



Warrior Of Earth Saga, Book II:

The Ride To Revenge

Alan M. Brooker

WARRIOR OF EARTH, BOOK II

THE RIDE TO REVENGE

...Before them stood the body of Sette, still in the funeral robes used at his burial and with his sword in his hand. Behind him towered the figure of a warrior dressed in battle armor.

“Behold your leader, Sette,” the warrior said.

They dropped their heads to the bare boards, paying homage to him they thought must be the Lord of the Underworld—but why bring Sette back to life?

“I am not dead, my friends,” Sette said, his voice strong but calm. “I was rescued by Jason of Thurgan—not from death but from Tarn’s slave pens in Sarando.”

The councilors and pirate captains jumped to their feet, their anger clearly visible in their faces. A babble of voices filled the room as each sought answers to his own questions. Sette held up his hands, a smile on his face.

“I don’t know the answers to your questions. Let Jason answer them, it is he I have to thank for my rescue.”

“But who is Jason of Thurgan?” a councilor asked. “I have never heard of him.”

“Do you not recognize the mighty Sword of Thoran?” Sette asked, pointing to the sword in Jason’s left hand, the tip of the mighty blade resting on the ground.

They fell to their knees again. They all knew the legend of the sword but had never expected to see it unsheathed before them. Yet who but the mighty warrior holding the sword would have had the power to penetrate Tarn’s deceit and rescue Sette?

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WARRIOR OF EARTH SAGA
BOOK II

THE RIDE TO REVENGE

BY

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*A special thanks to the scifi/fantasy writers of the past who
grabbed my interest, and led me away from Westerns.*

CHAPTER 1

SACRIFICE

A scream of utter despair echoed through the forest as the young girl was dragged out of the slave pens and across the bare clearing toward the stone altar. She struggled in the grip of the vicious and cruel Black Horsemen, but was no match for the two men holding her. She was not yet into her teens, they were mature and powerful warriors. Her face mirrored the fear in her heart as she was dragged across the compound toward the stark wooden cross standing behind the bare altar, silhouetted against the dark green canopy of the forest trees.

The evil Prince Khuramani stood menacingly in front of the altar, his wizard Shartan at his side. There was no trace of mercy in either face as they watched the young girl being dragged toward them, tears streaming down her face. The Black Horsemen stopped in front of their Prince, throwing the girl at his feet. She cowed, head bowed, frightened

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to raise her eyes to his.

“Prepare her,” Khuramani snarled angrily. “We are wasting time.”

Shartan snapped his fingers. The Horsemen reached down, grabbing the girl by a hand each. They dragged her upright, forcing her toward the altar. Two ropes hung from the cross arm of the cross. They fastened one to each ankle, then hauled on the ropes. The girl fell forward as her legs were hauled from under her. She was dragged, upside down, up the cross. Shartan drew a knife from under his robes. He stepped forward and cut the ragged robe from the girl, leaving her naked. The Black Horsemen started to haul on the ropes again, lifting the girl into air, her legs forced cruelly apart.

Scream after scream burst from her throat, a combination of pain and panic. She tried to reach upward with her hands. They were grabbed and tied to the upright of the cross. She hung there inverted and helpless.

Khuramani stepped forward and stood in front of the altar, staring at the naked young body hanging before his eyes.

“Will this sacrifice prove acceptable to the Evil Ones?” he demanded of his wizard.

Shartan nodded his head.

“Yes, Prince, this girl should prove adequate.”

“But are you sure she is a virgin?”

“Yes, Prince, I have tested her and I am certain she is a virgin.”

“But can you really be certain?” the Prince mocked. “You told me my sister Charni was a virgin when we tried to make our sacrifice at the Conjunction, yet it turned out she was not.”

Shartan grimaced. The Prince was right. Princess Charni of Thurgan had been their planned sacrifice to welcome the Evil Ones to Praesepe at the time of the Conjunction. Unknown to them, Charni was no longer a virgin and the Evil Ones had rejected her as an acceptable sacrifice, destroying the pentagram that had been erected at the Keep. Unknown

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to Khuramani, Jason, now known to all Praesepe as the Warrior of Earth, had used the power of the magic amulet to penetrate the Keep's defenses and, aided by Charni's loyal captain Herus and the renegade Thorsan, they had attacked the Keep during the ceremonies and defeated the Black Horsemen. Khuramani's warriors had been driven from the Keep and, disguised as two of his own men who had paid with their lives so the Prince could "borrow" their uniforms, Khuramani and his wizard had joined their flight into the mountains.

The Conjunction, the most propitious time for linking with the Evil Ones, had been wasted. The next conjunction would not occur for another five hundred years.

"There is no doubt this slave child is a virgin, Prince. She has been examined and she is intact. Her blood will appease the Evil Ones and make them look with greater favor on us..."

"The Evil Ones cannot be made to look with favor on any they do not wish to acknowledge," Khuramani interjected. "We can make our sacrifice and offer up our supplications. All we can do then is hope these find favor in their eyes. If they do not, then they will ignore us—if they do, they might answer our call."

Shartan nodded. The Prince was right. The Evil Ones would only make contact with those they selected. They must receive endless supplications from many worlds. Shartan hoped this time they would select Praesepe.

"Perform the ritual," Khuramani told him, his impatience showing. "We are wasting time."

Shartan moved toward the altar. He picked up a wickedly sharp knife lying in the middle of the altar near the young girl's head. It was nearly half an eter long, shaped like the body of a snake in motion. The blade was sharpened on both edges. He handed the jewel-encrusted handle to Khuramani, then picked up a large golden bowl and placed it immediately under the girl's head.

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The wizard began a low chant, the words barely audible. He raised his arms in the air, spread to either side of the suspended girl. The chant increased in volume. As it reached a crescendo, Khuramani slashed the blade across the girl's throat. Her scream ended in a gasping gurgle as her blood gushed from the jagged cut.

The blood flowed into the bowl, slowing to a trickle as it drained from her body. She spasmed then hung limply from the wooden cross. She was no longer living in their world, but had gone to join her gods.

Shartan raised his hands into the air again, then he reached down to take the bowl in both hands. He raised it toward the cross, calling for the Evil Ones to accept this sacrifice of the young virgin. He called for a sign to show their sacrifice had been found acceptable.

Nothing happened.

Khuramani slapped his clenched fist impatiently against his thigh.

"It didn't work," he snarled angrily. "Something is wrong. What is missing?"

"I'm not sure, Prince. I have done all I can remember of the rituals, but my charts of the secret rituals are still hidden in the Keep. Without them I do not know if I have done them exactly as the Evil Ones demand. They must be accurate if we are to successfully summon our new masters."

"Then we shall have to get what you need," Khuramani muttered, holding his anger in check. He didn't like being thwarted twice in such a short space of time. "We must renew our contacts with the Evil Ones before they move to other planets to use them to seek entry into our dimension."

"But the Keep is in Thurgan's hands," Shartan protested.

"That is true, but while Jason seeks contact with other cities and Herus guards Charni, the Keep will prove no obstacle."

"But the Warrior of Earth..."

"I told you Jason seeks to establish contacts with the other cities on

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the plains. While he is involved with that, he will not also be guarding the Keep. He cannot be in two places at the same time.”

“But the warrior has many powers, some of which we may not even suspect.”

“Does the mighty wizard Shartan grow timid at the thought of the Axe of Thoran?” Khuramani mocked. “Even the Axe can only be wielded in the hands of the Warrior, and he has to know what we do before he can attack. We will move out of the forests at night and surround the Keep between the setting of the third moon and the rising of the first sun. We will attack with the sun at our backs. Even if a messenger manages to escape, we will have left the Keep long before he reached Thurgan.”

Khuramani looked into the sky. The first of the two Praesepean suns was approaching the horizon. It would sink from view within the next ern. The second sun would follow two erns later. The sky was clear of clouds. The Black Horsemen would have to move off the island before the rising of the first of the three moons, in case there were any spies in the surrounding forests. They must be clear of the island in the dark so that if there were any watchers, they would remain unaware of the location of the artificially created ford the slaves had been forced to construct between the island and the lakeshore. That knowledge must not fall into the wrong hands or else the island’s security could be easily breached and it would become vulnerable to attack from the warriors from Thurgan.

An advance party of Black Horsemen rode into the lake waters as the sun dipped below the horizon. They carefully picked their way over the underwater causeway, the water rising almost to the bellies of their horses. Quickly they took up defensive positions on the bank so that the main party could cross without fear of ambush. While their scouts had seen no traces of any other horsemen in the area, they were taking no risks of being surprised while they were still waist-deep in the lake

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waters.

Khuramani and Shartan rode in the middle of the second group. They were not prepared to risk becoming the targets for an assassin's arrow. Bravery and heroism were not strong points with either, that was the duty of their underlings.

The horsemen rode rapidly through the forest in the direction of the Keep. It was a long ride; there would be little time for rests along the way. They had to be at the edge of the plain when the third moon sank below the horizon. They would then gather in the last ern before dawn just beyond the sight of the guards at the bridge leading into the Keep. It was the only vulnerable point. Khuramani knew this well; the Keep had been his stronghold for many years before he had been driven from it when the ceremonies at the conjunction failed.

The Black Horsemen would attack at dawn, riding in with the sun at their backs.

The element of surprise would be theirs.

CHAPTER 2

THE KEEP

The garrison in the Keep was totally unaware of the gathering storm. They were expecting no attack. Many had been in the battle that had driven the Black Horsemen out of the fortress and they had watched them flee, pursued by Thorsan and his men. The scouts from the Keep had seen no trace of any danger the previous evening, and the reports from Thorsan were that he had been unable to find any trace of them in the forests. The coronation of Princess Charni and her marriage to Jason had gone without a hitch. Many were already writing off any possible danger from Prince Khuramani, looking on him as a spent force.

Even if he had survived, he wouldn't be able to penetrate the Keep's defenses. Jason had reconnected the screen that shielded the Keep at night, and it once again protected all surrounding walls except

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for the main entrance gate. Guards were on duty protecting this area from any surprise raid; all the rest of the garrison rested in their chambers.

Many of the prisoners had not yet been transferred to Thurgan, especially those injured in the battle. Herus had decided to keep them in the cells at the Keep until their wounds healed sufficiently for them to be transported by wagons back to the city. The more severely injured of Thurgan's warriors and Thorsan's renegades were also still at the Keep. It was easier to treat the wounded in one place and then take them back when they were able to move more freely. Skilled healers and their assistants had been sent from Thurgan, and Prince Marcello of Cortano had sent some of his people to help. It was but a small gesture to show his appreciation of Jason's help with his daughter Ormuti, who had been harshly used by Khuramani when she was his prisoner. Thanks to Jason's intervention, she was now fully recovered and back in the city of Cortano with her father. The scars of her ordeal would take time to heal, but the improvement was much greater than Marcello had ever believed was possible.

The guards on the bridge stopped their pacing. They stood, ears cocked, listening. They were sure they could hear hoof beats. They looked toward the rising sun, but could see nothing against the glare from the fiery globe.

The guard commander stepped into the middle of the bridge, trying to peer into the glare. He raised his hands to his eyes, trying to shield them sufficiently so that he could see. He gave a sudden gurgling cough and fell backward, an arrow protruding from his chest.

The guard on the tower grabbed the hammer and began to beat the alarm gong. Its hollow booms echoed through the Keep, rudely shaking the garrison from their sleep. They staggered to their feet, reaching for their weapons. There was a scream and the booming of the gong ceased. They heard the clash of weapons at the bridge, then silence

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broken only by the sounds of horses milling around in the courtyard. There shouldn't be any horses in the courtyard, they had all been penned over-night in the stables. They rushed down the steps, to be met with a hail of arrows as they rounded the corner into the courtyard. Many fell at the first wave of death, others tried to back away only to be pushed forward by those behind them who were not yet aware of what was happening.

The Black Horsemen leapt from their horses and surged forward, driving the defenders before them. The suddenness of the attack had caught the defenders unprepared and disorganized. Many only had time to grab hand weapons. They offered little coordinated opposition to the Black Horsemen as they were driven back into the main chambers of the Keep. They broke into small groups as they were pursued up the stairs toward the towers and down into the cellars. The screams and moans of the wounded echoed against the background of the clash of weapons.

Within the ern, the Keep was back in Khuramani's hands. He rode triumphantly over the bridge, Shartan at his side. He stopped in the middle of the courtyard, a vicious smile on his face.

"Kill all the warriors who are still alive," he instructed his captain. "I want no prisoners or witnesses to carry the message to Thurgan."

"What about the wounded in the cells, Lord? Some of them are Black Horsemen who were wounded during the last battle."

"Kill them, unless they can rejoin our ranks," Khuramani told him dispassionately. "We cannot carry them back to the island. It is better they die now."

"What about the healers, Lord? Some are women."

"Bring the women into the courtyard. Kill the others. They are of no value to us."

"But we are short of skilled healers," the captain protested.

"Would you trust a healer from Thurgan to treat you if he was a

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prisoner?” Khuramani asked him with a sneer. “It would not take long for them to make your injuries worse than they were before you sought treatment. They could spread sickness and disease among our warriors until we were too weak to resist the warriors from Thurgan. Is that what you would like to see happen? No, the risk is too great. Kill them.”

The Black Horsemen flowed through the Keep like a tide of death, carrying out Khuramani’s instructions. The cries of the wounded were soon silenced by the swords and lances penetrating their hearts. The healers joined the tide of death engulfing everyone who was not a member of Khuramani’s force. During their search, the Black Horsemen found twenty female healer’s assistants. They were herded into the courtyard and forced to their knees in front of the evil Prince. He leered down at them as they knelt shivering at his feet.

“They are still clothed,” he snarled. “Prepare the slave chain. I want to examine my prize.”

The Black Horsemen moved forward, systematically stripping the women until they were all naked at the Prince’s feet. Most were young and reasonably attractive. They would be used to entertain the Black Horsemen when they returned to the island. The others would become domestic slaves, to work in the grime of the primitive island kitchens. They were herded into a line, then their wrists were bound behind their backs. Rope collars were fastened around their necks and these were linked together until the slaves formed a line like chained beasts of burden.

“Start them toward the forests,” Khuramani told the captain. “They will slow us down. Send some warriors and get them on their way while we finish our work here.”

“What about the prisoners in the dungeons, Lord?” the captain asked, as the slaves were herded over the bridge.

“Why?”

“Some of them are our former comrades, others were criminals. Our

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numbers drop. We could use more warriors.”

“Are they fit enough to travel without assistance?”

“I don’t know that yet, Lord. I haven’t checked them out, but I would imagine most of them are fit enough to return to our ranks.”

“Then do so,” Khuramani snapped. “Those who still have their health can join us; leave the others in their cells.”

Khuramani stalked through the Keep, his eyes blazing with anger. Shartan had hurried to his chambers to collect what he needed to aid his efforts to contact the Evil Ones. The captain was carrying out the Prince’s instructions in the dungeons. Khuramani stormed up to the treasure chamber. He threw the door open and glared around the empty room. The contents, collected over many years of raids and attacks on innocent travelers and small cities, had already been transferred to Thurgan. He hurried over to the astrodome. It was empty. The charts, including those stolen from Thurgan, and mobile instruments had been removed. Only the large floor-mounted telescope remained. It was too heavy to move from the tower. It had been in the tower for longer than he could remember, and he had never been able to work out how the builder’s of the Keep had managed to get it up the steps and into the chamber.

Khuramani was furious that the star charts were back in Sento’s hands in Thurgan. His sister would be stronger now that her wizard had his charts back—and most of the equipment from the Keep. That astrodome had been much better equipped than the one in Thurgan, as a result of the confiscation of equipment from other cities.

Even his own chambers had been stripped of everything of value. The gate to his pet manappe’s cage was open, the beast no longer inside. It must have either been killed or managed to escape during the attack.

There was little left for Khuramani in the Keep. It was of no further use to him. He was determined it would never be of any use to

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Thurgan. He instructed Shartan to destroy it.

“But what about the screen, Prince?” Shartan protested. “It is the magic of our ancestors, built into the walls of the Keep.”

“It didn’t protect us from the Warrior of Earth,” Khuramani snarled. “It shall not be left to serve him after we leave here.”

“But the magic—”

“I have spoken,” Khuramani growled. “The Keep will be destroyed.”

“But—”

“You forget your station, wizard,” Khuramani snapped. “Follow my instructions or you might also be left within the Keep when I leave.”

Shartan paled. He didn’t doubt Khuramani would carry out his threat if he angered him enough. He must be more careful. He must bide his time. The Black Horsemen would follow the Prince. No other city would welcome him through their gates. He had no option but to stay with Khuramani, or perish alone in the forests. There was no other choice but to obey—at this stage.

Shartan hurried away to lay the fire trails that would destroy the Keep. He led the trails from chamber to chamber, from the top of the towers to the basement. No chamber was spared. There would be a conflagration greater than any seen on Thurgan since the Battle of the Space Moon.

Khuramani was waiting for Shartan in the courtyard when he finally emerged, hot and grimy from his exertions.

“It is done,” Shartan muttered. “The fire trails are laid; the Keep will be burned to the ground. Only the stone walls will remain to bear witness to its existence. Nothing will survive inside.”

“That is good, wizard,” Khuramani said with a grim smile. “It is time we left and returned to the forest while we make our plans. Leave a single horseman to start the fires when we have reached the edge of the forests.”

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The solitary Black Horseman watched them cross the bridge before he climbed to the top of the tower to watch their progress. When he could see them no more, he would start the fires that would destroy the Keep. He was tense. He was used to moving in a group with other Black Horsemen, the weight of their numbers ensuring they were not opposed. He was not comfortable on his own. He could hear the low moans from those who were still alive and were asking for help. Some had been his friends. He was glad he wasn't one of them. There was no way they would survive the fires the wizard had laid.

He breathed a sigh of relief when the party faded from his view. He ran down the stairs to where his horse was waiting, tethered just inside the main gate. Shartan had left him the means to start the fire. He didn't waste any time setting fire to the pile of combustible materials stacked in the middle of the courtyard. When these were alight, they would set fire to the trails Shartan had laid throughout the Keep. It wouldn't take long.

The warrior sprang on to his mount and spurred over the bridge, then turned and headed in the direction taken by the other riders. A lometer from the Keep, he stopped his horse and turned in his saddle. The Keep was aglow, flames towering far into the clear blue sky.

The rider turned his back on his handiwork and put spurs to his horse's flanks. It bounded forward, then was thrown off its feet as the blast from a mighty explosion echoed over the plains. The Keep had disintegrated. The rider never knew this. He was lying dead beside the body of his horse, his eardrums burst by the percussion of the explosion.

* * *

Jason stirred restlessly. He felt a sense of foreboding, but he didn't know why. Princess Charni, his lovely new bride, lay sleeping peacefully at his side, her long blonde hair mirroring her beautiful face. Charni seemed totally unaffected by the sense of disaster that Jason

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felt. She did not pick up the vibrations of the cosmos as easily as her sister Larni, or even the Warrior of Earth, her husband Jason.

Jason could feel a multitude of minds trying to reach him, the vibrations jumbled and indistinct. He lowered his natural defenses, letting them through. He cried out in pain, clapping his hands to his ears. Charni stirred, opening her eyes to look up at him.

“What troubles you?” she asked sleepily, her concern visible in her eyes.

“There has been a great hurt to many people not far from here,” Jason muttered. “Many minds touched mine, all screaming out in pain and fear. Then, suddenly, as one, they were all silenced. Not separately, one by one, but all at the same time. I don’t like it. Something evil has occurred.”

“But what could cause such an event?” Charni asked. “I didn’t know that so many people on Praesepe could send their thoughts through the air like you and my sister. Could it be some natural calamity?”

“I don’t know,” Jason growled. “The thoughts were not directed; they were sent out by minds in fear, a desperate call for help that no one could answer in time. Their pain is now ended. I can no longer detect any of the vibrations, not even the slightest tremor. Those sending them out must now be dead.”

“But what event could kill so many people, so soon and at the same time?” Charni asked, a worried frown crossing her face.

Jason raised himself off the couch and moved toward the window. The second sun had not long dropped below the horizon, the first moon had yet to rise. There was a dull glow showing over the distant mountains, but not in the right location to be the last rays of the setting sun.

“That glow is coming from the direction of the Keep,” Jason muttered, pointing it out to Charni, who had risen to stand at his side.

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“It’s not the setting sun. I’ll go to the Keep. The garrison might need help.”

“Be careful,” Charni pleaded. “Don’t let yourself be led into a trap.”

“I’ll be careful,” Jason promised her. “While I’m away, summon Herus and Sento. Have them wait for my return. I don’t like what my mind is telling me.”

Jason lifted the mighty Axe of Thoran from its brackets on the wall. He lovingly ran his fingers over the razor-sharp blade. The axe had saved his life many times since he had been brought to Praesepe from Earth. He had never dreamed—except in his nightmares—that he would one day be wielding a weapon from the past to protect himself. It was hard to accept that he was no longer a writer but a famous warrior.

He turned to face the window and willed himself to the top of the castle tower. The power of the magic amulet fastened around his arm carried him there in the twinkling of an eye. He looked down toward the window. Charni was standing framed in the opening. He waved to her, then vanished from view.

Charni gave an involuntary gasp. She would never get used to Jason’s ability to make himself invisible. It was yet another power he had gained through the amulet, but Charni was not aware of the source. That was a secret between Jason and Sento. The fewer people who knew of the source of the warrior’s powers, the less chance there would be of him being defeated by trickery or treachery.

Jason stood on the cliffs overlooking the Keep, a look of shocked disbelief on his face. The Keep should have been a mere ten lometers away, standing menacingly in the middle of the plain.

It was not there.

Where it should have stood was a smoking ruin, the glow of fires still showing through the rubble. Some mighty force had razed the Keep to the ground. It must have been the voices of the garrison, raised

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in fear, that he had sensed. He must return in daylight and investigate. It was important they knew the cause of this disaster. Was it natural, or the work of the evil Prince Khuramani? It had to be a natural phenomenon—surely not even Shartan had the power to release such total devastation. Maybe the anger of the Evil Ones had been simmering since the failure of the Conjunction and they had decided to return and wreck the site of the abortive sacrifice.

Jason returned to the castle. Charni had dressed. She stood waiting for him, the frail figure of Sento at her side. His old eyes mirrored the concern in hers.

Alongside them was the mighty Herus, solid and dependable, a reassuring sight. Concern was also showing in his eyes. His hand reached down toward his sword as Jason suddenly materialized beside them, then he gave a sigh and released his grip on his weapon. He still couldn't get used to the warrior's ability to move freely through space—and to appear and disappear at will. However, that was not his problem. His task was to guard Princess Charni and Thurgan, and he took that responsibility very seriously.

“Was it the Keep?” Charni asked, her concern obvious from her voice.

“It was,” Jason said grimly.

“Is the garrison safe?”

“The garrison is no more—and neither is the Keep.”

The three people in the chamber gasped, unwilling to accept what Jason was telling them. The Keep had stood, solid and immovable, since the time before the Battle of the Space Moon. It had faced storms and earthquakes, battles and conflicts, all without the slightest signs of damage. Even age had not weathered the solid stone walls. Nothing could destroy the Keep.

“What do you mean, the Keep is no more?” Herus growled. “No power on Praesepe could destroy the Keep. Such is its construction that

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it even survived the battles that devastated the surface of our world at the time of the Battle of the Space Moon.”

“I believe you, and I agree with you, but what if the power that wrecked the Keep was not from this planet?” Jason asked.

“You mean the Evil Ones,” Sento asked.

Jason nodded.

A frown crossed Sento’s brow. “That could be possible,” he mused aloud. But for what purpose? And how would they channel their power specifically to destroy the Keep? They could only come into this dimension through the power of their symbol, and then only with the proper rituals. The symbol at the Keep had been destroyed after the attempted sacrifice of Princess Charni proved abortive because she was no longer a virgin. Even if there had been another pentagram in some hidden chamber at the Keep, the ritual was known only to Shartan and others who dabbled in that portion of the wizard’s arts. They knew Shartan had not been in the Keep after the Conjunction—if he had been, their search would have found him—and there was no way he would have got back into the Keep past the guards who would have been wary of any surprise attack from the Black Horsemen.

“We must check the Keep when the first sun rises,” Jason muttered. “There might be something there that will show us what happened. I will return there at first light tomorrow.”

“Shall I come with you?” Herus asked.

“No. It is better that you remain to guard Thurgan,” Jason muttered. “If the destruction was man-made, maybe it is part of a trick to lure us away from the city, leaving it at the mercy of the Black Horsemen.”

CHAPTER 3

RETURN TO THE NORTHERN CAVES

The first rays of the sun cast long shadows over the plain. Jason stood at the edge of the moat, looking with amazement at the devastation. The Keep had been blown apart by a massive explosion that had obviously started inside the complex. The huge stone blocks, some as high as a man and twice as wide, had been tossed outward and were scattered around the plain like grains of sand. Some lay in the moat, but many others had been thrown many meters away from their original positions. The interior timbers lay in piles of ashes and scattered charred logs.

Jason wandered through the wreckage, carefully picking his way through the tangled mess. His foot hit a metal object. He bent down and picked it up, swearing softly to himself. It was a sword, but not the type used by the warriors of Thurgan. He knew the design well. It was the

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kind used by the Black Horsemen, the sign of the Evil Ones engraved on the handle.

He reached a small area clear of rubble. He swore again, but this time aloud. Scattered bodies lay around the clearing, both Black Horsemen and the warriors of Thurgan. They lay stacked on each other where they had been thrown after they had had their throats cut. These were the wounded warriors who had been too injured to travel back to Thurgan with the main party—and their guards!

A metallic glint at the top of a pile of blocks caught Jason's eye. He rose, landing to balance precariously on the top block. A metal pipe protruded from the block. It was ducting, similar to what he had seen leading from the solar collection panels that fed energy to the machines powering the energy screen that had protected the Keep during the hours of darkness. He swore. The force field had been destroyed before he had managed to examine it in detail.

From his vantage point, Jason noticed a trail of ashes leading in a straight line across the open areas of the courtyard. Then another line, and yet another. A frown crossed his face. Why straight lines of ashes? Fires didn't burn in straight lines—or did they? They would, if they were deliberately lit. Khuramani had been at the Keep, that was clear from the presence of dead Black Horsemen and the slaughtered garrison, so had he set fire to the Keep after capturing it, in revenge for the failed Conjunction? That was a possibility because Khuramani would often destroy that which he could no longer use. The killing of the wounded was also his trademark. He never took prisoners unless they were potential slaves—and he never carried away his own wounded unless they were able to move under their own steam.

Jason moved swiftly toward where the bridge over the moat had once stood. It was still there, its charred timbers standing out starkly against the ruins. They had escaped the total destruction the fires had caused to the inside of the Keep.

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Hoof prints scuffed the bridge approaches. Riders had galloped in at speed. Clear of the bridge, the prints split into two groups—one very obviously coming in and the other going out. Jason looked up at the sun. It rose immediately behind the incoming prints. He scowled as he looked toward the distant forests. The attack must have been launched at dawn, the Black Horsemen shielded by the rising sun and using the element of surprise. The other prints swung away toward the most direct route to the forests. He followed the tracks directly into a shallow, but wide, stream bed. Jason swore. Khuramani was cunning, knowing that the tracks could not be followed through the water. There would be many dry, stony areas ahead where the riders could leave the stream without trace. They could even have left an ambush party to guard their rear in case of any pursuit.

Jason willed himself back to the castle at Thurgan.

Charni was waiting, still looking as worried as when he left. Jason smiled grimly. He hadn't realized how long he had been away. Herus and Sento looked expectantly at him. They wanted information.

"It was Khuramani and his Black Horsemen," he told them.

"But how? Shartan does not have the power to wreck the destruction you tell us has been done to the Keep," Sento murmured.

"That is true, but I suspect that the Keep was destroyed by neither Shartan nor the Evil Ones."

"Then who would have the power to do such damage?" Sento asked in amazement.

"Your ancestors—from the time of the Space Moon!"

"How in Harden could that be?" Herus said in surprise. "They are dead; they couldn't reach out from the grave to wreck the Keep."

"Khuramani attacked the Keep, slaughtered the garrison and prisoners, then set fire to it. I suspect the fire caused the machinery that ran the screen to explode. The heat from the fires would heat the machinery. I don't know what type of storage was used to keep the

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energy from the suns, but if the storage cells were similar to those used on earth to store electrical energy, then they would explode when they were over-heated. With the machinery being placed in chambers concealed in the walls of the Keep, the walls would be torn apart with the force. The solar collection panels and the screen generator were in the chamber just below where the altar had been built, but I didn't see any storage cells in those chambers. I suspect they would have been hidden in the lower levels where the walls were thicker and the temperature would have been cooler in the summer. It would also explain why many of the blocks had been blown across the moat by the force of the explosion."

Sento was watching Jason, a quizzical expression on his face.

"You appear to know much about the destructive technology of your world," he said with a smile. "It was wise of our people to avoid making formal contact with your world. It would not be good for Praesepe. I doubt if we could stand against the power of weapons that such technology could construct."

"We must send out warriors to track down Khuramani," Herus growled angrily, ignoring Sento's words.

"They would find nothing," Jason assured him. "The Black Horsemen were returning to the forests and by now they will be back on the island. The warriors would not catch them."

"Then we must alert Thorsan."

Jason agreed. Thorsan must be warned that Khuramani was again growing in confidence and was prepared to leave the sanctuary of the island. The successful raid on the Keep could make him rash, giving him a false confidence and encouraging him to leave his island sanctuary again. If Thorsan was aware that the Prince was on the move, he might be able to intercept him. While it was unlikely he would capture either the Prince or his wizard, he might be able to deal them a blow that would severely dent their morale.

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Jason went to the window, placed his hands to his temple to help him concentrate his thoughts, then reached out toward Thorsan. It was a blind search. All he knew was that Thorsan and his renegades were somewhere between the castle and the lake. That was a very large area. He concentrated hard, but there was no indication of any receptive thought patterns in response.

“I feel nothing,” he muttered dejectedly to Sento. “I’m afraid the forest is shielding the thought beams.”

“Perhaps it would be better if you were able to beam your thoughts in a direct line, rather than bouncing them back of our atmosphere. It might make the beam more powerful,” Sento suggested.

“You could be right,” Jason agreed. “I’ll go to the cliffs overlooking the forest. I might be more successful from there.”

He vanished from their sight.

Jason looked down from his vantage point. Bare ridges stretched away to the west, standing out like the ribs on a starving leia. Slowly they climbed as they bent toward the north, to link with the snow-capped northern mountains—the home of the manappes. The forests stretched for miles to the east until they reached the marshes, the home of the dark-skinned warrior women. A wide swathe of forests lay to the north, a finger of low-lying land between the two ranges. It slowly narrowed as it was squeezed in by the converging ranges. To the south lay the plains that stretch across the planet’s equator.

He wasn’t sure what lay beyond that—he hadn’t got around to questioning Sento about the southern lands.

Jason tried to concentrate his thoughts into a narrow beam. It was a new technique he was working on. It hadn’t been perfected yet, but he felt it should give his thoughts more power. He slowly turned in an arch, sweeping the beam across the forests. There was no response. He tried again, moving the beam more slowly but there was still no response. It was as he had feared—the trees were shielding Thorsan

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from receiving his message. Thorsan would need to be in a clearing before he could be reached.

Should he contact Larni? No, it would be better not to alarm her. The manappes would protect her if Khuramani launched a surprise attack.

Jason returned to the chamber. Charni and Herus were no longer there. Sento waited patiently near the window.

“The Princess had to leave,” Sento said. “It was time for the meeting of the council. The Princess doesn’t wish to worry the elders, so she left for the meeting without you. There was nothing on the agenda today that needed your attention. Charni will submit your apology, telling them you had other important business to attend to.”

“And there was,” Jason muttered. “However, I was unable to make contact with Thorsan and there is little I can do now until he makes contact with us. I won’t go to the meeting. I will spend the time in thought. I’m still worried that Khuramani was able to penetrate the Keep’s defenses with such ease. That is not good. If he can get into the Keep, where else can he reach?”

Sento left Jason to his thoughts. The old wizard hurried to the council meeting to take his place beside his Princess. Jason clapped his hands. His two chamber slaves, Bianco and Brunnel, hurried into the chamber, dropping to their knees before him.

“Bring food,” he instructed them.

“Yes, Master,” they chorused in unison, eager to please the only master who had ever shown them kindness and affection. They had been his slaves since his arrival on their world. He had taken them from unskilled domestic slaves and made them into skilled chamber slaves. They owed their master much, including their virginity. They had been made women in his arms.

Jason ate slowly from the steaming bowls they presented to him. It wasn’t their duty to serve food, that should have been done by domestic

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slaves from the castle kitchens, but they loved their master and wanted to do everything for him. They cleared the empty platters and placed them outside the door for the domestic slaves to clear away; then they stood watching their master, waiting for his next command. They blushed as they felt Jason's hot eyes running over their bodies. They drew in their breath, standing more straight and forcing their breasts to stand out proudly from their chests. The filmy outfits they wore did little to conceal the shapely lines of their bodies. Bianco was a slim blonde with full breasts; Brunnel more slender all over and with dark hair—and both were natural colors, the hair the same color all over their body. Their outfits did nothing to conceal the finer details of their flesh.

Jason lay back on the couch. The young slaves rushed to put cushions behind his head to make him more comfortable, then knelt at his side waiting his further commands. He remained silent.

Bianco reached out a timid hand.

“Master, may I speak?” she asked shyly.

“Yes.”

“I sense the master is worried, and that makes us sad. Is there anything we can do?”

“You are right. I am worried,” Jason agreed. “But there is nothing you can do to help. I went to the Keep today—and it wasn't there any more.”

“Not there?” Brunnel gasped. “How can that be? It has always been there.”

“Not any longer. It has been destroyed.”

The slaves lapsed into silence. This was more than they could understand. The Keep had always been there. It had withstood the devastation of the wars that had swept their world those many years ago. They had been fortunate never to have actually been inside the menacing black walls that grew out of the plain, but other slaves who

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had been in the Keep spoke in hushed tones of its forbidding presence. They couldn't believe such a place could have been destroyed—but if that is what their master said had happened, then that must be the truth. If he was worried, then there must be a good cause for that. He hadn't appeared so worried even when the Princess Charni had been a prisoner of her evil brother inside the Keep.

Jason lay back against the cushions, his eyes closed. They saw his muscles suddenly tense and his hands reached for his head, pressing against his temples.

Jason concentrated. He sensed another mind trying to reach him. The pattern was weak, but familiar. He needed extra height to give the questing mind a clearer path. He would try from the top of the tower. The slaves gasped as their master suddenly vanished from their sight.

There was no obstruction to the questing waves at the top of the tower. Jason concentrated. It was Larni, Charni's blind younger sister and Thurgan's new ambassador to the manappes. He sensed deep concern in her thought patterns. The forest dweller they had found badly wounded in the bush was fading fast. He was calling for the Warrior of Earth. Maybe he had more information that would help in the search for Khuramani. Jason told Larni he would return to the northern caves as soon as possible.

He reappeared in his chambers, behind where the slaves were still kneeling. They gave a start when he spoke. He had surprised them. He gave them an urgent message for Sento, then vanished again.

The journey to the caves of the manappes in the northern mountains took less time than the flick of an eyelid. He willed himself to the entrance of the caves—and he was there.

CHAPTER 4

CHARNI

Jason materialized alongside a group of young manappes playing a game with stones that resembled the earth game of knucklebones. One of them had just tossed the stones into the air. The sudden appearance of the Warrior standing alongside them with the mighty Axe of Thoran in his hands proved too much of a surprise. The stones went everywhere as the child fell back onto it's haunches with a squeal of fear. Then they recognized Jason and they sprang to their feet, surrounding him with shouts of joy. Their friend was back.

Their squeals brought the adult manappes rushing out of the caves.

They gathered around, happy to have the warrior back with them. With a growl of joy, Jason was grabbed and hugged by a giant male. It was Gorta, the son of Mortgage, the leader of the manappes. Gorta, more than most manappes, had reason to feel affection for Jason. He had

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been a caged prisoner at the Keep, kept for the evil Khuramani's entertainment. It was true that his people didn't look like the other human dwellers on Praesepe, but that was no fault of their own making. They had been driven into the frozen wastes of the northern mountains at the time of the fighting that ravaged their world during the Battle for the Space Moon. They had been isolated in the centuries that had followed while Praesepe rebuilt. They had developed separately, affected by their isolation and the harsh conditions.

Their skin had grown more hair until it came to resemble the pelts of the native animals such as draga and leia. The hair had grown so dense they had ceased to need clothing like that worn by the plains dwellers, even though the conditions were far more vigorous. Their needs were few and simple. They had been a peaceful people, easy prey for the more belligerent races on their world. In time their existence had been forgotten as they were left out of the discussions of the other tribes. These tribes had grown in strength and clawed their way back to "civilization." The manappes were forgotten. When they were rediscovered by the hunters from the plains, they were treated like animals to be hunted for sport and for their skins. Their language had changed during their years of isolation—they could no longer communicate with the other human races on their world.

And so it had remained until Jason had come among them.

Their legends had spoken of a mighty warrior from the stars who would come among them, bearing the legendary Axe of Thoran and speaking their language. Through the marvels of Sento's translator ring, Jason had been able to speak with the manappes in their own language. The legend had been fulfilled. Their isolation had ended with honor and sympathetic understanding between the manappes and the people of Thurgan. The links between the two races had been formalized with the exchange of ambassadors: Larni, Charni's blind sister, had stayed with the manappes while Gorta's sister Senca had traveled with Jason to

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Thurgan to join Charni's court. The other cities would follow Thurgan's lead as the news spread around their world.

"Come," Gorta growled, trying to hide his joy at seeing Jason again. "The Lady Larni waits with the forest dweller. He fades fast."

They hurried to the caves.

The injured forest dweller lay in the cave where Jason had spent his first night with the manappes. Larni knelt at his side, her sightless eyes staring straight ahead, her pretty face stained with tears. She sensed Jason's approach and jumped up, throwing herself into his arms, sobbing quietly.

"I sense his time has almost come," she sobbed. "His mind barely responds, his body is weak. I don't think he will survive many more erns. His mind calls for the Warrior of Earth. Link your mind with his, so he can die in peace."

Jason knelt beside the slight figure of the forest dweller. The mind waves were weak, only just fluttering above oblivion. Jason concentrated hard. The waves fluctuated wildly, then settled down under the calming influence of Jason's thoughts. The body relaxed physically, the lines around the face assuming a more composed pattern. Jason didn't notice. His eyes were closed as he concentrated. Slowly pictures emerged as the forest dweller relived the hours before his savage beating. Jason had to hide the revulsion in his mind at the sight of Shartan sacrificing the young girl to sanctify the altar on the island to the Evil Ones.

The forest dweller let his mind wander over the island, showing Jason the layout that had existed before he had been beaten and discarded. The mists swirled, then Shartan's evil face filled the dying man's thoughts. He called weakly for revenge for his people and his daughter. Jason gave an involuntary gasp. The young girl had been his daughter. He had been forced to watch helplessly while she had been sacrificed on the altar.

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Jason sent out a strong beam assuring the dying man that his people would be revenged. Offerings would be made in memory of his dead daughter. The proper burial rites wouldn't be possible—her body had been thrown into the forest for the night scavengers.

Slowly the picture of Shartan faded, to be replaced by images of a pretty little blonde girl cuddling happily in the arms of a young woman, raggedly dressed but with a contented smile on her face. The picture started to fade. Jason tried to bring it back into focus. It continued to fade, then the images he was receiving stopped and it was as if he was looking into a black void. The forest dweller was dead.

Jason rose to his feet, slowly drawing the skins over the dead man's face.

"He's gone," he said simply.

Jason reached for the Axe and held it in front of him. He ran his fingers slowly along the edge of the sharp blade, then raised it above his head in both hands, before lowering it reverently to his lips.

"He might be gone, but he will not be forgotten," he murmured. "I swear by the Axe of Thoran that he will be revenged."

"He appeared to die happy," Gorta muttered sadly. "His face looked more peaceful at the end."

"He died with happy thoughts of his daughter," Jason said.

"His daughter?" Larni asked, surprise in her voice.

"His daughter." Jason nodded. "She was the first girl to be sacrificed by Shartan when they reached the island and attempted to sanctify the altar to the Evil Ones. He was forced to watch the ritual."

"Our people must unite to purge Praesepe of Khuramani's evil presence," Gorta growled in anger. "He will not stay on the island for long."

"He has already moved," Jason said. "He has left the island. The Keep is no more."

Larni gasped. Gorta stood with a look of bemusement on his face.

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“What do you mean, the Keep is no more?” Larni asked. “The building withstood the ravages of the Space Moon battles. How can it be no more?”

“I’m not sure, but I suspect he set fire to the Keep and that the energy shield left by the ancient builders exploded. What matters now is that Khuramani is on the move. We must remain on the alert. We don’t know where he will strike next—all we can be certain off is that he will be planning his revenge on Charni.”

Mortage had entered the chamber during the discussions, standing in the background while he listened. He spoke, calmly but forcefully.

“Khuramani knows that Larni is in our caves. I suspect his spies have told him about the changed status of the manappes. He will not accept that we are not just wild beasts. The caves could be his next target.”

Jason nodded. Larni would be a useful target. She would be an important hostage. Charni would be prepared to listen if her sister was in his power.

“Khuramani would have to slaughter all the manappes before he would get the Lady Larni,” Gorta growled, his anger clearly visible.

“I agree, my son,” Mortage said, his voice firm and resolute. “He will never get Larni while a single manappe lives. However, we must be ready. We must be on our guard for any signs of the Black Horsemen in our mountains.”

“Wouldn’t it be safer for your people if I returned to Thurgan?” Larni asked, her concern evident to the others in the chamber.

“It would give a victory, even if only a small one, to Khuramani. We cannot allow that,” Mortage growled. “We might be a peaceful race, but we are a proud people. We will not bow to threats from your brother, either perceived or real. Our days of isolation are over, we must stand with the other races of Praesepe to defeat Prince Khuramani. We would be sad to see you return to Thurgan, but the

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choice must be yours. We will not stand in your way if you wish to return to the safety of the castle.”

Larni rested her hand on Mortgage’s arm.

“I am honored to be invited to stay, and I have no desire to return to Thurgan. My concerns were for your people. I don’t want to place them in any greater danger.”

Larni turned to face Jason.

“Has Thorsan managed to make contact with Khuramani?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t been able to reach him in the forests. The trees are shielding my thoughts. I’ll try again tonight. I must return to Thurgan first.”

“Do not forget that we are at your call, Warrior,” Mortgage growled. “We are not forest dwellers, but we will be there when you need us.”

