave but afraid to unless surrounded. The waters frothed with predatory fish seeking attackers as mermen sped from their posts at the doors.

"What is it, Your Majesty?" a guard asked, his fellows splitting to sweep the room for intruders.

"We wish to inspect the treasure rooms under the palace," he commanded, his voice stronger than it had been in some time. "Have them cleared of undesirables for our tour."

The guard stared slackly then retreated at Aboshan's angry expression.

Servants streamed in as the announcement spread of the emperor leaving his rooms. They brought his jewelry and worked to make him presentable. The uneasiness made him wonder if he should stay. But it had been so long.

He must not allow his subjects to think him cowering in a corner. He was in control, not the rebels or his wife. Not even his loyal servant Laquatus directed the path of the empire. The realm was his to use as he saw fit. Aboshan resolutely swept out into the halls. Guards raced down side passages to clear a path for the monarch, unable to cut in front of the emperor.

The halls appeared deserted, the ruler knowing many feared to be in his presence while his moods were so unpredictable. They must learn to live with it, he decided. He would not be a pariah in his own house. The passage wound down to the sea floor. Light blazed from normally dark walls as the palace reacted to his presence.

Aboshan reached the bedrock. A shimmering bubble stretched across the room to a partition. He could see a squad of tresias chivying someone behind the screen. At least he would not have to soil himself by looking on the land-bound. The sentry bowed to the ground, his stalk pivoting to bring his torso flat to the rock. The emperor ignored him as he swam closer to the bubble of air. The monarch remembered his ministers creating the spell. The problems with item preservation dictated that Aboshan, who despised all above the sea, have a pocket of air and dry land in his

own house. Worse, he could not swim among his treasures but must walk on legs.

"Avert your eyes as we inspect our treasures," the emperor told the guards. He swam closer, then passed into the bubble. He writhed with unexpected pain. He had buried his ability to form legs at least as deep as the treasures below. He lay on the floor, gasping for air as his tentacles combined and formed legs. He laboriously expelled water cleared from his new lungs. He tried to stand, but his muscles protested. The best he could manage was a I crawl as he neared the trapdoor. He sat at the top of the stairs leading down, the air feeling as chill as the ocean depths. At last he slid down the wooden steps. He gripped the banister and laboriously pulled himself to his newly created feet.

The room was lit by unpleasantly flaring lamps. Crystal globes captured traces of fire and threw their harsh rays from the chamber's corners. The shelves erected on the floor were taller than his head, his treasures laid upon them and cataloged. He tottered toward the first set, gripping the sides as his feet shuffled over the uneven floor. Some of the wooden planks groaned under their loads. The steel and glass heads of forgotten fighting machines stared at him as he worked his way down the aisle. Mechanical limbs threw threatening shadows. He passed a section of knives, their wavy edges promising death to who ever touched the blade, the wielder as well as the victim. A pile of jewels, separated by type, covered the wood at the end of the aisle.

"Is this all?" he asked himself. Where were the magics to sweep away his enemies? He had no interest

in baubles or small devices. He could draw on an empire to build his armies. These items were inconsequential compared to his might under the sea. Perhaps the greater wonders were deeper under the palace?

Aboshan moved toward the hole leading down to the next room. His stride improved as he went down the ladder. He was no weakling to be overwhelmed by walking. The shelves seemed more of the same. A projector lay groaning on a set of tables. He could see the spears contained through gaps in the mechanism. The weapon might make a single warrior or machine nigh unstoppable but was of no use against the hordes a war must bring.

He strained to topple the trestles. He snarled at his impotence as he tried to move weights unsupported by water for the first time. Dry land oppressed him. All but a tiny fraction of his forces could not leave the water at all. The continent's interior seemed remote as distant islands to the savages inhabiting the world of air.

The real weapons must be hidden. He stretched out his senses, drifting between the shelves. He could smell the water and mud down in the lower levels. His eyes saw little sign of hidden cases or rooms as he worked his way back. It was only his meticulous attention to the walls that tipped him off.

One section of rock changed slowly as the light brightened. The shift reminded him of the palace walls, but it appeared bare rock. He approached and let his senses wash over it. The surface was a facade, and he felt the thrill of discovering a secret trove. His will grated against the surface, and the covering

slowly sloughed away. Water poured out, murky and stinking of metal and rot. The cache must predate the Cabal's arrival, Aboshan realized. The former curator must have hidden the object before dying in the rebel attack.