Jason returned to Thurgan. The council was still in session. He strode in, his face like thunder. He told the council what had happened in the mountains. They would need to remain on full alert. Their trade wagons could be at risk from attacks by marauding bands of Black Horsemen as Khuramani tried to rebuild his supplies. He advised them to travel in groups—and to travel well armed. If they were attacked, he recommended they detached the horses and flee to safety, leaving the wagons to the raiders. He suspected Khuramani would be seeking supplies, not slaves. The council agreed. Goods could be replaced. Men could not.

Jason and Charni returned to their chamber after the meeting ended. Jason told her of Larni’s concerns about a possible attack on the manappes. She would remain on the alert and tell him if anything strange happened in the northern mountains. That night he would try to reach Thorsan again from the top of the ridge looking down over the canopy of trees—but he would do it after the first moon had risen.

“Be careful, my husband,” Charni murmured, holding her arms out to him. “I don’t trust my brother. He will try everything in his power to

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trap you. He knows you stand between him and domination of our world. He will never forgive you for thwarting his attempts to welcome the Evil Ones at the Conjunction.”

“I’ll be careful,” Jason promised her, lifting her face gently. Her eyes were brimming with tears.

Jason fastened his lips over hers, forcing his tongue between her teeth. He felt her relax. She pressed against him, her full breasts mounding against his chest. Her mouth opened, welcoming his questing tongue. She sighed, pressing herself harder against his body. He could feel her hardening nipples drilling into his chest. He forced his hand between their bodies, cupping the full white mound. She sighed as his fingers closed around the turgid tip and started to caress it. Her body began to squirm. She fell back on the couch, dragging Jason down on top of her. He smiled gently down at her.

“It’s still light,” he whispered in her ear. “What if the slaves enter?”

“Then they will learn that their mistress is only human,” Charni whispered back, as she lay with her head on the pillows, mirrored by her long blonde hair.

Jason sat up and looked down at this beautiful young woman who was now such an integral part of his life. Princess she might be, alive she definitely was. He reached out and slowly unfastened her robes, removing them one by one until she lay naked to his gaze, her body spread out on the couch. He stood up and removed his own robes, then lowered himself until he was lying pressed against her glowing white flesh. He let his hands roam over her supple body, bringing her pleasure as he sought and found those private areas that bring such exquisite pleasure to a woman. His lips followed the paths traced by his fingers. Charni squirmed as he built up the pleasure within her body. She arched her hips to meet his tormenting tongue, then groaned and fell back as the waves of satisfaction ran through her heated flesh.

She reached for Jason and drew him between her spread thighs. He

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slid gently into her. She moaned, forcing her hips up to drive him deeper into her body. She was happy. They were one again.

She didn't hear the gasp of surprise, then the suppressed giggles as the chamber slaves quietly glided from the chamber. They were happy that their master and mistress found happiness in each other's arms.

The second sun was approaching the horizon before Jason called for food. The slaves brought it in, their eyes downcast but happy smiles on their faces.

Jason looked at them quizzically.

"You have been in this chamber within the last ern?"

"Yes, master," they answered.

He looked across at Charni. She was blushing. She was embarrassed. They had been seen.

"What did you see?"

"Nothing that master does not want us to have seen," Bianco whispered, trying to suppress a happy giggle. "Our lips are sealed. As master has taught us, what happens within the master's chambers are of no concern to anybody other than the master."

Jason drew them into his arms, hugging them.

"Tonight I must leave the castle for a short time," he told them. "You will remain with the Princess while she rests, but make sure that one of you is always awake. If anything strange happens, do not try to help, but summon Sento immediately. We must take no risks that Shartan reaches the Princess while I'm not here."

The slaves paled. They had twice seen what Shartan could do by dabbling with the minds of other people. They had watched their master almost succumb to Shartan before the Conjunction. He was strong. The Princess was not. They would stay alert.

CHAPTER 5

THE BAIT

Jason took his leave of Charni as the sun dropped below the horizon. He willed himself to the top of the castle tower, looking down on a scene of peace and tranquility, that he hoped would not be rudely shattered by the sudden appearance of Prince Khuramani and his Black Horsemen. The torches were flickering in the courtyard and around the gate, which had been closed for the night as an added precaution against any surprise attack. Guards were patrolling the walls, alert for any sign of trouble. Beyond the walls of the castle, the streets of the city were lit by more flickering torches, but most of the dwellings were already in darkness. Few Thurgans remained awake long after the twin suns set. They were an industrious people, making the most of the hours of daylight.

The wainui taverns were still open, but they were few in number

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and appeared to have few patrons. The fermented juice of the nui tree was a popular beverage, but the consumption in Thurgan was low compared to that in most of the other cities. The guards had few problems with citizens affected by the potency of the juice.

Jason vanished from the top of the tower to reappear on the cliff top overlooking the forests. The land of the forest dwellers was in darkness, the canopy of trees hiding the glow of the fires that Jason knew must be lit in the scattered villages spread through their lands. The fires were never extinguished at night. They gave warmth and light, but they also served as a deterrent to the attacks of the wild hunting dragas. Many draga had been domesticated and were used for hunting and guarding property, but their wild streak had never been successfully bred from them. They were savage hunters by nature, and that was never more apparent than in their natural habitat. A man on foot alone in the forest, especially at night, would be no match for a single draga—and the beasts seldom worked alone. They preferred to work as a team, a technique that enabled them to drag down even the largest of prey. The only protection for the villages was the flames of the large open fires they kept burning around the villages and in the central area between the huts. At least the dragas shared the fear of fire with the other nocturnal forest beasts.

Concentrating his thoughts, Jason slowly turned, sweeping the forests for any signs of life. There were no answering vibrations from Thorsan. He must be down there somewhere. Jason swept the valley again. He detected a disturbance in the pattern near the side of the lake. He concentrated on that area. There was a distinct change in the pattern of waves. It was indicating pain and fear, almost to the point of panic. The vibrations didn't belong to Thorsan. But if not him or one of his warriors, then who was projecting such a strong wave?

The level of fear was increasing rapidly. It was confined to a small area near where the manappes had attacked the Black Horsemen to free

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Larni. He willed himself under the cloak of invisibility, then landed in the middle of a small clearing near the source of the waves. Cowering in the branches of a small tree was the slight figure of a slender young girl. She was naked, her long black hair hanging down her back to below her waist. Her young body had started to bud, the baby fat already fallen from her slender figure. She was clinging to the branches, straddling the tree trunk, weeping in fear. She was afraid to move in case she fell.

Jason reached up to help her down. She screamed, refusing to let go of the branches.

“No,” she cried. “No...No...the dragas will get me...the dragas will get me.”

Jason looked around. He could see no dragas.

“What dragas?” he asked. “I can see no dragas.”

“They’re everywhere,” the young girl cried. “See...there...and there...all around the tree...they’re trying to climb the branches.”

Jason looked around the deserted clearing. There was no sound other than the hysterical cries from the young girl. There wasn’t a draga in sight. Even the birds had been driven from the clearing by her screams of panic. He looked around the base of the tree. The only tracks belonged to the young girl. She was in a branch only a man’s height from the forest floor. She would have been an easy meal for a hungry draga. They could easily leap over a standing man. And they were skilled climbers, well able to pursue their prey into the forest trees!

Jason decided to humor the young girl. He lit a small branch and waved it around, pretending to drive the dragas from the clearing.

“See?” he assured her. “The dragas have gone. You can come down now.”

“Are you sure?” she sobbed, looking around fearfully.

“Yes. They’ve all gone. You’re safe now.”

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She slid down the trunk and fell sobbing into his arms, pressing her body against his. She was still shaking with fear.

“You’re brave to rescue me,” she whispered, her sobs slowing. “I was frightened.”

“Where do you come from?” Jason asked her.

“From the island.”

“How did you get here?”

“I was brought by a warrior on a horse. He carried me here across the horse’s neck, then he left me here.”

“Why did he bring you from the village?”

“I don’t know,” the young girl whispered, pressing hard against Jason, her arms around his neck, her face buried against his chest. Her legs had parted and were wound around his thigh, pressing her stomach hard against his leg. Her breath was ragged and her eyes gleamed with a hidden excitement.

“What happened to your robes?” he asked, curious that the Black Horseman would have brought her from the island naked and left her alone in the forest. They didn’t normally waste tasty morsels, and she was certainly ready to be used as entertainment by Khuramani’s warriors.

“The warrior took them off me when we stopped,” she whispered. “He said I looked better with no robes to hide me.”

Jason had to agree with the Black Horseman’s assessment. The girl was very shapely and showed promise of developing into quite a beauty, possibly she might even have a future as a chamber slave. Her limbs were slender but already rounded, her hair long and gleaming. Her breasts were only small, but would undoubtedly grow larger as she grew older. Her nipples were dark and large, sticking out from her chest. With surprise, he noticed the tips had hardened and were as firm as his little finger. The young girl was aroused and showed no shame as she rubbed her stomach against his thigh. He could feel the moisture

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soaking through his outer garments as she squirmed against him.

“Did the warrior do anything to you after he removed your robes?”

“Yes,” she whispered, drawing away from Jason and looking him in the eyes as she ran her hands up her body until they cupped her breasts. She took her nipples in her fingers and slowly caressed them. “He caressed me. He told me my breasts were like the fruit of the avando tree, succulent and to be enjoyed by many as they ripened.”

She gave her nipples a final tweak, then ran her hands down between her thighs.

“He told me the garden at the junction of my thighs was like the gateway to Astra, hiding the pleasures of Paradise within their portals. He told me never to close these gates, but to welcome all who knocked for entry—friend and stranger alike. He said it would be selfish to stop others from gaining entry to Astra on Praesepe.”

Jason tried hard not to be affected by the wanton sight before him. The young girl was leaning back against the trunk of the tree, her fingers caressing the gates to Astra. Eyes closed, her hips slowly undulated as she stoked the fires within her body. Her nipples were as hard as rocks. She was as aroused as even the most experienced of chamber slaves.

Jason reached for her shoulders to shake her out of her sexual trance. She moved quickly, twisting so that his hand fastened instead around her breast. Her hand closed over his, forcing them against her nipples. He couldn't resist giving the nipple a squeeze. The girl gave a gasp and forced herself harder against his body. Her hands reached for him through his clothes, clasping him with the knowledge of an experienced chamber slave. Her actions weren't those of an innocent young girl. In spite of himself, he started to react. The girl gave a moan of pleasure, then twisted and fell back on to the grass. Her sudden movement caught Jason by surprise and he fell forward on top of her. As she fell, she had parted her legs and he landed cradled between her

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thighs. She closed her thighs around him, holding him firmly against her.

“You are a mighty warrior,” she whispered. “Wouldn’t you like to enter through the gates of Astra? The goddess would welcome a visit from one such as you.”

Jason fought against his feelings of arousal. This wasn’t right. The girl was too knowing for one so young. Something was wrong. He tried to pull away, but she clung to him like a limpet. She started to grind her hips against him. He started to respond and she reached down to cup him with one hand while she ran her fingers lovingly over the amulet.

“This is so beautiful,” she whispered. “If I’m very good, will you let me try it on?”

Jason tensed, then relaxed. She was young, he had nothing to fear from her. He ran his fingers through her hair, looking down at her innocent young face. Her eyes were deep dark pools of desire. He felt himself being drawn into them like a drowning man. He could feel his arousal increasing, taking away his powers of logical thought. He plunged into the young girl’s body, guided in by her knowing hands. *Yes*, he muttered to himself. She could try on the amulet. She was good. It would do no harm. She was innocent. He felt the amulet start to expand and slip down his arm. He started to feel weak.

There was a tingling feeling in his brain. Through his haze of lust he could feel another mind trying to reach him, jumbled at first but the thoughts slowly crystallizing.

“Remember the amulet...Never remove the amulet...remember the amulet...never remove...remember...never remove...amulet...never remove...amulet...”

With a cry of anger, Jason sprang to his feet. The amulet fastened firmly around his arm again. There was a screech of frustrated anger. It started in the young girl, then left her body and echoed through the trees, vanishing toward the island. The girl fell back, eyes staring. Jason

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rested his hand over her heart. She was alive but unconscious. He swept her into his arms, then vanished from view.

His sudden appearance in his chambers, carrying the body of a naked young girl made Charni gasp with surprise.

Quickly he summoned the slaves and handed the girl to them. They took the slender young body and laid it on the couch, then crouched beside her as they waited his further commands.

“She was the bait in a trap I suspect was set by Shartan,” he told Charni. “I almost took the bait, but someone reached my mind just in time. I think it was Larni. This is the second time she’s reached me in time to prevent me releasing the amulet. Take care of the girl, I will speak with her when she’s had some rest. She must be from the island.”

“Were you able to reach Thorsan?” Charni asked.

“No. There is nothing there. It’s as if the forest is covered by a blanket which my mind cannot penetrate.”

“That could be the work of Shartan,” Sento added. He had arrived in the chamber in time to hear the last part of the conversation.

“If we’re unable to contact Thorsan soon, we will have to send a messenger to try and follow his tracks. It will be a risk, but he has been gone too long without contact. I’m starting to get worried,” Jason muttered.

CHAPTER 6

BARTHA

The next morning dawned with isolated showers of rain sweeping across the plains from the west. Jason knew the farmers would be welcoming the rain, but he preferred the warmth of the sun. He stretched, lying back on the couch. He looked down fondly at Charni still sleeping peacefully beside him. He would question the young girl later, but he didn't expect to gain any useful information from her. If Shartan had taken over her mind and had been able to control her body to use it as bait to lure Jason to the lake side, then he would have made sure he installed blocks to keep his secrets secure.

Further reverie was broken by the excited shouts of the guard on the tower. A body of riders was approaching Thurgan from the direction of the mountains. They were making no effort to conceal their approach, neither were they moving fast. They appeared tired, their horses

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exhausted.

Jason moved over to the window. The riders were still some way from the castle. They had slowed their horses to a walk. Charni stirred, opening her eyes. She looked with surprise at Jason standing in the window.

“There’s a group of riders approaching from the mountains,” Jason told her as he walked back to the side of the couch. He reached down and kissed her lips. She drew him to her, resting her head against his side. He held her close. “I’ll go and see who they are. They don’t appear to be in any hurry to reach Thurgan.”

Jason wandered off to the tower overlooking the gate. Herus was already there, waiting just inside the solid wooden doors that controlled entry to the courtyard. The riders were now within sight of the guard on the gate.

“It’s Thorsan and his warriors,” the guard called down to Herus.

Herus ordered the gates opened, then stood in the opening to welcome the incoming riders. They were covered with the dust and grime of their long journey, which even the rain was unable to wash away. They looked exhausted, but otherwise they were in good health. Jason could see no signs of any injuries—or prisoners—so they couldn’t have made contact with the Black Horsemen. Thorsan, his flaming red beard and hair stained with the gray dust of the plains, grinned down at them, then slid off his horse.

“It’s good to be back where you can see the sun,” he growled, looking up at the heavens, “even if she is a bit shy today. I’m sick of the trees. It’s like being in a prison, but with the walls hiding hidden dangers. Give me the open spaces of the plains and mountains.”

“Come, old friend,” Herus said, hurrying forward to stand at his side. “Send your men to the guard chambers. While they freshen themselves, I’ll have new clothing sent for them—and refreshments.”

“That’s just what they need.” Thorsan thanked him, turning to the

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riders to pass on the message. He turned back to Jason who had joined them. "We must talk. I saw no trace of Khuramani or his men, yet I followed their tracks to the edge of the lake. It's as if they've vanished off the face of the planet. They must be on the island. I couldn't find any tracks leading away from there."

"They're definitely on the island," Jason assured him. "I found that out for certain last night. They must have used Shartan's magic to conceal themselves from your view. But rest first, then we'll talk. A lot has happened since you left Thurgan."

While Thorsan was resting, Jason wandered back to see the young girl he had brought back from the forests. She lay on her back, looking through sightless eyes at the ceiling. He waved his hand in front of her eyes. She didn't blink. He shook her shoulder; her body moved but her eyes remained vacant.

"Has she moved at all since you brought her here?" he asked the slaves.

"No, master," Bianco muttered. "We placed her on her back after we had bathed and dressed her. She is still in the same position."

"Was there any reaction when you bathed her?"

"No, master," Brunnel said. "But she did moan quietly when we were drying her."

"At what stage?"

"When we were drying her beasts. Her nipples hardened and she moaned, but her eyes remained vacant."

"That does not surprise me, Shartan has been playing with her mind," Jason muttered.

"Like he did with the Lady Ormuti, master?" Brunnel asked, a touch of sadness in her voice as she remembered what the evil Khuramani had done to Lady Ormuti.

"I suspect so. I will try and reach into her mind to see what he has done."

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Jason sat beside the supine figure. He reached out and placed his hands on her head, fingers touching each temple. He concentrated hard. He encountered a blank wall. The girl's mind was shielded. He called the slaves over, instructing them to each take a breast in their hands and caress the nipple. They did. There was a slight disturbance in the wall surrounding the young girl's mind.

"Her mind reacts to the stimulation," Jason murmured. "He has not swamped her sexuality even though he has taken over her mind. That's good, maybe it will help me break down the wall. Arouse her."

The slaves went to work on the young girl's breasts. The wall sheltering her mind began to swirl as her emotions became aroused, but he still couldn't break down the barrier.

"More," he urged the slaves on. "We are nearly there, but the wall still stands. You must arouse her even more."

Brunnel took the young girl's nipple between her lips and began to suck. The girl began to moan softly. Jason smiled in triumph. The wall was now a mass of swirling mists. The shield was breaking. She gave a quavering cry, then fell back on the couch. Jason cried out in triumph as he had penetrated the shield surrounding her mind. Slowly he searched for the triggers implanted by Shartan to put her into her coma. One by one he found them and removed them. There were seven. As the seventh was removed, the young girl's eyes opened and she screamed in fear.

Who were these strange people around her? Where was she? Where was her mother? She had been at her mother's side when she'd been dragged away by a Black Horseman and taken to Khuramani's hut. She had been held between two warriors while his wizard swung some strange and shining jewel in front of her face. She had been forced to watch the swinging jewel until she become sleepy. She had tried to keep awake, but her eyes had closed and she could remember no more except some isolated flashes of strange scenes. She could remember

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dreaming of being naked in the arms of a strange warrior in the forest, then she could remember intense pain as she was thrown to the ground by him. Now she was surrounded by strangers in some huge chamber. She must be dead.

Jason took her into his arms, holding her close as he tried to calm her fears.

“Who are you?” he asked her as her shivering slowed.

“My name is Bartha,” she whispered.

“How old are you?”

“My mother tells me I have seen sixteen summers.”

“Do you know where you are?”

“No,” the girl whispered. “I must be dead.”

“You aren’t dead. Don’t be frightened. You are in the castle of Princess Charni of Thurgan. You are safe now.”

“But my mother...”

“She is still on the island, under the control of the Black Horsemen. We will rescue her when we can reach the island,” Jason assured her. “While she is there, she is in danger, as are all your people. You will stay in the castle until we can get your people off the island.”

“Nobody can reach the island, not even the Warrior of Earth” the young girl sobbed.

“Why do you say that?” Jason asked.

“It’s what the evil warriors who have taken over our island told us. They say that their magic will keep the island safe until they are ready to move against the city of Thurgan. Their magic is powerful. They have built an altar to strange gods. Every seven nights they sacrifice another of my friends to their evil gods, leaving the body over the altar until the next sacrifice.”

“Who do they sacrifice?”

“Young girls who have not yet known a man in their body. They have a pen where they keep some young girls isolated so that they can’t

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be touched by the warriors until it's their turn on the altar.”

“And you?”

“I was placed on the altar after the first sacrifice, along with the other women and some of the young girls, to satisfy their lusts. I was lucky. They don't want me now for the sacrifices to their gods.”

Jason stood fuming. The females from the village hadn't been given much of a choice—sacrifice or rape!

He held the young girl close.

“You will be safe now. Bianco and Brunnel will see you are cared for.”

He turned to the two slaves.

“Give her a couch with Marni and Sarsi until it has been decided what will be done with them. I will talk with the Princess about their future.”

He strode from the room.

The young girl followed him out of the room with her eyes, then turned to the two slaves.

“That warrior is a good man,” she whispered. “Who is he?”

“He is Jason, Warrior of Earth,” Bianco told her. “He is our Master.”

CHAPTER 7

THE MESSENGER

Jason wasn't happy. He stood at the top of the tower looking across the plains toward the distant mountains, tinged with the pale pink light of the setting suns. Somewhere out there Khuramani was planning his next move. Where would he strike next? There were many cities in easy reach of the island in the lake—none would be safe from the evil prince's anger, especially those that didn't maintain a strong defense force.

He froze, straining to see into the distance. He was certain he had seen the swirls of dust that marked the approach of a horseman. The cloud was small, like that thrown up by a single rider. But who would be out alone at this hour of the day? He must be a fool—or a messenger. Jason looked again. He had been right. A solitary rider was approaching the castle, moving very slowly.

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Jason called to the guard on the gate to alert Herus. The rider was still out of sight from the castle gates.

As Herus strode toward the gate, Jason materialized beside him.

“What’s the problem?” Herus asked.

“A rider approaches,” Jason told him.

“He must be a messenger—nobody else rides alone during these troubled times.”

“I’m not so sure,” Jason muttered. “He seems to be riding very slowly, unlike most messengers I’ve seen. They ride like the hounds of Harden are snapping at their heels.”

“With Khuramani on the loose, they have a good reason to go as fast as their horses can carry them,” Herus said. “If he’s on his own, then he must be a fool.”

There was an excited call from the guard on the gate tower. The rider was in sight. The guard didn’t recognize him, but he appeared to be injured. He rode slumped forward in the saddle. The reins were draped over the horse’s neck. It made it’s own way toward the castle.

Herus called for the gates to be opened. He ran toward the approaching rider, followed by Jason. The horse walked slowly toward him. It was encrusted with mud and dust, it’s mouth flecked with foam. It had been ridden hard, but was now calling on its last reserves of energy to get its master to safety. It stopped beside Herus, its head drooping until it was almost touching the ground.

Herus gently eased the rider from the saddle. His condition was worse than that of his horse. He was covered from head to toe in mud and grime. The mud was stained with blood from the many wounds that laced his body. He had been in a fight, and looked lucky to have survived. Herus handed him to the two healer’s assistants who had been called by the guard when he saw the injured messenger, and instructed them to treat their guest, then feed and clothe him.

A guard led the horse slowly toward the castle stables, where it

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could also be cared for.

Jason and Herus followed the group into the healer's chambers. They stood watching while the wounded man was treated. Sento came to join them.

"Where's he from?" Jason asked.

"It's hard to recognize his uniform, it's so damaged," Herus muttered. "It doesn't look like a uniform from any of the major cities, and many of the smaller cities have no identifiable insignia which makes it hard to recognize them. He's ridden far, but it's not easy to say how far. He's weak and wouldn't have been able to control his horse properly; they could have passed within lometers of other cities without stopping or being noticed."

"Then we must speak with him," Jason muttered. "Will he live?" he asked, turning to the healer's assistants still fussing over the patient.

"He is weak, but he should live," they agreed.

"How long before I can speak with him?" Jason asked.

"It would be best if you could let him rest tonight, then he will have extra strength in the morning."

"Keep a guard in the chamber tonight," Herus ordered. "Send a messenger as soon as he is able to talk."

The first moon was almost over the top of the tower when there was a banging on the door to Jason's chamber. A warrior entered.

"The wounded man has awakened, Lord," he said. "Herus is on the way to the chamber. The man calls for the Warrior of Earth."

Jason hurried to join Herus. Sento was already there.

The wounded man lay propped up on the couch, his eyes open. They were filled with pain from the many wounds he carried, the cavities made by arrows and the slashes of swords and lances clearly visible. The attack must have been bloody if a survivor was so badly maimed.

Herus was leaning over the man, trying to hear what he was saying.

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The voice was little more than a whisper, the strain of talking clearly etched in his face.

Jason leaned his hand on Herus's shoulder.

"The warrior is weak," he whispered in Herus's ear. "I'll speak to him in his mind. It will drain less energy from him."

Jason leaned forward, letting his hands rest gently on the wounded man's head. He concentrated his thoughts, forcing his way through the waves of pain that engulfed the mind he was trying to reach. Slowly the mists cleared as he projected concentrated images of pleasant green fields, fresh running streams and colorful flowers. The watchers could see the lines of pain etched into the man's face ease as he relaxed under Jason's telepathic suggestions.

"I am Jason," he projected in a calm tone. "I'm the Warrior of Earth. I'm told that you want to see me."

There was a burst of renewed pain, then the mists cleared again.

"Warrior, we need your help, but I'm afraid it will be too late for many of my people."

"Who seek my help; where do you come from?"

"The people of Ortagaso need your help. Our city has been destroyed. Prince Orlando has been captured. Our people are either killed or enslaved. We are no more. We..."

The mists of pain swirled through his head again. Jason concentrated hard, trying to calm the wounded man.

"Don't excite yourself. Tell me slowly what happened to our city. I will help you."

"We were attacked by raiders who came out of the forests as the second sun set. We were celebrating the start of another growth season. We were praying at the altar of our gods requesting a good harvest when we were struck by the Black Horsemen. Our prince was captured, our guards slaughtered. Our women and children have been led away as slaves into the forests."

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“How did you escape?”

“I was with the Prince when the attack was launched. I was ordered to ride for help and not to stop until I reached the Warrior of Earth. I was pursued and attacked, but was left for dead when I was thrown from my horse. It returned for me when the Black Horsemen had left. I struggled to mount—the horse brought me here. I owe it my life.”

“Rest, warrior,” Jason soothed him. “Your people will be revenged. I will seek out the evil Prince Khuramani and his Black Horsemen. They shall pay for their treachery. Rest now. Gather your strength. Ortgaso and your Prince will need warriors such as you.”

“I fear that there will be no Ortgaso to welcome me back. I looked back when my horse returned for me. The city was in flames. We had few buildings made from stone. We were not a rich city; our buildings were made from the trees of the forests. The buildings have stood for many summers, they will burn well.”

“Then your people will build a new city from the ashes, and you will be there to help them. Thurgan will do what it can to help. Rest.”

Jason lulled the wounded man into a deep sleep, then removed his hands from his head. He turned, grim faced, to the waiting group.

“The warrior is from Ortgaso. Where is that city?”

Sento scratched his head, thoughtfully.

“It’s only a small city,” he said. “I’ve never been there. It’s built on the edge of the marshes, but shares borders with the forest dwellers and the coastal fishermen. Its lands are small, it’s wealth even smaller.”

“What’s happened at Ortgaso?” Herus growled, expecting the worst.

“It has been destroyed,” Jason muttered angrily. “Khuramani has set it on fire, by now it will be little but a pile of ashes. The men of the city have been slaughtered, the women and children enslaved. It is another attack to add to the list that the Black Horsemen must be made to pay for.”

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“They range far,” Herus mused. “Ortagaso is at least two moons travel from the island in the lake. Khuramani is becoming confident.”

“I will go with Thorsan and a dozen of his best warriors in pursuit of the Black Horsemen,” Jason told Herus. “The other warriors will remain with you in Thurgan in case Khuramani attacks.”

“But it will take you more than a day to reach the city; the Black Horsemen will be almost back at the island.”

“Then they will be surprised when we pursue them into the forests with the rising of the first sun.”

“You could never get there that fast,” Herus muttered in amazement. “No horsemen could travel that far in one night.”

“They could, using the power in the amulet,” Sento said, understanding dawning in his eyes. “Jason can transmit anything that he is in contact with, either by direct touch or through an intermediary host. A rider and his horse could be transported as one at the same time—and in the speed of a heart beat.”

Jason nodded.

“Have Thorsan and a dozen of his best warriors met me in the courtyard, fully armed, within the next ern. We will leave before the third moon has set.”

Jason transported the riders and their horses to the edge of the ruins that were once the peaceful city of Ortagaso. No buildings remained standing; those that hadn’t burnt to the ground had been pulled down and then their contents torched. The bodies of the slaughtered men had been heaped in the middle of what had been the city square, then set on fire. The sweet smell of burnt flesh still hung heavy in the cold night air.

Thorsan glared around him.

“This is the work of animals, not of warriors. I see few weapons, only the ornaments of the harvest offerings to their gods. This is not fighting. It is murder.”

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“And the way Khuramani likes to work,” Jason muttered. “He is trying to instill fear into the hearts of the smaller cities so that they will not unite against him in case they attract his anger and retaliation.”

“If he does this to many more of the smaller cities, there won’t be any left in existence,” Thorsan said grimly. “They do not deserve this treatment.”

“We will move out with the first rays of the first sun,” Jason said, looking toward the eastern horizon. The sky was showing the first tinges of the rising sun.

The sun’s rays showed the full extent of the havoc caused to the city. It also showed the tracks of the Black Horsemen as they left the city, herding the slaves ahead of them. They had made no effort to hide their tracks. They hadn’t expected pursuit so soon. The tracks led toward the edge of the marshes.

Thorsan and his warriors followed the tracks. Jason rode just behind Thorsan, amazed at the skill of the tracker in following signs that he couldn’t even see. The tracks led to a well-worn trail through a narrow arm of the marshes that extended up a small valley forming a border between the forests and the plains. The ground underfoot was firm, beaten down by the pounding of many feet over the years. Clumps of reeds and tall grasses grew to the edge of the track, forming dense walls that could have hidden a hundred men from their view. Jason wasn’t concerned. Sounds of birds and small animals filled the air ahead of them. The path would be clear. If the Black Horsemen had laid an ambush, the birds would have taken off in fright and the sounds would have been stilled.

The trail left the marshes and entered the forests. It widened as it entered a small clearing. They came across signs of an ambush. A Black Horseman lay near where the track entered the clearing, an arrow through his heart. It was a short arrow, smaller than those used at Thurgan. Another lay with a short spear driven deep into his back. Both

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bodies were cold, the limbs already frozen into their death throes. They had been dead some time, left by their companions to feed the wild draga. There was no sign of the captives from Ortagaso. Thorsan rode slowly around the clearing, then pulled his horse to a halt facing Jason.

“The Black Horsemen were attacked by the warriors from the marshes. They use shorter arrows and spears than we do; they are easier to use in the dense growth of the marshes and surrounding scrub. The Black Horsemen rode in that direction,” he said, pointing through the forests to his right. “The captives are no longer with them. They have been taken by the warriors back to the marshes.”

“As slaves,” Jason asked.

“I don’t know, but somehow I don’t think so. They no longer appear to be moving in slave lines, but in a loose group. Maybe they are no longer chained together.”

“Which path do you think we should follow?” Jason asked with a wry smile.

“That taken by the Horsemen,” Thorsan growled. “The warriors from the marshes will return to their village. We can always reach them when we return from the island.”

“I’m glad you’re thinking the same way I am,” Jason said grimly. “We must stop Khuramani.”

“I don’t think Khuramani travels with them,” Thorsan muttered. “Their tracks are too easy to follow, almost as if they wished to be followed. And they are only a small group, maybe no more than ten warriors.”

“That’s too small for a war party!”

“I think it’s only those who were sent to take the slaves back to the island.”

“Then where has the main group gone?”

“I don’t know. There was only one set of tracks leaving Ortagaso. Maybe Shartan has hidden the tracks of the main group and they are

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even now riding to attack some other city.”

“Then we had better find these warriors and persuade them to tell us where Khuramani has gone,” Jason suggested.

Thorsan nodded his agreement, an evil smile spreading across his face. He would love to get his hands on a Black Horseman. He would enjoy getting him to talk, but he hoped he wouldn't break his silence too soon. He was looking forward to paying them back for some of the hurt they had administered to the people of Praesepe.

The tracks of the fleeing Horsemen led deeper into the forest. The suns were again reaching the western horizon, the long shadows cast by the forest trees making it difficult to follow the tracks. Thorsan decided to camp for the night. They tethered their horses, then swung the saddles down into the edge of the clearing. He wasn't sure how far ahead the Black Horsemen were, so he forbid the lighting of any fires. The glow cast by the flames might alert the pursued that they were already being followed.

The warriors wrapped themselves in saddle skins, then settled back to rest. Two warriors, weapons in hand, remained on guard. Prowling draga could be attracted by the smell of the horses.

Jason was just starting to doze off when the quiet of the forest night was shattered by a piercing scream of agony. It rose in pitch, fell, then rose again.

The warriors sprang to their feet, weapons in their hands. It sounded if all the fiends of Harden had been released in their midst. Jason rose to the top of a tall tree, scanning the forest for any sign of the cause of the scream. He noticed a glow in a clearing only a short distance ahead of where they had set up their own camp. It looked like a campfire. Could it be the Black Horsemen? But if it was, what had caused the scream of agony?

Thorsan led his warriors down the track on foot. It was quicker than saddling up their horses. With a very short time, they could see the

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glow of the campfire through the trees. They moved silently, spreading out, their weapons at the ready.

If this was the camp of the Black Horsemen, then they wanted to keep the element of surprise on their side—if it wasn't, then some innocent travelers were in for a shock!

CHAPTER 8

ATTACK ON THURGAN

They stopped at the edge of a large clearing. Five large fires had been lit in a circle around the perimeter. In the middle of the circle of fire were the Black Horsemen and their mounts. They were not alone!

Four stakes had been driven into the ground about three ells apart. They were sturdy branches, as thick as a man's leg. Slung between them, a limb fastened to each stake, hung the body of a female warrior. She was suspended about an arrow's length above the ground, the weight of her body carried by her arms and legs. She was naked, her body gleaming with sweat in the glow from the campfires.

A Black Horseman withdrew his lance from the gleam embers, the tip gleaming red from the heat. He approached the suspended woman. He touched the sole of her foot with the point of the red-hot blade. She screamed shrilly, her body convulsing with pain.

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Thorsan reached for an arrow, fitting it to the bowstring. The other warriors did the same. Before they could line up their targets, the Black Horseman laid the blade across the naked woman's stomach. She screamed again, unable to escape the searing heat. The smell of burning flesh filled the clearing. The Horsemen laughed sadistically.

The laughter ended in their throats as the arrows thudded into their backs and chests. They fell where they had stood; some alongside the naked captive, others sideways into the fires. The aim of the warriors was good—none of the Black Horsemen were alive.

Thorsan hurried forward. Quickly the warrior was cut down and gently laid on the ground. She had fainted from the pain of her wounds. Thorsan produced a skin filled with a white salve made from the pulp of the nui fruit. He applied it to the woman's wounds. It was a cream often used to ease the pain from burns.

Jason spun around, axe at the ready. He was sure he had heard a noise from the edge of the clearing. He moved quickly toward it, vanishing from view under the cloak of invisibility. There was a quiet rustling in some bushes, barely audible above the crackling of the flames. He moved behind the bush. A Black Horseman crouched there, trying to hide from the warriors in the clearing. He was unarmed, his body covered with dressings to cover wounds he must have received when ambushed by the warriors from the marshes.

Jason materialized behind him and prodded him into the clearing with the head of the axe. The warrior stumbled forward, barely able to walk.

Standing over him, mighty axe in hand, Jason demanded to know the destination of Khuramani and the other Black Horsemen. Cowering before Jason's towering figure, the Horseman pleaded ignorance.

"I am only a guard," he pleaded. "I don't know what the Prince plans."

"What were your orders?" Jason demanded.

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“To return the slaves to our fortress.”

“What slaves?”

“Those from Ortugaso.”

“What happened to the other Black Horsemen?”

“They left us at the edge of the marshes and returned to the plains.”

“Their destination,” Jason asked harshly.

“I don’t know,” the captive pleaded, his eyes starting to show fear as Thorsan and his men slowly closed to form a ring around him.

Jason prodded him with the head of the axe. “Khuramani must seek other targets. Did he say when he would return to the island?”

“No,” the captive muttered. “He told us nothing. We were not in his confidence. We were only guards to look after his slaves.”

Frowning, Jason turned to Thorsan.

“I don’t like it. Where would Khuramani go from Ortugaso? What are the nearest cities?”

“Cortano is the nearest, then Thurgan, but that isn’t in a direct line. He could reach Thurgan without being seen by Marcello’s warriors.”

“I’ll return to Thurgan tomorrow,” Jason told Thorsan, watching the captive out of the corner of his eye. A look of triumph passed across his face, quickly concealed, but not before Jason had seen it. He reached out and let the head of the axe rest across the captive’s throat.

“You lie,” he thundered. “Khuramani moves against Thurgan.”

“But he would never reach Thurgan for another two days,” Thorsan protested.

“Unless he left other Black Horsemen in the mountains to launch a surprise attack. I’ll return to Thurgan now. Care for the injured warrior from the marshes and our other captive. I’ll return with the rising sun.”

Jason vanished from view. He was too late to alert Thurgan. The battle was already joined.

Jason landed on the tower to the swish of arrows and the screams of wounded men. The attack had been launched at the main gate—the

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only accessible portion of the castle's defenses. Secondary attacks had been launched at the walls of the city. Thurgan's scouts had alerted the defenders in time for the gates to be closed, eliminating the element of surprise that the Black Horsemen would have needed to successfully breach the walls of Thurgan.

Since the attack on Cortano, Herus had insured the walls of the city had been strengthened and guards were kept posted at the four gates into the city. It was a wise precaution. The scouts had only just reached the city ahead of the first wave of Black Horsemen, but the gap had been sufficient to close the gates before the attackers had been able to break through.

The Black Horsemen had been greeted with a deadly hail of arrows that had driven them back to regroup. They tried each gate in turn, the result the same. The defenses held.

The second wave of attackers gathered out of the range of the weapons. Wagons could be heard approaching through the night. A strange wagon drove into view, drawn by the sturdy plains oxen. It was a large frame on wheels. It resembled an inverted V, taller than the height of three men and longer than ten. The sides were covered with reeds from the marshes, half an eter in thickness. Hanging from the frame was the trunk of a large forest tree, trimmed of its branches. It swung from ropes suspended from the apex of the V. The widest end had been rounded. Spikes had been driven into the side of the trunk on both sides, set an eter apart. The trunk swung at the waist level of a standing man.

The oxen were detached from the wagon and led behind the lines of the attackers. Two other wagons had drawn up alongside the strange machine. Slaves were dragged out and driven under the protection of the reeds. Some were lashed by their hands to the frame, others to the spikes on the trunk. Four guards with short whips followed them in. There was the sound of whips hitting naked flesh. The wagon started to

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roll slowly forward toward the castle gate.

The defenders looked down in consternation. Herus barked out a string of sharp orders. A wave of arrows rained down on the wagon, sticking harmlessly into the wall of rushes. Herus swore. The defenders couldn't reach the slaves pushing the wagon. It inched toward the gate. It stopped an eter away. Herus heard the sound of the whips again. The giant log slowly began to swing on its ropes, gaining momentum. The rounded end thudded against the gate, sending shock waves through the solid timber. The swinging started again, to end with another crash against the gate. The solid wooden structure shuddered on its hinges, the timber groaning as it absorbed the impact of the heavy trunk.

Herus was worried. How long would the gate withstand the pounding it was getting? It wasn't designed to withstand such punishment.

He called for arrows soaked in oil. They were ignited and fired into the rushes. They didn't set the cover on fire. The rushes were fresh and green—they had also been soaked in water.

Jason materialized beside Herus, the Axe of Thoran in his hands.

"The log must be stopped," he cried above the noise of the battle.

"I know," Herus agreed, "but the slaves cannot be reached from the walls while they are sheltered by the rushes."

"I'll stop it," Jason said grimly. "Aim for the Black Horsemen and drive them away from the wagon while I stop the log."

The defenders increased the range of their fire, driving the Black Horsemen back, away from the wagon. Jason landed at the base of the gate, to one side of where the trunk was hitting the gate. Unseen by the attackers, he swung the axe and severed the front rope from which the trunk was suspended. The end of the trunk dipped and ploughed into the ground in front of the gate, shuddering to a stop. It was no longer able to swing. There were screams from the slaves as they were thrown off their feet. Those at the rear of the log were left hanging from the

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spikes by their hands, their feet clear of the ground. The ram had been stopped. Jason could hear the sounds of the whips striking the slaves, trying to force them to get the trunk swinging again. It would take more than whips to get it back into motion.

Jason appeared alongside Herus.

“That’s put a stop to that,” he said with a grim smile.

“Just as well,” Herus muttered. “I don’t know how much longer the gate would have stood against that contraption.”

There was a sudden glow behind the attackers. A wagon burst into flames, then another. There was the shrill whinny of panic-stricken horses. The wagons started to roll toward the castle gate, their cargo of blazing brush well lit. The horses were pointed at the gate, then given their heads. They galloped toward the closed gate in a vain effort to escape the flames behind them.

“Bring down the horses,” Herus cried to his archers. “They must not reach the gate.”

A hail of arrows fell on the bewildered, panicking horses, eventually bringing them down short of the gate. There were screams of anger from the Black Horsemen.

“Enough is enough,” Jason muttered to Herus. “It’s time to hit back. In ten dierns, open the gate and send out your warriors. I’ll strike from the rear while the Black Horsemen group to stop your charge.”

Herus grinned happily. He hurried down the steps and gathered his best horsemen together. Their mounts had been readied at the start of the attack; they quickly mounted and gathered inside the courtyard. Jason raised his hand in salute, then vanished from view.

The gates opened and Herus and his warriors streamed onto the plain. The Black Horsemen stopped in amazement. It was foolish to leave the protection of the castle and meet the enemy on the open plain.

The leader raised his arm to urge his riders forward. His headless body tethered in the saddle, then collapsed to the ground. The men on

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either side of him also sat headless in their saddles, their sightless eyes staring up at them from the dusty ground.

The leaderless Black Horsemen milled around in panic. More riders fell, then Herus and his warriors were on them. It was rout. The disorganized and leaderless raiders fell to the swords and lances of the castle guard.

A solitary rider broke from the melee, spurring his horse toward the distant hills. Herus started off in pursuit. Jason appeared in front of him, staying him with a raised hand.

“Let him run. I’ll follow unseen. I might find the secret entrance to the island.”

He vanished again. Herus turned back to the battle. It was over. The dragas would feed well that night, the vulturas would clean up with the rising of the suns. When the plains had heated and they soared in the rising thermal currents, their keen eyesight would soon detect the carnage left outside Thurgan. They would gather to feast on the dead. But only the Black Horsemen and the animals. The wounded, and the dead from Thurgan, would be returned to the city for the Rites of the Departed. Herus would ensure that. His warriors would not be left to the scavengers. They had fought with honor for their city; their city would honor them in gratitude.

Herus turned his mount and rode back through the castle gates. Charni was awaiting news of the battle and her warrior husband.

CHAPTER 9

THE ISLAND

Jason materialized on the cliffs overlooking the pass through the mountains. The dust cloud from the fleeing Black Horseman could be seen approaching across the plains. The rider was stretched along the horse's back to present as small a target as possible to his pursuers, not realizing that he wasn't a target and that he had been allowed to escape. As he entered the pass, Jason saw him quickly turned his head to check how close his enemies were then he straighten in the saddle when he saw no sign of any pursuing riders. The sound of battle had long since subsided.

The rider let his horse walk to the side of the small stream that flowed through one of the narrow valleys that led off the main pass. He slid from the saddle and joined his horse at the water's edge. Jason watched as they both slaked their thirst; they were both obviously

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exhausted and the ride to the island was still long if that was their destination. When the second moon reached the horizon, the Black Horseman stirred. He led his horse slowly down the valley. He mounted when he reached the junction with the pass, after he had again assured himself there were still no riders following him.

Jason had sat patiently with his back to a rock overlooking the entrance to the valley. He had dozed, but the sound of horse hooves clattering against the scattered rocks below him brought him instantly awake. He watched the rider mount and ride through the pass in the opposite direction to Thurgan. Taking the Axe in his hand, he materialized over the exit where the pass joined the plains opposite the road to the Keep. He would wait for the rider there. It would take him at least two erns to reach this point. Jason rested again.

He woke to the feeling of warmth as the rays from the first sun beat down on his body, driving away the chills of the cold night. Jason swore as he leapt to his feet. His body had betrayed him. He had slept as the Black Horseman rode through the pass below him. He glared up at the sun. For the rays to reach him, the orb must be halfway to its zenith—he had slept for over six erns. The rider would be well across the plains and into the forests by now. He may even have reached the island, if he had driven his horse hard over the plains. More than likely he would have ridden as fast as the horse would gallop—he wouldn't want to be seen alone on the plains by the warriors from Thurgan, especially after the attack on the Keep. There was even the risk that the plains dwellers would attack a solitary Black Horseman now that their myth of invincibility had been destroyed. The capture or death of a Black Horseman would be seen as a status symbol.

Jason materialized in the clearing opposite the island.

He looked over the water to the tress on the far shore. Had the rider arrived? Was the mind screen still in place?

There was only one way to find out—to try and cross the lake to the

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island. He willed himself over to the far shore. He fell his body rise into the air. A wave of fear flowed through him. What if he was to lose the power of flight while he was over the lake? He would crash. He would fall into the lake and be grabbed by the lake monsters. He hadn't seen them, but he had heard talk about them. They were huge, vicious beasts that could cut a man's body in half with one bite. He could almost feel the sharp teeth cutting through his flesh. He shuddered. He had always had a secret fear of being taken by sharks when he went swimming on earth, a reason he had never been keen on swimming in the open oceans. He had blamed the effect of salt water in his eyes; few of his friends knew of his phobia about sharks.

Jason could clearly visualize the massive Praesepean water monsters. He had never seen them, yet he could see them in his mind. They looked just like giant sharks, with row upon row of razor-sharp teeth waiting to slice into his flesh. He cringed, backing away from the lakeshore. What if the lake monsters were amphibians? His sharks grew short legs. He could see them being able to leave the lake to search for prey. He didn't want to be their target. Let the monsters feed on the forest dwellers or the fishermen. Why should he risk his life for an island full of forest dwellers? They were not his concern. If they wished to risk their lives by living in close proximity to water monsters, that was their own stupid fault.

He backed further away from the lake, his mind oblivious to everything around him. His thoughts were focused totally on the water and what lurked under its placid surface.

A scream broke the stillness of the forest. It penetrated his mind, driving away his fears like clouds of swirling mists. He shook his head to clear the last visages of fear from his mind.

The scream came again.

Jason rushed back to the edge of the lake, keeping clear of the invisible barrier that had assailed his mind.

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Across the water he could see the altar that Shartan had erected at Khuramani's instructions. The evil Prince stood in front of the altar, his wizard at his side.

On his knees in front of them was a Black Horseman. His arms were lashed behind his back, his armor stripped from the upper part of his body. At his side stood another warrior, a spiked chain whip in his hand.

"Again," Khuramani ordered. The whip snaked out to curl lovingly around the captive's shoulders. He screamed as the spikes embedded in his flesh and again when they were roughly torn out as the whip was hauled away.

"I repeat... Who followed you?" Khuramani demanded.

"No one, Lord," the captive whimpered through his pain. "I watched. I was alone."

"Fool. You were allowed to escape. The Warrior of Earth is wise. He would let you escape to try and find the way across to the island. He could be out there now, waiting to strike."

Khuramani swung around to face Shartan.

"Do you sense any disturbance in the mind screen?"

"Yes, Lord." Shartan nodded. "It has just been disturbed, but not penetrated. It could have been a forest dweller. The impact was fleeting; it was broken off as the intruder fled."

"No forest dweller would willingly approach within many lometers of the shores of this lake now that they know that we are here. Their fear of the Black Horsemen is greater than the lure of all the treasures of Thurgan."

"It could have been a spy from Thurgan," Shartan mused.

"Following the tracks left by him," Khuramani thundered, pointing to the luckless captive kneeling at his feet. "Kill him, then feed him to the dragas."

The guard's sword descended in a shining arch and the luckless

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captive's head rolled at Khuramani's feet, the cry for mercy cut off in mid-sentence. The body was dragged from the clearing. Shartan callously kicked the head to the side of the altar so that it would no longer be in the way.

"We cannot risk an attack from Thurgan, our numbers are too low," Shartan muttered.

"But no one can penetrate the mind shield," Khuramani growled.

"The mind shield activates through a watcher's ears," Shartan muttered, his voice scarcely above a whisper, not carrying beyond the edge of the clearing. "It is a silent signal telling their brain to build fear in their inner mind. It will not work on a deaf warrior."

"Then we must ensure that they cannot cross the lake. Have warriors guard the secret ford."

"It shall be done, Lord," Shartan said. "But what about the rest of the shore? We don't have enough warriors to mount a guard all around the island."

"Then use the women and children from the tribe."

"The women and children?" Shartan asked in surprise.

"Yes, the women and children. Bring them out from the slave pens and use them to form a human screen around the island. The warriors from Thurgan would not risk attacking us if they placed the lives of the hostages in danger."

The Black Horsemen drove a series of stakes into the soft mud around the lakeshore. The captives were dragged from their pens, then stripped. Ropes were attached around their wrists, then fastened to the stakes. Their legs were left free so that they could wriggle and squirm helplessly. Their movement would attract the attention of any attackers. The movement would also increase the chance of them getting hit by the arrows and lances of the attacking force. It was a simple but effective protective screen.

Jason was furious. Any attack on the island would have to first

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break through the mind screen, then risk the lives of the helpless women and children. He glared across at the island. Nothing would be gained by remaining at the side of the lake. He re-appeared in the council chambers at Thurgan.

Charni was closeted with Sento and Herus. They all looked worried. They were obviously concerned about Jason since they had expected him back many years earlier. His sudden reappearance brought sighs of relief.

“The warrior doesn’t look happy,” Herus muttered, looking at Jason’s scowling features.

“I am not. I didn’t find the way through the waters of the lake.”

“And the mind screen,” Sento asked?

“It’s still there,” Jason told him. “It works well. I nearly ran. It’s a powerful screen.”

“What does it do?” Charni asked.

“It appears to build on the hidden fears of anybody making contact with it,” Jason told her. “It selected a fear from my past, a fear known to no one on Praesepe, then it built on it until I was ready to flee. If it wasn’t for the tortured scream of a Black Horseman, I would still be running like a coward.”

“It’s power must be great to make the warrior run,” Sento growled. “If it can find your hidden fears, no one will be able to penetrate it.”

“And that is only the first obstacle to reaching the island,” Jason told them, a grim look on his face.

“What else protects the island?” Sento wanted to know.

“After the screen, there’s the water. While we try and cross that, our warriors would be unprotected from the enemy’s arrows and lances.”

“But by then we should be able to fight back” Herus growled.

“Not without killing innocent and helpless forest dwellers.”

“How can that be?”

“The captives have been tied naked to stakes along the shore of the

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lake. The Black Horsemen will fire from behind the protection of their naked bodies. We couldn't fire back without hitting them."

Herus swore, then quickly apologized to Charni. They couldn't risk a frontal assault on the island if it placed the hostages in such direct personal danger. They would have to try and find some other way of trying to penetrate Khuramani's defenses.

Jason looked across at Charni, then hurried to her side. She looked pale and drawn, her eyes tired and lacking their usual sparkle. He placed his hand on her brow. Her forehead was burning.

"You don't look well," Jason whispered. "What ails you?"

"It's nothing," Charni told him shyly.

"It's more than nothing," Jason scolded her. "You must look after your health. You are important to Thurgan."

"And to Jason?"

"Even more to me," he whispered, holding her close. "It worries me to see you unwell. You must see the healers."

"I have," Charni said with a smile.

"And?"

"And I'm happy to be unwell!"

"What a load of nonsense. How can you be happy to be unwell?"

"I can," Charni whispered, looking lovingly at him. "Especially when it is caused by my husband's seed."

Jason looked at her, slow to understand the importance of the news. Then a wide grin spread across his face and he swept her into his arms. He was going to be a father—and legally this time!

Herus had his back to the couple, but spun around when he saw the surprised look on Sento's face.

"The warrior grows impatient," he said with a grin. "He longs for the night."

"Maybe he doesn't want to wait until then and would like us to leave now," Sento added.

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“No, my friends.” Jason laughed. “It isn’t impatience, but happiness that makes me act this way. Charni has given me the news that makes all husbands happy. We are to have an heir to the throne of Thurgan.”

The men rushed forward to embrace the happy couple and offer their congratulations. It would be a happy day when the news reached the population of the city and surrounding plains.

Jason carried Charni from the room, a feather weight in his arms. She nestled her head against his shoulder, happy he was back with her.

Bianco and Brunnel were waiting in the chambers when Jason walked through the door. They looked worried. Why was he carrying the Princess? Was she ill? They stood timidly at the edge of the couch, their concern showing on their faces. Jason looked at them tenderly.

“Don’t look so worried,” he told them. “Your mistress is unwell, but it’s an illness that she is happy to have. She will soon be a mother.”

The slaves gave squeals of un-suppressed joy, then blushed and dropped their eyes. They had forgotten their place. They had let their happiness show. That was not permitted for slaves. They raised their eyes defiantly. They didn’t care. They were happy their mistress was to have a child. They were even happier their master was the father. These were their two favorite people on Praesepe. If they were to be punished for showing their joy, then so be it.

“I’m glad you share my happiness,” Charni told them gently. “I will need your help during the days ahead. Go. Bring food. I’m tired.”

They rushed from the room to carry out Charni’s command. Jason laid her gently on the couch, bending to kiss her lips before he released her. He was happy, the troubles with Khuramani temporarily forgotten.

He turned toward the window. Charni saw the muscles in his neck tighten and his hands reach for his forehead. He stood still for a few moments, then raced toward the open window. He stood facing the distant hills, a look of deep concentration on his face. He nodded several times, the tension easing from his face, then turned to face

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Charni.

“The warrior from the marshes will live. She has regained consciousness,” he told her. “Thorsan says she wishes to talk. I must go, but I’ll return as soon as I can.”

She nodded, and Jason disappeared.

CHAPTER 10

THE MARSHES

The marsh warrior lay propped against the trunk of a tree, carefully covered with skins. Although the second sun was still above the horizon, it had dipped low and its warming rays no longer penetrated the forest clearing. The damp evening mists were already starting to rise from the ground. A large fire had been lit in the middle of the clearing, its warming rays keeping the cold at bay. Food was being prepared, the aroma wafting through the trees. Guards had been posted around the perimeter—the smell of the cooking would lure draga toward the clearing and hungry draga were difficult to stop. Thorsan was also taking no chance that human predators might also follow the scent.

Jason materialized beside the fire.

The warrior preparing the meal nearly dropped the cooking vessel

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into the flames. He could not get used to the ability of the warrior to appear and disappear at will. Quickly he righted the pot and continued to prepare their evening meal.

Thorsan rose from beside the prone female warrior to greet Jason.

Jason knelt beside her, reaching out his hand to firmly grip hers. She looked at him through pain-filled eyes, then let her gaze wander to the head of the mighty axe.

“Then the tales of the travelers are correct,” she whispered. “The legend lives; the Axe has been released from its home at the Lake of Serenity. You are Jason?”

He nodded.

“That is good news for our world. At last the evil Prince Khuramani will be defeated.”

“That day will come soon,” Jason promised. “But how did you come to be a prisoner of the Black Horsemen?”

“We ambushed Black Horsemen taking prisoners through our lands. We freed the captives, but many of the Black Horsemen escaped. I was injured, but taken with them as a hostage. When my sisters didn’t pursue them, they set up camp for the night and began to use me as sport. I fainted, waking in the care of these warriors.”

“Will your wounds let you travel?” Jason asked.

“I’ll survive,” the woman muttered, gritting her teeth. “We are many erns from my village. We should wait until the rising of the first sun. The forest is not friendly at night.”

“The forest won’t even see our passing.” Jason chuckled. “Tell me the direction and distance of your village, then we will depart after we’ve eaten.”

The warrior looked at him in bewilderment, but took the hot food that was handed to her. The group ate in silence, each consumed by their own thoughts. They threw the unwanted food into the flames. There must be minimum temptation for the night predators. Jason rose

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to his feet, stretching.

“We will leave now,” he told Thorsan. “Return to Thurgan tomorrow. There is little we can do in the forests now. I will await you at the castle.”

Jason gently raised the wounded warrior to her feet, then lifted her into his arms. The Axe of Thoran was strapped to his back. He turned to face the direction of the warrior’s village and vanished from view.

* * *

The village nestled in the reeds on the banks of a wide stream flowing through the marshes. The reeds had been cut down to form a large clearing. Trunks of forest trees had been floated down the stream and dragged up on to the banks. They had been used to form the poles and rafters of the small houses, and also to build the fence that completely surrounded the village. The houses had been walled and thatched with dried reeds. The floors had been raised an eter above the damp ground, then reeds had been lashed to the floor timbers to form a dense mat. Small round holes had been cut in the walls to act as windows and larger holes had been cut as doorways. Both had curtains of dried reeds to keep out the damp, but they could be rolled up when the suns were shining. The houses would be dry and warm, no matter what the weather was outside.

A large fire burned in the middle of the village in front of the largest house. The other houses surrounded the open space around the fire. Torches flickered on holders set outside each building. The insides appeared to be dark; Jason guessed that they would be vulnerable to the flames of the torches, so there must be some other form of illumination at night.

A large carved wooden seat was set outside the largest house. A tall, dark-haired woman sat on it, watching as the members of the village gathered around her. Jason noticed many young children moving through the group, naked except for short skirts. They women

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also wore short skirts. Some had cloaks thrown around their shoulders to shelter them from the cold, but otherwise they were all naked from the waist up. There was a total absence of men and boys—unless they were still out working, it must be a village without men.

The woman rose from the seat, holding up her hand for silence. She lifted a short stabbing spear in her right hand and raised it above her head, the point gleaming in the flickering flames. The other women raised their clenched fists over their heads.

Time to visit, Jason muttered to himself.

There were gasps of surprise as he materialized between the fire and the leader, cradling the injured warrior in his arms. There was stunned silence as he gently placed the warrior at her leader's feet, then stepped back. He raised the mighty Axe of Thoran in the air, then lowered the blade reverently to his lips.

A gentle murmur rippled through the group. They had heard that the Axe had been released from the log, but hadn't believed that such an event could happen. Now the Axe was before them, carried by the magical Warrior of Earth. It had to be the Warrior. He had come out of nowhere. The legend had been fulfilled. A mighty warrior had come to their village—unafraid and in friendship. No man had come willingly to their village in the living memory of their oldest member. Men had come as captives, to be used and released when they were no longer able to perform to the expectations of the tribe. Now the warrior stood before them, proud and alone, but not afraid.

Jason could feel admiring eyes running over his body. Many of the women were hungry for a man; they were tired of the pathetic attentions of slaves.

"Greetings, Queen Nerfeti, Queen of the mighty Warriors of the Marshes," Jason greeted their leader. "Your fame extends far beyond the boundaries of these marshes, even to the plains and the northern mountains. I bring greetings from Princess Charni of Thurgan, and

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from Gorta of the Council of the Manappes.”

The warrior rose from her seat and stood facing Jason. She was almost as tall as him, supple but strongly built. Unlike her followers, a band of golden material encased her full breasts. It gleamed in the light from the fire, contrasting with the dark of her skin.

“You are welcome, Warrior of Earth, for that is who you must be,” she said, her voice strong and deep. “No other male would have the courage to stand freely in our village. We extend our greetings to Princess Charni of Thurgan. But who is this Gorta of whom you speak? Surely the manappes are wild creatures from the northern mountains.”

“The manappes were people from the plains who were driven from their homes at the time of the Battle for the Space Moon. They have returned to the court at Thurgan where they have sent Lady Senca, Gorta’s daughter, as ambassador. Lady Larni of Thurgan has traveled to the northern mountains to be our ambassador. We have united because of our common enemy Prince Khuramani.”

Jason could feel the swell of anger at the mention of Khuramani’s name. The prince was not a welcome visitor to the marshes.

“We have no love for Khuramani,” Nerfeti growled. “There is only one place for the prince’s head—not on my pillow but under the blade of my sword.”

There was a roar of approval from the assembled women. Many had fallen prey to the Black Horsemen, to become their playthings until they had tired of them. Jason saw two warriors in the foreground who had lost their left breasts. It was the sign that the Black Horsemen had captured them, used them and then tired of them. Jason could understand the hatred in their hearts.

“Thurgan invites you to visit, great Queen, so that we can combine our resources and plan the demise of the prince.”

“That is an invitation I cannot decline. I shall travel to Thurgan tomorrow, but it will take many erns to reach the city.”

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“If your majesty wishes, it can take but the blink of an eyelid.”

“That appears impossible. How can you travel so far so fast?”

“We can return the same way as I brought the wounded warrior back to her village.”

“By magic,” the Queen gasped.

Jason nodded.

The Queen looked at him, then slowly nodded.

“I shall accept your offer. Never let it be said that Queen Nerfeti is afraid of the unknown. Stay and share our food tonight, then we can travel at daybreak tomorrow—unless you are concerned about Princess Charni.”

“The Princess is in good hands. Many swords guard her from her brother. I don’t fear for her safety, just the safety of anyone who tries to harm her.”

Nerfeti clapped her hands.

“Let there be a celebration,” she ordered. “Our sister has been returned to us safely. That’s reason enough to be happy.”

There was much laughter as the women hurried away to prepare the feast. They had gathered in anger, the night would finish in happiness. The captives from Ortagaso were encouraged to come from their huts and join in the celebrations. They were still in shock from their capture and subsequent release. They had little to celebrate. The women offered encouragement. Surely they didn’t want to offend their hosts. The Warrior of Earth was with them. Surely they wouldn’t want to insult him when the feast was in his honor. Slowly and reluctantly they came from their huts and gathered in the clearing. They were asked to help with minor tasks until they were swept along with the enthusiasm of the people around them.

More logs were thrown on the fire, the flames reaching high into the night sky. Reed flutes appeared as if by magic, their haunting sound carrying far over the marshes. Other villagers saw the flames and heard

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the laughter and music. They traveled to join the festivities, unsure of the reason but happy to join in a party at any excuse. Life was hard, fun must be grabbed whenever the chance arose.

The smell of food wafted over the hungry guests. They gathered around the blazing fire, helping themselves from the plates of meat and root vegetables. Jason and Nerfeti stepped into the glow of the flames. There were gasps as he reached for food. Many had not realized who the guest of honor was. They had never expected it was a man.

The flute players increased the tempo of their music, the plaintive notes giving way to a lively tune. Women began to undulate their bodies to the sensuous beat, like snakes charming their prey. Jason watched fascinated as young and old joined in the dance. He heard a suppressed giggle behind him and took a quick look over his shoulder. Two young girls were entwined in each other's arms, writhing in time with the music, unaware that the shadows from the hut didn't hide them from view. The beat of the music had taken control of their minds and bodies. They were enflamed, but had to settle for each other. There weren't enough male slaves to satisfy the needs of all the women present, and warriors took precedence over the young when it came to meeting the needs of the flesh.

They gasped, blushing, when they realized that Jason was watching them. He winked at them and they giggled, fading further into the shadows.

Jason began to tire. He tried to suppress a yawn but was seen. Nerfeti rose to her feet and called a young girl over to her side.

"Show the warrior to his hut," she ordered. "See that his needs are met."

The girl nodded. She led Jason to a hut on the outskirts of the village. She crawled through the opening. Jason followed. The hut was surprisingly warm and comfortable. He stretched out on the pile of cushions and skins scattered on the reed floor. The girl asked if he

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lacked anything. Jason shook his head. She seemed disappointed, but quickly left the hut. Jason settled back, letting his eyes close as he dozed off. He heard quiet giggles outside the hut, but paid no attention to them.

He tensed as he felt soft hands running over his body. He must be dreaming. The hands went away. He dozed again, dreaming he was in the hands of two sirens who were working on his body to bring themselves pleasure. He tossed and turned in response to their ministrations. His hands touched soft breasts and fastened around them. He squeezed the soft mounds until he felt the nipples harden against his palms. Hands reached for him, lips following the path traced by the teasing fingers. Jason arched his back, moaning as he felt his body respond. His eyes shot open—this was too real to be a dream.

It wasn't.

At his side were the two young girls he had seen together in the shadows during the feast. Their naked bodies were molded against him, their eyes clouded with their desires. They were definitely not children. They had proved they were skilled in the ways of the adult world. Jason felt drained. They nestled against him, contented smiles on their faces as the tension eased from their bodies and their nipples lost their rigidity. He took them into his arms. He closed his eyes, sinking back into the realms of sleep.

When he awoke, the girls were gone. Their scent lingered to remind him he hadn't been dreaming.

Queen Nerfeti had dressed in her best robes. It wasn't every day that a marsh warrior was welcomed into any of the castles on the plains. None of her people had ever visited Thurgan other than as slaves. Her name would be woven into the history of her people. She looked nervous as she watched Jason approach. What effect would the warrior's magic have on her? He had brought the wounded warrior to the village with no apparent ill effects, but she was still nervous.

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Jason smiled at her, quickly assuring her there was no danger. The members of the village gathered in the central clearing. Many had missed the arrival of the warrior the previous night. They doubted their stories of his sudden appearance in the middle of the clearing. Humans couldn't appear and disappear, even with magic.

Jason stood beside the Queen and placed his arm around her shoulders. The watchers gasped. They were no longer standing before them.

They had vanished.

CHAPTER 11

QUEEN NERFETI

Senca was approaching Charni with a message from Ormuti of Cortano. She gave an involuntary scream as Jason and Queen Nerfeti materialized in her path. She cannoned into Jason, unable to stop. Charni smiled, then waited expectantly. It was becoming a habit of Jason's to appear with surprise guests.

Jason led the visitor forward, stopping in front of Charni.

"Allow me to present Queen Nerfeti of the Warriors of the Marshes," he announced. "The Queen has graciously accepted our invitation to visit Thurgan as our honored guest."

"It is an honor for Thurgan to host such an important visitor," Charni said with a smile. "The valor of the warriors of the marshes is renowned throughout Praesepe."

"The honor is mine," Queen Nerfeti said, taking Charni's hand in

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hers. “The compassion and prudence of Lady Charni, and the courage of the Warrior of Earth, have spread beyond the boundaries of Thurgan and have even reached us in the depths of the marshes. The defeat of your brother, the evil Prince Khuramani, raised hope within the hearts of many people that peace would return again to our world. The warrior Jason mentioned the exchange of ambassadors between Thurgan and the manappes. We never suspected that the manappes were people. Your wisdom has brought them out of the age of darkness our ancestors brought down on them. I see the Lady Senca in your court, proof of the words spoken by the warrior. It is good.”

Nerfeti turned to face Senca.

“Your people will be welcome to the marshes as honored guests if you ever travel in our region.”

She reached out her hand to Senca, who took it, dropping to her knee.

“Do not bow to me; you are not a slave.”

“I bow to you in thanks for your invitation, your majesty,” Senca murmured. “My people seldom traveled in the past because it was dangerous to our lives. Now that we have powerful friends, we have much to discover about our world.”

Charni clapped her hands. A young male slave came forward and she gave him some quiet instructions. He hurried from the chamber.

“I host many important visitors in Thurgan,” Charni said with a smile. There was movement outside the door. “I would like you to meet three who should be known to you.”

“Known to me?” Nerfeti asked curiously.

“Turn and see,” Charni suggested.

Nerfeti turned, looking curiously at the two tall figures standing in the entrance. She didn’t recognize them. They were dressed in the robes of the ladies of the court, cut low at their breasts but sweeping down to the floor. Their hair had been allowed to grow long and cascaded in a

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luxurious tide down their backs. They had scant need for the artificial colorings popular with some of the ladies to highlight their pallid skins. They moved forward and knelt at the Queen's feet.

"Welcome to Thurgan, Queen of our people."

"Your people..."

Nerfeti studied them carefully, still unable to recognize them.

"I am Zena, majesty, and this is my sister Putu."

"Zena...Putu...but you died when the Black Horsemen raided our village many moons ago. Few escaped that attack. We didn't find many bodies. We assumed the dead had been fed to the dragas."

"No. Many were taken prisoner and sold into slavery," Zena told her, tears in her eyes. "They attacked within ears of our warriors being lured out of the village in pursuit of Black Horsemen attacking and burning our farms. It was a trick. Other Black Horsemen had remained in hiding nearby, waiting to raid the village for slaves."

"What happen to you? How do you come to be in Thurgan?"

"We were taken prisoner by the Black Horsemen, then forced to serve Prince Khuramani. The Warrior of Earth defeated us in fair combat during the attack on the Keep. We became his slaves by right of combat, but he gave us our freedom. We stayed in Thurgan to protect the Princes."

"It was a sad day for our village," Nerfeti murmured. "We lost the wisdom of many of our elders, slaughtered during the raid. They were given a warrior's farewell. We never did find the body of our most revered elder, your mother."

"Then find her now."

A quavering old voice broke the silence. Nerfeti spun round, then rushed forward to enfold the frail old woman in her arms. It was her mother. Zena and Putu were her younger sisters. There would be a celebration in Thurgan that night when the family retired to their chambers.

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“Thurgan has brought joy to the marshes today,” Nerfeti muttered, turning to Charni, still cradling the old woman in her arms. “We have taken the vow of vengeance against your brother. We will combine our forces with those from Thurgan in pursuit of the evil prince. Khuramani must die.”

“He must,” Jason agreed, “but he is secure on an island in the middle of a lake. He is protected with an invisible screen of fear that cannot be penetrated. I have tried twice, and I’ve been repelled both times.”

“The screen can be broken,” Nerfeti muttered.

Jason tensed, a look of hope in his eyes.

“How?”

“We have had spies on the island since the prince set up camp there. The first spy was driven in fear from the edge of the lake. Her companion, who is deaf, was not affected by the same fears. Our council discussed this, then sent two spies who could hear, but we blocked their ears with soft bees wax. They crossed the barrier while their companion, without the aid of the wax, turned to flee. We are gathering bees wax from the wild bees. When we have sufficient for all our warriors, we will attack.”

Herus had been listening intently, a look of triumph in his eyes.

“And Khuramani will be caught with his pants down. Many of the plains dwellers have made hives to attract the wild bees to their crops. We will get wax from them for our warriors.”

“Thorsan is on his way back to Thurgan,” Jason added. “When he returns, divide your forces so that at least half remain to guard Thurgan, then meet us at the lake. I’ll return to the marshes and ride with the marsh warriors.”

CHAPTER 12

DISASTER

Queen Nerfeti set her warriors to reaping vast amounts of dry reeds and they spent the next day binding these into bundles the thickness of a man's thigh. These would be carried to the edge of the river feeding into the lake where they would be bound together to form rafts to transport the warriors across the lake to the island. They would wait for the warriors from Thurgan to launch a mock attack from the side of the lake opposite the altar. While the Black Horsemen were preparing to repel that assault, they would float silently down the river to the island and attack Khuramani from the rear. The evil prince's forces would be routed.

During the night the warriors transferred the bundles of reeds to the edge of the river. They bound them together to make rafts large enough to carry the weight of six armed females. When fully loaded, they

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would float with the water almost lapping over the top. The rafts were flat, no reed bundles were wasted to construct sides. If they had been making the rafts for an attack where they were expecting retaliation, the Queen told Jason, they would have made the rafts with reinforced sides and a reed roof. However, this would have required a double thickness raft because of the extra weight. The council had decided to count on the element of surprise. The extra bundles would be used to make extra rafts.

Jason watched with interest at the skilled way in which the warriors lashed the rafts together using vines from the surrounding forest. These were strong and pliable, allowing the reed bundles to move with the action of the waves.

The rafts were lifted carefully into the water, then tied by ropes to trees on the riverbank. Jason looked into the eastern sky. The first tinge of the approaching dawn was painting the trees with a delicate shade of pink. The rays of the first sun would soon strike the altar on the island, the sign for the attack from the warriors from Thurgan.

“How long will it take for the rafts to reach the island?” Jason asked. “We need to reach the shores of the lake just after the attack, so that the rafts can cross during the initial confusion.”

“It will take about ten dierns to get the warriors on to the rafts and another twenty dierns to reach the junction with the lake,” Nerfeti told him.

“And the sun?”

“It will reach the altar within the ern.”

Nerfeti barked a short command. Bowls of soft bees wax were brought into the clearing together with piles of soft fiber beaten from flax leaves. The warriors soaked the fiber in the wax and plugged their ears. They would be protected from Shartan’s mind screen—but they would still be in danger from the Black Horsemen’s weapons.

Quickly they climbed on to the rafts. These settled slowly into the

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water, barely visible above the surface. The warriors lay flat on the reeds. They would attract less attention that way, their shadows merging with the shadows cast by the rising sun. The lines holding the rafts to the shore were cast off and the rafts were pushed into the slowly running river. They were caught by the current and began the slow journey toward the lake.

The river deepened as it neared the lake, the waters moving sluggishly but relentlessly as it held the rafts in its grip. The long raft poles used to propel them from the shore and fend them off obstructions were useless now, unable to reach the bottom of the river. The warriors were totally at the mercy of the water. The leading raft had been caught by the current and swept into the middle of the river, passing slowly over the deepest waters. The other five rafts were moving slowly nearer the shore, under the shelter of the overhanging trees.

Jason had remained on the bank. He could move more freely around the shore, able to flit from location to location with ease. He had placed bees wax in his ears, hopeful that the warriors were correct in their assessment of its power to protect from the mind screen. He didn't want to see the water monsters from his dreams again!

Queen Nerfeti had remained with the rest of her warriors on the shore. She wouldn't throw all her warriors into the surprise attack in case Khuramani had left Black Horsemen in the forests as a protection against surprise.

Jason stood looking across at the rafts.

The first raft was now many meters ahead of the others. It had almost reached the junction with the lake. The others were still within the shadows cast by the trees. The first rays were touching the tops of the tallest trees. It wouldn't be long before the rays reached the altar, but would that be before the raft reached the lake and was noticed? The raft slowed as the current slowed where the lake and the river joined. Jason

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breathed a sigh of relief as the other rafts slowly caught up with it, still in the grip of the current.

There was the sound of trumpets from the far side of the island, followed by the battle cries of the warriors from Thurgan. Jason noticed shadows detach from the trees on the nearest bank of the island and hurry into the forest. There had been guards placed all around the island. They had been alerted by the sounds of battle and were rushing to join the defense of the island. Jason smiled grimly. Khuramani would not be happy that his warriors had deserted their posts, especially when the marsh warriors launched their attack from his rear. Stage One of the plan had gone according to schedule. They would land unopposed on the island and their attack would come as a complete surprise.

He glanced at the first raft, floating toward the island, clear of the banks of the river. He tensed when he saw a ripple in the water, moving purposefully toward the raft—against the flow of the current! It looked like the bow wave from some object racing just below the surface. But what could that be? It was joined by another, then another.

The raft rocked as a heavy object struck it. Warriors held on to the vines, preventing themselves from being thrown into the lake. The raft rocked again, one edge being driven below the water as the other was lifted clear. The second raft had floated clear of the river mouth, too far from the trees to stop. The other rafts had managed to get lines tangled in the branches of the overhanging trees and had drawn themselves toward the bank, waiting to see what was happening.

The first raft rocked violently, in the grip of conflicting forces from beneath the water. The warriors clung on to the reeds, frantically trying to remain above the water. The raft rose suddenly into the air, then fell back with a loud thud. Jason gasped. He was sure he had caught a fleeting glimpse of the raft rising on the top of a large brown object. The force of the impact snapped some of the vines and the reed bundles

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started to separate. A warrior fell into the water. She screamed and started to swim, her hands reaching toward the raft. A red stain appeared around her and she vanished below the surface—her mouth still open in a long wail of pure terror.

The warriors on the second raft crouched, their weapons in hand, seeking a target. Whatever was attacking the other raft was real, not something placed in their minds by Shartan's magic.

Another warrior fell from the raft. As her body landed in the water, there was a surging ripple and she was tossed into the air, her scream stilled. Jason gasped. Her body was in two parts. She had been severed at the waist.

A long tail-like projection broke from the water and crashed across the raft. The reed bundles shuddered; some separated, most held together. The tail struck again. It hit a warrior across the head, crushing her skull. She fell to the deck, then slowly slid into the water. There was a churning in the water around her and her body rose into the air. With screams of anger the warriors on the second raft fired. The body was held in the jaws of one of the ugliest heads Jason had ever seen—much worse than the one he had seen in his nightmares. It was at least an eter long, with powerful jaws studded with rows of vicious razor-sharp teeth. Two large red eyes, shrouded by stubby projections, glared down at the warriors on the raft. Two long horns grew from the top of the craggy head, thick and blunt. Smaller horn-like projections followed down the line of the spine until they vanished below the water. The head towered over the raft, the jaws stained with the dead warrior's blood.

The arrows stuck in the beast's skin, but appeared to do it no harm. It shook its head. The warrior's body fell to either side, severed by the pressure of the mighty jaws.

The head sunk below the surface, then rose beneath the raft—lifting it into the air. The vines tried valiantly to hold the bundles of reeds

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together, but the strain was too great and the raft disintegrated, tossing the remaining warriors into the lake. They struggled in the water, trying to reach the shore. The beast surfaced beside them, reaching out to grab one of the struggling figures. It gave a bellow of rage as one of the arrows struck it in the skin near the eye. It turned its ugly head, seeking out the cause of its pain. A second flight of arrows struck against its skin. It glared at the raft. That was where the pain came from.

It turned and rushed forward. It took the raft in its mouth, surging toward the shore, shaking the raft in its jaws. The warriors were tossed helplessly into the water, but the creature ignored them. The pain had come from the raft. It would kill the raft.

The warriors from the second raft managed to struggle to the shore, falling exhausted to the ground. The other two warriors made it to the island. Jason looked across the water, but he couldn't see them any more. He would search for them later; they would be safe as long as they stayed hidden on this side of the island and kept away from the village. The other rafts had been pulled in to the shore and abandoned. The creature was still demolishing the second raft, its roars of anger echoing through the forests.

Jason stood and watched, his anger clearly visible. As long as the creature remained in the area, any attempt at crossing over to the island would be too dangerous. He couldn't afford to take the risk. He would have to find the secret causeway. If he could find that, they would be able to reach the island without the rafts. It had to be found. He paced up and down the bank, looking for some sign of the hidden causeway. He couldn't see anything that would indicate a hidden path.

A scream of agony echoed over the island, followed immediately by a second. They came from the direction of the altar. The warriors tensed, reaching for their weapons. They looked toward Jason for guidance.

Jason was no longer at their side.

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* * *

Thorsan glared across at the island. What had happened to the marsh warriors? The rays of the sun had reached the cross behind the altar many years earlier, the sign to launch their mock attack. In fact, the altar itself was now bathed in the light of the golden globe clearly visible above the forest trees. The Black Horsemen had gathered behind the screen of naked, helpless forest dwellers, taunting the warriors on the other side of the lake to fire their flights of arrows and lances. They felt secure behind their human shield. Thorsan fumed. The marsh warriors should have reached the village long before this. The Black Horsemen were sitting targets, concentrating on the warriors facing them over the water, leaving their backs unguarded.

Khuramani and Shartan stood alongside the altar, smiles of triumph on their faces. They had been right, the warriors from Thurgan would not risk the lives of the helpless captives. It was their weakness.

The warriors heard the roar of the water creature, but those on the island ignored it. Thorsan's men were curious, but knew of no forest creature that would make such a noise. They had never encountered a water monster before.

Black Horsemen strode into the clearing, prodding two marsh warriors in front of them. The women were dripping with the slime from the edge of the lake where they had crawled to safety. They were without their weapons. These had been lost when they were thrown from the raft. Their clothing was ripped from their flight through the trees, leaving them almost naked. They were forced down at Khuramani's feet.

The prince glared at them, demanding to know what they were doing on the island. They looked blankly back at him, as if unable to hear. He screamed at them in anger, threatening to cut off their breasts and choke them with the still-warm flesh. They remained unmoved.

Shartan had been watching them, taking note of their lack of change

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of expression as Khuramani's anger grew and his threats increased. He moved forward and reached into their ears, withdrawing wax.

"Thurgan's attack was a decoy, Lord," he muttered. "The marsh warriors were to attack from the rear."

"What?" Khuramani thundered. "They wouldn't have been able to penetrate your mind screen."

"They would have," Shartan muttered, holding out the little plugs of bees wax. "With their ears plugged, they wouldn't hear the commands of the mind screen and so they wouldn't have been effected by its instructions."

"Get guards back around the island," Khuramani screamed in a combination of fear and rage. "They could even now be ready to attack us from the rear"

"I don't think so, Lord," Shartan said, looking at the two drenched women. "I think that they've been attacked by the lake creatures and that these are the only two survivors. We heard the roars. The creatures must have been feeding late and attacked the rafts."

"Late?"

"They only feed at night when the moons are out. They must have sensed the presence of these warriors and lain in wait for them. They have saved us."

"Then we shall feed them tonight in thanks. First, we will sacrifice these two warriors to the Evil Ones, a double offering of power and strength."

The two females were hauled to their feet. The remaining shreds of their clothing were torn from their bodies and they were dragged to the altar. Ropes were fastened around their ankles. They were drawn upside down to the arms of the cross, their legs separated, touching only at the middle over the upright. Their arms were fastened to the base of the altar.

Khuramani reached for his stave, the one with the polished gnarled

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knob at one end and the sharp spike at the other. He drove the spike into the stomach of each warrior until it protruded through their backs. While they screamed in agony, Shartan moved forward with the sacrificial knife and cut their throats, letting their blood spurt out over the bare altar.

Thorsan felt sick with anger as he watched helplessly, unable to prevent the death of the two warriors. The event would be cataloged in his mind, another to be revenged on the evil prince when he was in their clutches. The list was growing at an alarming rate.

Jason materialized at his side, resting his hand on his arm.

“They will be revenged, but this isn’t the time or the place. Ride around the shore. We will meet with the marsh warriors.”

Nerfeti had arrived at the site of the forced landing by the time Jason and Thorsan arrived with their men. The two bands of warriors warily watched each other, unsure of each’s reaction to the other. Neither group had made peaceful contact with the other in the living memory of all present. Hands hovered over weapons.

“We are at peace with Thurgan,” Nerfeti said. “We now have a common enemy. Do not draw your weapons in anger against each other from this day forward.”

“Remember that the warriors from the marshes are mighty fighters,” Thorsan told the men from Thurgan, his flaming red hair and beard gleaming in the rays of the sun. “We have a common enemy. He must be our target, not each other.”

“Let us combine our forces to encircle the lake,” Jason suggested. “Khuramani cannot remain on the island for ever. We must know of his movements, but we must also be prepared to attack him if he tries to cross to the mainland.”

The warriors looked at each other, still wary and unsettled.

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“There must be friendship and trust between our two people,” Nerfeti added. “Let one warrior from Thurgan join with one of my warriors, and stand guard together against Khuramani.”

“I like that idea,” Thorsan growled. “Let it be.”

The warriors fed, then settled down to rest. Scouts were placed on alert, but the main encirclement would take place before the last sun settled for the long night. They didn’t expect the Black Horsemen would try to leave now that Khuramani must realize that Thurgan had joined forces with the marsh warriors, but they would have to remain on a constant state of readiness. It would be a long wait

Nerfeti returned to her village; Jason to Thurgan.

CHAPTER 13

SHARTAN

Shartan watched as Khuramani stood looking down at the corpses of the two marsh warriors. His concerned was obvious from the tense lines of his body. Shartan was equally concerned. If these warriors had worked out how to nullify his mind screen, and they were now in league with Thurgan, it wouldn't be long before their combined forces launched another attack on the island. It would be hard to repel them with the diminishing number of Black Horsemen. Khuramani needed time to rebuild his army and to train more warriors but that would no longer be possible on the island. They would have to leave the security of the lake, but where could they go? The forest and plains dwellers were on the alert for any movement, the manappes would not tolerate his presence in the northern mountains—and now the marshes were no longer open to the movements of his party.

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Shartan knew of the fishermen of Praesepe, but he doubted if they would be any more welcoming. They had trading contracts with the cities of the plains and their trading caravans had often fallen victim to the marauding bands of Black Horsemen who used to scour the plains with impunity for plunder for the Keep. No, they would definitely not be welcome in the ports of the fishermen—and they would still be in easy reach of the warriors from Thurgan.

“The pirates, Lord,” he said excitedly, turning to look at his leader.

“What pirates?” Khuramani asked.

“The pirates who prey on the coastal ports. They could be prepared to take us across the seas so that you can rebuild your forces before we strike at Thurgan again.”

“How do you expect to make contact with pirates here at this island?”

“I’ll travel to the ports to make contact with them. After I’ve arranged the travel, I’ll return for you and the Black Horsemen.”

“And what happens if you don’t return? Are we to be left to the mercy of Thurgan?”

“No, Lord, that cannot happen. We need each other if we are to make contact with the Evil Ones. Neither can do that on our own. I will return, and as soon as possible.”

“Then leave tonight. I don’t like the noose of Thurgan around the island. I fear it may tighten around my neck.”

Shartan left the island surrounded in a cloud of forgetfulness. The magic mist clouded the minds of the warriors who saw him pass. They noticed his passage but forgot that they were there to prevent it. It was a potent mist, even clouding the minds of hunting dragas he passed on his way through the forests and marshes. Shartan had taken the fastest horse on the island. He drove it hard through the night. By the first rays of the suns the marshes were far behind him. The plains ahead were covered with the cultivated fields of the crop farmers and the grasslands

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used to graze cattle and sheep. There were scattered small groups of trees to give shade for the wandering stock.

Shartan pulled his horse into the shelter of a coppice, then dismounted to rest the animal. A small pool sparkled in the middle of the trees, its water cool and welcoming. He let the horse drink first, not from any sense of compassion but from a sense of self-preservation. If the water was poisoned, the horse would die and he would live even if that meant a long walk looking for another beast to carry him south.