A leather sack lay on the floor. The emperor knelt down, nearly falling as he performed the maneuver. He opened the bag, the material tearing like paper. He held the world in his hands.

The orb was brilliant blue, the globe's surface covered in places by chop, as waves and weather collided. The depths of the sphere called to him, speaking its name.

"Mirari," the emperor whispered.

He stared in wonder, his senses diving beneath the surface to explore the world he ruled. The abysmal depths called to him, and he raced to answer.

The orb spun out of his hands as he toppled, the ball rolling away to fetch up against a shelf. The emperor's legs split into tentacles. He thrashed in panic as his lungs tried to turn back to gills. His mind convinced he swam in the ocean, his body had attempted to adapt to the new reality. Aboshan shuddered as his magic slowly halted the transformation and forced himself to revert to his land-bound form.

He rolled upright, furious that his being could betray him so. He walked quickly to the orb, the sphere's glory feeling slightly less. He stooped to pick it up and rapped his head against the wood.

"Everything conspires against us!" Aboshan swore, closing his eyes against the pain. "Forced to walk on legs like a common animal. How I despise

them all!" The ruler put his tentacles to his head as if to press the anger back in. The land assaulted his mind. Even for the care of treasures like the orb he depended on the Cabal. He wondered what trick they had prepared for him?

He held the Mirari before his eyes. The sphere's endless seas were swept by waves without land's interruption.

"That is what I want. For my kingdom to stretch on forever." Perhaps his wife might come back to him if he were more powerful. But the continents seemed forever beyond his reach.

"We will sweep you all away!" he said madly and thrust his magic into the sphere.

CHAPTER 24

Laquatus swam down the corridor, his jack struggling to keep up with him. He had waited too long, and now everything might be at risk. He did not hear of the emperor's excursion until after he finished chastising Turg. Only after he started for the vaults did another courtier ask him if he was joining Aboshan's tour of the treasure rooms? "What do you mean?" Laquatus bellowed, as he crowded the noble back. His champion took hold of the aristocrat's limbs. Outrage filled the minister's face as the amphibian laid hands on him.

"I demand you let me go," he hissed. The frog broke his prisoner's collarbones at his master's surge of irritation.

"You might heal if you hurry to a doctor," the ambassador said intently, giving the broken bones a nudge with his hand. "Or you could suffer injuries leaving you with flippers instead of hands." Turg gave the noble a simple fracture in a lower arm. Guards and servants ignored the impromptu torture session. It was unhealthy of late to be interested in Laquatus's business.

"He is clearing the treasure rooms of workers and will inspect the rooms in person. He left while you talked with this animal." Turg broke his other arm in passing as Laqua-tus rushed to the vaults in the depths of the palace.

The way was clear, the servants keeping as much space as possible between themselves and their

sovereign. The aristocrat passed guards and checkpoints, but they were never challenged. The ambassador was now the second most powerful person in the northern court, but he could be cast down at the emperor's whim.

Laquatus passed the interior banquet rooms, ignoring the delicacies that eternally awaited a courtier's dining. The hall changed shape and direction as he passed chambers that had been sealed at the emperor's pleasure. Rumors abounded of disloyal subjects interred in the finest rooms, lacking nothing but an exit. The swim was taking too long, and the ambassador accelerated, cursing the grand airs of the marine rulers. He and Turg neared the lower passages, leading to the vaults. There were few doors here, most of the space devoted to the organs which allowed the palace to live. Laquatus passed members of the imperial guard, posted to protect the emperor as he toured the bowels of the palace. A giant squid jetted back and forth through the narrow corridor. The ambassador wanted to force it aside.

However, he knew how aggressive the cephalopods were, so he slowed and gave it as wide a berth as possible. A huge eye looked him over as the ambassador continued on. It took seconds to pass the monster. The long whips stretched beyond the other tentacles. Laquatus dodged the long clubs with their oversized hooked suction cups.

The squid was one of Aboshan's proudest achievements, recruited from the queen's allies in the abyss. The emperor proved at least in his own mind that he could compete with his wife. The pair neared the entrance to the vaults.

The sessile warrior still floated on his stalk. He held a trident in his hands as he directed the guards in moving a partition. Laquatus was surprised to see Fulla and her companions penned in the bubble set over the trapdoor. The air was stretched until it resembled a loaf of bread. The spell seemed to be straining. The dementia caster poked her hand out through the water barrier, watching the boundary ripple with interest.