Shartan secured the horse to a small tree by a rope. It could feed on the surrounding grass and still reach the water if it wanted to drink. It would be easier to catch—he didn't like the idea of leaving it free in case it wandered off over the plains while he rested.

Many of the trees were covered with fruit. He recognized some of them from the markets in the cities. He fed on these until his hunger was satisfied, then placed others in a sack to take with him. He was not used to traveling without slaves to do the menial tasks for him—he had forgotten to bring food with him from the island. He wasn't sure how far it was to the nearest port. He could starve unless he carried some food with him.

As the sun dropped below the horizon, he mounted again and rode in the direction of the low hills he could see in the distance. He noticed the lights of several isolated farmhouses. He gave them a wide berth. He didn't want his passing noticed—if he was recognized, the news would quickly reach Thurgan. He rode through the night guided by the light from the three moons. In time, the first rays of the sun shone on the tops of the scrub covering the low hills he had been riding toward. The scrub grew closely together forming an almost impenetrable wall of branches, but fortunately for Shartan there were many paths winding through it. He followed one at random, hoping it would lead him to the top of the rise.

The hills dropped steeply down toward a series of tussock-covered

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sand hills that stretched for a lometer across a low plain until they were absorbed by the largest expanse of water he had ever seen. It stretched to the left and the right as far as the eye could see, the smooth lines of the shore being broken only by a few rocky outcrops and small headlands. The water reached into the far horizon, its vast blue expanse broken only by the small white-capped waves blown up by the on-shore wind.

Where was the nearest town? Left or right? He stared both ways, looking for some signs of habitation. The sky was cloudless, but some small clouds seemed to be forming low on the horizon to his right. Were they really clouds or smoke from dwellings? They were too far away to ride and investigate—and once he started to ride down the beach there didn't appear to be any place to hide if he saw other people approaching. Shartan looked along the ridge on which he was standing. There was a small rocky outcrop several eters to his left. It would offer shelter from the sun. He would rest there, then see if there were any signs of lights at night. He rode into the shelter of the rocks and dismounted. He was pleased to find a small pool of water trapped in a sheltered rocky pan. It would water the horse. He would get sufficient moisture from the fruit he had in his sack.

When the rays of the sun fell below the horizon, a small glow was visible to his right—it came from the same area in which he had seen the clouds. It must be a town.

He rode down from the hills until he struck a track that led in the direction of the glow. The track was soon joined by another, then yet another. It widened until it was wide enough to let wagons pass in opposite directions. The low scrub grew to the side of track forming walls almost two eters high. In the moonlight the walls seemed solid, impassable structures.

Shartan heard the creaking sounds from an approaching wagon. He turned his horse off the track. He found that the scrub was light enough

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to let the horse pass through. He stopped and stood silently as the wagon passed. He heard the sounds of a male and female voice raised in heated argument, but could only understand the odd word. It appeared that their farm had been raided by marauders who had ridden out of the scrub and driven their animals away at night. The animals had been found—or what was left of them. The best meat had been taken from each beast, as well as the skins and horns. The least valuable parts of the animals had been left. That was what had been loaded on the wagon, being hauled back to the farm. It would supply them with some food, but all the marketable material had been removed. He heard the word Sarabandi mentioned several times, but it didn't mean anything to him.

When the wagon passed, Shartan continued his journey.

The glow got nearer and he could identify the outline of low buildings. It was a village. He could now clearly see several small, single story buildings and two larger, taller buildings. Several horses were tethered outside one of the larger buildings. There was a hum of muffled conversation from within as well as the clink of drinking vessels. Shartan squinted at the weather-beaten sign over the entrance. He could barely see the worn writing, but he thought he could make out the words *Wainui* and half the word *Tavern*. It must be the local drinking tavern.

He pushed his way through the battered doors and into the dim interior. Several small torches flickered in holders set against the walls. Small tables, some with their own lamps, were scattered around the edge of the central cleared space. The only seating was small, three-man benches. A long table at the far end of the room served as the bar from which the wainui was served. It was a poor tavern with only the owner and a single serving slave. No dancers or pleasure slaves were in evidence. The conversation stopped when Shartan entered. The other occupants looked him over, then returned to their drinking. He didn't

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appear to offer any danger.

Shartan ordered wainui, then sat in a quiet corner, listening to the conversation as he sipped at the fiery liquid the slave had brought him.

The conversation around him kept mentioning the same word he had heard the wagon driver use—the Sarabandi. He leaned over and politely asked a drinker next to him what the word meant.

“You have never heard of the Sarabandi?” the drinker said in surprise.

“I’m a stranger in these parts,” Shartan murmured. “The word is new to me. I come from the forests near the northern mountains.”

“Then that is why you haven’t heard of the Sarabandi. They’re the most dangerous of the pirate bands that prey on our coasts. They attack without pity, looking for both slaves and food. Sometimes they visit the wainui taverns on the coast. We’re fortunate, we don’t see them very often. It’s better that way; they’re not good for business.”

There was a sound of a disturbance from near the wharf. Shartan heard shouting, with the odd scream thrown in, then raucous laughter. Sounds of a large group of people staggering toward the tavern carried through the open windows. The owner took a quick look outside. He blanched.

“Sarabandi,” he muttered in hushed tones.

Shartan looked around. He was alone with just the owner and the serving slave. The other occupants had melted quickly from view, scurrying out the back door. Maybe the Sarabandi were seeking more recruits for their rowing benches. All the able-bodied men capable of being slaves were making sure they wouldn’t be found. The women and young girls had also melted into the scrub. They would remain hidden until the pirate vessel left their port.

The pirates burst through the entrance, swaggering into the tavern as if they owned the place. They flopped on to the benches and demanded wainui. The serving slave hurried forward with drinking

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vessels filled with the liquid. The leader raised his vessel, draining it in one swallow. He held it out demanding a refill. The slave came forward with a large jug filled with wainui. She filled his glass, then turned back to the bar. He grabbed her arm and hauled her roughly around.

“Remain, until I’ve given you permission to leave,” he snarled. “Or until your jug is empty.”

She cowed on her knees before him, the jug held in her trembling hands. She was a short, stocky girl with very large breasts spilling through her tight tunic. Under the tunic she was naked. One of the pirates reached out and grabbed a breast in both hands.

“Her jugs are full, Tarn.” He laughed, giving her a squeeze. “They could take a lot to empty.”

Tarn laughed when he saw the slave blush. He reached out and tore her tunic from her, leaving her naked.

“Now she has three jugs. She will serve us well.”

Tarn took the wainui jug from her hands.

“You’ve been at sea a long time,” he told his men. “Use her, if you want to; she is nothing but a slave. I don’t think the owner of this hovel will object,” he added, his fingers playing over the hilt of the dagger stuck in his waistband.

The owner hurried over with another jug of wainui. He placed it on the table in front of Tarn.

“My humble tavern is at your disposal, master,” he whined. “My slave is at your command. I—”

“Silence,” Tarn thundered.

There was a muffled squeal from the slave, then the sound of flesh striking flesh. Shartan swung his eyes around. The slave was flat on her back, a pirate pounding away between her thighs. She was responding to his thrusts with growing enthusiasm. The pirated grunted, then rolled away, his place taken by another. Then another, until all except Tarn had used her.

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Tarn looked around the tavern for the first time and noticed Shartan. His hand fell to the hilt of his sword.

“Ho,” he cried out in surprise. “A strange who has not flown from the Sarabandi.”

“I have heard of the ferocity of the Sarabandi,” Shartan told him, his voice calm and unafraid. “Nothing I’ve heard gives me any cause for fear. I seek an audience with the leaders of your people on a matter of mutual interest.”

“What could you have that would interest us?” Tarn said in surprise.

“What I have to say is for the ears of the leaders, not their draga.”

Tarn’s hand moved back to his sword.

“Don’t insult me, stranger, or you will not live to see the next sun.”

“I don’t cringe at idle words,” Shartan taunted him.

A pirate at Shartan’s left sprang to his feet with an oath, his hand reaching for his sword. Shartan locked minds with him; he fell writhing to the floor. Shartan turned to face the other pirates, a confident smile on his face.

“I seek audience with the leader of the Sarabandi from the vessel in the port.”

“That is me,” Tarn muttered, watching the pirate writhing on the floor. “What have you done to my warrior?”

“He will recover,” Shartan told him, releasing his control of the pirate’s mind. The man fell back unconscious to the floor.

“Why do you want to meet with me?” Tarn asked curiously. “Aren’t you fearful of the Sarabandi?”

“I am fearful of no man. My powers will protect me.”

“Your powers. What powers?”

“I am the wizard Shartan of the court of Prince Khuramani of Thurgan.”

“I hear that Princess Charni rules Thurgan, not Khuramani,” Tarn

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said mockingly.

“A temporary inconvenience, one that will soon be sorted out. Charni’s reign will be short. Khuramani will return to Thurgan in triumph to claim what is rightfully his.”

“Why do you seek to meet with the Sarabandi?”

“Prince Khuramani wishes to temporarily move his warriors from this region while he rests them for the final assault on Thurgan. We seek passage for the Prince and his Black Horsemen.”

“What’s in it for the Sarabandi?”

“The treasures of Thurgan will be equally divided after the city returns to the Prince’s control.”

“But that might never happen,” Tarn told him. “We want something now, not far in the future.”

“We have many slaves from the forest dwellers. They can be yours, to add to your slave pens.”

“We already have more than enough slaves, and can always get more whenever we want. That is not sufficient.”

“You obviously have something in mind. What do you want in payment?”

“I seek nothing from Khuramani, but I want your assistance in the coming meeting of the Council of the Sarabandi, when the successor to Sette is voted for.”

“You want me to cloud the council’s minds so that they vote for you as successor?”

“That’s correct,” Tarn agreed. “Sette is old and will not survive long. His successor will be elected soon, so that they can work together before Sette dies. I must be that successor.”

Shartan smiled to himself. Tarn appeared to be a replica of Khuramani, driven by the same selfish needs and the greed for power. He would be easy to manipulate.

“I will help you.”

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“Then return here in seven moons. I will bring a store ship so we can transport all the Black Horsemen and their horses, as well as the Prince.”

Shartan smiled in relief. The Prince would be there, of that there was no doubt. Seven moons would give him time to get back to the island and guide the party to the port. They would need to travel at night, especially with a large group of armed warriors. The transport of the slaves would be a problem, but that would be for Khuramani to decide.

Shartan left the pirates still taking their pleasure with the solitary slave. Her actions had become mechanical, a conditioned response to the actions of the men. Her sense of feeling had long since dulled, her mind no longer registering either pleasure or pain.

CHAPTER 14

RETURN TO THE ISLAND

Shartan led the Black Horsemen off the island, one by one, under the protection of his cloud of forgetfulness. No one registered the departure of the warriors, including those surrounding the island. Khuramani had forbidden any of his warriors from approaching any of the watchers in case this disturbed the cloud and enabled others to see the passage of his men. The Black Horsemen gathered in a clearing out of view of the watchers on the shore, then moved quickly and silently through the forest. Shartan led them on a course that took them clear of the marshes. He knew that the movement of so many men and horses would have alerted the night creatures and, even if they couldn't see those passing, their cries of alarm would have warned the warriors from the marshes.

The warriors sheltered during the day, traveling only at night. They

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moved unnoticed over the plains and through the low hills arriving at the port in the early hours of the morning. Security was no longer their prime objective. By the time any news reached Thurgan, they would be well on their way to their new sanctuary.

They rode openly through the small village to where the Sarabandi vessels were moored to the jetty. The storage vessel to transport the warriors and their horses was moored alongside with a bridge of planks connecting the opening in the side of the vessel to the jetty. The riders dismounted and led their horses through the gap in the ship's side. Small temporary stalls had been built in the hold to restrict the animals' movements during the journey. The deck was covered with straw to give them a more stable footing, and also to absorb their droppings during the time it would take to cross the sea to their new home. The planks were withdrawn and the side of the vessel closed after the last rider entered.

The oars dipped and the vessel pulled slowly away from the port. When it reached open water, the oars were pulled aboard and the sailors set the vessel's sails. It slowly gathered speed, heading away from the shore.

The pirate galley glided in silently to take its place at the jetty. A wooden bridge was slung across the open gap between the vessel and the jetty. Khuramani and Shartan crossed quickly to be greeted by Tarn, who had remained on board during the loading. The bridge was withdrawn and the vessel was pushed away from the jetty. The oars dipped as it turned to follow the other vessel. It was much faster, a sleek and menacing example of the ship maker's art. It didn't take long to catch up, then it took station in front of its slower companion.

Khuramani looked around. He had never been to sea before. This was a new experience to be floating on water with the land fast disappearing into the distance. The pirate vessel sat low in the water but curved up at the prow in the shape of a swan's neck, the graceful curve

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in stark contrast to the blunt stern. The sides of the vessel rose at least two eters above the deck, giving the pirates protection from spears and arrows when they were approaching their target. The banks of oars were operated through slots in the side of the vessel, less than an eter above the water line. The rowers were protected by the heavy planks forming the walls.

Archers could fire over the top of the protecting walls on the deck. They were hinged to the side of the vessel. To board target vessels, the oars were driven under the side of the enemy, allowing the two vessels to close on each other. At impact, the sides were released and fell over the gap to rest on the deck of the enemy vessel and make a bridge for the pirates to swarm over in hand-to-hand combat.

Each vessel carried up to fifty pirates, as well as the slaves who manned the oars. Tarn's vessel was one of the fastest in the Sarabandi fleet. It was powered by twenty oars on each side; it also carried a wide range of sails. Each oar was pulled by two slaves chained to their posts from the time that the vessel left port until the journey ended. If any of them died at their post, they were fed to the sea animals and their places were taken by other slaves captured during the voyage. It was not uncommon for the pirates to lash female captives into the rowing benches if male slaves were not available.

The slaves rowed naked, the heat and stench in the galley taking its toll of all except the strongest. Seldom did all the slaves return alive from a raiding trip.

Tarn pointed to the carved head at the prow. It was the head of a dog, flowing down to the deck in the graceful shape of a swan's neck. The wings of an eagle were painted on the sides of the prow.

"Our God Anubis. He guides us on our journey."

"How far to your lands?" Khuramani asked, looking back at the coast fast receding in the background.

"We will sail for two days and one night before we reach our

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shores.”

* * *

Jason was worried. It had been several days since he'd received any report from the lake. The last report had indicated everything was quiet and the watchers had seen little activity on the island. That was unusual. The naked slaves had been unchained and placed back in their pens three days after the abortive attack. Little had been seen of the Black Horsemen over the last two days. Thorsan assumed they were remaining out of sight in case they became targets for archers from the shore. What was concerning Thorsan was that few fires were being lit at night, and those that were being lit were in the middle of the village, out of sight of the watchers.

What was Khuramani playing at? Was he trying to lure the warriors from Thurgan into a trap?

Herus doubted that. He felt that the Black Horsemen were merely nursing their wounds, readying themselves for their next attack on Thurgan—or some other unsuspecting city!

Sento and Charni, however, both thought that something was amiss. With the number of warriors encircling the lake, some sign of the Black Horsemen would have been expected. Surely they wouldn't be able to keep out of sight from all the watchers all the time.

“Maybe Shartan has added the power of clouding the sight of others with his mind screen,” Sento mused.

“But the watchers are out of the range of the screen,” Jason objected.

“Could he have extended the range of the screen without our knowledge?” Charni asked.

“That could be possible, I suppose,” Sento mused. “The range of the screen depends on the power of the waves Shartan can spread. I doubt if he could have expanded the range so dramatically—he would have to double the range to cover the shores all around the island.”

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“Then I suppose I had better go to the lake and investigate,” Jason muttered. “I don’t like the message my suspicions are giving me.”

Jason vanished from the chamber, appearing in the clearing beside the lake.

Thorsan was standing looking across at the island. His hand flew to the handle of his sword when he heard the sound behind him. He spun round, weapon half drawn, then forced it back into its scabbard when he saw who his visitor was.

“I don’t like the silence, Jason,” he muttered. “Everything is too quiet and still on the island. Even the birds are quiet. I have seen no movement at all since yesterday.”

“What about the altar?”

“The corpses of the two marsh warriors are still hanging where they were placed after the attack. The smell of death wafts over the water, but even the dragas avoid the island.”

“Could they be avoiding the water because of the water creatures?”

“That is possible, but most unlikely. Dragas are as at home in water as on land. They can move with great speed both above and below the water and would easily avoid the water creatures.”

“Get me some bees wax for my ears. I’ll go to the island to try and find out what’s happened.”

“Be careful. It might be a trap.”

Jason plugged his ears with the soft wax, then vanished from Thorsan’s sight. He reappeared in the middle of the clearing in front of the altar, axe at the ready. Nothing moved. Jason moved quickly from hut to hut. They were empty. The stench from the decaying bodies on the cross was overpowering. He moved quickly to the slave pens. The slaves were still huddled inside, their haggard faces looking out at him. He swung the axe, cutting the ropes that held the gates closed. The slaves staggered out, stiff from the crouched position they had to adopt inside the low pens. They crawled toward the water, burying their faces

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in the cool liquid. They drank deeply. Some tried to stagger to their feet, swaying drunkenly when they reached the vertical. Others remained on their knees.

“Where are the Black Horsemen?” Jason asked.

A young woman looked up at him from where she sat propped up against a tree beside the lake.

“We don’t know. We haven’t seen them for at least two days.”

“Then who gave you food and water?”

“A wounded warrior was left to tend the fires. In sympathy he brought us water. All the food and weapons were taken when the prince left. The wounded were left to die. The last died yesterday. We were left to starve in the pens.”

“Do you know where the secret causeway is?”

“I do,” a small girl answered. “I was being used by one of the warriors in the bushes when the wizard passed. I heard him say where the way was for the horses to cross the water. The warrior didn’t hear; he was too busy with his own pleasure.”

“Then show me where it is,” Jason told the young girl.

She tried to stand, but her knees wouldn’t hold the weight of her slight body. Jason swung her into his arms, ignoring the dirt and filth that covered her from head to toe. The girl pointed the way; Jason followed her directions. They moved slowly through the trees, heading toward the far side of the island. The girl pointed to a spot near where the warriors had swum ashore after they had been tossed from the second raft. Jason swore. If the raft had drifted only a few eters further from the mouth of the river it would have run aground on the causeway. The warriors on the shore would have been able to go to the rescue of the rafts. The power of the Axe of Thoran could have been used against the water monster.

The small girl looked up at him, wonder in her eyes. The mighty warrior had tears in his eyes. She had never seen men cry. Boys,

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sometimes; men, never. And this warrior was a man unlike any she had seen before. She ran her hand down his face, resting her head against his chest.

“Why does the warrior cry?” she asked.

“The two warriors hanging at the altar were attacked by a water creature near here,” Jason told her sadly. “The creature sank their raft and killed some of their companions. They escaped, but swam to the wrong shore. The Black Horsemen captured them.”

“I’ve often heard the water creatures, but never seen them,” the girl told him. “They never come to our side of the island. My father told me they stay near the mouth of the river to feed on what the river brings down on the current.”

“Are you afraid of the waters?” Jason asked.

The little girl shook her head. Jason held her close in his left arm, the Axe firmly in his right hand. He stepped carefully into the water. It came as high as his knees. He gingerly felt his way along the rocks of the causeway. The water never rose above his knees.

The warriors on the far bank had heard the voices. They quickly gathered on the bank when they saw Jason crossing the lake. *Truly, they marveled, the warrior is greater than our Gods. Not only can he vanish from sight, but he can also walk on water. He is greater than any wizard on Praesepe.*

Jason stepped ashore and placed the little girl on the grass.

“Take her and give her some food,” he instructed. “Then summon the warriors. The island is deserted—the Black Horsemen have flown.”

There were gasps of astonishment at the news. How could the riders have left the island without being seen? They must also have powerful magic. The watchers relayed the message around the lakeshore; within an ern all the warriors had gathered.

“Bring horses and come with me,” Jason told them. “The forest dwellers have been left in the slave pens to die. They are starving and

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in serious need of healers.”

“But the horses cannot walk on water,” a warrior protested.

“And neither can I,” Jason said with a smile

“But we saw you—”

“What you think you saw is not what you actually saw,” Jason told him. “Khuramani made the slaves carry rocks from the mountains and build a bridge between the island and the shore, but made sure it could not be seen above the surface. Because it couldn’t be seen, we didn’t know where it was even though we suspected there must be such a causeway for them to cross to the island. If anybody tried to cross and didn’t know which way the causeway ran, they would ride off the edge and plunge into the deep water.”

The horses had been led forward. They were carefully walked across the causeway, the warriors gingerly feeling the way with the shafts of their spears.

The forest dwellers were still huddled together at the edge of the lake. They looked up fearfully when they heard the sound of the horses moving through the trees. Jason strode into the clearing, leading a horse. He was followed by many other warriors, both male and female. Many of the captives broke into tears. This wasn’t their imagination playing tricks on them, their freedom was real. These weren’t the Black Horsemen. These were the warriors from Thurgan who had withheld their fire rather than risk hitting them when they were lashed to the stakes to form a human shield. But what were they doing alongside the warriors from the marshes?

Many warriors also had tears in their eyes as they lifted the forest dwellers on to the backs of the horses. The marks of the harsh treatment they had received from Khuramani showed on their bodies. They were starved, their ribs clearly visible through their skin. Warriors ransacked the huts looking for whatever clothing they could find to wrap around the naked captives. Those who were wearing cloaks to protect them

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from the forest chill, whipped them off their shoulders and wrapped them around the naked bodies.

Jason stood at the foot of the altar, looking at the decaying bodies of the two female warriors hanging upside down from the cross.

“Bring wood and pile it around the altar,” he commanded.

This was done. A pile at least two eters high was placed around the altar. Jason stepped around the pile and raised the Axe of Thoran to the sky before lowering the blade to his lips, eyes closed.

“Let the power and truth of the Axe of Thoran purify this place from the evil that has been done by Prince Khuramani and his warriors.”

With a single swing of the axe he severed the cross at the base. It fell across the pile of wood, the two bodies resting on top of the bonfire.

“Bring fire,” he called out.

A marsh warrior appeared with a burning torch. He took it from her, raised it to the sky in offering to the gods, then plunged it deep into the pile of wood. The flames spread quickly through the dry timber. The flames roared skyward, following the tall plume of black smoke through the canopy of trees. The heat was intense, forcing the warriors back across the clearing.

“Set fire to the Black Horsemen’s huts,” Jason ordered.

It was a task the warriors accepted with alacrity. They grabbed burning branches from the fire and ran through the village, tossing them into the roofs of the huts constructed for Khuramani’s warriors. The slave pens were left to the last, a burning branch being handed to the only forest dweller who could still walk unaided. She moved deliberately to the pens and methodically set them alight. She then moved purposefully to the villagers’ huts and set them alight, to weak cheers from the other captives. They were glad to see the village burn. While it had been their home, they doubted if they would ever return to

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the island again. They would seek a site for a new village elsewhere in the forest; there were too many bad dreams linked to the island.

There was an explosion from within the fire over the altar. Sparks showered around the clearing. Several smaller explosions followed in quick succession. The heat was expanding and cracking the altar stone.

“It’s time to go,” Jason muttered, turning to face the assembled crowd of warriors and captives. “We must get off the island and set up a camp before the second sun sets. We won’t reach Thurgan today.”

Jason smiled when he reached the edge of the lake. Queen Nerfeti was waiting on the other bank with more warriors. She must have seen the column of smoke from her village and come as fast as she could in case more help was needed.

She watched in amazement as Jason walked into the lake, leading his horse. The water never rose above his knees, or that of the horse. The other warriors followed the same path until they were all safely over the lake.

“Prince Khuramani and the Black Horsemen have gone,” he told her.

“How could that have happened? We have had warriors on guard all around the island.”

“I’m afraid that Shartan must have used his magical powers to blind the minds of our warriors to their passage,” Jason muttered. “They left the captives, still in the slave pens, and some injured warriors to keep the fires burning. They were all left to die.”

“What will you do with the forest dwellers?”

“They need food and shelter until I can help them find a new home.”

“Let them remain here with us until they have rested, then we will work with them to build them a new home. Thurgan has carried too much of the load in the fight against Khuramani. It’s time for others to help.”

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“But Khuramani was a Thurgan problem that spread to involve others.”

“The evil prince could have risen in any city. It was unfortunate for Thurgan that he was born there. And you, you are not from Thurgan, yet you risk your life to help them?”

“I’m from Thurgan now; Princess Charni is my wife, Thurgan my home.”

“I’m sure Princess Charni appreciates her fortune in claiming you before others reached your heart.”

“Your thoughts are kind,” Jason muttered, embarrassed. “If you will look after the forest dwellers until they can find a new home, I’ll return to Thurgan. We must continue our search for Khuramani.”

“May your journey go well and swiftly,” Nerfeti said with a smile. “Don’t forget your way to the marshes; they will always be a second home to you and your people.”

The forest dwellers were carefully lifted off the horses. Branches were cut from the surrounding trees and litters were built. These were lashed between the saddles of the horses and the weakest were lifted on to them. The stronger were placed on the saddles. The warriors parted company reluctantly. They had grown to respect each other during their observation of the island. Friendships had been formed, barriers broken down.

Thorsan turned his men toward Thurgan, Nerfeti toward the marshes.

Jason watched them leave, then vanished. Not even the forest birds saw his passing.

CHAPTER 15

THE SARABANDI

Khuramani stood looking over the rails at the approaching land. Sheer cliffs reached up from the pounding seas. The line of cliffs appeared to stretch unbroken across the skyline, yet the vessel continued to bear straight ahead with no slackening of speed. From a distance the land behind the cliffs had appeared flat and featureless, stretching into the horizon in a uniform shade of dull brown. The only change as they approached the shore was a lightening of the brown to a golden yellow.

Tarn joined him at the rail.

“You appear concerned, Prince?”

“I can see no port. How do you intend to get ashore?”

“All is not as it seems,” Tarn said with a smile. “You will soon see where we’re going. It isn’t visible yet.”

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The vessel continued to bear down on the cliffs. Khuramani noticed a brown vertical mark running down the face of the cliff directly ahead. It grew wider as they approached. Then he realized it was a gap in the cliffs, wide enough to allow the passage of both vessels. Tarn shouted commands. The sails on both vessels were dropped and the oars pushed out from the oar ports. With the sails down, their speed slowed as they approached the narrow fissure in the rocks.

Khuramani looked up at the imposing cliffs towering above his head. He noticed guards posted at the top, looking down on the opening. The entrance would be easy to defend against any invading vessels.

The chasm slowly widened and the height of the cliffs became lower. The vessel slowed as it approached what appeared to be a solid wall of rock. The helmsman swung the wheel hard to port and the vessel slowly heeled over. The chasm turned at a right angle to move around a massive hill of solid rock. Perched on top was an imposing structure in shining white surmounted with a golden colored dome.

The cliffs rapidly fell in height to join the rest of the flat landscape that stretched away from the port toward the distant horizon. The port was nestled at the base of the rock, hidden from view until vessels had taken the final turn in the chasm. Khuramani appreciated the security aspects of the channel. Once inside the chasm there could be no turning back. Vessels would have to row to the port basin before they could turn or reverse direction. Any attack launched from the sea would be vulnerable from the surrounding cliffs and the invading vessels would be unable to retreat from the weapons from the town.

There were several jetties sticking out into the basin like fingers from the land. Khuramani wondered why they stood so high out of the water—he had never experienced the rise and fall of the sea caused by the tides. The seas around Sarando could rise up to three eters between high and low water every day. The rivers of the plains only varied their

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height when the rains came in the mountains.

Most of the buildings around the port were flat-roofed single story structures. As the city climbed away from the sea and up onto the hill, the buildings increased in grandeur. Sarando was a large city, almost as large as Thurgan.

The vessels pulled up at a large jetty nearest the entrance. Slaves were waiting on the jetty to catch the ropes thrown from the vessels. When the lines were secured, the oars were pulled back into the vessels and they were hauled against the bundles of reeds hanging as buffers against the rocks from which the jetties were made. Ladders were pushed over the edge and the pirates and their guests climbed ashore.

“The horses will be brought ashore when the tide is high enough for the planks to be fed into the side of the ship. Until then they will be fed and watered on board,” Tarn told Khuramani. “Come with me. We will go and meet with Sette, the head of the council. I’ll tell him I have offered you sanctuary.”

Sette was in the Council House, an imposing structure in the lower area of the town. While only single storied, it was taller than the surrounding buildings and the front opened on to a large square cobbled space. The council house had been built from large blocks of stone while the surrounding buildings appeared to be built from blocks made from mud and reeds held together with dried mud.

Tarn led Khuramani and Shartan into the inner chamber, leaving the Black Horsemen milling around in a group in the square. Sette was an imposing figure as he rose to greet the visitors. Being told of his impending death, Khuramani had expected a frail old man. Sette didn’t appear either frail or old. He stood over two eters in height with the build of a warrior. His hair was turning gray but still showed traces of the black of his youth. His back was straight and his voice strong when he greeted them. Khuramani was curious. How could Tarn think that Sette would die soon? He looked to have many years ahead of him.

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In the middle of the chamber stood a single column about one eter in diameter and two eters high. It was surmounted by a carving made from solid rock which showed the standing body of a man—but this was no normal man! The body had the head of a dog and the breasts of a woman, and from his shoulders sprouted the wings of an eagle. In one hand he held a large spear, in the other a globe with strange markings carved into it.

Sette saw Khuramani staring at it.

“It is Anubis, our God of Gods. We have other minor gods, but Anubis is head of the Council of the Gods. His temple guards the entrance to Sarando.”

Khuramani nodded. The imposing structure on the rock must be the temple. It would be an ideal site for a temple to the Evil Ones.

“Tarn tells me you seek sanctuary in our city. Why is that?”

“I have been deprived of my rightful position as ruler of Thurgan by my sisters and their warriors. I was driven from the city, then my Keep was destroyed. I hid in the forests, but they even pursued me there, killing many of the warriors who remained loyal to me. I need time to rest and regroup my forces so I can return to claim my rightful position.”

“I don’t know much about the affairs of Thurgan,” Sette said. “Tarn speaks well of you. I will speak for you at the council, but until then you are welcome to remain as my guest. I will arrange accommodation for your people. I didn’t notice any slaves within your group.”

“No,” Khuramani said sadly. “I was forced to leave them when I escaped from the forest. They were slaughtered by the warriors sent by my sisters.”

Shartan smiled to himself. The prince was embellishing the story sufficiently to gain sympathy from Sette. They could yet make their stay in Sarando profitable.

The council were swayed by Sette’s words and agreed to give

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Khuramani sanctuary, unaware of the terrible price they would have to pay for their kindness.

Tarn arranged a feast to welcome his guests. He lived in an imposing building set halfway up the hill overlooking the city. The members of the council and other prominent people from the community were invited. Most accepted their invitations, curious to meet this refugee who had been granted sanctuary but who appeared to have his own private army. A large table ran down the center of the main chamber. It was loaded with foods from many lands, some from lands that their guests had never even heard off. A large beast turned slowly on a spit over an open fire set outside the main entrance, the smells wafting in through the entrance. Naked slaves, both male and female, hurried between the guests with bowls of food and vessels of pungent drink. Hands reached for the food, and occasionally the slaves. They squirmed, but made no attempt to pull away. To do so would be to invite instant and public punishment. They were as freely available to the guests as the food and drink, to be used whenever a guest wished.

No free women were present. This was frowned on in Sarando. To have attended would be to invite capture and slavery to any freeman who wished to have them. The free women all moved around the city in the company of armed male retainers. Once their bodies started to bud, they wore long cloaks to hide their figures and veils to covered their faces. It gave them a mysterious allure, but few strangers knew what they looked like under their robes. To take such a woman prisoner was to gamble on her age and beauty. Few took the gamble. The slaves were available and their nakedness ensured you knew what you claimed.

Tarn noticed Khuramani watching a tall, well-endowed dark-haired food server. He called her over. She hurried forward, then stood with downcast eyes before them.

“Do you find her interesting?”

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“She is pleasing to the eye,” Khuramani agreed.

“If you want her, she is yours.”

Khuramani let his hands run from her waist up to her breasts. She didn't move. He cupped her breasts. They were firm and rounded. He took a nipple between his fingers and gave it a twist. The girl gasped but didn't pull away. She was well trained. He let his hand fall between her legs. She was moist.

“She interests me,” he muttered, lust growing in his eyes as he imagined her writhing under him.

Tarn clapped his hands three times. The girl scurried away.

“She will be waiting for you in your chambers.”

The tables were almost devoid of food. Male slaves gathered around the tables, lifting them and carrying them from the chamber. A gong sounded outside and several slaves entered carrying strange stringed instruments. One carried a long tube, narrow at one end and shaped like a funnel at the other. The middle was expanded into a bulb as large as a woman's breast. He blew into the narrow end. A weird wailing noise came out of the funnel, rising and falling as he blew hard and soft into it. The girls began to pluck on the stringed instruments. The overall effect was strange but not unpleasant.

Six women ran to the center of the cleared space. They were dressed in short colored skirts that only just reached to their knees, and transparent loose tops. Garlands of shells hung around their necks. Their dark hair fell loosely to their waists. The flickering torchlight reflected from their white bodies, highlighting the brown of their nipples protruding from their full soft breasts.

The music changed tempo. The dancers began to undulate in time with the sensuous beat. Their breasts swayed with the rhythm of their hips. The music became even faster. The dancers began to rotate, the thin material of their skirts flying outward like a hoop. The music increased in tempo. The skirts lifted level with the dancers' waists.

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They were naked underneath, the torches reflecting off gleaming thighs. The tension in the room increased. The dancers reached for clasps holding their skirts. They flew through the air to land at the feet of the guests, who grabbed for them.

Tarn smiled and whispered to Khuramani: “The person left holding the skirt when the music stops has the dancer until the sun rises tomorrow.”

The music stopped. The dancers sunk to their knees in a gesture of submission.

The gong sounded again. The dancers rose gracefully to their feet, awaiting their masters for the night. The six lucky guests moved forward to claim their prizes. Each dancer had a piece of material around her neck that matched the color of her skirt. The claimants matched materials and drew the dancers away from the floor.

Slaves ran around with jugs filling the empty drinking vessels. Shartan noticed the hands were wandering more freely now as the drink took hold. He had sipped his and been amazed at the spicy flavor. This was a new drink to him, more potent than the juice of the nui tree. It must be a local concoction. There seemed to be fewer slaves delivering the drink jugs. He peered around the shadowy edges of the chamber. Many of the slaves had been grabbed by the guests. They were flat on their backs between groups of waiting males. The festivities were warming up.

Some of the younger male slaves had also been thrown on the floor to pleasure the guests. The Sarabandi were quite open about their bisexuality. The night would be long—and interesting!

CHAPTER 16

SACKING OF ENTONIA

Jason lay back on the couch, gently caressing the growing mound that had once been Charni's slim stomach. She could no longer hide her motherhood from her people. They were delighted. They would have an heir to the throne of Thurgan. Charni looked up at her husband, a happy smile on her face. Peace had returned to the city. The tensions of the past were fading into history.

"Why are you looking so worried?" she asked.

"I'm worried because we've heard nothing about your brother since he left the island. I'm sure he isn't dead nor has he disbanded the Black Horsemen. It concerns me that we've heard nothing about his whereabouts. It's just like he vanished from Praesepe, yet we know that can't have happened. I wonder where he could be."

"I don't know," Charni said sadly. "Knowing him as I do, he could

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he anywhere by now. I'm surprised no one noticed his passage. He certainly wouldn't be traveling alone, so surely somebody would have noticed a large group of warriors moving through their lands?"

"That would be because of Shartan. He would cloud the minds of anybody who saw them pass."

"Or Khuramani, who would willingly have had the Black Horsemen slaughter them, in case they passed the news on to Thurgan."

"I don't think he would have done that, because it would have left corpses or missing people that would lead to whispers and rumors in the marketplaces. There have been no such whispers."

Charni saw Jason tense, a faraway look in his eyes.

"What's the trouble?"

"I can sense a disturbance in my thought patterns. It's very weak, but somebody is trying to reach me from a great distance. I sense they are very concerned. The message is important."

"Can you increase your powers to accept their message?"

Jason clapped his hands. Bianco hurried into the chamber.

"Fetch Marni and Sarsi," he instructed her.

"Marni and Sarsi?" Charni asked curiously after the slave had left. "How can they assist you?"

"Their minds showed great natural receptive abilities when we first brought them to the castle. If they can join with my mind, our concentration could be boosted. It might work. We must try and reach the messenger."

The two young girls rushed into the room and flew to Jason's arms. He hugged them close. The horror of their mother's suicide was fading slowly from their minds as they grew into the routines of the castle. The regular food and attention had filled out their skinny bodies and they were growing into regular beauties.

"I need your help," Jason told them. "We must combine our minds. Someone is trying to reach me, but their thoughts are too weak to receive

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clearly.”

“We will try,” Marni said, accepting for both in her role of elder sister.

“What do we do?” Sarsi asked.

“Close your eyes and let your minds go blank,” Jason told them. “When you feel a mind trying to reach you, let it happen. Don’t try to get the message, let it come to you in its own time and speed. I will link with whichever mind receives the strongest impulse.”

The young girls closed their eyes. Their faces became expressionless as they relaxed. Jason let his eyes move from face to face. Which sister would receive the message first? He saw Marni tense, then relax again. She had received a fleeting contact, but it had been lost. Sarsi stiffened, pain showing on her face. Jason quickly linked minds with her.

Lady Ormuti was trying to reach him from Cortano. The message was garbled—sometimes clear, at other times fading almost totally away. It didn’t sound good. He let his mind slip from Sarsi’s and told her gently to open her eyes.

“I don’t like what I saw,” she whispered. “I think there is trouble.”

“Don’t worry,” Jason told her, holding her close. “I’ll travel to Cortano and talk with Lady Ormuti. She will thank you for helping her reach us. She couldn’t have done it without you.”

“Cortano?” Charni asked after the girls had left the room.

“Cortano has received a messenger from the coastal city of Entonia. He is seriously wounded and they fear he will not live, but he wishes to speak with the Warrior of the Axe of Thoran.”

“Your fame is growing,” Charni said with a smile. “What is the message?”

“I don’t know. Ormuti seemed agitated. Her projections were not as clear as usual, but I sensed many deaths and great destruction.”

“When will you leave for Cortano?”

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“I’ll go now. Ormuti was worried the messenger mightn’t live long. His courage mustn’t be wasted.”

Jason vanished from view, reappearing in the great hall at Cortano, the Axe of Thoran in his hand. Ormuti threw herself into his arms, the worry in her face easing slightly.

“I wasn’t sure if I’d reached you,” she murmured.

“Your message was weak. I had to meld my mind with Sarsi’s to get enough power to receive you. Where is the messenger?”

Ormuti led Jason to a small room. It had been darkened, but there was still enough light to see the shadowy figures huddled around a couch set against the far wall. A figure lay still and unmoving on the couch, swathed in bandages. A healer and his two assistants fussed around him. Marcello stood at the foot of the couch. He moved quickly and quietly toward Jason as he entered the chamber.

“Welcome, Warrior,” he greeted him. “I think you’ve arrived just in time. The messenger is fading fast.”

The healers looked disapprovingly at him as he moved toward their patient, then stepped back when they recognized who it was.

Jason kneeled beside the couch, letting his fingers rest gently against the messenger’s temples. He let his thoughts flow over the wounded man, sending out calming waves to ease the pain that he could sense. The taut pain lines around his face eased.

Jason probed until he established contact with the man’s thought waves, then he opened his own mind to receive the message

It wasn’t good.

The messenger was a warrior from the city of Entonia, a peaceful coastal city that lived by trading between the nations that made up the world of Praesepe. Like Cortano, they didn’t have a powerful army of warriors to protect them. Their small group of warriors was only used to maintain law and order within the confines of the city and to mount a small guard at the castle gates.

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The Sarabandi, the fearful pirates from across the seas, had been mounting a growing series of raids on the coastal villages in search of provisions and slaves, but they had left the coastal cities unharmed.

Until now. Now their targets had changed. The last target had been the city of Entonia itself. The Sarabandi had brought their armed vessels into the port and attacked the other vessels moored at the jetties. They had all been unarmed merchantmen and had been easy prey for the pirates. The pirates had extended their raid, rampaging through the streets, slaughtering all who had opposed them. Women and girls had been stripped where they stood, then bound and left lying naked to be collected later. Few had escaped. Any who had struggled or tried to protest were thrown to the street and raped before being bound and left for later collection.

The trading establishments had been looted, the owners and their staff forced to carry their valuables down to the jetty and load them on to the pirate vessels. The young and the healthy had then been stripped and placed in the slave chain. They would be used as slaves to row the pirate vessels. The old had been released. Any who had opposed the pirates had been slaughtered and their bodies thrown into the sea. The harbor basin had been filled with floating bodies, their blood tinging the normally placid waters red.

The pirates moved to the castle. They surrounded it and demanded the gates be opened to them. The Prince had refused. His guards had put up a valiant defense, but it had been little more than a skirmish to the battle-hardened pirates. The gates had given way. The Prince was dragged into the courtyard and beheaded before his family. His wife and daughter were stripped, then raped by the pirate leader and his men. They had struggled, but it had been to no avail. The pirates stretched them on the ground and took their pleasure with them. The women fainted under the numbers that used them, but that didn't stop the pirate tide. The messenger had grave concerns for their lives.

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The Prince's son had been stripped and tied to a cart, then pulled around the city, his father's severed head hung around his neck like a badge of office. He would be added to the slave chain after the pirates finished with him. He was young, delicate like a girl. He would no doubt provide the pirates with a great deal of pleasure. He would be spared the rowers' bench until they tired of him. The messenger didn't think he would survive the pirates let alone the rowers' bench.

The messenger had been wounded during the attack on the castle. He had been left for dead, his body sheltered by those of his dead companions. He struggled free when the suns set. He broke into the healers' store and found some salve for his wounds, then made his way carefully to the stables. The horses hadn't been slaughtered. He selected the fastest and threw a saddle on its back. He mounted, lying low along the animal's neck. He drove the other horses out of the stables and herded them toward the castle gate. He rode in the middle, hidden by the flying manes of the animals around him.

The horses fled through the gates, taking him with them. They scattered when they reached the city streets, but all continued to head in the same direction—the city gates and the fields outside. The pirates made no effort to stop them. They had no room for horses—they had a full human cargo in the animal holds of their supply vessels.

The messenger had been found wandering aimlessly through the fields near Cortano. The farmers brought him to the castle—he needed immediate assistance.

The healers brought him back to consciousness.

Marcello had been summoned when they realized where the messenger had come from. The caravans from Entonia often visited Cortano, bringing the goods from many nations to be bartered for the work of the artisans and farmers of Cortano.