"Guard," the ambassador said, drawing the stationary fighter to attention. The arms on the rooted figure crossed as he drew himself upright. "I would speak with the emperor."

Laquatus wondered how he would deal with an outraged sovereign. He had no idea how obvious the Cabal's looting operation of the vaults was. Aboshan might have no idea anything untoward was happening.

The flare of powerful magic seemed to fill the room. A massive spell's presence set the magical field to vibrating. The air bubble shook violently as the palace spells interacted with the new force. With a sinking heart Laquatus realized Aboshan must have found the orb.

"I must see the emperor now," the aristocrat demanded, determined to find out what was happening. The guard twisted his stalk, the trident no longer at attention but lowered for use.

"Absolutely not," the sessile warrior said flatly, coiling on his long stalk as if to lunge forward. "His imperial majesty did not wish to be disturbed, so none shall pass. The emperor allowed for no exceptions."

The soldier waved for reinforcements from the corridor.

These guards might move from where they were rooted only a few times in their lives. As a result, Laquatus believed, they were the most stubborn and unyielding guards in all existence. Rigid obedience to all orders was their trademark.

Another pulse shook the ether, but this time the concussion was also physical. The ambassador felt the water surging in sympathy to some spell perpetuated by Aboshan. Laquatus remembered the disaster that had struck the Order. Aboshan had no interest in what happened to the Citadel, and Laquatus neglected to share the information for fear of drawing the emperor's attention to the orb. Even now a spell might be encasing the vaults in impenetrable crystal. The palace wall shivered as a new wave of energy blasted through the living tissue.

"There is no time," Laquatus growled as his commands leaped from his mind to the palace walls. His authority unquestioned by any in the court, the building obeyed. The walls closed. Laquatus imagined the panic that must be filling the upper floors of the building for he did not limit his command. He wondered how many would die as the passage pinched shut, sealing the troops away from the emperor. The giant squid the ambassador had passed jetted down the corridor, its speed blinding as it tore into the vaults' antechamber, getting through the door before lattices of chitin and coral could crimp the passage shut.

"Take it," the ambassador ordered Turg and moved against the rooted guard. The stubborn whelk directed a sudden current at the ambassador,

threatening to batter the merman against the walls. Laquatus swam into the flow, showing off his body's power as he rarely did. He stilled the torrent and circled the guard, wondering how long it would take the poison on his rings to kill his opponent.

In the background he could see the Cabal workers panicking—under the ocean with only a thin bubble preventing them from drowning.

The ambassador focused on his one fight. Who would think an immobile opponent would offer a challenge? He called for a shark to feast on the stationary target. But the fighter was tied directly into the palace, and his counter-spell disrupted the magical call. Laquatus tried to conjure other monsters. In spite of his vigorous attempts, the guard's magic was a stone bastion upon which he wasted all his strength.

In the bubble, the Cabal workers struck at their amphibian watchers with magical attacks. The blind tre-sias's limbs withered, the muscle melting away under the workers' hands. The fighters shrank to miniscule proportions, their bones cracking and spearing through their skins. If only the aristocrat enjoyed some of that dark magic, but his spells were of the sea and his opponent opposed every summoning. At least the amphibians would not interfere with the ambassador's fight.

Another wave of power welled up from below, and the ambassador lost focus as some effort from the emperor assaulted his sense. But Laquatus's sessile opponent suffered more. The surges of energy pulsed through the walls, and the guard was anchored to them. The warrior appeared confused and discharged

magical blasts in all directions as the ambassador tried to close with him.

"Turg," the noble called, hoping that together they might uproot the enemy, but the frog could not come.

The giant squid jetted through the water faster than a bird. Only the amphibian's creative use of the air bubble on the floor allowed him to escape time after time. The jack threw himself through the crowded space, bowling whimpering Cabal technicians over as he vanished from view. The squid fished for his enemy, its two long tentacles slamming into the workers and snatching them into the other eight where it tore them apart.

Fulla became involved as her safety was threatened. The Cabal workers reanimated their drowned brethren and set them swimming for squid. The deep-sea monster threaded by them with ease, their clumsy motions no match for its speed and agility.

The rooted warrior directed more currents to sweep the chamber. The palace walls began to relax as the warrior countered the ambassador's command. If any of the elite survived beyond the door they would soon be attacking Laquatus.