Jason rose to his feet, his face set in grim lines. Entonia had blood links with both Cortano and Thurgan. The Prince must be revenged, his

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family rescued. Ormuti was worried about the prince's daughter Estelle. She had only just seen seventeen summers and had led a very sheltered life, and she was extremely beautiful. The pirates would not be able to resist using her. Ormuti was not sure how she would withstand these pressures. Parcus had already been abused. At fifteen, he was even younger and more impressionable. His future did not look good.

“This warrior has risked much for his Prince. I will travel in search of them,” Jason assured Ormuti, his face grim as he stared in the direction of Entonia. “It now seems that we are faced with more problems than just Khuramani and his Black Horsemen.”

CHAPTER 17

THE SWORD OF THORAN

Jason returned to Thurgan. He needed as much information as he could get on the Sarabandi if he was to be successful in his search for Estela and Parcus. To know that they had been taken prisoner by the pirates was not sufficient. He needed to know something about the country the pirates inhabited, where their cities were located and the structure of their society. Did they raid in separate bands, working independently of each other, or were they in some form of a confederation with a central leadership? This information would be necessary to mount an effective search. Certainly he could hop in and out of their cities unnoticed, but trying to find two captives among the population of a whole country would be like looking for a needle in a haystack—a long and futile exercise.

He told Charni what had happened at Entonia. She was sad for the

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people who had lost their leaders in one single attack, as well as most of their able bodied young. She agreed that Jason should take the time to try and rescue the missing prince and princess and their mother—especially while there was a lull in the search for Khuramani.

Sento couldn't supply much information about the Sarabandi. Like many of the dwellers from the plains and forests, he had heard about the pirates but had never made any contact with them. He could tell Jason that they were an ancient race and stories about them had been recorded from even before the Battle of the Space Moon. All the stories had always said they were pirates, living off the industry of others. The history spoke of a time when their lands had been green and fertile, but changes in the weather patterns on Praesepe had taken the rains away from the equator and driven the green belts further north and south. However, that had happened many generations ago—the equatorial plains had dried and the crops had failed, leaving in their wake a red desert with only isolated pockets of green to break the arid landscape.

The Sarabandi had been driven toward the shores of their parched land, but even there they found no relief. The seas were salty and all their water had to be separated from the salt before it could be used. They developed an efficient system of condensing fresh water from the salt water, but this left them with mountains of salt. They used much of this to preserve their food against the tropical heat—and they developed a trade with their neighbors for the surplus.

But salt was their only saleable commodity. The countries they were trading with forced them to accept less and less in exchange for their salt. They became a poor country.

The Sarabandi were a proud race.

They tried to reason with their trading partners for a better deal for their salt. They were unsuccessful. However, they had the boats and they were expert sailors. They were not prepared to accept the cheating without protest. They armed their trading vessels and took the goods

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they considered rightfully theirs from the ships of their enemies. These ships were slower and heavier—an easy target for the low, sleek vessels developed by the Sarabandi. They placed oars in their vessels so that they would be able to maneuver with greater skill when it came to close combat. These vessels became the scourge of the seas.

Even with the growth of technology on Praesepe, the Sarabandi remained pirates. Their vessels continued to scour the seas, but now mainly at night and powered by the new fuels science had provided. When the battle of the Space Moon devastated the planet, the Sarabandi were not attacked. They had little of value the warring factions wanted, so they were left in peace. Unfortunately, they didn't take this as their chance to change their ways. Instead, they continued to prey on all sides of the conflict, growing wealthy while the city states wiped themselves off the map.

The pirates could have moved out and ruled Praesepe, but that was not one of their aims. They were an insular people and remained in their desert strongholds, protected on their shores by their fleets of war vessels while their land boundaries were the vast, impassable desert wastelands. As the battle raged and the technical advances of the past were lost, they returned to their old ways. They rebuild their fleets of sailing vessels and continued to target the isolated pockets of civilization left on Praesepe.

Sento knew little of their culture or religion other than that they worshiped a plethora of gods ruled over by one called Anubis, a god displaying a combination of male and female characteristics—and links with the animal world. It had the head of a dog and the wings of an eagle. He had heard it said that the people of the Sarabandi were openly bisexual, claiming their god showed approval of this activity. Children were openly led into this type of lifestyle by their relatives, friends, and even their parents. Slaves who had worked for the pirates had been well trained to pleasure both sexes, and appeared to enjoy the experience

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much more so than those from Thurgan.

Jason thought long and hard about how he should approach his search. He decided he should travel secretly to the country, then mingle with the people as one of their allies. Charni agreed reluctantly. She knew the dangers, but realized that any other approach would be very much a hit or miss affair. Jason could find his quarry immediately, or else he might never find them. They would be slaves, their identity not known to most of the people they came into contact with.

Jason looked at the mighty Axe of Thoran hanging beside the couch. To take it with him would be to attract attention. It was too large a weapon to hide under his cloak. But it was important that he be armed, especially in such a strange and unknown country. Sento read his mind.

“The Axe has a brother,” he said.

“A brother?” Herus asked incredulously. “I thought the Axe of Thoran was unlike any other weapon on Praesepe.”

“It is...but when it was constructed, three items were made from the magic metal. Jason has the Axe and the amulet, but there was also a mighty sword. It still lies hidden in the Lake of Serenity waiting the call to join its brother. Come. We will go and collect it.”

“But I don’t know where the lake is,” Jason said. “I have only seen it in my dreams.”

“Take my hand,” Sento told him. “Now will yourself to the shores of the lake.”

Jason reached for Sento’s hand, closed his eyes, and willed his body to stand on the shores of the Lake of Serenity.

The lake was as he remembered it. He had landed beside the trees at the edge of the lake beside the log from which he had drawn the Axe of Thoran. The waters were calm, reflecting the images from the log in their sparkling surface. The only sound was the songs of birds singing in the trees.

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Jason stood facing the middle of the lake, the Axe held firmly in his left hand.

“Will the Sword of Thoran join the Axe?” Sento told him.

Jason stared at the water, concentrating. He called on the Sword to leave the waters of the lake and join the Axe. A gentle ripple started in the middle of the lake, slowly spreading outward in concentric circles until small waves were lapping gently against the shore. The ripples increased in intensity until the lake started to boil and bubble like a heated cauldron. Slowly a gleaming sword appeared through the waters, rising hilt first from the depths. It sparkled in the light from the twin suns, reflecting the rays around the lake as it floated through the air toward Jason. It hung suspended in front of his face, the hilt level with his right hand. He reached out and let his hand close around the leather binding. The leather was dry, even though the sword had just risen from the depths of the lake. When his fingers closed around the hilt, the waves stopped as suddenly as they had started. The lake was like a mirror again.

“The Sword has the same powers as the Axe,” Sento told him. “It will shield you from the powers of the Evil Ones. No one else will be able to use it except you as long as you wear the amulet. Release the amulet, and the sword and the axe will return to the lake. If anyone else tries to use it, it will not obey their commands and react against them. Unlike the Axe, the Sword can be made to stay invisible even when you don’t have it in your hands. You can send it from you and will it back whenever you want. Will it back to you, and it will return immediately. Use it wisely and well.”

Jason turned away from the lake, sword in hand and stumbled over an object lying at his feet. He kicked at it, looking down to see what it was. At his feet lay a scabbard bound with strips of leather. It was attached to a wide leather belt decorated with metal studs. The studs were in the shape of small silver crosses. He picked the belt up and

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buckled it on. It fitted perfectly. The sword slid snugly into the scabbard mouth.

Where had they come from?

Jason was certain they hadn't been there when he arrived at the lake's side.

Jason returned with Sento to Thurgan, then he vanished again.

The Warrior had started his search for the missing prince and princess.

CHAPTER 18

THE NOMADS

Jason materialized outside the gates of Entonia. The stench of death hung heavy in the air. Vulturas no longer circled over the city. They had picked the bones clean and left them to bleach in the hot sun; the dead within the buildings would have to wait until the rats and maggots completed their task. Only then would the smells of death and destruction fade from around the city.

The streets were deserted. Most of the buildings were gutted by the fires set by the pirates after they had finished their rampage of rape and plunder. The castle had been stripped of all its valuables. Those that couldn't be removed had been destroyed where they stood, including the giant mural painted on the wall behind the throne that depicted the history of Entonia. It had stood for centuries, the pirates had destroyed it in a single night of senseless vandalism.

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A skull hung pinned by a dagger to the back of the throne. Flesh still hung in shreds to parts of the bones where maggots hadn't completed their cleansing task. Jason looked at the dagger, then pulled it from the throne, letting the skull fall to the ground. It was an unusual shape for a dagger, unlike anything he had seen so far on Praesepe. It was narrow but with an evilly curved blade that would make it ideal for ripping stomachs or slicing throats. The blade was razor sharp on both edges. There was a strange engraving on the blade and the top of the hilt was carved in the shape of a skull with red gems set in the eye sockets. There wouldn't be many daggers around with such an unusual shape. It would be a good clue to the identity of the raiders. Jason slipped it into his waistband.

He moved swiftly to the jetty. The buildings around the port area were all empty. The bodies the messenger had mentioned had all vanished, carried out to sea by the ebbing tides. If they hadn't already been eaten by the sea beasts, they would eventually wash ashore somewhere on the coast—unknown and unmourned.

Jason stood looking out over the sea. Somewhere out there were the two young people he had come to rescue. But where? The lands occupied by the Sarabandi were vast. Where should he start looking? Definitely not on the shores of Entonia, of that he was certain. He vanished from view...and landed deep in the deserts.

He was standing on a small sand hill overlooking some old ruins. They looked vaguely familiar, but he had never been to these lands before. Indistinct pictures flitted through his mind, firming as he concentrated on them. He saw himself staggering through the desert, the red sands being blown against his face. He fell flat on his face, feeling the hot twin suns beating down on him. He saw himself rise to his feet, his body buffeted by the winds. The figure he was watching in his mind staggered into the shelter of some old ruins, sheltering behind a fallen wall.

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He looked around. The wall he was seeing in his mind was in front of him, only eters away, half-buried in the sand. He looked upward into the clear sky. Vulturas were soaring high overhead, making good use of the thermal currents rising off the hot desert sand.

Of course, Jason muttered to himself. These were the same ruins that had figured so prominently in his early dreams about Praesepe, the only difference was that the vulturas were in flight and not perched waiting on the walls like omens of doom.

He could see some green trees at the edge of the ruins. It must be an oasis. He could hear the snorting of dramas, the animals that had been domesticated by the desert tribes for use as beasts of burden. Their wide padded feet enabled them to move with ease through the shifting sands and their compact bodies offered little resistance to the violent desert storms that could spring up without warning and trap unwary travelers. The shortage of water within the desert had been solved by nature assigning them three humps along their back that absorbed water when it was available and could then feed it to the drama in times of need. Layers of fat formed around the neck in times of plenty to provide food in time of famine.

The drama had an unusual barking call unlike any other animal on Praesepe. It was impossible to mistake it for any other animal.

Jason willed himself under the cloak of invisibility before approaching the trees. He didn't want the travelers, whoever they were, to be alarmed at his sudden appearance from out of the desert—especially on foot and in the dress of a warrior from the plains of Thurgan. It would be difficult to explain his presence in these circumstances.

He approached the trees from downwind of the animals. The dramas had very sensitive noses; they might panic if they caught his strange smell.

Jason could hear the sound of voices within the shelter of the trees.

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He approached cautiously. The drama belonged to a tribe of desert nomads. They were setting up camp for the night. Their tents had been laid out, ready to raise into position. The women were busy lighting cooking fires while the children were fetching water from the oasis. The tents appeared to have been made from animal skins stitched together. The different colors of the skins gave the tents a patchwork effect. The nomads gathered around the fires as the suns sank below the horizon. The temperature in the desert fell quickly. Jason waited until the nomads were eating, then moved into their store tent. He took two spare skins and some desert bread, then returned to the shelter of the ruins. The stones would retain the heat from the suns and should provide him with some warmth during the night.

The first rays of the sun reached Jason's face at the same time as he woke to the sounds of the nomads striking camp. He stretched, rolling out of the skins. He laid them on top of each other, then rolled them up and carried them over to the camp. The store tent was the last to be pulled down. He tossed the skins inside just before two nomads came to pack the supplies into the large bags that would be slung from the side of the dramas.

The animals snorted and shuffled their feet as they were forced to their knees and the bags were attached to harnesses slung between their humps. The nomads climbed aboard and urged the animals to their feet. Jason noticed several dramas carrying only storage bags. He climbed on to the last one in the line, a sturdy beast with an evil gleam in its eye. It snorted at the extra weight, turning its head to look back along its body, but was hauled forward by the rope attached to its halter. It shuffled after the line of animals trudging across the sands.

Jason was amazed at the speed with which the dramas were able to cover the ground. They took long, loping strides covering nearly two eters. They had an unusual gait, putting both left feet forward at the same time. It gave their movement a strange, rolling sensation, not

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unlike a small ship in a gentle sea. It wasn't unpleasant, becoming almost hypnotic as their feet ate up the lometers. The nomads didn't stop to rest; they merely dozed in their saddles, letting the animals set their own pace.

As the second sun approached the horizon, Jason heard an excited cry from the leading rider. He looked up. The smoke from many cooking fires could be seen not far from the caravan. The outlines of low buildings were silhouetted against the darkening sky. The green branches of large trees could be seen towering above them. It was a small town set around one of the larger oases, one large enough to support a permanent population.

The buildings were all made from sand bricks. They were partly excavated into the desert sands, with entrances reached by steps from the sandy street. Hollow windows were set into the walls, with wooden slats set away from the opening to deflect any wind-blown sand. The bricks were bleached white from the intense heat from the suns, but this helped to keep the inside of the building cool by reflecting most of the heat.

The caravan wandered toward the center of town. A large clearing led down to the edge of the lake. Long, low troughs were set under the shelter of the trees, with a line of large pegs driven into the sands set along the length of the troughs. The dramas were fastened to the pegs. The nomads unloaded the animals while the children ran to the water's edge. A large wooden contraption stood alongside the lake with a large handle protruding from a hollow cylinder. The children swung the lever in an up and down motion. There was a gurgling from inside the cylinder and water started to gush into the troughs. The dramas would be satisfied, they would be able to drink as much as they wanted.

The nomads pitched their tents alongside the animals. The women lit cooking fires and began preparing their evening meal.

Jason wandered into town. He was curious. He had never seen a

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desert town before. The second sun had set, the moons were yet to rise. Jason moved into the shadows cast by a large tree. He materialized, then wandered toward the lights and music he could hear in the distance. A large fire burned outside the entrance to a large building that had been built at ground level. A group of men sat around the fire playing strange stringed instruments while another sat beating out the rhythm on a hollow log with skins taped to either end.

A young girl swayed to the beat in the light from the fire, her hair flying in time with the abandoned wriggling of her hips. She wore a short skirt made from animal hide and a loose jacket unfastened in the front. Her breasts peeked out tantalizingly as she swayed. They were small but well rounded with large brown nipples. Her dark hair flew around her face, first revealing and then concealing her parted lips and gleaming eyes. A container stood in front of the log. Passersby stood and watched, then moved on. Some threw metal objects into the container. Jason guessed it must be the local currency, appreciation for the skill of the dancer.

Jason looked around. A young male nomad stood nearby, his mouth half open, a look of adoration in his eyes. The girl noticed him and slowly moved until she was facing him. Her eyes stared into his. Her movements became more suggestive. Her hips continued to sway, but the rotation was now broken by a new motion as she drove her hips toward him then jerked them back with a look of lust on her face. Jason smiled to himself. The girl was skilled at tormenting her watchers. The young nomad watched spellbound as the girl began to shake her shoulders. She let her head fall back, forcing her breasts forward. The jacket fell open revealing her taut breasts with their rigid brown nipples sticking out like tiny daggers. The nipples wobbled in time with the beat.

The dancer sank to her knees, thighs spread, her hair sweeping the sand behind her. Her hips no longer swayed but began to rock back and

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forward while the gleaming flesh of her thighs shivered as if she was in the grip of lust. Jason heard the boy groan with suppressed desire.

The dancer heard him above the wailing music. She smiled triumphantly and rose gracefully to her feet. With a toss of her head, she moved away from the fire toward the darkness between two buildings. The boy seemed in a trance as his feet slowly followed her.

Jason looked toward the shadows. He was certain he had seen movement. Was it a trap to snare the boy? He decided to investigate. He willed himself invisible, then hurried across the clearing. He moved silently forward, following the boy as he followed the dancer. The girl stopped in a dark recess. She turned to face the boy, slipping her top from her shoulders and letting it fall to the ground. The boy gasped and moved forward a couple of steps. She smiled, then hooked her fingers into the band holding up her skirt and eased it over her hips. It fell to the ground; she stood naked before her prey.

The boy moved forward, a dazed expression on his face. He was no longer in control of his body, his mind unable to concentrate on anything other than the naked girl standing before him, luring him on. He didn't see the two figures moving silently toward him from the rear, heavy wooden cudgels in their hands. It was lucky Jason had. He moved quickly and silently behind the two men, striking them with sharp blows to their necks. They fell silently to the ground, no longer interested in their quarry. Their sudden departure from the equation hadn't been noticed by the dancer.

She opened her arms, dragging the boy against her breasts, expecting at any moment to feel his body go limp as her companions struck him down. He pressed her against the wall, his hands running greedily over her naked body. She tried to wriggle free. His grip was strong. She started to panic.

The dancer began to squirm as the boy's fingers reached their target. She gasped as they penetrated her, then started to respond in

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spite of herself. If her companions had deserted her, then she might as well enjoy herself. She could never overcome the boy on her own, he was far too strong—and aroused. She leaned against the wall, arching her back as he drove into her. He pounded away until she was moaning in submission. With a groan, he collapsed against her. She hung limply in his arms, equally exhausted.

“Performed like a true warrior,” a strange voice said from behind them.

Jason had materialized. He stood over the two unconscious robbers. The girl gasped when she saw the figures lying at his feet. She went white with fear.

“You do well to show fear,” Jason said sternly. “If I hadn’t seen your friends move in the shadows, it would be my friend lying at your feet, stripped and robbed. If the blow had been expertly made, he could even have become meat for the vulturas. I should hand you over to the Sarabandi authorities.”

“Please don’t do that, Master,” the dancer cried, tears pouring from her eyes. “We didn’t mean to kill your friend, only relieve him of his purse.”

“And if he didn’t have any goods of value on him, what then?”

“We would not have harmed him, I swear.”

“The Sarabandi would not believe you, so why should I? Tell me, what do you think your fate would be if I were to hand you and your friends over to the authorities?”

“We would be enslaved. They would go to the rowing benches. I would be sold at the block.”

“To serve some master who would make you perform well—and often!”

“Have pity, Master.”

“Why should I have pity? Would you have had pity on my friend?”

The girl fell sobbing to her knees, her spirit broken. She could see

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slavery staring her in the face, and all for a few paltry coins.

“What is your name, slave?”

She looked at him, her fear clearly visible in her eyes. He had called her slave. Her fate was sealed. She was doomed.

“Mira, Master.”

“I should enslave you now, Mira. You deserve little else. Who are your companions?”

“They are members of our traveling band of musicians. We entertain where we can, living off the generosity of the local people. The living is not good, especially in the deserts.”

“Clothe yourself, Mira, then come to me.”

“Is your slave to be permitted clothes?”

“If you were to be my slave, no.”

“If?”

Hope sprung into Mira’s eyes. She was to be spared. She was...

“Hurry,” Jason told her gently. “If you remain naked before me, I might yet change my mind.”

Mira smiled happily, climbing into her clothes.

Jason turned to the nomad boy.

“Never forget this night,” he told him. “You are lucky to still have your skull intact. Never go unprepared into the unknown. It could cost you your life. Don’t tell people what has happened here this night because no one will believe you. They will laugh at you and accuse you of boasting. The gift you received from Mira was good. Treasure it.”

The boy scuttled away into the shadows.

Jason took Mira by the arm. “Come, I want to meet the leader of your band.”

She pointed toward the two prone bodies.

“They will live,” Jason said with a grim smile. “They will remember tonight by the ache in their heads. They will waken within the ern.”

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“You are not of the desert,” Mira whispered.

“Why do you think that?”

“I sense a power in you, a power greater than any I have experienced. I’m frightened.”

She shivered. Jason drew her against him. She felt the huge sword buckled to his waist. She ran her hands along the outline, then pulled his cloak aside so that she could take a look. She paled, falling to her knees before him, eyes downcast.

“The Sword of Thoran,” she whispered in awe. “I have seen the mightiest weapon on our world with my own eyes.”

“How do you know of Thoran?” Jason asked in surprise.

“My mother was taken as a slave from the city of Antonia while still a young child. She escaped from the Sarabandi, but was then taken captive by the nomads. She was sold to the traveling entertainers to assist with their shows. She is old now and no longer entertains, but she still travels with us and keeps in touch with the people from across the seas when she can. She told me of the mighty Warrior of Earth who had drawn the Axe of Thoran from the log. She also knew about the magical sword.”

Mira gasped as recognition dawned.

“You must be the Warrior of Earth.”

“I am Jason, now of Thurgan.”

Jason took her arm and raised her to her feet. He held her close, feeling the pounding of her heart against his chest.

“Nobody must know I am the Warrior,” Jason told her gently. “It’s important that it remain a secret, known only to us.”

“My lips will be sealed,” Mira whispered. “I will tell our leader that you rescued me after my companions were attacked and knocked unconscious in the dark.”

CHAPTER 19

THE ENTERTAINERS

Carto, the leader of the entertainers, was tall and thin, his skin weathered the color of copper from long exposure to the desert sun. His back was stooped with age, but his eyes still had the sparkle of youth. He looked at Mira with disbelief when she told him Jason was a traveler who had rescued her from robbers. He had seen Mira lure the young nomad into the shadows and suspected her two friends were lying in wait for the unsuspecting youth. He didn't believe Mira had been the innocent party. If there had been any trouble, it would have been started by the wastrels who followed the entertainers' caravan as hangers-on. He didn't voice his disbelief, but Jason could see the clear doubt in his eyes.

"Mira owes you her thanks for her freedom. She could have been enslaved. We are thankful for your assistance. We need her skills as a

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dancer to ensure we attract a generous audience when we perform.”

Jason looked down at the slender dancer standing alongside them.

“She certainly has great skills,” he agreed. “She could easily lure men into forgetfulness.”

Carto smiled knowingly. Mira had already lured many with her charms. She was an asset to the caravan. She would be hard to replace. They were lucky no one had made an effort to trap her into slavery. It would be easy to snatch her from an unarmed caravan. The two wastrels had been hired to protect the caravan. It would appear they would have been an easy conquest for any warrior with the minimum of skills. Carto had no doubt in his own mind Jason had rescued the nomad boy—but why had he brought Mira back to the caravan? She could have been on his slave chain by now.

“In which direction are you traveling?” Jason asked, an apparently innocent question.

“Our next stop is Sarando.”

“Sarando?”

“The capital of the Sarabandi. Don’t you know about our country?”

“I’ve learning more each day,” Jason said with a smile. “I’m a stranger in these parts, in search for knowledge about your people.”

Carto looked at him quizzically. The Sarabandi were seldom visited by casual travelers. The land was inhospitable, the people insular. It was most unlikely that a single traveler would have come so far inland without help. Anyhow, all vessels called at Sarando first, so any visitor coming by sea would have landed at the capital first. The stranger was certainly not one of the dessert nomads, he was too powerfully built and radiated a great sense of power around him.

“Why don’t you travel with us to Sarando?” Carto suggested. “The tribes gather for the Festival of Anubis. There will be many robbers on the roads looking for defenseless victims. Your strength could be useful to us.”

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“I don’t want to impose on your kindness,” Jason told him.

“Then work with us. We need assistance with the show. You can become one of the entertainers.”

“But I wouldn’t know what to do. I have never been on a stage before.”

“I’ll teach you while we journey. We don’t perform again until we reach the city. There is plenty of time for you to learn some of our skills.”

Jason acted reluctant to accept the offer, but his mind had already been made up. The entertainers would provide him excellent cover to enter Sarando unnoticed.

The entertainers had finished work for the night. They had allowed the large fire to die down and lit a small one nearer their caravans. Carto appeared to not notice that Jason had no traveling equipment. He loaned him sleeping skins and invited him to come with him to meet the others in the group. There were six wagons and about fifteen people in the troop. Many of the troupe no longer took part in the entertaining, but helped with work in the background. There were six male musicians, a juggler and a comedian. Mira was the lead dancer. There were three other young blonde girls who sometimes danced with her. They were taller than her, with slender bodies and large firm breasts, the kind of figures that drove the desert dwellers wild with lust.

The caravan left the oasis town before the rays of the first sun reached the square. Carto wanted to make sure they were well on their way in case the nomads decided to inform the authorities about the events of the previous evening. He was still sure Mira had lured the boy into the shadows. There was no trace of her two companions—they must have seen Jason around the fire during the night and decided not to risk a confrontation with him.

Jason rode in the last wagon in the train. He was accompanied by two of the young blonde girls. They huddled together on the seat,

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sitting silently without even talking to each other. He spoke gently to them. They nodded their answers to his questions, speaking no words. He gave up the uneven conversation and lapsed into silence as well. The girls both appeared tense and worried. Jason wondered what was worrying them.

The second sun was now almost directly overhead. The hazy outlines of an oasis had appeared on the horizon. They would reach it in another three or four days and spend the night there. It was deserted of other travelers when they reached it. The women in the troop lit fires and started the preparation of the evening meal, while the men took care of the horses. Jason sought out Carto and asked him what the problem was with the two young blondes. Carto didn't know, but told Jason they always appeared tense and unhappy when they visited the city. They had been bought as slaves because of their beauty. They had not spoken often since they had joined the caravan.

Jason was curious. When he had more time, he must probe their minds to try and find the reason for their silence. There must be some hidden fear that silenced their tongues. If he could find it, he might be able to clear it from their minds and free their tongues.

Carto called for rehearsals for the new item they would add to their show at Sarando. Jason would have a small part, that of the simple apprentice to the comedian. He would be the butt of most of the jokes. Carto was a hard taskmaster. They rehearsed in the light from the fires, not stopping until the first moon was high over their heads.

The caravan was on the road again as soon as the sun rose. Carto wanted to reach Sarando that day so they could give their first show before the Festival of Anubis started the next day. The authorities didn't allow any public entertainment on the festival day of their god; all the population was expected to be at the temple to give thanks to Anubis.

The entertainers reached Sarando while the second sun was still

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high in the sky. They were well known in the city, having performed there often in the past. They were allowed to park their caravans behind the impressive building that housed the council. There was a small open square behind the building which was where they would perform. The wagons were unloaded, then the sides were removed. The base of the wagons formed a stage on which the entertainers would perform. They were high enough to be seen by the crowds they hoped would come to watch.

The musicians began to play when the sun dropped below the horizon. Torches were lit and placed around the platform. The musicians sat on the ground around the platform. The sounds of the music attracted passersby and soon a small crowd had gathered around the wagons.

Mira sprang on to the platform and began to dance. She twisted and turned to the music, her naked limbs flashing in the flickering light each time they broke from the cover of her short skirt. Word of her dancing spread around the lower levels of the city and a crowd began to gather. The music stopped and she sank gracefully to the planks.

She was replaced by the juggler. He was good, but didn't please the crowd as much as Mira had done. His best performances were reserved for when the younger children were present. Then he would call on his skills to amaze and confuse them—the men in the crowd were more interested in the flesh on display.

The comedian was quietly received. His jokes received loud applause when they were based on the relationships between male and female, otherwise the reception was subdued. The crowd became restless and started to chant, they wanted to see more of Mira. The musicians started to play again. Mira appeared on the stage in a transparent robe that reached down as far as her knees, but was so sheer it revealed every detail of her lush body. The robe fitted tightly as far down as her waist, then hung loosely with splits on each side that

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reached from her waist to the hem. She swayed seductively to the slow music as if she was in the throes of some secret sexual emotion. Her eyes were closed. Her lips were parted. Her feet were apart, the robe falling like a veil between her taut naked thighs. Her hips undulated as she sank slowly to the ground.

The crowd was silent; the whistling that called her to the stage long since stilled. Her dance had stopped and she was gone from the stage before the crowd realized it. The whistling and applause was deafening.

Carto replaced her in the middle of the stage. He held his hands up for silence.

“Mira will return,” he promised. “But now we would like to present to you a story based on the pride and greed that we all have but will never admit to.”

The tallest of the blonde girls was lifted on to the platform. She was clad in the robes of a lady of high social standing, her robes fine and stretching down to the planks so that only her face was visible to the crowd. The comedian approached, Jason following behind him carrying a large basket.

She stopped them with a haughty wave of her hand, demanding to know what was in the basket. The comedian told her it was some of the finest material that had ever been spun, finer than the finest material available in Sarando. It was more valuable than all the gold in the city, suitable only for the most distinguished ladies in the land. She demanded to see it.

“I cannot allow that, my lady,” he told her slyly. “To see it would be to desire it—and it is only suitable for the finest ladies in Sarando.”

“I demand to see it,” the girl stormed, stamping her foot. “Do not my clothes show that I am indeed among the finest in the city?”

“Your robes are very impressive, my lady, but compared to this material they are as coarse as the uncured skins of dramas.”

“I will see it,” the girl cried, stamping her foot in growing anger.

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“My father has much gold, he will buy it for me.”

“But it has been promised to the finest lady in the land,” the comedian protested. “I cannot sell it to you.”

“But I want it; I must have it.”

“If you promise not to tell anybody, I might be able to let you feel it,” the comedian said with forced reluctance.

“Then show it to me. I must see it. I must feel it.”

Jason was called forward. He placed the basket on the platform. The comedian looked around, as if to ensure that no one was watching him. He took the lid off the basket and plunged his hand inside. He drew out a piece of imaginary material. He let his fingers caress it as if he was letting the folds run through his hands, feeling the texture. Jason made sounds of admiration.

“See how fine the texture is,” the comedian crooned. “It is so finely spun that the rays of the sun seem to shine through the material as if it wasn’t there, yet it offers more shelter than a drama skin. It is so light you can hardly feel any weight. It is truly the most amazing material in all of Sarando.”

“Let me feel it,” the girl demanded.

“Be careful,” the comedian told her. “Do not grasp it too hard or you might tear it, it is so fine. Just let it flow through your fingers.”

The girl reached for it. She could feel nothing, but she didn’t say so. Maybe she was not skilled enough to feel the fine texture. Maybe her hands were too hardened from helping her mother around their home. There were appreciated sniggers from the crowd.

The comedian held an imaginary piece against her cheek.

“The color matches your skin, the texture is right for you. What a pity that it has been offered to the finest lady in the city.”

“I want to feel it against my skin,” the girl gasped. “I want to say that I was the first to wear this wonderful new material.”

“But I will be in trouble if you are seen to wear it,” the comedian

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protested.

“But I must,” the girl demanded. “I must.”

The comedian stood deep in thought, then his face brightened.

“I have an idea,” he said. “There is another piece of material in the basket. My assistant and I will hold it up like a screen. You can try the material against your skin behind that, then you will not be seen.”

“Are you sure?”

“Let’s try it and see. You stand behind the screen and undo the clasp from your hair.”

He held one end of the imaginary material, Jason the other. They stood apart on the platform, the blonde standing between them. She reached up and undid the clasp holding her hair and let it cascade down her back.

“Hurry,” the comedian muttered. “My arms grow tired. Undo your hair.”

“But I have.”

“Are you sure. I couldn’t tell.”

The crowd started to take a greater interest in the events on the stage. A titter ran through them as the girl scratched her left breast, as if unaware that she could be seen. The crowd knew better than that.

“Try the material against your skin, then,” the comedian invited her.

The girl held the material against her robes, a puzzled look on her face.

“I can feel nothing through my robes.”

“That is most unfortunate, but I must hurry with the material to the home of the lady to whom it is promised.”

“I will take it home and try it in my chambers.”

“I’m sorry, but I cannot allow that. It is already promised to the finest lady in the city and she will be growing impatient. She knows I’m in the city and will send out her guards if I don’t get it to her soon.”

“But I must be first,” the girl said, stamping her foot. “I will be first.”

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Hold the screen up high and do not peek. I will try the material on here; I'm safe behind the screen."

The crowd tittered as the girl began to remove her robe, then the short light robes she wore beneath her outer traveling robe. She stood naked before them, her full breasts jutting out from her chest; her nipples tinted red to match the red color on her lips.

"Have you started yet?" the comedian demanded. "My arms are growing tired."

"The material feels good. It's so soft and light," the girl said, preening herself as if she was standing in front of a mirror. She was facing the crowd, her naked body in full view.

"Hurry," the comedian told her suddenly. "Strangers are approaching."

He moved back with Jason. The girl stepped back until they had moved her away from her clothes. The comedian kicked the basket. Mira climbed out. She quickly threw the clothes and jewelry into the basket and climbed back inside, pulling the lid shut behind her. The comedian quickly dropped the material and pretended to fold it and push it into the basket. Jason had grabbed the other piece from the girl's hands and also pushed that into the basket.

"Strangers are approaching. They mustn't see the material."

"But where are my clothes?" the girl gasped. "I cannot stand before people naked."

She crouched, trying to hide her nakedness.

The crowd broke in to laughter and applause at the girl's embarrassment.

"You are no more naked now than you were before, but your pride let you imagine clothing where there really was none," the comedian told her sternly. "Only slaves stand naked before men. You are naked, therefore you must be my slave."

He snapped a bracelet around her ankle, attached to a light chain.

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He led her round the stage like a pet animal.

“Come, slave. Share your beauty with your masters.”

There was a roar of applause. Whistles and clapping echoed around the clearing. The musicians started to play as the performers stepped into the middle of the stage. The girl stepped forward, proudly naked. She pirouetted for the last time, then sank to her knees in a pose of slave submission. There wasn't a man in the crowd who would not have willingly bought her if she had been for sale.

Mire danced once more for the crowd, then the torches were extinguished around the platform and the crowds drifted away. The show would be the talk of the taverns.

There would be more in the crowd when they next performed.

CHAPTER 20

THE TEMPLE OF ANUBIS

The show had excited the blonde. There was a hungry gleam in her eyes as they settled down for the night. Jason had thrown his skins against the side of the wagon away from the fire. He settled back, then tensed when he heard stealthy movement under the wagon. A soft hand touched his arm, a soft breast brushed against his back. He turned and reached out. His hands settled around a naked figure. The blonde had been aroused by her open display of nudity and the open lust in the eyes of the dozens of men watching her on the stage. She was determined to settle the fires that raged through her body. She had never been displayed naked to the crowds before. Their hot stares had ignited the dormant fires in her own body. She forced herself against Jason. He had also become aroused watching her at close quarters on the stage.

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The shadows hid the fulfillment of their lust. Many erns later, the blonde crawled back to her own sleeping area, sore but satisfied. Jason leaned back and dozed, images of the blonde clashing with those of Charni in Thurgan. He knew he had been weak and he hoped Charni would forgive him his transgression because of the strange situation he was placed in. It wouldn't be long before the sun's rays signaled the start of another day and the continuation of his frustrating search for the missing Prince Parcus and Princess Estelle. He was lost in a city which was as strange to him as Thurgan had been on his first days on Praesepe, except here he had no Sento and Herus to guide him. He was on his own, a stranger searching for strangers among strangers. It would take more than the power of the amulet to bring him success, it would take massive doses of luck.

The crowds all moved the same direction that morning—up the hill toward the Temple of Anubis.

Jason moved with them.

The sky was clear, the twin suns beating down on the massive white pillars that held the curved dome of the temple.

He stood staring in amazement at the giant structure. The temple had been built before the Battles of the Space Moon, but showed little signs of wear. It had been constructed of huge blocks of solid white stone, but unlike any stone found in the lands of the Sarabandi. Legend had it that it had been dragged many lometers from a distant range of mountains beyond the red deserts just to be used in the temple's construction. No other buildings in Sarando had been built using that white rock. The blocks had been cut with such precision they fitted together like a jigsaw, not needing any mortar or plaster to hold them in place. Even the blocks used in the towering pillars didn't appear to be held together by anything other than gravity.

At the end of the temple furthest from the entrance sat a huge stone replica of the god Anubis.

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He towered over the mortals crowding into his temple. Anubis stood, feet apart. In his left hand he held a round globe balanced in his outstretched palm, in the other a massive spear. Jason let his eyes run up the length of the figure, marveling at the skill of the carvers who had formed this likeness from what appeared to be a single block of stone. Bulging muscles ran down the arms and legs, giving an impression of great strength. The head was carved in the likeness of a dog, long fangs showing in the parted mouth. The wings of an eagle sprouted from the shoulders, while the full breasts of a woman protruded from the god's chest.

Jason let his eyes run down until they were looking straight ahead toward the altar—his eyes were on a level with the statue's knees.

Around the base were replicas of the other gods of the Sarabandi, but none of them were any taller than Anubis's waist.

Between the gods was a raised altar of black stone, two eters long and one wide. Priests in white robes gathered around the altar, chanting and spraying pungent incense over the black stone surface. Jason looked around and noticed there were no women in the temple. The bisexuality of the Sarabandi didn't extend into permitting the involvement of women in the rituals to the gods.

Gongs sounded outside the temple, then peal after peal of trumpets.

A slow procession wound through the entrance, led by the High Priest wearing a mask of Anubis. Following behind were two slight figures clad in black robes covered in golden images. They moved slowly as if in a trance. Warriors armed with long black lances tipped with golden spikes marched on either side. The High Priest stopped at the foot of the altar and held his hands toward the god.

"Oh Mighty Anubis," he intoned. "Accept this offering from your humble people to celebrate the anniversary of your holy day."

The two dark-cloaked figures were led forward. They stopped before the High Priest. Priests hurried forward and stripped the cloaks

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from their bodies. Jason saw one was a young boy, the other a slender girl. The boy was obviously under the influence of some aphrodisiac, his body proudly ready for action. The girl was lifted and placed on her back on the altar, then her arms and legs were fastened to the corners of the altar with slender golden chains. She didn't struggle, but lay there breathing deeply and steadily. She looked drugged.

The boy was lifted and placed between her thighs. He immediately plunged in and pounded into her body. The warriors moved forward to encircle the altar. The boy's motion increased in speed and his back arched. He groaned and threw back his head as he reached his climax. The High Priest dropped his arms. The lances plunged into the two young bodies on the altar. The girl died silently, the boy screamed once before he fell forward over her body.

"Let our offering of the seed and lives of these virgins prove again our loyalty to you, Great Anubis. Look down with favor on your people as you have since the first days of the founding of the Sarabandi. Your people worship you, now and until the end of time."

The gongs clanged, the trumpets blared, the crowds cheered—a cacophony of sound rising to the roof of the temple, then echoing back from the mighty domed roof. Jason's ears rung with the vibrations.

Temple servers, clad in transparent flowing white robes, glided in and started to swirl around the statues of the gods, faster and faster as they spun toward the front rows of the multitude. Hands reached out, grabbing at the filmy material. The robes tore from their bodies, leaving them naked. Their spinning slowed and they sank to their knees, legs spread wide, heads and shoulders touching the floor behind them.

"Let your seed put life into the handmaidens of Anubis," the High Priest intoned. "Let the offerings of your loins be the servants of the father of our people."

The crowd fell upon the young women with cries of lust.

Jason moved carefully toward the entrance. He didn't want to

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attract attention to himself. He noticed other men also moving away from the altar.

Public contribution to Anubis did not appeal to all the Sarabandi.

CHAPTER 21

THE BATHHOUSE

Scratching his beard reflectively—he had let it grow to help disguise him from anybody who might recognize his face—Jason wandered through the streets heading back toward the entertainers’ caravans. He was level with a dark door recess when a figure came flying out, to land on its hands and knees in front of him. It was a huge man, strong and with a mane of almost white hair—but it was not the white caused by age but rather the bleaching effect of the desert sun. The man staggered to his feet, moving unsteadily toward Jason. As he got almost level, he stumbled and fell to the ground again. Jason stooped and helped him to his feet.

The man looked at him through bleary eyes, muttering some comments, but his words were so slurred that they were unintelligible. He staggered forward. Jason steadied him.

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“Waidata,” the man muttered. “I need a drink.”

“Maybe you’ve had too much of the juice of the desert palm already,” Jason suggested.

“Never,” the man muttered in a torrent of slurred words. “Waidata is the water of life. I need waidata.”

“I can see a tavern just ahead. Do you want me to lead you to it?”

“Not that one. That tavern is the home of the desert dogs who don’t appreciate the value of the juice,” the man muttered. “They took my money, then gave me no more waidata.”

More likely you couldn’t hold any more, Jason thought, and they threw you out to avoid trouble with their other patrons—but he held his silence. The man was strong and he seemed to be regaining his strength now that he was in the fresh air. Jason marveled at his recuperative powers.

“Come with me,” the man said. “There is a good tavern in the next street. The owner is a good friend. He will serve us.”

“If I’m to drink with you, what is your name?” Jason asked. “My name is Jason.”

“I am called Jarrard, but my friends call me Jar. To you, I am Jar. Welcome, Jason.”

Jar led Jason to the tavern. It was only small, but it appeared to be busy even at this hour of the day. The owner welcomed Jar like a long lost brother—which, Jason found out later, he was! The serving slave produced large vessels filled with the potent juice. Jason took a tentative sip and nearly choked on the fiery liquid. It was much more potent than the wainui of the plains. He doubted that many people from Thurgan would survive a night in a Sarando tavern.

Jar’s brother invited them into a side room. He sent for food. Jason was glad for the break from the potent brew. He needed to keep his wits about him. He couldn’t risk losing his mind to the waidata.

After the noise of the main tavern, the side room was as silent as a

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tomb. Jason leaned back against the wall. He could hear the sound of splashing water and the suppressed giggles of women. He held his finger to his lips and pointed to the wall. Jar listened, then gave an evil grin.

“It’s a bathhouse,” he said. “Maybe we should join them.”

“But I can hear only women’s voices,” Jason muttered.

Jar’s brother had wandered in, in time to hear Jason’s words.

“That’s because it’s the women’s baths on this side,” he said. “The men’s baths are on the other side, with a communal bath in between.”

“Would you like some free entertainment?” he added, looking from Jason to Jar.

Jason shrugged. Jar nodded his head vigorously.

“Then come with me. The owner of the bathhouse is a good friend of mine. We have an observation room so we can look over some of the private rooms reserved for the ladies of Sarando, those who consider themselves too proud to share the communal baths with the commoners. If only they knew others watched them in secret!”