The static guard's power pushed to reopen the palace passages, and Laquatus tried to steal victory from the jaws of the defeat. He redoubled the guard's call as he dived through the top of the air bubble. The command forced open the passage over the vault entry as well as doors throughout the palace. He transformed into a humanoid even as he rolled down the steps with bone-jarring force. Turg followed, one of

the squid's tentacles snatching away a layer of skin as the ambassador shut the living curtain. This time he directed a bolt of lightning and killed the door to prevent the rooted guard from opening it for reinforcements.

There was no sign of the emperor. The ruler's spell still pulsed out, but the force was so great it obscured the exact position it flowed from. The vaults took up twelve large chambers in the living rock. The palace walls spread over every surface, but it was thin in comparison to the upper rooms of the structure. Laquatus looked to Turg for aid, but the frog was curled up, his skin pouring out a restorative slime over his wounds.

Laquatus composed himself, sinking into a chair before a cluster of tables. The furniture must have been imported at great expense, but it was an ugly reminder of dry land to the ambassador. Intricate mechanisms rested on the table in the stages of restoration. A card on one matrix of crystal, copper, and gold identified it as an aid in clairvoyance—the art of distant sight.

Laquatus threw out his senses, desperate to find the emperor before some catastrophe overwhelmed them all. Instead his view expanded exponentially, and information flooded in. He soared up from the ocean floor. Below him lay the palace. Then the capital. Finally he saw the continental shelf and the mainland.

The ambassador's awareness swept the coastline, and he understood the purpose of the spell. Huge waves swept toward the helpless shore. He admired Aboshan's vision as he saw walls of water smashing

into small villages. The impact tumbled boats far from the shore. The emperor poured more power to fuel the continuing destruction. But Laquatus could also see the power tearing at the capital's fabric. The surges of mystic energy disrupted the delicate web of spells the living constructions relied on to function.

To his horror, he saw the palace lying in the eye of the storm of magic. Many dwellings were beginning to disintegrate, as spells they relied on flared and died.

His spirit collapsed back to the palace, the chaotic waves of power playing havoc with the enhancement spell this close to the origin of the destruction. He grasped the organization of the vaults in a burst of vision—twelve caverns interconnected by a single passage and most of them packed tight with mud. People said the vaults were in the bowels of the palace, and bowels were not full of treasure. But there was one piece of perfection, the orb. He saw that the emperor was only one level below him.

"Aboshan, you fool," the ambassador cried, headed for the pit leading down. Turg uncurled and followed slowly, still favoring his side. Water began to cascade down the stairs as the temporary hatch locking out the imperial guards began to fail under repeated blows from the other side.

Laquatus flew down the steps, racing for the chamber's corner. There the emperor knelt entranced, his hands holding the sphere. Waves crawled over the miniature globe's surface as the monarch sent another burst of power through the orb, only to have it magnified a thousand-fold. The ruler was lost in his personal visions of a landless world.

"I should have killed you months ago, you deluded idiot," the ambassador said as a tremor shook the room, sending artifacts crashing to the floor. Turg moved forward, savoring his first taste of regicide. Aboshan started awake, self-preservation overriding his blindness at the display of treachery and insolence.

"Guards!" cried the emperor. Perhaps the palace was dying, but it struggled to obey its master's voice. The hatch above broke and water roared into the upper chamber, forming a cataract down the stairs.

The long whips of the giant squid curled around the shelves below as it pulled itself down the stairs. It rushed to protect its emperor. Wooden planks bucked off their frames as the body slammed into the piled treasures. The hole leading down to the next room plugged up, and the water level began to rise. A few mermen slid down the stairs on their bellies, thrashing around in the water. However, unlike Laquatus and Aboshan, they were unable to form legs. They ducked their heads into the water, trying to breathe. The soldiers sent arc after arc of lightning flying toward the ambassador.

The noble retreated, an image of charred flesh left behind in his place. However, the palace guard knew his reputation, and spears of power smashed through the illusion, searching for him. Seeing their bloodthirstiness and indiscriminate attacks, Laquatus sent his image racing among the guards. It ran as if insanely desperate to flee. Spears and gouts of power from the guards devoured their own ranks as the elite tried to kill the traitor.

Where is my champion? the ambassador wondered as he sent a snake of lightening writhing among the prone guards.

Turg fled before the giant squid. The long whips pulled down shelves as the cephalopod pulled itself after the frog. His camouflage failed him. The slab of skin pulled off by the guard's tentacle showed clearly, despite the amphibian's attempts to hide. The jack tried to cast a spell of blindness, but Laquatus was too involved to send much power through the link. Timber and a variety of maces fell on the amphibian as the squid pulled a rack of treasures down on him.

In desperation, Laquatus tried to feed on the palace's remaining magic. The spell gained him little power. Turg, in turn, siphoned most of it through the pair's link. He needed every scrap as he fought to survive in his battle against the deadly guard. The ambassador felt spells failing as he sent a weak blast against the guards. The water was waist deep, and he thought of returning to his swimming form. A converging series of blasts sent him scrambling up a set of shelves, his hands bleeding as he gripped the tangled metal of a recovered artifact. A ground shock shook many of the items to the water below, some of the frames splashing as they collapsed as well.

"You are destroying your kingdom!" Laquatus shouted to Aboshan. The ruler rocked in glee as he continued to call for the land's destruction. The mer warriors attacked the apparent source of the ambassador's voice. The two guards electrocuted each other, as the noble tricked them yet again.

"Nothing is beyond our grasp," the emperor called, and another surge of magical force assailed the

mainland. The ruler appeared oblivious to the ongoing destruction around him, lost in his vision of what his attacks accomplished.

"Your are destroying your palace!" Laquatus bellowed, then staggered. A psychic wound cut through his mind and mastery of magic.

Turg was caught in the squid's tentacles. His frame shud' dered as the monster's beak bit into his flesh. The cephalo-pod's short arms writhed, working at the prey in its grasp. The amphibian's flesh tore, and the ambassador fell, his teeth clenched. He felt through the link the champion's muscles and tendons tearing. The frog writhed in agony, energy flaring as the beak tore at its waist. Laquatus reeled as the legs separated, and the blood vacuumed from the frog's brain.

A final surge leaped through the link. With only one hand showing beyond the tentacles, a long lash of power whipped from the jack and burrowed into the huge eye. Fluid spurted as the organ collapsed, the body shivering briefly as the charge raced up the optic nerve. It destroyed the brain and took Turg's killer with him into death. Laquatus collapsed, and only the remaining guard's fear of yet another trap prevented them from killing him.

Aboshan wailed, and the ambassador wondered dumbly if his pain somehow carried to his sovereign. The guards closed around the ruler, trying to intercept the attack that made him cry out.

"My palace! My city!" the monarch bellowed, his eyes wide as the side effects of his spell finally became known to him. Another ground shock hit, this one finally tearing free the blockage to the levels below.

With a stuttering roar a whirlpool formed, dragging debris into the lower rooms. Turg and his killer slowly slid from sight as Laquatus gripped the shelving he fetched up against. The guards' flukes beat as they held the emperor against the current.

"This is your fault," Aboshan cried out, searching for someone to blame. "None of this would have happened without your treachery."

Laquatus ignored the lie, staying still as he tried to marshal his strength. Perhaps he could still escape. His body ached to transform to its tailed state, but any magic or movement might bring the guards down on him. The warriors stayed clustered around the sovereign. Another pulse of power fed into the emperor's spell despite Aboshan's efforts to stop it. Laquatus remembered Kirtar and doubted the ruler would survive his ambassador by more than a few minutes. A fresh wave of guards flowed down the staircase, the cephalids holding tridents. The aristocrat readied himself to meet his death but was unexpectedly reprieved.

The guards retreated from the upper room in defeat. A giant newt moved to the head of the stairs. It was the size of a crocodile, but it showed no teeth. Its dark red flesh was covered with weeping sores. Its skin extruded a thick gel, especially on its hindquarters. The animal turned and whipped its tail, launching gobs of the muck at the retreating soldiers. They tried to dive beneath the water, but its level had fallen. A merman was hit on the back, and his skin blackened. It began to slough off. The creature leaped into the air and landed on another warrior. The others rushed away and threw darts that thudded into the animal's

flesh with little effect. The corruption dissolved into the water, and despite the superiority of gills, the ambassador vowed to breathe air for as long as possible.

The supply of water running down the stairs diminished, though now air began to bubble at the hole leading down to the next floor. The ground shocks must have opened other leaks. Soon more palace soldiers would be able to enter the treasure rooms.

A figure leaped down the stairs, sending a wave of water up as she skidded into the pool. It was Fulla, and she grinned like a madwoman. Her sword swept aside a merman's trident strike, and her return cut laid a tentacle open. Laquatus could see the slash turning dark as infection deepened the wound in seconds. The soldier thrashed in the water and stopped as the toxins reached his heart. A soldier managed to summon a school of poisonous jellyfish, forcing the dementia caster to jump out of the water to high shelves. She crawled along the flame work as magic strikes darkened the wood around her. The guards closed as she neared the emperor.