He led them to a small room. It had no windows and was dark even at this time of the day. Small observation ports had been cut into the walls, each one looking in on a small private chamber. Each chamber was curtained with fine transparent material, but the darkness in the viewing chamber would make the walls behind the curtains all look solid—the users of the private chambers would never suspect they could be watched by others. Jason wondered if many would really care—some might even get a vicarious thrill from knowing they were being watched! The viewers in the darkened chambers could reach through and adjust the curtains to give them the best view, and they could see everything without being seen.

They had only just settled themselves behind one of the viewing ports when the bellaneh, or female bathhouse attendant, led a young female patron into the chamber. The young girl wore the robes of one

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of the rich merchant's daughters. The bellaneh was a large girl, over two eters tall and muscular, but quite feminine. She wore only a narrow strip of coarse material around her hips. A long length of thick white material hung over one shoulder, covering one breast. The other breast was bare, large and with a prominent brown nipple. Her face was sculptured arrogance, her hair cropped short against a well-molded skull.

The patron was slender, petite, and golden-skinned. Her eyes were dark, flashing impishly beneath a wealth of long ebony hair. Her hair tumbled down around her shoulders as the bellaneh removed the silver jeweled clasp that had been holding it in place. She stood still as the attendant removed her robes.

When she was completely nude, the girl stretched out full-length on the stones beside the sunken bath. The bellaneh hefted an ornamental water jug and poured its steaming contents over the prostrate girl from head to toe. The girl turned over on her stomach and the attendant repeated the process until every inch of the lovely young body was covered with the scented water.

The girl turned again so that she was lying face up, and a second phase of the bathhouse ritual began. She remained still as the bellaneh took the material from over her shoulder, twirling it into one long strand that she knotted at one end. She began flicking it expertly at the girl's outstretched body. The knotted tip striking against the girl's flesh was wet and it must have stung, but the reclining girl held herself rigid and gave no sign of feeling any pain from this mild whipping.

There were other signs, however, that the ritual was having an effect on her. The bellaneh's main targets, expertly hit so often that the watchers lost count, were the tips of the girl's breasts and the cleft of the plumb rise between her thighs. The first of these areas, soft rosettes before the material took its teasing nips, now deepened to scarlet and hardened visibly, soon jutting out from the girlish circles into sharp,

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hard points. The second target widened and dampened with a first quivering and then rhythmic response to the flagellation it was receiving. Finally, with the only motion she made throughout the ritual, the girl's hips thrust into the air, her buttocks clearing the floor—and a loud exclamation of joy reached the watchers ears.

Almost immediately, she turned over again, with both her hands lost to view beneath her lower body. The bellaneh stood on top of her, one of her feet balanced carefully on each of the girl's buttocks, forcing them wide apart. Jason thought that the girl would find this weight quite uncomfortable, but this was obviously not the case. The bellaneh flicked the material rope now, with deadly accuracy, so that it struck deep in the target she had arranged. More quickly than the first time, the girl's little cry of pleasure carried through the walls.

She got unsteadily to her feet and the bellaneh poured still more steaming water over the girl until the perspiration was washed from her body. Then the attendant approached her with a large vessel filled with soapy bubbles and began to sponge her body. This process, too, became an erotic game.

Rubbing soap between her fingers, the bellaneh manipulated the tips of the girl's breasts until the sensation became so exquisite the girl grasped her hand and thrust it against her body for another rapid journey to gain satisfaction for her aroused desires. This was repeated in different ways until the bellaneh, standing behind her, reached around her to wash her innermost bodily regions and in the process flipped the material from her own hips so that her own quivering sex was pressed tightly against the girl's buttocks. The girl forced herself back against her tormentor, using her body like a hand, and this time the cry of ecstasy was a double one.

The bellaneh lifted the girl in her arms and carried her to the sunken bath, depositing her gently in the water. She joined the girl in the bath. They played and frolicked and splashed for all the world like innocent

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children. When they were cleansed of the suds, they emerged from the water and the bellaneh again resumed her role as servant.

Stretching the girl out again, she began to lather her legs with a thick foam and shaved them clean. This done, she applied some sort of lotion to the shaved surfaces. This must have been astringent, because when she rubbed it over the plump mound at the junction of the girl's legs, the girl began to moan and move about so that her thighs rubbed together. Quickly the ballaneh used a finger to once again provide the release that her insatiable client demanded. Then the two of them rose and disappeared through a curtained archway to one side of the bath.

The watchers moved quickly to the next observation port. They were looking into another small chamber, but this one had a narrow wooden table in the middle of it.

The bellaneh and the girl entered. The girl lay face down on the table. The bellaneh began to knead the girl's flesh gently. After a short while the gentleness gave way to a more vigorous rubbing, which was finally replaced by a series of harsh blows. The girl on the table rose to her knees, crouching as the bellaneh administered a spanking that left her hindquarters a bright, glowing red.

Following this, the girl turned around so that she was sitting at the very end of the table, one of her legs dangling over each side. The attendant picked up a long feather and knelt in front of her. It was impossible to tell where the girl's giggles left off and her sobs began. The bellaneh's use of the feather was devastating, the final result it achieved was as much hysterical as erotic.

The experience left the girl limp and drained. The watchers were equally affected. The girl remained passive as the attendant combed and brushed her hair. Nor did she respond to the caress of the bellaneh's fingers as they massaged scented oil into her body and then coated her flesh with a phosphorescent balm. Indeed, by the time this process had finished, the girl had dozed off. The bellaneh smiled down

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at her and left the chamber.

“The show is over?” Jason muttered hoarsely.

“Not yet,” Jar said, his voice equally hoarse. “Most Sarabandi women are bisexual. She hasn’t finished yet. The tastes of Tarn’s daughter are well known. She is not yet satisfied. I have watched her many times.”

Attendants appeared and arranged a large, wide, ornately embroidered cushion in the center of the room. As they lifted the girl from the table and placed her on the cushion, she scarcely seemed to stir. The table was removed from the room. Several incense burners were placed around the chamber and lit, the heady aroma they gave off reaching the watchers through the opening in the wall. They found it both sweet and strangely stirring. One of the attendants pulled a silken cord in the corner of the room and four yellow, transparent filmy curtains fell from the ceiling to encircle the area of the chamber where the girl lay sleeping on the cushion. The attendants disappeared as quickly as they had appeared. A moment later a female figure entered and slipped between the transparent draperies.

As they watched, the new attendant approached the naked sleeping beauty. Like the girl, her body was naked and anointed with oils. In loveliness, this attendant matched the beauty of the sleeping girl. Tall and shimmering in the light from the flickering torches, her breasts swayed as though alive with eagerness as she approached the sleeping girl and gently awoke her with a long, deep kiss on the lips. The girl’s eyes opened and she began to languidly caress the attendant’s firm thighs. Only a moment, and this produced a visible discharge of pleasure. As if in gratitude, the attendant knelt over the girl and bestowed a long drawn out series of sucking kisses on her breasts. These were punctuated by the teasing flicking of her tongue and delicate little sharp bites.

The pair moved as if performing a familiar dance to which each

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knew all the steps. Their every embrace seemed a part of this dance. The postures were varied and intricate, yet each had in common the fact that the purpose was more and more heightened stimulation. Finally they stretched out facing each other, each with one leg under the other's body so that the quivering junctions of their thighs were fused together. They joined hands and began rocking back and forth.

Quickly they fell back on their shoulders, dropping their handclasp, and both their lower bodies rose high in the air as the fruits of their mutual delights washed over their limbs and bellies. They held the position for a long moment, straining to savor the last dregs of pleasure.

They sank back exhausted to the cushion, then wound their arms around each other, falling asleep in the arms of their companion.

Jason felt as drained as they looked.

"I need a drink," he gasped.

"So do I," Jar muttered. "I need waidata. Let's get back to the tavern."

CHAPTER 22

TARN

The tavern was more crowded than when they had been invited to the private room. The orgy in the temple had finished. The priestesses had been carried back to their chambers behind the temple; they hadn't been able to walk the short distance because of the ordeal they had been put through. Their bodies and minds would not be aware of the value of the offering they had been required to make to Anubis—the young girls bred into the priesthood were brought up in isolation from the rest of Sarando. They were schooled into blind obedience of the High Priest. They were taught that they belonged to the temple and that their selection was a high honor reserved for the selected few of the Sarabandi. To ensure they didn't escape the fate planned for them, they were kept away from males until their first dance in the temple. Their virginal bodies were not awake to the touch of a male, but by the time

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they danced, they had been well used by the other priestesses—especially those from previous years who had not yet born offspring as a result of their temple dance during the annual festival.

The dancers always performed their first dance under the influence of powerful mind drugs that removed all fear and modesty from their thoughts. Some didn't survive the trauma of waking from the drugs to hear what they had done—but these were few in number. If a priestess remained barren after three festivals, she was sold at the slave block—the others were placed in the temple bordello to entertain the guests of Anubis's priests, and the priests themselves. The male children were trained to be temple slaves.

Jason looked around the crowd in the tavern. They were all male. Women seldom visited the taverns unless they were accompanied by a male companion. To do so would have been to invite capture and slavery if they were in any way attractive of face or figure.

Many sailors from the pirate ships had gathered to celebrate. The waidata flowed freely, the slaves rushed off their feet as they tried to keep up with the demands for jugs of the potent liquid. This tavern didn't provide entertainment, the customers provided their own. Tongues loosened by waidata were known to wag freely in both song and gossip. Jason listened carefully. He might hear news of the two captives he was looking for. They would have been brought captive to Sarando on the pirate ships that attacked their city. It was possible some of those pirates might even be drinking in this tavern.

The door burst open and a huge man stood towering in the opening.

There were cries of greeting. He was well known to most of the patrons. Jason leaned over to Jar, asking who he was.

“That is Tarn, the most feared and hated of the Sarabandi pirates. He is without fear and pity.”

Jason noticed Tarn was holding a chain in his left hand. It disappeared outside the door. He strode forward, jerking the chain

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behind him. A young male slave, naked and effeminate, scuttled into the room. Tarn jerked the chain again. The boy fell to his knees, rolling over as the chain tangled around his ankles. He was dragged forward, on his back, toward where Tarn was standing. He cowered in fear at his feet.

Tarn moved toward a table set against the wall. The occupants scuttled away, not prepared to dispute possession with him. Two more pirates followed him into the tavern, their unsheathed swords stuck through the belts they wore around their waists. Their long, straggly hair hung down below their shoulders, matching the color of their drab brown robes. The taller had a jagged scar that ran from high on his cheek, down his neck and into his robes. The other had two fingers missing from his left hand. They projected evil. A slave moved cautiously forward with vessels filled with waidata. They grabbed them, quaffing the contents with a single gulp, shuddering as the potent liquid ran down their throats. They slammed the vessels down on the table, demanding more. The slave hurried forward and refilled them. The second disappeared more slowly; the third remained in the vessels while they looked around.

Tarn dragged the naked slave toward him. The boy unwound the chain from his ankles. He crouched at Tarn's feet like a tame draga.

Jason heard a guffaw from the crowd.

"Tarn has a new hunting draga," a voice cried out.

"That draga couldn't even bring down a bitch in heat," another mocked.

The boy cringed, his face burning with embarrassment.

A drunken pirate staggered forward.

"The draga lacks training," he muttered. "It crouches on its feet when in the presence of its masters."

Tarn snapped his fingers. The boy rolled on to his side, arms and legs tucked against his chest.

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“Is it on heat?” another asked.

“That is for you to discover,” Tarn said with a laugh. “I haven’t tried its ability yet. Take it, then tell me what you think.”

He tossed the end of the chain toward the short, stocky patron who had asked the question. He grabbed the chain eagerly and hauled the boy to his feet. The boy tried to hang back. Tarn reached over and struck him in the back, knocking him against the pirate.

“He is eager,” a voice called from the crowd. “He comes to you in haste.”

The boy was hauled toward a group of pirates in the far corner of the tavern. They were gathered around a small, low table. They had already drunk a vast amount of waidata, their actions slow and unsteady. The boy was drawn into their midst. Jason heard him give a choking gasp as he was dragged on to the table, then he vanished from view in the middle of the group. Jason heard him give a single despairing cry of shame, then there was silence punctuated only by the coarse comments and laughter from the group around him. Jason felt a deep sadness in his heart. The boy was young, he would be scared for life—but then he would never know anything but slavery until he died. His fate was sealed.

Tarn looked around the tavern. He noticed Jason sitting not far from him, wearing the robes of an entertainer. He couldn’t recall having seen his face before. He didn’t like strangers.

Tarn stood up and staggered menacingly toward the table. Jar started to rise. Jason restrained him with a hand on his arm.

“Who are you and where do you come from?” Tarn demanded. “I don’t like strangers.”

“But I’m no stranger, Tarn of Sarando,” Jason said softly. “I entertained your people before the Festival of Anubis.”

“How do you know who I am?”

“Everyone knows about the mighty Tarn,” Jason said ingratiatingly.

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“His fame has spread far beyond the lands of the Sarabandi.”

“That is true,” Jar added, working to cool the tense atmosphere.

“Tarn is well known as the mightiest pirate of all the Sarabandi.”

“Everybody admires your power against those who do not believe in Anubis. The gods will show favor to you, their favorite son.”

“Is that true?” Tarn asked, his hostility melting before the flow of flattering words.

“That is what is written in the sands of the desert,” Jason said, his mind working fast. “I have seen it in the dunes of the desert that the destiny of Tarn is the destiny of Sarando.”

Tarn took a step back in amazement. Was this entertainer a soothsayer? Could he read the future in the sands of the desert? Was his destiny really the destiny of Sarando? The sands of the desert would never lie. They had protected the Sarabandi from their enemies since time began. They would not lie. He would prevail. He would be the leader of his people. Jason could see that he had hit upon the right track to get through to Tarn. He was ambitious. He must use this ambition to achieve his own goals.

“Tarn is so mighty even slaves crawl naked at his feet,” Jason murmured, looking toward the distant table. “Where did the mighty Tarn find a human draga so appealing and docile?”

“That is no normal slave,” Tarn told him boastfully. “He is a prince.”

“He is no prince now,” Jason said with a smile. “He is nothing but the lowest slave.”

“That’s true, but he was once a prince.”

“He moves well on the chain. You must have had him as a slave for many moons.”

“He is new to the chain,” Tarn said, a note of pride in his voice. “He was only added to the chain after the fall of Entonia.”

“Surely that cannot be,” Jason said, hiding his elation. “He moves

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on the chain like he was born to it.”

“Neither he nor his sister were born to the chain, but they have learned fast.”

“His sister is also within your slave pens?”

“No. She was sent to the slave block with the other plunder from Entonia. The boy interested me. He will stay until I tire of him, then he will also be sent to the block.”

“Surely the rowers’ bench should be the place for a male slave,” Jason said with a smile.

“So it should be, if he were indeed a male, but he hardly warrants that title. He wouldn’t be able to cope with the work of the oars. He is only the shell of a boy and by the time I finish with him, he will have the heart of a woman.”

“Where could you find another one such as he?” Jason asked.

“You don’t find them for sale at the block,” Tarn said. “They are seldom captured and, if they are, by the time their owners tire of them, they are of no interest to other buyers. By then they are only any good as food for the dragas.”

Tarn looked over to the corner where the boy had been dragged. The activity had slowed. It wouldn’t be long before he was dragged back to Tarn’s table, his initiation completed.

“Come, strangers, share a vessel of waidata with me. We shall talk of the desert sands and the tales they tell.”

Jason and Jar joined Tarn at his table. Tarn tried to pry further information from Jason about the tales he had seen in the desert sands. Jason smiled to himself. Tarn was obviously superstitious. He was also hungry for power and glory. Jason fed his fantasies, embellishing the tales he had already told him. Tarn swallowed them all eagerly, especially when Jason spoke of the linking of his destiny with that of Sarando. He spoke in allegories. The waidata flowed. Tarn became maudlin. Jason pumped him for information, but was able to make little

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sense from what he was told.

Tarn kept talking about his election to the position of deputy leader of the council, and how he would then be leader. Jason was puzzled. He had seen Sette, the leader of the council. He didn't appear to be at risk from dying for many seasons yet. How could Tarn be so sure he would be leader soon?

Jason took his leave from Tarn, apologizing for not being able to stay longer but playing on his position with the entertainers as the reason he had to leave. Tarn waved him away. He was under the influence of the waidata—his memories of the evening would be fragmented and hazy.

Jar remained in the tavern as Jason left. He stepped into the shadow of a small tree, then vanished from sight. No longer visible, he wandered back to the tavern and stood where he could watch Tarn. He would follow him when he left. He might not have been honest about the whereabouts of the princess.

The boy had been returned during Jason's absence. He crouched at Tarn's feet in abject dejection. Tarn staggered to his feet, dragging the boy behind him as he left the tavern. There were several coarse comments as the boy moved slowly and painfully after his master, the chain taut around his neck.

Tarn staggered up the road leading to his house. The gate was barred. He beat a thunderous tattoo, demanding instant entry. A frightened slave quickly swung the gate open, bowing low. Tarn bounced off the gate post, then straightened in time to get through the doorway and into the entrance hall. The slave was amazed. He had never seen his master so full of waidata.

Tarn staggered to his chamber, dragging the boy behind him. Jason followed, unobserved. The boy was fastened to a ring at the foot of the couch, then Tarn fell back on the skins covering his couch. He lay on his back, mouth open, snoring loudly. He wouldn't wake up for many

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erns. Jason saw the boy watching him, his eyes filled with hate. He moved forward silently, the chain held in his hands. His eyes were focused on Tarn's bare throat. He strained against the chain, trying to get it to stretch, but he could reach no further than Tarn's waist. The bare neck remained tantalizingly out of reach. He collapsed weeping to the ground. Jason felt sympathy for him, but didn't appear to him. To do so would have revealed his real identity and risk the rescue of the boy's sister. Parcus would have to survive the harshness of slavery until they could both be rescued.

Jason left the chamber. He wandered through the house, marveling at the luxury of the surroundings. Tarn had collected many treasures from his raids, and he had obviously retained the best for himself. Jason was amazed. He was told the city took one third of all the treasure collected from each voyage, with the balance being divided fifty/fifty between captain and crew. If that was true, then Tarn must have brought Sarando vast riches from his raids. Ornaments in gold and other precious metals sat in alcoves set into the walls, their sides often encrusted with jewels. Carvings and beautiful woven materials were spread throughout all the rooms. The skins of many rare animals were scattered among the rugs on the floors. Jason growled when he noticed several manappe skins among them. One chamber was locked and guarded by an armed pirate. Jason assumed it must be the main treasure room.

The sleeping chambers were smaller, but still luxuriously furnished. He had seen inside Tarn's chamber, but there appeared to be several others. He wandered through them. All were empty, except the last one. Jason stopped at the door when he heard a noise inside. It was a female voice, groaning gently. He eased the door open and slid unseen through the gap. A young female lay stretched out naked on her back on the couch. She was asleep, but her dreams had aroused her to a state of suppressed desire. Her hands were gliding over her body, caressing her

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over-heated flesh. A steady stream of groans escaped from her gently parted lips. Her breathing was steady, but the flesh of her breasts was taut, the nipples sticking firmly out from the full mounds.

Jason stood looking down at her. Her face and figure looked familiar. A slow smile spread across his face. Of course he should have recognized her—it was the young girl he had watched perform in the bathhouse. Jar had mentioned that she was Tarn's daughter, but he hadn't related the names.

Jason moved beside her, letting his fingers gently caress the tips of her nipples. She arched her back, her eyes still closed. He cupped her breasts, slowly squeezing the firm mounds. The girl began to moan steadily, her hips starting to undulate. She began to breathe faster as her arousal grew stronger. Jason removed his hands. She subsided again to the couch.

Her legs parted. Jason let his hands rest at the junction, pressing hard against her mound as he sought the entrance to her body. Her eyes flew open as his fingers penetrated her. Jason withdrew his hand. The girl stared between her legs. There was no one there, yet the feeling had been so real. It must have been a dream. She turned over on her stomach, forcing a pillow under her hips. She pressed against it, her legs spread widely on either side of it.

Jason drove into her from the rear. She gasped and struggled as he pounded into her body, holding her helpless with her face pressed against the other pillow. He soon reached his own satisfaction. He withdrew and turned her over on to her back, letting his hands squeeze her breasts. She watched in a mixture of fear and amazement as the flesh molded to the unseen fingers, the nipples hard and the pleasure unbearable. She must still be dreaming. There was no one in her chamber with her, yet her body was responding to the caresses of a male lover. This was not one of her usual dreams—most of lovers, both real and imaginary, were other women.

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Jason removed his hands. The pressure on her breasts ceased. She fell back against the couch, looking wildly around the room. She had to be still dreaming, yet everything seemed so real and natural. She pinched herself, crying with the pain. The pinch was real. She must be loosing her mind. She mustn't tell her father, or else he might send her away from his house. It wouldn't do for the next ruler of the Sarabandi to have a mad daughter. It wouldn't be good for his image.

She must spend less time in the bathhouse—it must be effecting her mind.

CHAPTER 23

THE ELECTION

Returning to the entertainers' caravans, Jason materialized in the shadow of some trees before approaching the fire. Carto looked at him, a smile on his face.

"Have you had a good day?" he asked.

Jason nodded. He had certainly had a good day. Part of his quest had been successful.

"We perform again tomorrow night," Carto said. "Our show has attracted a lot of comments. It seems we have found favor with the local population. We should attract a greater crowd tonight. Many people will remain in the city for the election of the council during the day, then maybe they will come to watch us in the evening."

"What election?" Jason asked.

"The members of the Council of the Sarabandi meet in the council

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chambers to elect a deputy leader to Sette, the chief of the council. The deputy is elected every third summer, and remains in power until the next election. If anything was to happen to Sette, the deputy would become leader of the Sarabandi.”

Tarn had spoken of an election. Was this the one he was referring to?

“Is Tarn the pirate a member of the council?” Jason asked.

“Yes, he is,” Carton said, looking at Jason in surprise. “How do you know about Tarn?”

“I heard people mention his name in the tavern; other than that, I know little about him. I heard he was one of the Sarabandi pirates.”

“He is more than that,” Carto muttered. “He is the most evil pirate ever to hail from Sarando. He is a member of the council, with ambitions to become the deputy leader. The majority of people hope he doesn’t win the election, but if he does, that Sette has a long life ahead of him.”

“Three years, at least,” Mira murmured. She had wandered over unnoticed and heard the end of their conversation. “There will be great bloodshed if Tarn ever becomes leader.”

“Why?”

“Tarn feels the destiny of the Sarabandi is the destiny of Tarn. He has ambitions to be more than the ruler of the Sarabandi. If he has his way, he would lead the pirates against all others in an effort to become the leader of our world.”

“I have no doubt he would be opposed in his plans by the other people on Praesepe, like they oppose the evil Prince Khuramani.”

“Whispers in the markets say that Tarn has heard that the sands of the desert have spoken to him with signs. The Sarabandi are to be masters of our world,” Carto said sadly.

“Then there will indeed be great bloodshed,” Jason agreed. “Tarn might capture or destroy the ports of the cities along the coasts, but the

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people from the plains and forests will not stand idly as their brothers are slaughtered.”

“Neither will the Warrior of the Axe of Thoran,” Mira muttered.

Carto looked at her sternly.

“Never speak that name in this city,” Carto told her. “If Tarn’s spies hear you, you will be either killed or enslaved.”

“Why would Tarn do that?” Jason asked.

“Tarn fears the powers of darkness. They say that the Warrior can control these powers, that he can shield himself with the cloak of darkness whenever he wishes.”

“That would be a good power to control,” Jason said with a smile. “It could get you into the female bathhouse without being seen—or into Mira’s sleeping area when she’s changing.”

Mira blushed. She grabbed a handful of dust and threw it at Jason with a giggle. The serious mood was broken. Jason grabbed Mira and swung her over his knee, letting his hand rest on her rump.

“I should warm the end of your body for throwing dust at me,” he told her with mock seriousness.

She wriggled against him, urging him on with her body but objecting with her words. He let his hand deliver a sharp slap, then rolled her off his knees and on to her back in the dust. She swore at him as he rose to his feet. He moved threateningly toward her. She cringed back in mock fear at his feet.

“Spare me,” she begged, fighting to control the laughter in her voice.

“I will spare you, woman,” he told her loftily. “I need to preserve my strength for tomorrow’s performances.”

“Or to recover from today’s.” She giggled, ducking away into the shadows.

Carto had been watching the by-play with a smile on his face. He was glad to see Mira was staying close to the caravan now that Jason

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had joined the troop. It was good she was no longer hanging around with the wastrels in the local towns. It had long worried him that one day she wouldn't return to the caravan, having attracted the attention of some patron who then decide to enslave her for his own pleasure. She was a valuable member of the group and would be sorely missed.

The open space outside the council chambers was crowded when Jason arrived to observe the election. Every vantage point was taken and Jason could feel an air of expectancy running through the crowd. He stood at the edge of the crowd, letting his mind wander freely. His first impression was of chaos, then clear thoughts started to filter through. He could feel a strong sense of concern, and most of it was centered round Tarn. Many of the people in the crowd were worried that he might win, and it was obvious that a win for Tarn would not be a popular choice. He couldn't find a single mind in support of the pirate.

The members of the council, those leaders of the community who would have a say in the decision were milling around outside the chamber. Jason let his mind probe theirs. Tarn hadn't arrived as yet, but it would make no difference if he did. All the council members were focusing on a different deputy. Not one of them was thinking of Tarn as a potential candidate.

Jason felt more relaxed. He let his mind wander back over the crowd. Their concern hadn't abated, yet there was nothing he could do to let them know the way the council members were thinking. He hadn't yet developed his powers to the stage where he could influence the minds of many at the same time. He must remember to get Sento to teach him that technique when he got back to Thurgan.

There was a sudden and subtle change in the thought patters around him. He looked up. Tarn had joined the other council members outside the chambers. They moved into the building together. The discussions would start soon. The crowd moved around restlessly waiting for the

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result.

A subtle calm began to spread over the crowd. Jason started to relax, to feel a sense of security. He shook his head, clearing his mind. Strange vibrations were spreading though the square. They were relaxing the crowd. He sensed an emphasis on approbation for Tarn, an effort to prepare the crowd to accept his appointment as deputy. Jason let his eyes wander around the edge of the square. He couldn't pinpoint the source of the vibrations, but they were definitely caused by an outside influence. But who could have the power to pervade so many minds at the same time? Were they attempting to sway the decision of the council?

The question was answered with a few dierns. The councilors walked out from the chamber to announce their unanimous choice of deputy leader of the Sarabandi for the next three years. Sette stepped forward, a dazed look in his eyes.

“We, the council of the Sarabandi, have voted without dissent, to appoint as our deputy leader for the next three years, Tarn of Sarando.”

Jason gasped as cheers broke out from the crowd at the announcement. The mood had changed, the reverse of what it had been when the council entered the chamber. No one opposed the appointment of Tarn. The reverse was the picture he now got, approval was unanimous. Jason reached out to touch the minds of those around him. Their minds were blank, their actions the actions of puppets being controlled by others from a distance.

The voting had been rigged, controlled by forces outside the council of the Sarabandi. There could be no doubt about that, but who could be responsible?

Jason wondered how long the vibrations would hold the crowd within their power. Were they long lasting or would the fade very soon? What would the crowd's reaction be when their minds eventually cleared and they found out that Tarn was their new deputy leader?

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He must warn Sette the election had been tampered with. The council must rescind their vote and hold a new election. The future of Sarando depended on it.

CHAPTER 24

A FUNERAL

Jason returned to the caravan. Carto was still looking stunned at the result of the vote. The others also stared blankly into space. What would happen if anything happened to Sette and Tarn actually became the leader of the Sarabandi?

The crowd's responses at their performance that night were more subdued than usual. Even Mira's sensual dancing drew only restrained applause. The act with the invisible material fell flat. The crowd was preoccupied with their own concerns now that the full potential of the election result was sinking in. They were in no mood to be entertained.

When the show ended, Jason took his leave, ostensibly to return to the tavern. When he reached the shadows of the first tree, he vanished. Quickly he hurried up the hill toward the temple. Sette's home stood within the shadows of the temple walls. Jason approached quietly. He

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didn't want to alert the dragas he assumed would be guarding the gates.

The house was strangely silent.

Subdued light came from the windows at the back of the building, but otherwise there were no other lights showing. The night was still young. Jason had not expected to find that Sette had already retired. He tried the front gate. It opened silently as he pushed against it. The hinges had obviously been oiled recently. Stepping through the opening, he closed the gate behind him, waiting for the snarls from the guarding dragas. There were no snarls; the dragas weren't at their usual position just inside the gate. Jason moved rapidly toward the door. He tripped over a prone form. He had found one of the draga. He placed his hand over the animal's heart. It was still beating, but very slowly. He checked the animal's body. There were no signs of any external injuries.

The other dragas were lying just inside the door. They were also unconscious. Jason grew more worried. What had caused the dragas to fall asleep, and so deeply that even a stranger's smell and touch didn't awake them? These were nocturnal animals, hunters by instinct. They should have been alert and seeking out his scent as soon as he entered the courtyard.

Jason hurried into the house. It was as quiet as a tomb. No sounds disturbed the eerie silence. He hurried through the door from which the faint light showed. A naked slave crouched in front of the fire, stoking the flames. His movements were slow and deliberate as he slowly added sticks to the fire, one by one. He placed each stick carefully across those already in the fireplace. His eyes were glazed. Although still invisible, Jason spoke. The slave didn't even turn his head to see where the strange voice had come from. Standing beside him on the floor was a jug of waidata.

Leaving him, Jason hurried toward the back of the house where the sleeping chambers were normally located. The first two were empty,

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the skins on the couches undisturbed. He entered the third and froze in his tracks.

Sette lay on the couch, his arms crossed over his chest, his eyes closed. Jason looked at him with concern. He couldn't see any rise and fall in his chest to show he was still breathing. Jason hurried forward. He felt for the old man's heart. He couldn't find any beat, neither could he find a pulse when he took his hand. It was still warm, but strangely still.

The leader of the Sarabandi was dead.

A wadata vessel stood beside the couch. Jason sniffed at it. A strangely sweet odor could be smelled through the pungent liquid.

There was a disturbance at the gate. Jason heard it thrown open, then feet pounding through the house coupled with the clanking of weapons. Armed pirates burst through the door, then froze when they saw Sette lying on the couch. They backed away as a member of the council followed them into the chamber. He placed his hand over Sette's heart, his face rapidly going from tanned to white in dierns.

"Call the healers," he cried out in a quavering voice. "I fear Sette is dead."

A pirate ran from the room to fetch the healers. Another went to summon the High Priest, while others ran to summon the other members of the council.

Tarn was the first to appear, ahead of the healers and the priests. Jason noticed a suppressed gleam of triumph in his eyes. Tarn lived furthest away from Sette, and yet he had been the first into the chamber, even quicker than the High Priest who lived in the temple less than one hundred eters from Sette's gate. He must have been waiting close by, aware that strange events were happening in Sette's house.

A pirate dragged the naked slave into the chamber, bringing the wadata vessel with him. He forced the slave to his knees at the feet of the senior councilor and handed him the almost full vessel.

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“I found him in the main chamber,” he growled. “He wouldn’t answer my questions.”

The councilor looked from the vessel in his hand to the slave, then at the healers who had arrived and were fussing over Sette. The chief healer stepped away from the couch and turned to face the High Priest and the councilors, who had assembled by this time.

“Sette is dead,” he announced simply, the words catching in his throat.

“How did it happen?” the High Priest demanded.

The healer reached for the wadata vessel and sniffed at it.

“He was killed with the juice of the datura fungus. The wadata was used to disguise the taste from Sette,” he muttered, handing the vessel to the High Priest.

The priest sniffed the vessel, his nose twitching at the sweet smell. The councilor handed him the vessel that had been found beside the slave. The smell was the same. He turned to the armed pirates.

“Take him away,” he thundered, pointing to the naked slaves. “He has served Sette poisoned wadata. He shall spend the rest of his life on the oar benches.”

Tarn moved quickly forward to stand beside the High Priest.

“Let the slave prove his innocence by drinking from the same cup,” Tarn cried. “If the wadata isn’t poisoned and Sette died from other causes, then he will live and can go to the oars. If he is guilty, then let him suffer the same fate as his master.”

There was a chorus of agreement. The pirates grabbed the slave and hauled him from the chamber, the crowd following. The temple was close, judgment would be swift. Tarn watched them go, a grim smile of triumph on his lips. He didn’t know Jason was in the room with him. Jason followed him to the temple. Whoever had administered the poison didn’t matter, but he was certain it had been administered at Tarn’s command.

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The slave was dragged before the altar and thrown to his knees at the feet of Anubis. The High Priest towered over him, the waidata vessel in his hands. He lifted the vessel toward the gods.

“Let your judgment be hidden in the liquid of this vessel, Lord Anubis,” he intoned. “Our beloved leader and your loyal servant Sette has fallen to the hands of an assassin. Let your judgment be swift, your revenge immediate.”

He handed the vessel to the slave, who looked blankly at it.

“Drink,” the High Priest commanded.

The slave raised the vessel slowly to his lips and drank deeply, emptying the cup. His body tensed. He clutched at his throat, then gasped and fell forward at the High Priest’s feet.

He was dead.

He was also innocent. No assassin, no matter how hardened, would calmly drink from a vessel he knew contained the poison he had administered to his victim. Jason couldn’t believe the slave would have remained in the house after he had killed his master. He would have flown, attempting to escape from the fate he knew would await him. He must have been drugged, then the poisoned waidata placed beside him after the murder had been committed. He had been used as a dupe to cover the tracks of the real assassins.

The slave’s body was dragged outside the temple and tied to a pillar with a notice advising others of his crime.

The council gathered at the council chambers to confirm Tarn’s appointment as leader of the Sarabandi. They had no option. They had voted him in unopposed only the previous day. They declared the next day an official day of mourning. Sette would be carried in honor to the tomb of his ancestors as the second sun neared the horizon. As the day ended, so would his mortal remains be removed from the sight of his human kindred when the entrance to the tomb was sealed.

Jason returned to the caravan, worried by what he had seen.

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“What ails the people of Sarando?” Carto asked when he saw Jason enter the circle of firelight.

“Sette is dead.”

“He can’t be,” he gasped. “He appear in excellent health this morning.”

“He was, but an assassin made sure he didn’t live to enjoy his old age.”

Carto sunk to his knees before the flames, his face pale. The other entertainers huddled around in little groups as Jason told them what had happened. He gave them no details other than those that would have been known to the general population. To have said too much would be to reveal his true identity. Mira moved to his side. She was crying and shivering. She crouched against him, seeking both warmth and comfort. He put his arm around her, drawing her close.

“Sarando is finished,” she muttered sadly. “Tarn will lead the Sarabandi against the people of the plains. They will repel him, then take their revenge on us. We are doomed.”

“But the people from the plains don’t have vessels to transport them to Sarando,” Jason protested.

“They will get vessels when they defeat Tarn. We are doomed.”

“And the Warrior of the Axe of Thoran will rise to their support,” Carto added. “Tarn will not be able to withstand him.”

Jason kept silent. Little did Carto realize that the Warrior had already risen against Tarn. He was in Sarando, and very angry at the turn events had taken in the last few erns.

The next day was long. There was little joy in the city. Sette had been loved by all factions and had welded Sarando into a happy community. They were unsure what the future held with Tarn, but they sensed it would not be a happy one for many of them.

Sette’s body lay on the altar at the feet of Anubis, draped in his robes of office. The heavy gold chain rested on his chest. It would be

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removed from there and placed around the neck of his successor when he started his last journey.

Carto led the entertainers through as a group. Jason followed at the end of the line. He was their newest recruit, he must remain in his right position. Even the normally bubbly Mira was subdued. The blondes were openly crying—they were not the only weeping mourners in the temple.

Jason stood looking at Sette, a puzzled look on his face. Sette's face looked so relaxed, almost as if he was only sleeping and would rise up at any moment to greet the mourners.

The entertainers returned to the caravan. They would silently line the route taken by the procession that evening to offer their last respects; until then, they would remain at the campsite. Jason told them he would return to the city to find Jar. He would watch the procession from near the tavern. Carto watched him go, a quizzical expression on his face.

"I feel Jason is not what he appears to be," he muttered softly to Mira.

"He isn't," she agreed, but he couldn't draw any further information from her.

Jason wandered into the city. Looking for a seclude spot from where he could vanish unseen. He found one and disappeared.

He wandered through the city, letting his mind probe the minds of those he passed. He detected a dull pain, almost a sense of personal loss. He also detected a returning level of hatred for Tarn. The mind control had been released. Whoever had placed it for the election had not been able to retain it for more than a short time. That was good. It meant the people of the Sarabandi would not remain puppets to their new leader. Opposition would grow the more he deviated from the ways set by Sette.

Jason reached the temple.

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Sette's body had been placed on a wagon decked with black skins. He was dressed in his robes of office. His drawn sword had replaced his chain of office. That lay on the altar waiting to be hung around Tarn's neck.

Six black oxen were chained to the wagon. They would draw it slowly through the streets to the tomb where it would be placed next to Sette's father. Pirates walked slowly on each side of the wagon, black skins draped over their shoulders and black caps on their heads. The council, also in black, led the way, with the exception of Tarn. As the new leader, he followed the funeral wagon. The golden chain of office gleamed against the black robes he was wearing. The High Priest, followed by the other priests, walked ahead of the council. Some of the priests beat hollow wooden drums, while others beat large gongs. The echoing boom of the drums added to the somber occasion.

The procession crossed the river bridge on the outskirts of the city and headed slowly toward the hill near the entrance to the port. The people from the city didn't cross the bridge, they had to remain within the city boundaries. Only the priests, councilors, and pirate guard accompanied the wagon as it wound its way slowly from Sarando.

Jason followed behind, curious to see what happened at the tomb.

Several narrow valleys cut into the cliffs. The wagon followed the trail into the second valley they reached. The track was just wide enough for the wagon. The pirates stood silently at the entrance as the wagon rolled away from them with only the priests and councilors now as mourners—and Jason tagging on behind them.

The track was rutted and strewn with small boulders that had rolled down from the steep cliffs. The hard wheels jarred and shook the body at every turn. Few Sarabandi wagons had springs, but of what use were springs to the dead?

Ahead of them the track steepened and became narrower. The wagon stopped at a part of the track that had been widened by cutting

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into the cliff. The oxen were turned and the wagon pointed down the hill, then the oxen were tethered to posts that had been driven into the bank. These were well weathered and showed signs of being used many times.

The priests placed their drums and gongs alongside the wagon, then lifted the stretcher holding the body on to their shoulders. Jason hadn't realized that the skins also covered a narrow stretcher. Four priests, two at each end, carried the stretcher slowly forward until it was clear of the wagon. There was a cavity in the top of the wagon. It was filled with many torches. The remaining priests each took a torch and formed up in front of and behind the stretcher. They moved slowly forward, followed by the councilors. The track steepened and followed a narrow trail that had been cut into the side of the cliff. It was more like a tunnel with one side open, and the open side plunged many eters to the floor of the valley.

They approached a small opening in the side of the cliff many eters above the valley floor. The priests stopped and lit their torches. They moved slowly into the darkened interior.

The opening led straight into the cliff face for several eters, then started to slope gently downward. Jason looked around. The tunnel they were in had been cut by men, but a long time in the past. There was no way the wind, rain, or sun from the deserts could reach this far inside the cliff, yet the paintings that decorated the walls were showing signs of great age. The tunnel widened, opening into a small domed chamber. Three tunnels spread out from this, all wide enough for four men to move side by side. The floors were perfectly level, worn down by the tread of many feet over time. The priests moved into the middle tunnel. The councilors remained in the outer chamber. Jason followed the priests.

The tunnel led into a larger chamber, also hewn from the solid rock. The walls were honeycombed with platforms cut into the vertical sides

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of the chamber, three high. The roof was domed, the peak over the center of the chamber above a statue of Anubis. His hands no longer held the globe and spear but rested on the heads of two smaller statues. Jason recognized them as those of Erus, the mother goddess, and Helus, the god of the underworld. Sette would be in good hands.

Sette's body was placed reverently on the platform below his father's. His sword was reversed until the hilt rested in his hand. His fingers were closed around it. Jason was amazed that the fingers were able to be molded to shape. Sette had been dead for some time, surely the muscles should be hardening and movement of the limbs restricted. However, the priests didn't appear to use any force to close the fingers around the hilt.

The High Priest intoned the last rites, then the priests left the chamber. Jason remained behind. While there was still light from the torches that had been left burning in holders along the walls, he moved closer to Sette's body.

He laid his hands on the cold flesh in a last farewell—except the flesh was not cold and clammy like it should have been in death. It was still warm and pliable.

Something wasn't right with Sette's death.

Jason moved into the outer chamber and followed the priests to the entrance.

He was puzzled. Something was definitely wrong.

CHAPTER 25

GRAVE ROBBERS

The second sun had sunk below the horizon. Jason decided to wait until the rising of the first moon before he left the tomb. He wanted time to think. Something was definitely not right with the way events were developing.

He settled back against the cliff wall, wrapping his robe around him. He could feel the chill seeping up from the valley. He dozed, then suddenly he was wide awake. He could hear wagon wheels in the valley below him. He looked down. The torches from the funeral wagon were almost to the river bridge, the gleam clearly visible and the sounds of the drums and gongs echoing faintly to his ears. Yet he could also hear the sounds from another wagon. It sounded much closer, almost immediately below on the valley floor. He looked down. He couldn't see any torches, but he could hear the sounds of muffled

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voices approaching along the track.

Why would anybody want to visit the tomb at this time of the night?

The light from the first moon reached slowly into the valley, reflecting off a small wagon drawn by a single horse, tethered at the start of the track. The moonlight also showed three figures slowly climbing up toward the tomb. They were carrying some ropes and a long pole.

When they reached him, Jason stepped back so that they could pass without detecting his presence. The leader lit a torch and led the way unerringly into the chamber in which Sette's body lay. They ignored the weapons and the jewelry that lay on the dusty skeletons of Sette's ancestors and appeared to be only interested in Sette.

They threw his sword to one side, then dragged the black skins away from the body. They lashed it to the pole by the arms, legs, and waist. The leader barked a short, sharp command and his two companions raised the pole to their shoulders and followed him out from the burial chamber. Jason followed. He was intrigued—why steal a dead body?

The body was thrown roughly into the wagon and was covered with bales of dry grass to hide it from any casual observers, then the wagon was driven back toward Sarando. Jason followed, still puzzled.

The wagon drove slowly through the city toward the jetty, stopping alongside Tarn's vessel. Nobody had been interested in it as it passed, it looked like just another farm vehicle carrying goods to the wharves.

The men looked around, then quickly smuggled the body on board and into Tarn's cabin.

Tarn and the white-haired healer were already in the cabin. They had been waiting impatiently for the arrival of the body. The healer quickly pulled up Sette's eyelids and looked at the pupils. He held the dead wrist in his fingers.