Aboshan was gasping, his body slowly transforming back and forth between free-swimmer and land-walker. His eyes pleaded for help, but he lay draped over a pile of rubble, unable to move.

Laquatus slowly moved to greater cover, the guards too busy dealing with the Cabal fighter to waste time on him.

Fulla splashed behind some fallen shelving, her sword ready, but it was her mind that attacked, calling up magic to slay her enemies. Gigantic black cranes stepped into existence. The birds' heads ducked to

avoid the ceiling as they stalked from the dementia caster's mind. Their scummy plumage drifted to the water as they surrounded their mistress and waded out to the soldiers. Their long bills speared down to lift cephalids from the water avoiding the tridents with ease. The tentacles tried to pull the fighters free of the bills. Blood poured from their transfixed torsos as they struggled to escape. One bird was somewhat small and could not lift its target free of the water. Instead, the fowl stabbed multiple times, churning the water into a bloody froth.

Blood gushed from the wounds, and those able to escape the birds' vicious stabbing after only a single blow did not last long. Their eyes and noses began to leak blood as the cranes' magic destroyed their ability to heal or prevent the rupture of delicate membranes. Blinded warriors spread panic as the birds played with their victims, pricking limbs and watching the warriors quickly bleed out from minor wounds.

A merman panicked and attempted to flee. His tail beating wildly, he rushed the stairs and leaped like a salmon toward the next room. He smacked into loops of rotting vine. The plant filled the hole, choking off the last of the water flowing down to the steps. The warrior tried to pull free but could not move as more vegetation covered him. A crane Flapped its wings and jumped to the top of the stairs. There it plunged its beak into the warrior's heart.

"Fulla, I am over here!" Laquatus cried, cursing his bad luck. A crane was headed his way, and he was within seconds of being punctured. The Cabal commander dismissed her birds back from whence they came.

"Why, ambassador, did you have anything to do with this party?" Fulla asked sweetly, turning him over with the point of her sword. "I and my people were left out in the cold while you had all the fun for yourself," she gently chided him.

"I do not see Turg, my favorite playmate," she said looking at the destruction of all her work. Artifacts once more were immersed, and some of the tags identifying pieces were already dissolving the water. "I had to kill my way through the guards to find the person who called for this outing." She walked to the emperor, stepping around the dead and other remnants of the fight.

Aboshan could only blink, being too exhausted to move as the orb drained the last of his magic and his life.

"As it appears that you no longer need my services I will take my leave of you," she said in an arch tone. "While the going-away party was amusing, it was unexpectedly early. I think it only fair that I receive severance pay." She reached down and carefully swept the orb from the emperor's hand.

CHAPTER 25

Kamahll wondered if he should move down the coast. He had become a successful fighter though still not accepted by the arena staff. He was popular with the crowd, but his string of victories had become predictable. The limited pool of opponents was drained of any challenge after the second week. Seeing the same faces day in and out was one of the reasons he left the mountains.

But he would stay a little longer. One possible lead might yet yield fruit. Girter, one of the young men he was friendly with, knew of secret shipments between the empire and the fighting pits. A servant of the Cabal had come to Borben to discuss the gladiatorial companies that toured the continent.

The Chandler's son told Kamahl that the official had ties to the empire. He definitely dealt with the shipment of precious cargo to and from the mer. The barbarian left word at the traveler's inn that he wished to talk with the go-between. A substantial portion of his winnings over the past weeks was included to convince the man to come.

He stepped outside the hillside tavern to look down to the town. Instead of staying near the arena, the official had taken dockside accommodations. The need to conduct business down by the water belied the official explanation for the man's journey. Perhaps he might learn something to direct his quest.

The fishing fleet straggled back in, the docks beginning to bustle. Wagons hauled the catch away as

a few freight wagons waited on the pier. The lighter ferrying cargo and special items to the ships was out in the bay. There were ships waiting at the anchorage that had been there for quite some time. Perhaps the goods were particularly important to the empire. He needed to get on board. Perhaps one of the fishermen's brothers could take him out.

Kamahl felt reality pause, and a great noise filled the world. He dropped as a pulsing headache ripped through his head. Rage and bile seemed to wash him away, and he drew a knife to defend himself from attack. A spell of enormous power and damage was being worked, the disturbance seeming to fill the sky. Birds and farm animals yowled as the barbarian lost himself in the discordant chorus.