"We are in time," he muttered, relieved.

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Tarn appeared unconcerned.

The healer reached for a vessel containing a strange foaming liquid. He raised the body's head and forced some of the liquid between the dead lips. The body gave a shudder. Jason gasped. Either he was witnessing some powerful magic—or Sette was alive!

The healer forced some more liquid down Sette's throat. He gave a muffled groan. His heart started to beat. He was breathing again.

"The old fool is stronger than I expected," Tarn muttered. "He will be sorry he didn't die. I will take great pleasure in having him as my slave."

Tarn snapped his fingers. Pirates moved forward. They stripped Sette's robes from him, then bound him with the chains of a common slave.

"Place him in the slave pens on shore," Tarn instructed them. "No one will think he is still alive, and if he does talk, they will think it is the ramblings of an old and demented fool."

"What if they find out that his body is no longer in the tomb?"

"No one, not even the priests, may visit the tomb for thirty moons, and then only the priests can enter the sacred place. They will think the body has been stolen by grave robbers seeking to sell his body to wizards for their magical uses. They tell me many wizards think the strength of the mighty remains within the body after death and can be extracted with the correct incantations. No, he will not be missed."

CHAPTER 26

JASON BUYS A PRINCE...

Jason returned to the caravan, his thoughts in turmoil. He doubted if Tarn on his own would have been capable of pulling off this deception. He must have friends, powerful friends, but who were they? That was not really his problem. He had come to find Estela and Parcus. That had to remain his first priority. If he was able to help Sette, that would be a bonus.

That didn't really solve the problem. How could he leave the Sarabandi to Tarn when he knew this would eventually ignite a war between the pirates and the other people on Praesepe? It would inevitably embroil Thurgan, and would lead to casualties on both sides. Maybe it would be better to try and stop Tarn before he got into his stride. He would try, but the rescue of the two captives must still come first. He knew where Parcus was; he must look harder for the girl and

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her mother.

Jason pulled his skins around him and settled back to rest. A soft form pressed against him. He raised the skins and a female shape moved against him. He felt the full breasts pressed against his chest, the nipples hard and ready. It was the blonde who acted with him on the stage.

“I’m afraid,” she whispered in his ear. “What will happen to us now that Tarn is leader of the Sarabandi?”

“If you are one of them, then I suspect all will be well, at first,” Jason told her. “If you’re not, then I don’t really know. I imagine Tarn will ensure that only those Sarabandi who are his supporters are well cared for. They are the masters of Praesepe, in his eyes. Other people will be at the mercy of the pirates, wherever they are.”

“I’m not one of them,” the young woman muttered. “My friends and I were brought to Sarando on a pirate ship and were sold at the slave block. We were purchased by Carto because of our youth and beauty. He lets us live as free women within the caravan, but our records at Sarando show we are slaves.”

“The other two girls were captured with you?”

“Yes. Our vessel was attacked while traveling between ports. The men fought but were no match for the pirates. Those that weren’t slaughtered joined the women as slaves. I don’t know where the others from the vessel went. They wouldn’t have been as lucky as we were. One was only a child.”

“Why do the other girls remain silent?”

“They were virgins when they were captured. They were brutally raped by the pirate leader, then staked out on the deck for the pleasure of his men. They were raped many times that first day, and were used regularly by the pirates until we reached Sarando. They have been fearful of all men since that time.”

Jason nodded in sympathy. It was understandable that the two girls

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would be frightened of men after their ordeal. Their first experience could hardly have been pleasant.

“Have they had any contact with men since that time?”

“No. They have remained isolated within our group. They are frightened they will be recognized and returned to slavery.”

“Who was the pirate leader of the vessel that captured you?”

“Tarn.”

“Then I can understand their fear, but Tarn will not survive forever...”

“Even until the setting of the next sun could be too long,” the girl said sadly.

Jason held her close within the warm circle of his arms. He felt the tension ease in her muscles, to be replaced with excitement as his fingers closed over the firm mounds of her breasts and slowly caressed the taut nipples. She pressed her pliant body against his, her need growing within her. Jason rolled her over on to her back and let his lips follow the path taken by his hands. The girl groaned softly, drawing him down to her. Jason slid into her and drove her concerns about Tarn to the back of her mind.

The warm rays of the morning sun beat down on Jason’s face. He forced his eyes open, reluctant to leave the arms of sleep. The girl had slipped away during the night. He heard her voice near the cooking fires. There was still a note of tension, but it was a lot less than the previous day. She was speaking animatedly to the other two young dancers. He couldn’t hear what she was saying, but they kept taking quick glances in his direction. Mira interrupted frequently, waving her arms excitedly toward the city.

Carto sat staring gloomily at the ashes of the cooking fire. The other members of the group sat dejectedly around him. Something was wrong.

“Why this feeling of joy?” Jason asked.

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Dull, listless eyes looked up at him. The girls came over to join the group.

“Tarn has declared a week of mourning for Sette,” Carto told him.

“Surely that is nothing but a sign of respect for the departed. I expected nothing less.”

“The signs say that during that time there is to be no public entertainment and all taverns are to close their doors at the setting of the first sun.”

Jason had to agree the edict closing the taverns at night would not be popular. Most tavern doors never shut, the hours of business matching the thirst of their patrons. It would cost them many rani, and without clients they would find it hard to pay their dues to the city treasury.

“I have kept the worst until last,” Carto muttered. “Tarn has decreed that all who are not born Sarabandi are to leave the city until the week of mourning ends unless they have Tarn’s personal permission in writing to stay. They have until the setting of the second sun this day to leave.”

Jason looked up at the solitary sun just above the horizon. The second had yet to rise, which gave people affected by the ban only another eleven erns.

“Will you be seeking permission to stay?”

“I have checked the conditions with the city officials. They are as concerned as I am, but are unable to do anything else but obey the instructions of their new leader. The price to buy permission is one hundred gold rani.”

“How long would it take your group to raise that amount?”

“The first performance on this visit, which was one of the most generous crowds we have had for many seasons, gave one-hundred-fifteen silver rani. It takes one hundred silver rani to buy one gold coin. Only the very rich will be able to afford to stay.”

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Jason frowned. Tarn was starting to flex his authority earlier than he expected. The price would drive most foreigners out of Sarando for the week of the official mourning, but what would they be charged to be allowed to return? He doubted Tarn would allow them back in without a further payment. Carto answered his unasked question.

“To stay within the walls of Sarando will cost those not born of Sarabandi parents one silver rani each day. Those unable to pay will be put outside the walls and not allowed back in until they have the necessary coins. Those with only one Sarabandi parent will be charged the same amount as those with none.”

A very unsubtle way to ensure that foreigners were removed from Sarando, Jason mused.

“How many gold rani to buy citizenship?” Jason asked.

“How did you know that? I never mentioned anything about becoming a citizen of Sarando,” Carton said in surprise. “The official had heard you would be able to buy citizenship for five thousand gold rani, but that was yet to be announced. How did you know that?”

“Just a guess, but it would fit in with Tarn’s plans to make the Sarabandi think they are the masters of Praesepe. If foreigners are seen to be prepared to buy citizenship, it will make the people think their city is a special place on our world.”

Jason rubbed his fingers through the beard he had allowed to grow to help his disguise.

“Tarn will soon seal off the borders of the Sarabandi lands and spread his tax to all crossing them. Then no one will know what is happen within this region and any attack on those across the borders will come as a surprise when it’s launched.”

Carto looked at his assistant with new respect in his eyes. Jason was definitely not what he seemed. Not many people would have thought of this growing pattern of events. It would effect many people, basically all those who had come to the Sarabandi lands from their own. Most of

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them would not be able to afford to buy citizenship; others would only be able to stay for short periods of time. Would they be allowed to work while they were in the country? His troop certainly couldn't afford to buy citizenship.

Jason gave the entertainers a hand to load the wagons. He watched them leave, promising to catch up with them that night. He wanted to say farewell to Jar and his brother. Carto looked at him, his concern only barely hidden. He could sense a growing anger in Jason, a suppressed energy waiting to break out. He hoped he knew what he was doing. Jason knew the direction the caravan would take. He vowed he would have no trouble in catching up with them. Mira had merely smiled. What did the girl know about Jason that he didn't? Carto was certain she knew far more about his strange assistant than she would admit.

Cloaked in the screen of invisibility, Jason moved quickly through the city. He had a strange sense of foreboding. Something was definitely wrong. Tarn could not have pushed such sweeping changes through the council unless he was again tampering with their minds. He—or somebody else!

But who?

The council was in private session. Jason moved unseen into the chamber. Tarn was addressing the councilors. Jason could feel strange vibrations flowing through their minds. They sat passively, no longer thinking for themselves. Jason let his mind wander. The source of the emanations appeared to be coming from a chamber behind where Tarn stood. He started to move in that direction, then froze at Tarn's next words.

"I have been in consultation with foreign advisors and I now decree that two of them be appointed as my personal advisors. I have given them the citizenship rights of the Sarabandi and they will from henceforth be known to all as true citizens of Sarando. You shall meet

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them now.”

Two shadowy figures, strangely familiar, stepped through the door and into the chamber.

“Prince Khuramani and his wizard Shartan, my new advisors.”

The evil prince stepped forward; Shartan remained in the background. Jason hurried from the council chamber in case Shartan detected his presence. He must think. He hadn’t expected to find these two at Sarando, yet the events of the last two days bore the hallmarks of Shartan’s mind control abilities.

The involvement of Khuramani and Shartan threw a new complexity on the future of the Sarabandi. The evil pair would make use of the pirates to meet their own ends—the eventual linking of their powers with those of the Evil Ones. The Sarabandi would only be pawns in their game, expendable when the time was right. Tarn would have been easy to hoodwink into thinking that they would support him in his plans to gain the leadership of the Sarabandi. He was ambitious, his mind convinced his rightful place in history was to lead the pirates to domination of Praesepe. Shartan would have played on this, promising him help to pervert the result of the election. They would have assisted with Sette’s drugging, but would have let Tarn take all the risks. If his plans had failed and he had been captured, they would have disavowed all knowledge. Their tracks would have been well covered.

Jason was in a quandary. Should he continue to search for the missing captives, or should he turn his attention to Khuramani? The battle raged in his mind as he wandered toward the tavern, still under the cloak of invisibility.

He was nearing the public slave pens when he noticed a pirate dragging a naked male slave behind him on a chain. He dragged the slave into the entrance to the pens. The boy looked familiar. Jason moved closer. It was Parcus.

“Tarn grows weary of his pet draga,” he heard the pirate tell the

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slave master. “Tarn says to put him on the block. He is too weak for the oar benches.”

The slave master looked with disdain at the effeminate figure crouched before him.

“I hope the mighty Tarn doesn’t expect to get a high price for him. The only use he would be as a slave would be as a bathhouse attendant. He might prove entertaining to some of the male customers.”

He prodded Parcus with the butt end of his whip. The boy cringed away, fear in his eyes.

“Even then he will not fetch a high price, but I will try.”

He took the chain from the pirate and dragged Parcus into the slave pen, forcing him in and securing him to a chain and collar set against the wall. Several other slaves were similarly secured, all waiting disposal.

Jason materialized out of sight of the slaves. He knocked heavily on the front door. The slave master hurried over and peered through the grill set in the door, his evil eyes trying to decide if the visitor was a potential customer.

“Open,” Jason told him. “I wish to buy.”

“But we are in mourning for our recently departed leader,” the slave master said sadly. “I cannot sell until the mourning period is ended.”

“You would sell your own mother, if the price was right,” Jason mocked him. “Don’t try and tell me you wouldn’t make a sale now, even if Sette lay dead next door. Tarn advised me that he tired of his pet draga and sent the boy here for sale. I want him now, not tomorrow.”

“But...”

“Do you wish me to tell Tarn that you refused a sale for his slave—because of Sette?”

“But the officials...”

“No official would dare to question Tarn,” Jason growled. “He can

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do as he likes.”

The slave master nodded. There was no doubting that Tarn was now the power in Sarando. If Tarn wished to sell a slave during the period of mourning, who would be brave enough to question him? He must have told the stranger he had sent his slave to the pens, otherwise he wouldn't have known he was there. It was a sale; he would get a good commission. His eyes lit up with greed. He hated to miss a sale.

“Two gold rani,” he muttered, holding out his hand.

“Tarn will be impressed with your greed,” Jason told him with a smile. “That is higher than the price for even the strongest oar slave. The boy is worth no more than five silver rani.”

“But I have to live,” the slave master protested. “I have to provide shelter and feed the slaves.”

“That slave has been in your pens no longer than fifteen dierns. You have not even watered him, let alone given him food. You will make a handsome profit from this sale. Tarn told me your commission is one coin for every five of the price.”

“The master drives a hard bargain, but...”

“I will return to Tarn and tell him you didn't want to make a sale because of your honesty—and respect for the dead,” Jason told him sarcastically. “He will then take his slave back and sell him to me direct. Your commission would then be nothing.”

Jason turned on his heel, as if he was going to leave the slave pen. The slave master hurried after him, trying to slow him down with his hand.

“Do not leave,” he begged. “The slave is yours. Show me your money.”

“After you have fetched the slave.”

Parcus was dragged quickly from the pen and forced to his knees in front of Jason. He cowed to the ground, not even lifting his eyes to see who his new master was. His spirit was broken. Jason handed over the

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five silver rani. The slave master handed over the chain and a metal tag to show the slave now belonged to Jason. It was tied to the chain where it joined the collar.

CHAPTER 27

...RESTORES HIS IDENTITY...

Jason led Parcus to the waidata tavern where he had first seen him. He hoped Jar would be there. He was. He was quickly let in, then taken to the private room at the back. Jar and his brother joined him. They looked in amazement at the naked slave on the chain.

“He looks familiar,” Jar muttered.

“So he should, he was here with Tarn.”

“The pet draga who was thrown to the crowd,” Jar’s brother muttered.

“How do you have him with you?” Jar asked.

“I bought him from the slave pens; Tarn grew tired of him sooner than I expected.”

“But why did you buy him? You didn’t seem interested in boys when you were here.”

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“I’m not, but this slave is one of the reasons why I am came to Sarando.”

“That slave. He’s only a boy, why should he interest you?”

Jason leaned down and removed the chains from the boy, raising him to his feet. He placed his hand under his chin and lifted the head until the eyes were looking straight ahead. They were brimming with tears.

“Meet Prince Parcus, the rightful ruler of Entonia.”

Jar and his brother gasped with amazement. The boy fell against Jason, his body racked with sobs.

“Stand, Prince,” Jason commanded in a tone of authority. “It is not seemly for the ruler of the new Entonia to be seen to weep in the presence of other men.”

Parcus muffled his sobs, then stood upright again.

“Neither is it seemly for a Prince to appear naked before others,” Jason added, turning to Jar. “May I purchase robes to cover the Prince’s nakedness?”

“You may not purchase robes,” Jar said with a smile. “It will be an honor to give the Prince robes from my own store, but somehow I think they might be a bit too large for his slight frame.”

“My son’s robes might fit,” Jar’s brother muttered, his eyes checking the prince’s size. “I’ll fetch some and we can try them for size.”

The robes fitted almost perfectly.

Parcus had been watching Jason, his puzzlement clear in his eyes.

“How did you know I was Parcus?”

“Tarn told me while he was under the influence of waidata.”

“How did you know where to find me, and why?”

“A warrior from the castle guard at Entonia survived the Sarabandi attack. He escaped and carried his message to Cortano. The Lady Ormuti transferred the message to me at Thurgan and begged for

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assistance to find you, your mother, and your sister.”

The boy broke into sobs at the mention of his mother. She had been killed when a log fell on her as they were being led from the pirate vessel. At least she had been spared the humiliation of slavery with the quick escape of death. He didn't know where his sister was; they had been separated at the jetty. She had been sent direct to the slave block. Her fate was unknown.

Jar had been looking at Jason, a puzzled look on his face.

“This Lady Ormuti, how could she reach you at Thurgan if she was at this other place called Cortano? Are they close together?”

“They are two days ride apart,” Parcus interrupted. “How did she reach you, and who are you?”

“She spoke to me in my mind. We have taught many people in Thurgan to communicate this way over great distances. It is quicker than sending messengers on horses—they can be intercepted and the message ended by an arrow or a dagger in the ribs. The messages from mind to mind are quicker and more difficult to stop.”

“But who are you?” Jar asked again.

“I am Jason, that is my real name.”

Parcus burst into renewed sobs and threw himself on his knees in front of Jason, his arms wrapped around his legs. Jar watched in amazement.

“The name has a powerful effect on the Prince,” he mused. “Jason of Thurgan; the name raises some memories, but they are very faint.”

“Not just Thurgan,” the Prince sobbed, “but also Thoran.”

“Thoran?”

“He is the warrior of the Axe of Thoran.”

“The Warrior of Earth,” Jar mumbled, dropping to his knees. His brother was already on his.

“Rise, my friends,” Jason said with a smile. “It isn't seemly for equals to kneel before their friends.”

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“What brings you to Sarando?” Jar asked, rising from the floor.

“I initially came to find Parcus and his sister, Estela. Now other events intrude, events that will have a major impact on the future of the Sarabandi and Praesepe.”

The men were taken aback at the sudden change in Jason’s appearance. His face had grown serious, his eyes hard. They could sense a tenseness about him. Something was worrying him.

“Do you know any of the councilors who were loyal to Sette?” he asked.

Jar was taken back by the question. What had Sette to do with present events? He was dead.

“There were several who were his trusted followers. I couldn’t believe it when they elected Tarn as his deputy.”

“They were under the control of others when they made the decision,” Jason told them. “I will take Parcus to a safe place, then return to find his sister. I must meet with the councilors two days from now. Make a list for me for when I return. It is important.”

“You can leave Parcus here with us,” Jar suggested.

“The risk is too great, both for you and for Parcus. He will be safer with my friends in the desert. They will be many lometers away from here by now and no one will suspect Parcus is hidden with them.”

“How will you get Parcus through the gates of the city?” Jar wanted to know.

“The warrior has many powers,” the Prince said, admiration gleaming in his eyes. “If he says he can do it, then he can do it.”

Jason called Parcus over to his side and placed his arm around his shoulders. He turned to face Jar and his brother.

“Prepare the list,” he said. “I will return with the rising of the second moon.”

Jar stood with his mouth open. The warrior had vanished with his last word. The Prince wasn’t there either.

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* * *

Mira was bending over the cooking fire. It was her turn to prepare the evening meal. The other girls were assisting her. Carto and the men were in deep conversation, planning their future if they had to leave Sarando. They could never afford to pay the tax demanded for re-entry to the city. Mira screamed as Jason and the prince materialized beside her. His sudden appearance wasn't noticed by the others in the group.

"The warrior returns," she cried out in joy. Then he hand flew to her mouth. She had promised she wouldn't reveal his identity. She fell on her knees in front of him seeking his forgiveness.

The others quickly gathered around. They hadn't heard the sound of the approaching dramas, yet what else could move so swiftly and silently across the desert sands? They wondered who the young boy was with Jason. They didn't recognize him. Mira had screamed out that the warrior had returned. What warrior? They couldn't see any warrior. Carto looked at Mira, on her knees in front of Jason. A slow smile spread across his face as he moved quickly to Jason's side. He took his hand in welcome, bowing his head at the same time.

"My heart told me Mira has known more than she would tell us," he said. "I suspected, but wasn't sure. I guessed you were not who you said you were."

"I'm sorry, Lord," Mira muttered, trembling at Jason's feet. "I didn't mean to speak without your permission."

The others watched in amazement. Mira on her knees. Lord. Master. What was going on?

"It's all right, Mira," Jason said gently, reaching down to raise her from her kneeling position. "The time has come for the warrior to strike at his enemies, who are also the enemies of the Sarabandi."

He felt naked without his weapons. It was time for him to arm himself, especially with Khuramani and Shartan so close. He closed his eyes and concentrated, willing the amulet to bring him the Sword of

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Thoran from its hiding place. Carto watched in amazement. Why was Jason standing with his eyes closed, right hand stretched out in front of him? There was a whistling sound. The watchers moved back in fear. The whistling increased in intensity. A mighty sword materialized in Jason's hand, the scabbard and belt around his waist. They fell to their knees in awe. The sword had been ingrained into the traditions handed down to them through many generations. It could be no other weapon. It was the magical Sword of Thoran.

Jason lifted the mighty blade to the heavens, reverently kissing the hilt before sliding the blade into its scabbard.

"You are Jason of Thurgan," Carto gasped. "You are the warrior of the Axe of Thoran."

The entertainers watched in amazement. They had heard of the exploits of the warrior, but had thought they were only the idle gossip of the market place. Now the warrior stood among them. They had shared their food with him. This tale would be told many times, eventually being added into the history of their families.

"Carto, my friend, this is Prince Parcus of Entonia," Jason said with a smile, dragging the young boy forward. "I seek sanctuary for him while I return to Sarando to find his sister. They were taken captive by the pirates under Tarn when he destroyed their city. Their father and mother both died at the hands of the pirates. Nobody must know his identity until the time is right. I will return to Sarando to find his sister and bring her back here to join him. Then I will restore Sette to his rightful role as leader of the Sarabandi."

Carto gasped. A Prince. A Princess. Now Jason was talking about returning Sette to his people. What powers did the warrior have that he could perform such miracles?

"Sette isn't dead," Jason said with a laugh, noting the look of consternation on Carto's face. "I can't return the dead to their people, only the living. Sette has been enslaved, his death and entombment

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were tricks to deceive his people, but first I must find Princess Estela.”

“There was talk about a princess working as a slave at a waidata tavern near the jetty,” one of the musicians said. “I thought it was only idle chatter, but it may be true.”

“Then I’ll pay that tavern a visit tonight,” Jason said.

“Eat with us before you return to Sarando,” Mira begged.

“I’ll get your dramas watered,” Carto added. “In which direction have you left them?”

“The warrior doesn’t need dramas,” Mira giggled. “He travels faster than the wind. He uses the power of thought.”

“Mira knows too much,” Jason said, playfully pretending to slap her rump. She giggled and ran off to continue preparing the food. The atmosphere had changed subtly, the mood of depression replaced by one of hope. Jason took his bowl and went to sit between the two silent blondes. Mira sat beside Parcus and engaged him in animated conversation, trying to lift his mood of concern over his sister.

Jason ate silently. He could feel the eyes of the two girls watching him from under their eyelashes. He put his bowl down and placed an arm around each of their shoulders. He felt them tense, then relax as he drew them toward his chest. His strength was strangely calming.

“I have been told what happened to you after your capture by the pirates,” he told them quietly. “I’m sad that you have been frightened of all men since then. Don’t let your experience sour your thoughts forever.”

“We are only slaves in reality,” one of the girls said. “It’s only Carto’s kindness that lets us move around as free women.”

“After Tarn is defeated, you will be free,” Jason assured her. “Your records will be destroyed and you will be free to return to your homes.”

“We have no homes left,” the other girl said, a catch in her voice. “Nothing was left after the pirates attacked our village. They only left piles of ashes and dead bodies.”

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“Then you will be free to remain with the entertainers, or return with me to Thurgan.”

The girls looked at him through tear-filled eyes. For the first time they felt traces of hope replacing the despair that had been surrounding them since their slavery. A new city could mean a new life, with no traces of their past. But what about Carto? Could they leave him? He had been kind, like a father to them, but if they stayed the memories of their slavery would be constantly there to remind them. They would have to think carefully, but at least they now had a future over which they would have some control.

CHAPTER 28

...AND FINDS A PRINCESS

Jason returned to Sarando, materializing inside the tavern as Jar and his brother were about to eat. They choked on mouthfuls of food at his sudden appearance.

“I wish you could send some signal before you did that,” Jar muttered. “It’s no good for my health to suddenly find you standing alongside me.”

Jason laughed.

“It’s a good trick, isn’t it? It can catch my enemies by surprise.”

He looked at Jar. “Do you know anything about the waidata tavern near the jetty?”

“It’s small, and it is run by a pirate who was injured at sea, so it’s usually full of his ex-mates. The prices are quite high; the service is slow. Why?”

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“I think that is where Parcus’s sister might be working. I’ll go tonight and check it out.”

“I’ll come with you; it has a very seedy reputation. Keep your weapon at your side, you might need it,” he added, looking at the sword hanging at Jason’s hip.

The tavern was dirty, the lights dim. The wadata tasted more of water than the juice of the palm. Only a handful of patrons sat at the tables. Two naked slaves dawdled between the tables, slowly topping up the drinking vessels. A slave draped in a long length of dirty cloth served behind the counter. She was herself caked in grime, her hair hanging limply down her back, yet Jason could detect traces of beauty behind the grime—and culture in her bearing. Her spirit appeared to be totally broken.

“A drink of wadata from the hand of a princess, Estela,” Jason said softly, wandering over to the counter.

The girl paled, nearly dropping the serving vessel. She looked at him, her eyes showing her fear. Who was this stranger who had used her name? She didn’t recognize him, yet she could feel the strength in his presence.

“Yes, master,” she whispered, handing him a full vessel. He took it and wandered slowly over to join Jar.

“It’s definitely the princess,” he muttered.

“Doesn’t look much like a princess to me,” Jar murmured, letting his eyes flick quickly toward the counter. “However, if you’re sure, what are we going to do about it? Shall we capture her now?”

“No, that would attract too much attention. We must trick the owner into selling or giving her to us.”

“He wouldn’t give his own mother a drink, even if it meant her life,” Jar growled.

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“Then we must trick him into selling her to us. But how?”

Jason looked around at the bored looks on the customers’ faces. An idea grew in his mind. He slammed his drinking vessel down on the rough wooden planking that passed for tabletops.

“There is more life in Sette’s tomb than this tavern,” he roared.

Eyes swung around in his direction, then back to their glasses. They hoped the stranger wouldn’t make too much noise or he might attract the authorities and then they would all be in trouble. The tavern shouldn’t have been open—it was still within the official period of mourning declared by Tarn.

“Where are the entertainers? I want flesh,” Jason called, slamming his glass down on the table again.

The owner hurried over, urging him to keep quiet.

“Where are the dancers?” Jason demanded. “I want to see flesh.”

“We have no dancers,” the owner said, trying to sooth him.

“No dancers! What type of a tavern is this not to have dancers? I want flesh, naked women’s flesh. I have been in the desert for many moons without sight of women. I want flesh.”

“Please be quiet,” the owner urged. “I shouldn’t even be open.”

“More waidata,” Jason demanded, “and flesh.”

The owner waved the two serving slaves forward. They were short and stocky, showing distinct signs of wear from their years of drudgery. They were not the normal type of serving slaves found in taverns; they more resembled the slaves found working in the kitchens.

“I want young flesh,” Jason roared. “Not stale meat that would even turn the stomachs of starving dragas.”

The owner winced. The stranger could be trouble if he wasn’t able to quiet him.

Jason looked over at the counter where Estela crouched fearfully behind the vessels of waidata.

“What about her?” he called out loudly.

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“She is no dancer,” the owner whined, concern starting to showing on his face. Jason smiled to himself, his plan was working.

“That is for us to decide,” he said. “Who would like to see her dance?” he asked, staggering to his feet.

Some of the patrons nodded in agreement. Maybe that would keep the stranger quiet. The owner looked from Jason to the girl. It could be worth a try. He hadn’t had time to train the girl. She had come to him direct from the slave block. However, her body under the rags was shapely. It might silence the troublemaker. He waved the girl forward. She approached reluctantly.

Jason lifted the edge of the cloth draped around her. Her legs were long and shapely, the rest of her hidden.

“On the table,” he commanded.

She looked fearfully at the owner. He signaled her to obey. She sat on the table.

“On your feet,” Jason roared. “We all want to see what you can do.”

She climbed unsteadily to her feet and stood balancing on the swaying surface.

“Get ride of that cloth, it’s hiding our view,” Jason told her.

She slowly fiddled with the rope she had tied around her waist to hold the material around her, her fingers stiff and unresponsive. She didn’t know what to expect. She undid the last knot, the cloth still hanging loosely around her shoulders. Jason reached out and pulled it away. She blushed as she stood naked before the patrons. One hand tried to shield her breasts; the other was at the junction of her thighs.

“Hands above your head,” Jason roared. “Now turn slowly so that we can all see your beauty.”

Estela blushed as she slowly pivoted naked before the men. They stared at her, appreciation showing in their eyes. They were glad the stranger had made her strip; they hadn’t expected such beauty from a serving slave. Estela’s body was responding to the situation, her breasts

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standing out from her chest and her nipples as hard as little sticks. Jason ran a hand slowly up her thigh. She shivered at his touch, her breasts swaying in time with her body.

“Now that is flesh,” Jason told the owner. “How many rani for her?”

“She is not for sale.”

“I don’t want to buy her.” Jason laughed, quickly changing his plans in mid-stream. “What need would I have for a slave such as her? I just want to use her for an ern or two.”

“I don’t rent slaves; this tavern isn’t like that.”

“All taverns are like that, when the money is right. How much?”

“Ten silver rani,” the owner muttered, looking furtively around.

“I told you I didn’t want to buy her, just use her. One silver rani for each hour.”

The owner looked from Jason to the girl. One rani an ern was good money for an unskilled slave. Even the best hardly brought that in the larger taverns.. The stranger must be starving for female flesh. His stay in the desert must have been long and barren. He nodded his head in agreement to the proposed price, then gasped as Jason pressed five silver rani into his hand. He must have the strength and endurance of a drama to want the slave for five ern.

“The chamber will be extra,” he said, chancing his luck.

Jason gave the appearance of anger, but reluctantly handed over an extra coin. Five erns would give him time to get the girl well away before his absence was noted. He winked at Jar, who staggered out of the tavern as Jason was shown to a chamber in the back. There was one window set high in the wall. A single couch, devoid of everything except a single skin, was the only furniture in the room. The entrance led into a narrow corridor linking the main tavern with the outside back entrance. The girl was forced through the narrow opening. Jason followed. The owner was glad to see the back of him; maybe now the

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disturbance in the tavern would cease. He handed Jason a vessel full of waidata.

“You might need its strength before the five erns have ended,” he said with a smirk.

“The slave will need it before I do,” Jason said boastfully as he staggered in after the slave.

Estela was crouched fearfully beside the couch. Jason moved forward silently, suddenly staggering no more, his speech clear and calm.

“Do not fear, Princess,” he told her softly, helping her up gently from the floor.

“Who are you?” she asked, still fearful.

“I am known as Jason of Thurgan.”

Estela threw herself into his arms, weeping with relief. Jason reached around and gave her a hard slap on the rump. She squealed in surprise. He heard a suppressed giggle outside the door, then the footsteps of the owner returning to the tavern.

“The owner was still outside the door,” he whispered. “He must not be alerted.” He drew the skin off the couch and draped it around her shoulders. “Not proper robes for a Princess, but at least it will cover your nakedness until we reach the caravan.”

He drew her into his arms. She settled her head against his shoulder, closing her eyes. She felt secure at last, safe from the dangers of the tavern.

Estela tensed. She was sure she had heard the sound of a strange animal. She opened her eyes and blinked. Over Jason’s shoulder were trees and the lights of a campfire. The strange animals were looking at her with as much surprise as she was looking at them. She turned her head. She must be dreaming. She was no longer in the chamber at the tavern but out in the open desert. The moons shone down on her, the cool desert breezes blew around her naked legs.

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Jason released her. He spoke to someone behind her, his words indistinct. She turned her head, gave a muffled gasp and fainted in Jason's arms. Behind her stood Parcus, dressed in the robes of a desert dweller; beside him stood a slight girl dressed like an entertainer. They were holding hands. She must be dead. She had been told that her brother was dead, killed by the slavers after they had been separated at the jetty.

Jason lifted her easily into his arms and carried her to Mira's tent. The young girls helped clean the grim from her and found her suitable clothing.

Parcus remained at her side, averting his eyes when the skin was removed from around her shoulders but refusing to leave in case they were separated. He had lost his sister once, he didn't want it to happen again.

CHAPTER 29

RETURN OF THE DEAD

Jason returned to Sarando. Unseen, he returned to the tavern. Jar and his brother were sitting quietly at a table with vessels of waidata in front of them. A spare one was placed opposite them, ready for their visitor. Jason had told them he would return, so they were ready for his sudden appearance.

“The Princess is safe,” he told them. “She is back with her brother in the desert. Do you have the list I asked for?”

“These are the five I know were always loyal to Sette,” Jar said, handing the list over. “Most of the others will swing with the tide. Until now, none of them have spoken openly in support of Tarn and what he stood for.”

Jar handed Jason a tough map of the city. Five houses were circled in red. He pointed to them.

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“Those are the houses of the councilors loyal to Sette,” he told him.

“How about the captains of the pirate vessels?”

“Sette’s two sons each have their own vessels, and so does the husband of his eldest daughter.”

“Speak with them tomorrow. Ask them to meet with me at the tavern after the second sun has set. Tell them a stranger has arrived with news of their father. Don’t tell them any more than that. I will speak with the councilors and ask them to also meet me here.”

“What if they are reluctant to come?”

“Tell them it is very important and affects the security of Sarando. What news is there of Tarn?”

“He leaves tomorrow with two vessels on a raid to the south. I hear his advisors travel with him.”

“That doesn’t surprise me,” Jason said with a smile. “Tarn would not trust them out of his sight. After all, they supported him against Sette; he would be concerned in case they then supported somebody else against himself. It’s good they will be with Tarn and out of Sarando. They will be away while we prepare our surprise for their return.”

Jar scratched his head. *Surprise. What surprise? Oh, well, he would find out eventually.*

Jason waited until the second sun was directly overhead before he approached the councilors on Jar’s list. By then Tarn was well clear of the port, having sailed on the early tide. With Shartan on board and by now out of reach of Sarando, the councilors would no longer be under his mind control. Jason had watched from the hill as the vessels pulled clear of the port to make sure that both Khuramani and Shartan were on board, and hadn’t changed their minds and remained in the city. He had seen them standing on the bridge beside Tarn, talking animatedly and

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pointing back toward Sarando. He would like to have known what they were discussing, but to have landed on the vessel would have increased the risk of Shartan picking up his vibrations and alerting Khuramani.

Jason let his mind touch each councilor individually, placing within their subconscious thoughts the command to be at the tavern after the second sun set. It was safer than approaching them face to face and risk being seen by Tarn's spies. The command he placed in their minds would ensure they were at the tavern, but they wouldn't know what forced them to attend.

Jar contacted the three pirate captains. They vowed they would be there. They hadn't believed Sette had died at the hand of his slave—they expected the stranger would have proof of that.

Jason donned the cloak of invisibility and entered the slave pen at Tarn's jetty.

The slaves were sitting around the walls on low wooden benches, their heads bowed dejectedly. Sette was sitting alone in one corner. He felt a hand touch his arm and a voice tell him not to look up. He closed his eyes as he felt an arm placed around his shoulders. It must be his god coming for him. The voice had come from no visible body, neither had he seen any cloak.

He was instructed to open his eyes. He was at the entrance to the tomb. A strange warrior stood alongside him, a mighty sword in his right hand. In his left hand he carried the robe and sword Sette had worn during the funeral rites.

"Place the robe around you and take the sword in your hand," the stranger instructed him.

Sette obeyed, his mind still dazed at his removal from the slave pens to the entrance to the tomb. It was beyond his knowledge how such an event could happen without the intervention of the gods. The warrior reached out and enfolded him in his arms again. Sette closed his eyes when he felt the arms touch his. He was told to open his eyes.

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He did. He was in the inner sanctum of the temple, the private chambers of the High Priest.

The High Priest was on his knees, his head to the floor. The sudden appearance of the dead was not a normal event in Sarando.

“Rise,” the warrior commanded.

The High Priest rose shakily to his knees.

“Do not fear,” the warrior said. “I am not from the underworld, but from Thurgan. My name is Jason.”

“The Warrior of the Axe of Thoran,” Sette muttered.

The High Priest quivered in fear. The dead had spoken. They must have come for him.

“This is not a time for fear but for rejoicing,” Jason told him. “Sette has not returned from the dead. He was, and still is, very much alive—as he was when he was placed in his tomb.”

“But the healer certified him as dead, poisoned by his own slave.”

“He was alive at that time, but under the control of others not of the Sarabandi. He was drugged and his mind was made to resemble death. The mind obeyed. That night he was taken from the tomb, the drugs neutralized, and he has been in Tarn’s slave pens until fifteen dierns ago.”

“But the councilors elected Tarn our leader,” the High Priest protested.

“Tarn is your leader by deceit. Tonight Sette will meet with his friends and the course of destiny will be changed for Tarn and his supporters. Keep Sette safely within your chambers and prepare him for a meeting tonight. I will come for him when the second sun sets.”

“Forgive me, Lord,” the High Priest murmured, approaching Sette with some trepidation. “I didn’t know you were not dead when the healer said you were.”

“It is not your fault,” Sette said with a grim smile. “Only Tarn and his advisors knew what had happened. They even confused the healer

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to recognize only the symptoms of death in my body and to ignore those signs that showed life.”

They turned to face Jason. He was no longer in the chambers with them.

* * *

The councilors looked at each other in amazement as they gathered at the waidata tavern. Few of them had ever been in the tavern, but now that they were there they seemed unable to leave. They were unsure why they were there, but something in their mind had made them attend and now that they were there their mind stopped them from leaving. They were not the only people in the private chamber; they had been joined by Sette’s two sons and his son-in-law. All Sette’s relatives could tell them was that they had been invited to come and hear important news about their late father. They didn’t know what the news was, or who was bringing it to them.

Jar had brought vessels of waidata after he showed them into the private chamber, but these sat untouched on the table. They were so tense they couldn’t bring themselves to drink the potent brew. Jar looked out of the small window. The shadows were lengthening as the second sun approached the horizon. It would soon be time for their visitors.

The room became dark. Jar had torches lit, their flickering light reflecting off the solemn faces of those waiting. They were all facing the window, watching the sky as it darkened into night. Their minds told them the moment they were waiting for would occur just as the second sun set. That time was almost at hand.

“The night hold many secrets, my friends,” a calm voice said from behind them. “It is time to unveil one now.”

They spun round, then sunk to their knees in fear. Before them stood the body of Sette, still in the funeral robes used at his burial and with his sword in his hand. Behind him towered the figure of a warrior

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dressed in battle armor.

“Behold your leader, Sette,” the warrior said.

They dropped their heads to the bare boards, paying homage to him they thought must be the Lord of the Underworld—but why bring Sette back to life?

“I am not dead, my friends,” Sette said, his voice strong but calm. “I was rescued by Jason of Thurgan—not from death but from Tarn’s slave pens in Sarando.”

The councilors and pirate captains jumped to their feet, their anger clearly visible in their faces. A babble of voices filled the room as each sought answers to his own questions. Sette held up his hands, a smile on his face.

“I don’t know the answers to your questions. Let Jason answer them, it is he I have to thank for my rescue.”

“But who is Jason of Thurgan?” a councilor asked. “I have never heard of him.”

“Do you not recognize the mighty Sword of Thoran?” Sette asked, pointing to the sword in Jason’s left hand, the tip of the mighty blade resting on the ground.

They fell to their knees again. They all knew the legend of the sword but had never expected to see it unsheathed before them. Yet who but the mighty warrior holding the sword would have had the power to penetrate Tarn’s deceit and rescue Sette?

Jason spoke long into the night. They listened in amazement as Tarn’s tale of deceit was unraveled. They were angry when Khuramani’s part in the plot was revealed. He had come as a trusted guest but had abused their hospitality and threatened their leader. They asked many questions about both Khuramani and Shartan. The answers differed from the story Khuramani had given to Sette when seeking permission to stay in Sarando.

Sette’s eldest son promised his crew would round up the warriors

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Khuramani had brought with him. Jason was surprised to hear of the presence of the Black Horsemen. He had not sighted any of them during his search for Estela and Parcus, yet they must have been close by at many times during his search of the waidata taverns. The councilors were all in favor of acting against Tarn immediately. Sette urged caution in case a precipitous move alerted others who might be in league with Tarn.

Sette instructed his two sons to take to sea, then to lie hidden out of sight of the chasm through the cliffs. Jason would alert them when Tarn's ships were sighted. They would then move in behind him and seal off his escape back to the open sea. Jason and Sette's son-in-law would arrange the local reception.

Jason suggested that Sette should remain in the temple until the trap was sprung in case people saw him and the news reached Tarn.

Sette was returned to the temple.

The High Priest was waiting for them with refreshments. The priestesses waited on Sette and Jason as honored guests of the gods. They still found it hard to understand how their leader had been returned from the dead. Jason was amazed at the beauty of most of the young women. They were slender, their skin pale from the amount of time they spent within the seclusion of the temple. They seldom saw the light of day. Sette suggested Jason spend the night within the temple. He accepted gratefully. He needed a good night's rest. Once Tarn returned, there would be trouble—and he didn't know when that meeting with destiny would be.

Two young priestesses were assigned to look after him. They waited on his every need when the refreshments were served. His bowl was never empty. Sette looked tired, which didn't surprise Jason. He could imagine the torment Sette must have been through while he was a prisoner in Tarn's slave pens. Jason bid him goodnight and rose to leave.

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The young priestesses rose gracefully to their feet and led Jason to the chamber allocated to him. It was small, the furnishings sparse. There was no couch, only piles of cushions on the floor in a wide range of sizes. One was large enough for three. The girls fluffed that one up and asked him to lie on it. He fell back on to the soft surface.

They quickly removed his footwear. One girl brought a bowl of scented water, then together they washed his feet. The water was warm and relaxing. He closed his eyes, dozing under the gentle ministrations of the knowing hands.

His eyes suddenly shot open and he was instantly awake.

These were more than knowing hands. He had forgotten these were priestesses. He realized he was naked, his body responding to their gentle caresses. He looked down. The two girls were also naked, their gowns discarded on the cold stone floor. He hadn't realized what beautiful bodies they had hidden under their voluminous robes. They were both slender, but with gently rounded breasts and narrow firm waists. He reached for them; they giggled and backed away.

A third girl had entered the chamber. She was very young, but with the rapidly developing body of a woman.

The two naked priestesses rose and drew her forward. They slowly stripped her until she also stood naked before Jason, her blushes tingeing her skin a pale shade of pink. She was more rounded than the other two, her lack of height accentuating the fullness of her breasts and their prominent dark nipples.

"Our sister awaits her turn at the Festival of Anubis," the taller girl told him. "She was unwell and unable to take her place this time. She begs the honor of serving Anubis in your arms this night."

"And you?" Jason asked, curiously.

"We will await your pleasure."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then she will await her turn until the next festival. She will not be

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allowed to serve the temple until she has served either at the festival or is taken by an honored guest approved by the High Priest.”

“He knows?”

“It was he who instructed us to bring her to you.”

Jason held out his arms. The girl moved shyly forward and knelt at his feet. She kept her eyes downcast as he reached forward and drew her into his arms, letting his lips close over hers. She tensed, then relaxed and pressed against him. He felt her moan softly and wiggle against him. He marveled at her responses, especially for one who was still a virgin. He let his fingers run down her back, exploring her body. He found other hands were already there. No wonder the girl was responding; her sisters in the priesthood had already reached the core of her body.

He smiled to himself. It would be an interesting but tiring night, far from the relaxing sleep he had expected inside the temple walls.

The girl was soon wriggling frantically as the three sets of hands and lips explored her. Jason lowered her on to her back. She smiled shyly up at him. Jason felt her legs being drawn apart. He rolled between them and slowly eased himself into her until he felt her tense. He lay still until he felt her muscles relaxed, then plunged forward, straight and true. She gave a muffled scream. She had lost her virginity without the aid of the drugs normally given to the priestesses called on to serve at the festival.

Jason lay still, then started to move slowly. She moved tentatively at first in response, then gained confidence and matched his thrusts.

CHAPTER 30

BATTLE OF THE CHASM

There was much activity around the port the next day as Sette's sons armed and provisioned their vessels. They left the harbor in time to clear the chasm before the second sun sank below the horizon and made the exit hazardous. Once clear of the chasm, they headed away from the shore until the sun dropped below the horizon, then they turned north. The next morning they would move back inshore and lie in wait just north of the entrance, the opposite direction taken by Tarn, hidden by a rocky headland.

Wagons loaded with provisions left the port separately. Under the layer of provisions were weapons. These were hauled to the top of the cliffs overlooking the chasm.

Sette's son-in-law had also provisioned his vessel, but he hadn't left port. He moved from vessel to vessel of those captains he knew had

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been loyal to Sette, preparing the second stage of the plan.

Two days later, lookouts warned of three approaching vessels. They could be clearly identified as Tarn's vessels from their sinister black color and blood red sails. Jason materialized on the bridge of Sette's eldest son's vessel.

"Tarn returns," he said, then promptly vanished again, causing consternation among the pirates who didn't know of his existence.

Jason reappeared at the entrance to the temple.

A horse had been readied for him; a wagon for Sette. The High Priest stood at the entrance in full ceremonial robes, behind him the other priests with their gongs and drums. Many were openly weeping in happiness. Jason mounted his horse. The High Priest led the procession from the temple.

The sounds of the gongs and drums brought the population running from their homes. This was a joyous sound, unlike the somber beat used during Sette's funeral process. Surely it would not be permitted during a period of mourning. Why was the procession being held? They were unaware of any festival due to be held.

They gathered in the streets, watching silently as the priests walked past, then the stunned silence broke into cheer after cheer when they saw the legendary Sword of Thoran being carried by a warrior dressed in full war armor.

The cheers fell, then burst out anew when they saw the wagon carrying Sette. Their first thoughts were that the priests were parading Sette's body, but the silence turned to awe when they saw Sette was alive. They were seeing a double miracle—the legendary Sword of Thoran and the living Sette.

The procession stopped outside the council chambers. The councilors were already gathered outside. Although they were aware of what was happening, many were still openly effected by the emotion of the occasion and were openly weeping.

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Sette rose to his feet as the wagon stopped.

He held his hands up for silence.

The crowd listened in stunned silence as he told them what had occurred. Jason could feel their anger growing as they heard about Tarn's treachery. The people were told not to take their anger out on Tarn or his followers—his fate would be for the council to decide—but they were told not to let any of his supporters escape from the city.

Then Sette called for volunteers to man the weapons on the top of the cliffs. The crowd surged forward, nearly all the men wanted to help.

“Go with the warrior Jason of Thurgan. The time for our revenge is fast approaching. Tarn's vessels are nearing the chasm.”

The crowd of volunteers streamed after Jason as he rode toward the tracks that meandered along the top of the cliffs overlooking the chasm. The wagons had carried many small boulders and barrels of pitch to the top of the cliffs. Jason lined up his volunteers behind the improvised weapons. Raining down on Tarn from this height, they would provide a lethal shower of death and destruction.

A watcher at the lip overlooking the entrance to the chasm, unseen by the pirates on the vessels below, set fire to a warning beacon. Their quarry was inside the jaws of the trap—there would be no escape for Tarn.

* * *

Tarn paced the deck of his vessel. He was furious. Khuramani had insisted he was leaving the vessel after the last raid. He promised to return to Sarando, but insisted he had business further south that he had to attend to first. Tarn had let his anger show, but it had no affect on the prince. Khuramani was adamant. He took Shartan with him when he disembarked at the small seaside village they had sacked in search of slaves and plunder.

Tarn wasn't happy. He drove his men hard on the voyage home. Many of the rowers had died under the lash as he strove for ever greater

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speed.

The fact that the raids had not been as successful as he would have liked did little to please him. He had collected some treasure and provisions, but few slaves. His vessels had been sighted approaching many of the ports raided and the population had fled into the surrounding countryside, taking their horses and livestock with them. He had set fire to the towns in revenge, but he had needed slaves to man the oars. He had managed to capture none. So many of the rowers died under the lash as a result of his anger that some of the benches had to be manned by pirates for the return journey.

He was not happy.

He drove his vessel hard into the chasm, the other two following more closely.

The first warning he had of any impending trouble was a splash in the water beside his vessel as a rock fell from the cliff top. It was followed by a second that struck an oar, snapping it in two. There was a scream from below the deck as the unfortunate rowers were hurled against the roof by the force of the impact.

Tarn screamed for more speed to try and outrun the shower of rocks that were now raining down on his vessel. He could see men at the top of the cliffs, but they were out of range of his weapons.

The two vessels following him were now also under attack. The last vessel tried to reverse toward the entrance. This move was greeted by a shower of arrows from archers aboard the two vessels that were blocking the entrance.

Jason signaled to his men. They set fire to the barrels of pitch, then tossed the burning barrels down on to the decks of Tarn's vessels. The burning material stuck to the spars and sails, setting them alight. The burning sails fell to the deck, starting more fires where they landed.

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The pirates ran frantically around the decks, trying to escape the hail of fire and rocks.

Tarn stood his position on the bridge, screaming out a string of commands. These were ignored as each pirate sought to look after his own safety.

Some escaped the flames by jumping into the water, only to be struck by the falling rocks. The smoke from the burning vessels filled the chasm adding its choking intensity to the chaos. It was like a scene from *Harden*, worse than anything Tarn had ever experienced—but then he had usually been the attacker not the attacked.

A rock landed beside him on the bridge, the impact sending him reeling. A burning spar landed nearby, sending a shower of sparks over his hair and clothing. He frantically beat at them. Another burning spar fell on the bridge. He was trapped between them; there was no way to safety other than into the water. He was a proud man; he would not be driven from his vessel. He would stay and fight to the end. He raised his fist defiantly at the men on the cliffs. They must have come from Sarando; maybe he even knew some of them. Why had they turned against their new leader?

A rock landed on the railing and bounced off it to strike him on the thigh, breaking the bone. He fell forward. Another rock landed on his back. He screamed once in agony, then was silenced as a burning spar crashed down on his head. Tarn had paid the price of his treachery.

The shower of rocks continued to fall toward the vessels although they could no longer be seen through the pall of smoke drifting through the chasm.

All three vessels were now on fire. Jason called for the hail of rocks to cease. The pirate vessels were dead. They would burn until the fires reached the water line, then the fires would extinguish themselves.

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There would be no escape for the crews. Those who escaped the rocks and the flames would have to swim to the rocks lining the chasm and wait until they were rescued. The cliffs were too steep to climb. Loyal vessels waited at both ends of the chasm.

Tarn's threat to Sarando was finished.

Jason led the volunteers back to the city. Their return was greeted with rapturous cheers when they told the people Tarn's vessels were now nothing but float hulks in the chasm.

Sette was waiting in front of the council chambers; the councilors lined up behind him. Jason rode into the square and dismounted before him. He bowed his head in greeting.

"Greetings, Sette, lawful leader of the Sarabandi," he said in a loud voice that carried clearly to the crowds filling the square. "Tarn's vessels have been destroyed. They burn in the channel. Your sons will bring the survivors before you when the fires have died down. Sarando is returned to your care."

"The Sarabandi are deeply in debt to Jason of Thurgan, the Warrior of Earth. Your deeds will be woven into the history of our people. Whatever you wish shall be yours."

"The thanks of Sette is sufficient reward."

"Think longer; the battle is still too fresh in your mind."

"What about Prince Khuramani's warriors?"

"They have flown. The dwelling given to them for their use by Sarando is deserted. The slaves at the jetty say that the Black Horsemen departed by cargo vessel secretly on the night of my funeral."

"I don't like that news," Jason muttered. "If the Black Horsemen had already left in secret, then I fear Khuramani and Shartan most probably didn't return with Tarn. We must hear what the survivors have to say."

There were not many survivors to say anything.

Sette's sons towed the burnt out hulks into the harbor. Only ten of

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the pirate crew lived to tell their story of the inferno in the chasm. None of those came from Tarn's vessel, which had borne the brunt of the initial attack. Tarn's body had been found floating in the water, badly burnt and broken, but still recognizable. There was no sign of Khuramani and Shartan. Had they really perished, or had they left the vessel earlier as suspected? The other survivors told of the unsuccessful raids and an argument between Tarn and his advisors on the bridge of his vessel. They also told of putting in to a small port at night and leaving within an ern. They didn't know why they had diverted to the port, but they hadn't remained long enough to load either provisions or slaves.

Sette turned and entered the council chambers. Jason and the assembled councilors followed him. He stood looking fondly around the familiar chamber. He had never expected to stand inside it again when he had been thrown into the slave pen. But he was back—and all because of a foreigner.

“Let the official period of mourning for Sette be cancelled, and the waidata taverns opened so that the people of Sarando can celebrate their deliverance. Let the word go out to those driven from our city that the gates are open to them again. We need the skills others have to offer; we must be prepared to learn from many for the benefit of our own people. Then let a statue be erected to the memory of the Warrior of Earth, without whom we would still be under the yoke of Tarn.”

He looked over to where Jason stood.

“Tarn spoke against all those not born of the Sarabandi, as if that was a crime, yet there stands one such person, the savior of our city. Do not let any forget that, now or in the future.”

He turned to the council.

“Under the law of the Sarabandi, all property owned by Tarn is now the property of Sarando. The house of Tarn will become the property of Jason of Thurgan, freely given by the people of Sarando. All the slaves

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owned by Tarn will now be the slaves of Jason.”

A struggling girl was dragged into the chamber, her head covered in a black hood.

“Under the laws of the Sarabandi, the family of traitors must also pay the price for that treachery along with the perpetrator. Remove the hood from the prisoner.”

The hood was pulled from the prisoner’s head. The frightened face of Tarn’s daughter stared at the council. Her face was stained with tears. Jason felt a pang of sadness for her.

“Daughter of Tarn, your father has been found guilty of treachery against the people of the Sarabandi. Under our laws, his family is required to share his punishment. Your father has paid his penance in the chasm, your mother took her own life when she realized her husband’s perfidy. You are the only member of the family yet to pay. The sentence for treachery is known to all. You are hereby sentenced to be stripped of your title and all your worldly goods, then taken out into the desert and staked out at the rising of the first sun to be at the mercy of all who may seek you out. You shall remain there until the great God Anubis sees it in his wisdom to take you to his bosom.”

The girl fell fainting to the floor.

Jason looked at her, remembering his visit to her father’s house and her performance in the bathhouse. She was a spoilt brat but didn’t deserve to die in such a horrible manner. He turned to Sette.

“Jason of Thurgan pleads for the indulgence of Sette.”

“You may speak, Jason. You have won the right to speak freely in the councils of the Sarabandi.”

“I crave a pardon for the daughter of Tarn.”

Sette looked at him sadly.

“She can never be pardoned for the crime of treachery.”

“Then Jason craves a reward for his assistance to Sette in his time of need.”

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“Any reward you ask is yours.”

“Give me the life of Tarn’s daughter. Bond her to me in slavery for the rest of her life.”

The young girl was conscious again. She followed the talk with baited breath. Who was this mighty warrior bargaining with Sette for her life? Why did he bother about her after her father’s treachery?

Sette looked down at the young girl, then across at Jason. He was also curious why Jason would want the daughter of a traitor. It was true she had beauty of face and figure, but her temperament was such that not many free men would waste their time with her. Still, as a slave, she could be made to please.

He smiled. He could visualize her on the end of a slave chain being taught to answer the commands of her master. It would be a lasting memorial of her father’s treachery; a hard master might even make her pray for death. If she didn’t please Jason, she would be returned to her fate in the desert.

“Jason of Thurgan has requested a strange reward, not in keeping with the value of his services to the Sarabandi. However, as part of our reward, we will accede with your request. The daughter of the traitor Tarn will be bonded to you in slavery until her death. Prepare her,” he commanded.

Quickly the girl was stripped naked. She was fastened with a chain, then forced to her knees in front of Jason. She knelt in fear, the trembling making her full breasts sway. Her nipples were hard and pointed. The chain was handed to Jason. He drew her forward and made her kneel at his side while Sette continued with the rituals.

At last they were finished. He turned to Jason.

“Please don’t leave our city immediately. Stay so that we can talk; we have so much to discuss.”

“I must return to Thurgan soon. I have been away too long in pursuit of Khuramani. We do have much to discuss, but first, with your

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permission, I must bring the entertainers back to Sarando.”

“The entertainers?”

“That is how I arrived unheralded in your city and was able to remain undetected.”

“I’ll send riders to bring them in.”

“Your offer is gratefully accepted, but I can be there and back before the riders even reached the river bridge.”

Jason vanished from view.

Within dierns he was back again. The entertainers would return to Sarando the next day. They had been invited to stay at Jason’s new house on the hill.

CHAPTER 31

THE ENTERTAINERS RETURN

The return of the entertainers to the city was a joyous occasion. They had decorated their wagons with colorful banners. The girls stood on the seats next to the drivers, laughing and waving. The musicians walked alongside, playing lively music. Carto strode ahead of them, flanked by Parcus.

Jason met them at the bridge into the city. He leapt from his horse and embraced Carto. The five girls crowded around, all giggling and hugging. Five! The last time there had only been four. Jason stared hard at the extra girl. He almost didn't recognize Estela. She was no longer grimy and naked, a slave in a tavern, but dressed in a demure robe that fell to her ankles. Her hair was long, tied behind her neck with a ribbon that matched her robe. She stood erect, her body no longer visible to any who wanted to examine it.

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“Now everyone can see you are indeed a princess,” Jason whispered as he hugged her. “I don’t know which view I like better, here or in the tavern.”

Estela blushed, the color adding to her beauty.

Jason led the happy procession through the streets to his new home. Cheers and happy banter from the local population accompanied them up the hill. Their part, albeit unknowingly, in Tarn’s downfall was common knowledge—even if the story had been embellished as it passed from hand to hand! If the warrior wished to recognize them as friends, then so, too, would Sarando.

“Rest now, my friends,” Jason told them. “We have visitors coming to share our humble home tonight. The night could be long!”

“Our home?” Carto questioned.

“The home belonging to Tarn has been given to me, and any home of mine shall be an open home for you and your group of entertainers. You won’t need caravans when you visit Sarando in the future.”

“Your kindness is greatly appreciated,” Carto murmured, tears in his eyes. “Sarando is our best city for revenue. It’s good that we will be able to visit it more often than we have in the past.”

“If this is your most successful city, why not make this city and this house your home base? Travel from here to the oases when you wish, but return here to rest and practice.”

The troop had gathered around them as they spoke. This was a gesture they had never expected. Entertainers were always welcomed as visitors, but were never invited to stay long in any one place. It would be good to have a home where they could lead normal lives yet still be free to travel to entertain others. They were overcome.

After they had eaten, Jason showed them to the chambers that would be theirs in the future. The large house had a chamber for each person, with some rooms remaining empty if other guests arrived.

Jason was reclining on his couch, his eyes closed as he thought of

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Thurgan. He would soon be back there again; he had been away far too long, but his search had taken longer than expected, especially when Khuramani appeared in the picture.

After a timid knock on the door, Estela and Parcus entered. They looked worried.

“What is to happen to us?” Parcus asked.

“You have a city to rebuild. Your destiny must remain entwined with Entonia.”

“But the city was destroyed,” Estela said, a sob in her voice.

“The city might have been destroyed, but its spirit still lives. The people have returned and are camped beside the ruins. They await a leader who will give them the will to live and believe in Entonia again.”

“But I’m weak, everybody knows that. They will laugh at me when they hear what was done to me in that tavern in Sarando.”

“Only the foolish will laugh. Everybody knows fear, only the fool acts the hero.”

“But you are fearless, you—”

“I ran in fear from Shartan beside the forest lake when he managed to fill my mind with fears from my past. I had to fight to overcome them—but first I ran.”

Parcus looked at Jason in amazement. The warrior had admitted he was human, yet the people of Thurgan looked on him as a god. If the warrior had known fear and been able to overcome it, then why couldn’t he do the same. He would try.

“And what about you, Estela?” Jason asked. “Where do you think your destiny lies?”

“I am from Entonia, and that is where I shall return.”

“Then Entonia will survive and its people will also return. Thurgan will be ready to offer whatever help we can, but the will to live must come from the people themselves—led by their new leader.”

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A timid cough came from behind the couch.

Jason spun around to investigate. A lonely naked figure crouched in an alcove screened by a light curtain, which hid her from the chamber. It was the slave who had once been the lady of the house, the daughter of Tarn. Her wrists had been bound behind her back. Jason looked down at the her, the once-proud beauty who was destined to spend the rest of her days in bondage.

She'd been kneeling in the alcove since she'd been brought to the house, ignored by the other slaves. They enjoyed her discomfort, especially after the way she had lorded it over them when she was their mistress. She had taken great pleasure in humiliating the male slaves and tormenting the females, especially those new to slavery. Now it was her turn to feel the harshness and loneliness of bondage. She was stiff from kneeling on the hard surface, yet she dared not move in case her new master became angry with her and returned her to the Sarabandi. She had not been fed since morning; she didn't like being a slave. Yet she had much to be thankful for. If her master hadn't spoken in her defense, she could even now be staked out naked in the hot desert sun, waiting to die.

Jason grabbed her chin and lifted her face. She tried to drop her eyes, but his gaze firmly held her.

"You don't look comfortable, slave," he growled, trying to sound harsh.

"I am not, master."

"This is different from the pampering you received in the bathhouse, isn't it?"

"Yes, master," she murmured, looking at him in amazement. How did he know about her sessions in the bathhouse?

"Do you miss your mysterious lover, slave?"

The girl looked at him in surprise. She had told no one about her lover, not even her parents.

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“Well, do you?”

“Yes, master.” Her tear-stained face colored at the memory.

“The naked slave can still blush,” Jason said, smiling. “Have you been fed?”

“This morning, master,” she whispered.

Jason clapped his hands. A male slave hurried into the chamber. He didn’t even glance in the girl’s direction.

“Bring food,” Jason demanded.

Taking the girl by the arm, Jason raised her to her feet and dragged her to the sunken bath in an adjoining chamber. He pushed her into the water, then removed his robe and climbed in after her. He lowered her head under the water. She rose, spluttering. He ran soap over her, his hands exploring her helpless body. She squirmed as he probed and squeezed. He took her to the edge, then stopped and let her sink until she knelt on the bottom of the tub, the water lapping against the undersides of her breasts.

Jason cleaned himself, ignoring her. He rose and dried his body, then drew her from the water. She stood while her dried her flesh. He again roughly worked on her until she started to squirm, then he stopped. She watched him through hazy eyes. Why did he stop? It was cruel. He built up her need, then left her unsatisfied.

Soon, he rebound her hands in front of her, forcing her to kneel beside him while he ate. Absentmindedly, he passed her pieces of food, as he would any pet. She accepted them gratefully. He petted her the way he would any animal. She pressed against him. Jason deliberately let his hands wander over her body, again bringing her almost to her peak, then letting her subside. The girl squirmed in her need. Jason watched her through hooded eyes, pretending not to notice.

He could sense the battle raging within her young body. She wanted to throw herself against him and beg for satisfaction, but she knew enough about slavery to realize that to do so would be to invite

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punishment. She had delighted in tormenting some of her father's slaves the same way. Now she was learning that it was just as much punishment to be kept at the peak and not allowed release. It was a slow, potent torture that left the victim unmarked. In time she would come to rely totally on the actions of her master for her needs, tuned and ready to respond like a well-oiled spring.

Her training had begun.

Jason kept the slave at his side long into the night throughout the festivities. She stayed naked on her knees as the entertainment swirled around her. The guests watched her with interest. They had often seen Rona, Tarn's daughter, in this house, but always dressed in the finest robes money could buy. She had acted as if she was too good for them and they should be honored she had come among them. To see her naked at Jason's feet pleased them. Some of them had been her suitors, but they had never been allowed to see her the way they were seeing her now. They were surprised at the fullness of her body; they had never suspected the true beauty of her figure, that had been reserved for the attendants in the bathhouse.

Rona no longer blushed at the examining eyes. She didn't even see them. Her eyes were only for her new master. She was falling totally under his power.

After the guests left, Rona was chained to the foot of Jason's couch. He tied her wrists behind her back and threw a skin over her. She gritted her teeth in frustration; she couldn't even ease her frustrations with her own fingers under the cover of darkness.

The blonde dancer came to Jason that night. Rona sobbed quietly with frustration as she lay listening to the sounds of pleasure only meters from her head. The dancer left before the second moon had reached its peak.

Jason watched her go, then sat on the edge of the couch and looked down at Rona. "It's not easy being a slave."

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“That it isn’t, master,” she sobbed.

He ignored her obvious frustrations.

“Master, may a slave speak?”

“I don’t know. Do you think she has anything important to say?”

“To her it is important, master.”

“Then I will let her speak.”

“Master, please may I come to you?” Rona begged.

“But you are with me. You have been with me since you were enslaved by the council.”

“Master, I mean in your couch.”

“Why should I let you into my couch?”

“Master has built up a need in my body that begs for release. I go mad with the need to find release.”

“Then use your own hands.”

“I cannot. Master has bound them behind my back.”

“That is in case you try to leave.”

“A slave has no place to go. If I tried to leave my master, I would be punished.”

“If you left me, your papers would be returned to the Sarabandi and you would end up staked out in the desert to die. There would be no second chance. Remember that...your life depends on me. Never try to run away.”

“Yes, master. Your slave knows that. She is thankful that Master took her as a slave instead of leaving her to face the fate of traitors. But...”

“But what?”

“Why did master seek my life as his reward? I am not worthy of such a price.”

“That is true, however, I didn’t like the idea of a young girl being sacrificed to pay for the sins of her father. While that is the law of the Sarabandi, it is not a law I would support in Thurgan—but we are

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bound to support the judgment of the Sarabandi council. You will live, but you must also learn humility. Pride doesn't befit a slave."

"Yes, master," Rona murmured, tears running from her eyes.

Jason stooped down and effortlessly raised her in his arms. He undid the chain binding her to the foot of the couch. "Your training will now finish for the night, but don't think that it's ended."

He pressed his lips against hers, then lowered her to the couch. She fell back, her thighs parted. He drove into her. She was wet and more than willing. She screamed once, then moaned in her throat. Jason smiled. Rona would be a willing and eager slave. She wouldn't take as long to train as he had thought. But he must never forget that she was a slave, the daughter of a traitor, who could never be pardoned.

* * *

As the first rays of the sun rose over the sea, Jason willed himself to the top of the temple's highest tower. He faced in the direction of Thurgan and concentrated. A faint disturbance occurred in his thought patterns. He concentrated harder. His mind touched the mind of a child. The thought patterns appeared to be those of Sarsi. He spoke gently to her, giving her a message for Charni. In two days he would be leaving for home. He instructed Sarsi to have Charni tell Thorsan to meet him with his warriors at Entonia. He would be coming from the sea. Sarsi couldn't make out what he meant. He thought quickly, then told her to tell Charni he would be coming on a floating log.

Sette sent the ships of his two sons to transport Jason in honor to Entonia. He was loath to see the warrior leave, but was happy when Jason assured him he would return as often as his duties in Thurgan would let him—and he would bring Charni when her health permitted.

Jason made Carto promise to work on new items for his show. He also made him agree to bring the entertainers to the cities of the plains when they tired of Sarando.

The two silent blonde girls had blossomed since their return to the

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city. Jason had obtained their slave papers and destroyed them in front of their eyes. They were now free women. They were offered passage to Thurgan or any other city they wished. They elected to remain with the entertainers.

Mira was the biggest surprise of all. Jason found she also had the power to receive messages in her mind. He had been looking at her while she had her back turned, admiring her body, when she had sent her own thoughts directly to his, challenging him to make good his idle wishes. While he was still standing there in surprise, she turned and threw herself into his arms. She had always been able to read minds, but Jason was the first person with whom she had been able to communicate with without words. She would be part of his chain of communicators.

Sette and the council were at the jetty to see Jason embark. He looked back toward the city. It must be deserted; they all appeared to be at the harbor. Parcus and Estela were on the same vessel as Jason, Rona knelt at his side. Jason no longer kept her naked, but had given her a short slave tunic. It did nothing to hide her body, but she wore it with as much pride as she had worn some of her most expensive robes in the past.

To her it was a symbol that she had found favor in her master's eyes.

CHAPTER 32

RETURN TO ENTONIA

Thorsan stood on the sand hills overlooking the harbor that had once been Entonia. The dead had long since been buried and the returning citizens had started to remove the rubble that clogged the streets. Some of the old buildings had been destroyed to clear spaces for temporary shelters for those returning to their city. There was listlessness, though—a reluctance to resettle in case the Sarabandi pirates returned. Thorsan sensed a lack of leadership. Rubble was cleared from one site only to be stacked in a site also recently cleared. At that rate it would take many seasons before the city could be rebuilt. The castle hadn't been touched. It was being retained as a memorial to the family of their beloved leader. His body had been found and given a ceremonial burial, but nothing had been heard of the fate of his wife and children. It wasn't known if they were still alive and slaves of the

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pirates, or if they had been killed and their bodies dragged away and eaten by the wild dragas that roamed the plains at night.

Sarsi had told Charni Jason would be coming back to Entonia. Why return to this desolate place? And how did he expect to return from the sea on a floating log? It was a strange message; it didn't make any sense. Sarsi had been certain that she had heard Jason in her mind. Charni was equally sure the message was genuine.

It had been a long ride, but Thorsan had pushed his men and they had arrived many erns earlier than they expected. They had brought extra horses. Thorsan wasn't sure how many extra people would be returning with Jason. If he was making the journey alone, he would have expected Jason to have used his magical powers. Therefore he must have visitors with him.

An excited shout came from the lookout on the hill. He could see sails on the horizon, approaching rapidly from out of the setting sun. They should be near the shore in an ern or two. It would be getting dark about that time.

Thorsan ordered his men to build signal fires in case they needed them to mark the entrance to the harbor.

As the vessels neared the shore, the local people ran for the shelter of the trees.

Thorsan grabbed a young man. "Why are you running?"

"It's the pirate vessels," the youth cried. "They have returned to wipe us out."

"Then they'll be in for a surprise," Thorsan growled.

He ordered his men into defensive positions in the hills overlooking the port. When they landed, the pirates would be the ones in for a surprise. They would find a welcoming party of Thorsan's warriors, not the demoralized citizens from Entonia.

The vessels were now at the entrance to the harbor, their sails furled. The oarsmen drove them in toward the jetty, then the oars on the

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landward side were withdrawn and the vessels slid against the pillars holding the jetty above the water. Lines were cast around the pillars and the vessels secured.

Pirates swarmed over the side, but they made no move toward the city. Instead they formed a line on the wharf, raising their weapons in salute to a shadowy figure stepping ashore, accompanied with three others.

Thorsan raised his arm to give the order to open fire, then froze. The figure looked familiar.

“Hold your fire,” he shouted. “It’s Jason.”

Jason spun around on hearing his named. He smiled, running down the wharf toward the figure standing at the end of the jetty in the dying rays of the second sun. The red hair and beard were unmistakable. It was Thorsan. He looked at the surrounding hills dotted with Thorsan’s warriors, their weapons lowered but still in their hands.

“It’s good to see you, warrior,” Thorsan growled, emotion in his eyes. “We were becoming worried. It’s been a long time.”

“Too long, my friend, but the search was fruitful.”

A small group of locals ran to greet the next two figures who had left the vessel. They lifted a young man on their shoulders, following behind was a young female.

Thorsan looked quizzically at Jason.

“Prince Parcus and Princess Estela.”

“Then your search was successful?”

“Yes and no. I found Parcus and Estela; I lost Khuramani and Shartan.”

Thorsan’s hand fell automatically to the hilt of his sword. “What were those two doing in Sarando?” he demanded.

“That’s a long story. I’m not sure what took them to Sarando in the first place, but they were attempting to overthrow the elected leader of the Sarabandi through the actions of a puppet. He paid with his life, the

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other two escaped. I'll tell you what I know on the way back to Thurgan, but first you must meet the sons of Sette, the leader of the Sarabandi. I must also collect my slave, Rona, from their vessel."

"Another slave," Thorsan said with a smile. "She must be good to be hauled all this way."

"She's the daughter of the traitor who tried to topple Sette. Under Sarabandi law she was sentenced to death. At my request, she was given to me as part of my reward for helping Sette. She can never be released from slavery. Under the conditions of her sentence, she reverts to the justice of Sarando if I ever wish to get rid of her."

"Then I guess she will always remain your slave. I cannot imagine you releasing her to her death, even if she offends you."

"She will be taught not to offend," Jason said with a smile. "Her training has already started."

Rona was kneeling on the jetty beside the vessel when Jason and Thorsan arrived to meet the pirates. She stayed, eyes downcast, as her master passed, the picture of a submissive slave. Thorsan smiled. She would make a good slave unless she let her ways relapse. The sentence of the Sarabandi hanging over her head should make her think twice about offending her master.

The meeting between Sette's sons and Thorsan was cordial, but neither side was prepared to make the first moves of friendship. Jason had fought with both, yet both had fought against each other. The old wounds would take a long time to heal; they wouldn't be mended at this first meeting.

The old combatants shared waidata in honor of Jason, then the pirates returned to their vessels to leave Antonia.

The Antonians had been nervous in spite of the warrior's presence. Their ruined city still bore witness to the savagery of the last visit from the pirates. Their leader and his wife lay dead, their children had only just returned from slavery; others from the city hadn't been so lucky

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and still languished as slaves in Sarando and elsewhere. The people were reluctant to trust the Sarabandi.

As the pirate vessels pulled away from the jetty, the people came from their hiding places to help remove the piles of food and supplies left on the jetty by the departing Sarabandi, a small gift from Sette to atone for Tarn's brutality.

Jason returned to the ruins of the castle.

As he had expected, Parcus and his sister stood in the ruins of what had been the Great Hall, surrounded by the devastation that had been visited on them. Parcus stood straight, his eyes looking toward where his father had often sat in judgment on the decisions effecting Antonia. The throne had been scorched by the fires that had razed most of the castle, but it hadn't been totally destroyed.

Jason moved silently until he was standing behind the prince, his hand resting on the young man's shoulder.

"The throne can be restored and made the seat for the new ruler of Antonia," he said gently.

"And so it shall be," Parcus vowed. "Antonia shall rise again from the ashes to take her rightful place in the activities of Praesepe."

"Then you have made up your mind, Prince?"

Parcus let his eyes rise to the opening created by the fires in the top of the tower. The sky could be seen through the gap, the second moon almost directly overhead.

"Antonia is my city. While the memories will be painful, they must become history. I shall stay and work with my people as we look toward a better and more secure future now that we have you on our side."

They hadn't heard the silent footsteps as the people gathered in the ruins behind them. They had entered in small groups as the word went round that the children of their leader had returned on the pirate vessels with the Warrior of Earth. They only knew Parcus as a weak young

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boy; his sister had been a beautiful and gentle young girl. How had their slavery under the pirates effected them? His vow to remain in Antonia raised a ragged cheer of joy. Maybe Antonia would rise again and they could look forward to a new future. It was a challenge they would face together now that they had a new leader.

Estela stood in the shadows as the people crowded around Parcus. She was proud of the way he had changed since Jason had spoken with him in the deserts outside Sarando. She moved quietly to stand beside the warrior.

“Antonia will always be in your debt,” she whispered. “You have turned my brother into a man. I don’t know what you said to him, but I can sense he has changed and will lead our city into the future with honor.”

“I told Parcus nothing but the truth. What he has become was always within him. His capture and the abuse he received as a slave made him aware that to be a man he must act like one. Age is not sufficient, there must also be the determination to succeed.”

“What about me?” Estela asked. “What will you say to me to make me change?”

“There is no need to make you change. You are already a princess in mind and deed.”

“But my slavery, my performance in the tavern, I..”

“That was in the past, and beyond your control. No one will recognize you as the slave who was displayed naked on the table. Even if they had seen your face, and few would have let their eyes rise that far, they wouldn’t recognize in you that naked slave with the luscious body who danced for their gratification.”

Estela leaned against him.

“You made me yearn to be a woman that night. I still yearn.”

“Then you must seek satisfaction,” Jason told her. “Even princesses are human, and the needs of their bodies should not be denied.”

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“But who will fulfill me? Many would fear offending a princess by approaching her like a common woman.”

“You will find fulfillment,” Jason told her with a smile. “Your beauty is too great to be wasted in seclusion. Even one of Sette’s sons watched you with lust in his eyes during the journey from Sarando.”

“But he never even spoke to me!”

“Maybe he was unsure how to speak to a princess who had been enslaved and abused by his people.”

Estela looked pensively across the sea in the direction taken by the departing pirates.

“He was strangely interesting,” she murmured, “but I will never see him again.”

“Speak to Parcus,” Jason told her. “It is time for the people of Antonia to communicate with the Sarabandi. There must be peace between your people. I will sow the seed in his ear that there should be an exchange of ambassadors between your people for the good of all Praesepe. You could then suggest that Antonia should show the importance of that peace by sending as ambassador one with royal blood in their veins.”

“Me?”

“Who better?”

Estela threw her arms around Jason, tears of happiness in her eyes. She had secretly admired Sette’s eldest son during the journey but had been dejected by his aloofness. Now there was hope that she could return to Sarando and renew her acquaintance with him.

CHAPTER 33

THE SEARCH SPREADS

Jason returned to the jetty. Rona was still kneeling where he had left her. He raised her to her feet, wrapping his cloak around her. The cold night air had chilled her. She was shivering, but she hadn't moved from where she had been left. She was determined not to offend her master.

Jason led her to where Thorsan and his men were camped. He threw his sleeping skins near the fire, then told Rona to wrap herself in them and get warm. He felt the pangs of hunger that the excitement of the landing had driven from his mind. He filled a bowl with the steaming food that hung in a large pot over the fire, then took two wooden spoons and returned to his skins. He ate some of the food, handing the rest to Rona. She took the bowl with reluctance. It wasn't right for a master to bring food to feed his slave. She looked at him in puzzlement. Was this some trick to trap her into making a mistake which he could

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then punish?

“Eat,” Jason told her gently, a note of kindness in his voice. “This isn’t a trick. I shouldn’t have left you kneeling on the jetty for so long. I forgot you are not used to the cold of our lands.”

“Master can do what he wishes with his slave,” Rona said, tentatively taking a mouthful of food. She was starving. It had been many erns since she had eaten. Jason watched as she gulped the food down. He placed his hand on her arm, telling her to eat slower in case she made herself sick. She slowed, taking her time with the rest of the food. She made to rise to return the bowl to the fire.

“Leave it,” he told her, taking it from her hands and putting it at the base of the skins. “It can be cleaned tomorrow. It’s time to rest; we leave early for Thurgan.”

He climbed into the skins and drew her to him. She snuggled against him, her naked body drawing heat from his. She sighed. She was surprised. She was a slave yet she felt happy and contented. Her master had shown her kindness, and for no selfish reason.

Jason bid farewell to Parcus and Estela as the rays of the first sun climbed above the horizon. It was a long ride to Thurgan. Rona had never ridden a horse; she was lifted into the saddle, then her horse was led by one of the other warriors. The party rode at a steady pace, not prepared to exhaust their mounts. They would be in the saddle until the sun almost set the next day.

* * *

Herus stood looking toward the distant hills. His keen eyes had seen a cloud of dust approaching. How long would it be before the lookout in the tower saw the same cloud of dust and alerted the guard. His eyes must be weak, or else he wasn’t properly alert. He must be spoken to. It was no good having a lookout who could not see approaching horsemen.

There was an excited cry. At last the watcher had seen the

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approaching horsemen.

Herus turned on his heels and hurried down to warn Charni that riders were approaching the castle. She greeted his news with a smile.

“It’s Jason,” she told him. “I’ve already spoken to him in my mind.”

Herus slapped his palm against his thigh, a wry smile on his face.

“It’s not fair,” he said with a grin. “I can never be the first with any news about the warrior. He always reaches your mind before my feet reach your door. Does he have visitors?”

“Only a slave; the prince and princess remain at Entonia to rebuild their city.”

“That is good news, it must mean that the rescue was a success.”

“Yes, but I detected a note of worry in Jason’s mind. I’m afraid all did not go according to plan. He has asked that we have Sento meet with us this night. I get the impression the news isn’t good.”

The news was not good.

They were alarmed when he told them Khuramani and Shartan had been at Sarando meddling in the affairs of the Sarabandi. How had they managed to get there from the forests unnoticed? Where had the Black Horsemen gone when they fled from the city? Their departure must have been planned before the evil prince left with Tarn on his ill-fated voyage. It would have needed the cooperation of others to spirit the Black Horsemen out of the city unseen by Tarn and his spies. Was there another traitor in the city? Khuramani must have known Tarn’s plans were doomed and arranged to leave Sarando before retribution came down on the house of Tarn.

They would have been well paid to be advisors to Tarn. They could have bought a vessel and crew, then sailed while Tarn was still busy with the funeral plans. Many vessels had moved in and out of the port around that time. That was not unusual. One must have carried the Black Horsemen.

But to where?

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Khuramani could not return to the plains or marshes. The forests and the northern mountains couldn't be reached without crossing the plains. He was no longer welcome in the Sarabandi deserts. Where could he go that was safe? Where could he continue with his efforts to link with the Evil Ones? There was no doubt in Jason's mind that these efforts would continue. Khuramani needed the extra power to help him if he any hope of defeating Thurgan and the growing number of cities who were combining into alliances against him.

Sento scratched his head, looking at a rough globe of Praesepe.

"The lands to the north of our equator are now closed to Khuramani. He must have traveled south."

"What lies in that direction?" Jason asked.

"Many strange lands. I have heard of one race that believes in bring the dead back to life and using them as slaves, and yet another who live on the flesh of other humans believing it gives them the strength of those they've eaten. I haven't traveled far to the south; many who have started the journey haven't returned."

"It doesn't sound a very nice part of your world," Jason muttered.

"Then it should suit my brother. Maybe they will dispose of him for us," Charni murmured.

"I doubt it," Jason said with a smile. "That would be too much to hope for; and, anyhow, he could be of more danger to them than they would be to him."

Jason turned to Sento.

"Were the southern lands devastated by the Battle of the Space Moon?"

"No, the warring factions were mainly from those dwelling over the northern plains. However, it has long been said that some of the combatants fled to the south to escape the destruction they had brought to our world—and that they continue the battle to this day."

"How did they survive the holocaust?"

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“The winds of Praesepe are strong at the equator. They drive the debris from the northern lands back to the north; that from the south remains below the equator. They have never mixed, so the seeds of death that followed the destruction remained to punish the north, where they originated. The air in the south remained pure.”

“Why didn’t the south develop their technology and become the masters of Praesepe?”

“There was never a great history of technological advances by the races to the south. Their strange beliefs in spiritual forces and weird religions prohibited their adherence to science. They were the poorer for it.”

“And because of that they survived the holocaust,” Jason reminded him. “However, if Khuramani can unite the warring factions of the former northern races, there could be a chance he could get them to work together. Maybe some of their former scientific skills still remain hidden to this day.”

“Then we must reach him before he gains the confidence of any of those races. We do not want to renew the Battle of the Space Moon,” Herus snapped.

Sento agreed. That would not be good for their world. The people wanted peace, not the renewal of the old conflicts.

“Send out messengers to all the towns and villages nearest to the equator,” Jason said. “Tell them to seek news of events to the south. Any news, no matter how insignificant it might seem. I will continue the search, but not until I have some facts from which to start.”

Sento left the chamber, taking Herus and Thorsan with him. They had work to do.

Jason took Charni in his arms.

“We seem to be growing apart,” he said with a smile, gently rubbing her expanding stomach.

“But only for a little longer,” she said, cuddling against him. “It

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won't be long before the heir to Thurgan enters our world.”

That day would be a happy event for Thurgan.

A child born to the Warrior and their favorite princess would bring much joy to the city.

Jason vowed he would wait for the birth of his heir before he renewed his search for Prince Khuramani and the wizard Shartan.

ALAN M. BROOKER

Does a character resemble the author in some small way or does a little bit of each character get absorbed into the author's psyche?

An interest thought if the author happens to write science fiction, fantasy, horror and adventure with large doses of romance and a bit of good old-fashioned violence thrown in for good measure.

That would give analysts a fertile field to investigate, as fertile as the fields covered in the novels by New Zealand author Alan Brooker, who has joined the Amber Quill Press stable after some frustrating experiences with publishers in his own country and in the USA.

Alan's own life reads a bit like a novel, neatly divided into chapters that all seem to have a finite start and end. There has been no gentle progress from one chapter to the next, rather a distinct and sudden change of direction. Yet throughout, the steadying influence of words and images has taken him far beyond the confines of his earthly existence.

Starting his working life as a reporter with *The Otago Daily Times* in Otago in 1954, Alan slowly worked north from the southern tip of the country to the most northern, where he has slung anchor and plans to stay—beside the beach and in contact with the rest of the world through the miracles of cyberspace.

In the intervening years, he had a career with the Royal New Zealand Air Force, both in New Zealand and overseas, worked with a nationwide construction company, managed a health service and

worked with the mentally and physically disabled in a paid and also voluntary capacity.

He is a qualified scuba diver, a New York trained photographer and once held a pilot's license. He is also interested in gardening and web page design, as well as being involved with the SETI League as one of the millions around the world who have linked the power of their computers together to try and find intelligent extra-terrestrial life.

Yes, definitely as complicated as some of his characters, and it is not surprising that many of his novels stray into these fields of interest.

“I love creating the worlds in my science fiction and fantasy stories,” Alan says. “At least nobody can claim I've got the geography or history wrong or have even made errors in my scientific assumptions because these are my worlds and nobody has been there to check them out. I'm the final arbiter, the sole judge of what's right and wrong—but it's up to the public to show their acceptance of the stories by spending their money and supporting Amber Quill Press, who have been brave enough to bring them into print.”

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