How long he leaned against the building he did not know. A pitcher of beer in his face broke his fascination with the magical noise. He thanked the barmaid clearing the obstruction from the inn door. Kamahl shook himself and walked farther away from the building. He had never felt a spell of such strength. His prize must be close by, but there was no sign of anything strange. The town looked perfectly calm as the fisherman and wagon drivers went about their business. Then something dragged the barbarian's eyes back to the sea.

The boats along the pier lowered as water flowed out of the inlet. The bay continued to drop, and soon boats were hung up. The catch of fish fell to the exposed mud below.

Interested, people went toward the bay to see the unusual event. Here and there a few figures started running as hard as they could for the hills. More and

more people fled, and he wondered why. A flicker of movement brought his eyes to the horizon. Something was coming toward all points of the coast. The line grew to a wave striking the beaches far in the distance. He realized the size of the disaster as he saw tall trees stripped away. He looked directly to the sea, the hilly peninsula shielding him from the closest view. A roar smothered screams as a wall of water carried over the hills and fell down the slope toward the town. Now everyone in sight ran for higher ground.

The hatred and spite of the spell were nauseating as Kamahl started higher into the hills, not knowing how high the water might carry. The sound of smashing houses and shops tore the day apart. The barbarian wondered if anyone would survive the disaster. He stumbled as a new note of magic, just as strong as the first, stung his senses. The orb's magic was what drove the wave he guessed, but the bitter emotions drained away as the wave sped toward him. The magic was changed, and Kamahl knew the orb no longer belonged to the sea. Then a blast of air pushed him over, and the water came down.



Laquatus saw the orb lose its beauty, the blue ocean fading away until only gleaming metal remained. The imperial bastard, Aboshan, had cost him everything. The orb still radiated tremendous power as he looked at it, but it no longer resonated with his soul. His spirits sank lower as he realized he might be trapped here with Fulla. Who knew what insane spell she would cast now that she held the orb in her hands?

The dementia caster held the orb absently as she kicked through the destruction, sending water high into the air. Another aftershock threw her off her feet, and Laquatus slowly sat up, hoping she would lose her grip on the orb. Instead she surfaced from the water spitting a stream of the filthy liquid into the air.

I need a spell to distract her while she played likes a lunatic, he thought. If he could just capture the orb maybe he could recall its glory. But he could not grip any magic with his mind. The wound inflicted by Turg's death was crippling. The gaping hole of his bond allowed his magic to flow uncontrolled. If he were more prepared, he might have avoided it, but for now his spells pushed power to one no longer alive. An infinite void swallowed his effort, and he could not force the mental focus to end the drain.

Fulla seated herself on the stairs, bored with her horseplay. She looked at the guard enveloped by her predatory plant. She began to throw debris at him. Laquatus stood up and started toward her. The body of his former sovereign floated past, and he shoved it aside, ignoring it like a forgotten toy. The room plunged into darkness as the palace light system failed. The merman tried to coax forth light, but the Cabal member called up a luminescent mold that coated the walls.

Fulla glance absently at the orb but turned to the rising water. The air was becoming stuffy. She tucked the powerful item under her legs and looked at the ambassador. He hid his disbelief at her dismissive attitude toward the orb.

Laquatus decided that her resistance to its attractions was related to her resilience to his own

magical attacks on her mind. Dementia casters simply lived in a different world. Their perceptions of reality were so strange that perhaps the orb appeared mundane. Maybe it replicated some other effect they experienced often. Regardless, she showed little interest, and perhaps he could procure the sphere from her at a later date.

"We must escape," he told her, sitting down close to her but out of sword's reach. "This air bubble will disperse sooner or later. Unless you wish to die, you must flee to the surface."

"Why not swim away, little fish?" she asked, kicking the orb back and forth between her feet. "It is a big pond, and you are old enough to be on your own."

Laquatus curbed his first answer.

There was every chance some of the guards survived to report his treachery. At this very moment, his name might be added to the execution warrants that he signed this morning. The blanks concealed in his office with the emperor's seal already imprinted seemed a very bad idea now. The orb might be the only thing rescued from this debacle. If only he had brought his poison rings.

"You saved me, and I owe you a debt I can never repay," he said, curbing his nausea at the sentiment. "Perhaps working together we can reach the surface." If she would just help him clear the way, she could drown. A corpse had no possessions.

Another shock collapsed the stairs, and they fell into the water. The ambassador saw that she swam with difficulty though she still managed to find the orb. She struggled to one of the few shelves still standing.

Next time she is in the water I'll pull her under, Laqua-tus promised himself.

* * * * *

Fulla looked down at the merman who stood smiling like a shark. The bodies, the threat of death, and the danger of betrayal was comforting—just like home. If she returned to the Cabal it would be a disaster. Her mission to the sea had failed. Despite her manic outer denial, she could feel depression threatening to crush her. Returning as a failure was not an option.

But perhaps she could return to the arena instead of being bundled off to distant postings. She weighed the orb in her hand. She found it mildly interesting, but others seemed to covet it beyond all reason. Even now the ambassador waited for his chance to steal it. Only the chance that he might become interesting kept him alive.

It was dark and cold in the vault. Her ears started to hurt as the last remnants of the air supply spell failed. It was time to go home. Home, where a person could find a decent graveyard and strangers could disappear without awkward questions.

Laquatius meant nothing to her. She needed no aid to escape from something as simple as a collapsing underwater building. The plant still held a pocket of air though the earthquake might rip it free any moment. She concentrated, calling into being a mount she had studied for a long time.

The travel fish faded into being. Its flesh was transparent, and the dementia caster could see the bones and organs pulsing inside its monstrous body. It

flopped and wallowed in the shallow water, the wave it created reinforcing its gigantic size. She watched the ambassador jump for safety as the fish smashed whatever was in its way.

"Be still," she commanded, and it was. Laquatus was talking, but she ignored the words lost in her new creation. She stood before a blind eye, the monster unable to see except through her. The pressure was increasing, and she knew that the chamber must be moments away from catastrophic failure.

The fish turned, and its mouth gaped open, the toothless jaws stretching wide, inviting her in. She laughed, waved to the merman, and leaped into the monster's throat. She slid down the tube to the stomach still able to see the outside. It reminded her of her childhood, and she wished she could go again but time was running out. She knelt in the monster's belly, the chamber draining of the water that accompanied her on her entrance. The travel fish transported its passengers inside, and the room expanded as she stood up, her gigantic steed responding to her will.

She could see Laquatus hurling himself into the fish. She wondered if the monster should gulp him down in pieces, for the jaws were strong enough to shatter bone. No time for such rough horseplay she decided and turned her attention to the outside.

Fulla dispelled her plant, the rotting vines vanishing.

The cork holding the air pocket down ruptured. The corpses caught in its grip floated free as the travel fish wriggled through the hole to the first room and the trap door. The chamber was full of debris, but the

fish blindly searched the murky water and surged out of the bedrock.

The palace gaped open above them, a direct path to the ocean torn through the structure. The travel fish surged up, its motion jostling the dementia caster against the ambassador. She half-drew her sword, hating his touch.

"Wait, good caster," Laquatus cried, throwing himself back against the stomach wall. "Remember our agreement on shipping treasures back to the Cabal. I can still be of use."

The travel fish shot out of the palace. Huge rents in the sea floor sent gas bubbling to the surface. There were few signs of other survivors. The Cabal operative imagined them swimming far away. The empire was decimated, and the noble who had overseen its fate sat beside her. She laughed and loosed the ball the fascinated Laquatus so.

Fulla looked at the sphere as the fish swam up through the depths. The orb called to her, entreating her to commune, telling her its name—Mirari—but she ignored it. Most of her attention went to directing her steed. The glassy fish swam away from the destruction and violence that even now reduced the mer capital. Fulla turned the beast to avoid the currents rising from the sea floor.

The dementia caster regarded her stolen prize. The Mirari had turned from liquid metal as she rescued it from the dead emperor's grasp. A ball of dirt lay in her hands, the black soil reminding her of a grave. She believed the change inconsequential as her senses often misled her. Still, something lay beneath the surface, and part of her ached to raise it up.

Perhaps the orb really did promise power. She noticed Laquatus's trepidation as he regarded her in the dull light glowing from the fish's belly.

Fulla chuckled and tossed the sphere into the air, laughing harder as the ambassador barely restrained himself from diving for it. She opened a pouch and dropped it in, closing the leather bag without hesitation.

"It offers you what you want, not what you need," she crowed to Laquatus, thumping her purse. The call of the globe was lost and muted in the fractured horror of her mind, its visions overwhelmed by the dementia of her calling. Grim merriment filled the undead steed as she directed it to shore, leaving the corpse of a kingdom behind her.