

Judgment

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CHAPTER 1

Kamahl stared at the black spot on the floor where his friend's body had been just moments before. The spot that had once held a tortured soul now held nothing more than charcoal and dust. Kamahl hadn't killed his friend, he had merely sent his body on to Fiers. No. Kuberr. That was the god of the Cabal. "Well, Kuberr. I hope you'll accept a body sent to you by a proper barbarian funeral pyre," grumbled the big barbarian as he knelt to honor his fallen friend a moment longer. "Chainer, you once wondered if you would have made a good barbarian. Perhaps I have sent you to Fiers after all, so you can find out. Wouldn't that be the final irony of our friendship?"

Kamahl scraped his brass-skinned hand through the dust that once was his friend and clenched a pinch of the blackened powder in his fist. After wetting the index finger of his other hand, he jabbed it into the cavity of the fist-into the remains of Chainer in his palm. He then withdrew the finger, now covered in wet, black dust, and brought it up to the bridge of his nose. Pressing the black paste against his skin, he drew a line down over his nose to his mouth and then stuck the finger into his mouth to suck off the remaining dust. Kamahl repeated the process three more times, drawing black, smudgy lines on both cheeks and across his forehead.

"I send you on to Fiers but keep a part of you with me to guide my way to the Brass Halls, where we will all remain after the return of the Lady," he intoned. For the first time in his life, Kamahl found himself hoping that the old dwarven legends were true. "Perhaps you can find peace there, Chainer, even if it does mean eternal life amongst the dwarves."

As Kamahl rose from the ritual, he glanced once again at the Mirari, still lying on the floor where Chainer had dropped it right before the end. It seemed like an eternity since he had first seen that accursed orb. Kamahl was still full of hope at the possibilities that the power of the Mirari could bring, if only he could gain it for himself.

"Full of hope and full of pride," the barbarian said to his friend's ashes. No. Kamahl hadn't killed Chainer. His friend had died when he became a slave to that power. The one man who had ever wielded the power of the Mirari and survived had been consumed by that power in the end. How could Kamahl ever hope to find the strength to control that much power?

He must try. He had made a promise to a friend. An oath. And death does not revoke an oath, it forges the bonds of the oath into steel. Standing over the small, fist-sized orb that he had chased across a continent and back, Kamahl hesitated but a moment before leaning down and swiping it into his hand.

Once he held the Mirari, Kamahl wondered why he had ever hesitated. It was the most beautiful object in the world. The Mirari drew his gaze down into its sleek, steely depths, down into a world where rust-colored mountains met cool, azure skies, down into a world where he stood at the top of the tallest mountain, his huge sword held high with the Mirari attached to its pommel, silver light streaming out from it in all directions, down into a world where barbarians from every tribe bowed before him, cheering his name.

Holding his sword point down before him, Kamahl smiled as he looked from the Mirari to the great mountain, from the barbarian throngs at his feet to the cloudless, blue sky above him. His smile faded. For high in the sky, Kamahl could see the face of a barbarian staring down at him—a face with four coal-black lines freshly drawn across the nose, cheeks, and forehead. His face.

Kamahl shook his head to clear the vision from his mind. "No! That path leads to madness," said the tired and inured barbarian as he dropped the orb back into the rubble. "That path leads to destruction."

Kamahl scanned the hall, looking for his sword. "All I need to conquer the mountains is my strength and my sword. ... If I can find it."

A glint of steel in the corner caught the large barbarian's attention. He walked over, stooped down, and tossed several cask-sized chunks of rock out of the way to dig out his sword. Kamahl's father had given him this sword upon his completion of Balthor's Judgment and becoming a man, just as he had gotten it from his father. The sword had towered over Kamahl at the time. Now the pommel only reached his chest when he stuck the point into the ground.

Clearing the last of the debris from atop the sword, Kamahl stared at the weapon with a mixture of wonder and dread. The mighty weapon lay there, gleaming in all its glory, with the Mirari attached to the pommel.

Kamahl might have stood there all day, staring at what moments ago had been merely a dream, wondering if his own power or the orb's had caused the fusion, the unmistakable sound of swords being drawn from scabbards broke his reverie. The brass-skinned man thrust his foot forward and popped the two-handed sword straight up into the air. Catching the hilt in his right hand, Kamahl whirled around on his

would-be attackers, swinging his sword in a wide arc.

The surprised Order soldier looked at the severed haft of his own blade and then down at the swath the huge sword had cut across his chest. With blood streaming down his armor, the soldier crumpled to the ground next to the top half of his own sword.

Kamahl surveyed the now-crowded hallway. He held his sword, glowing red-hot from cross bar to tip, firmly in both hands and pointed it at the throng of Order soldiers blocking his path.

"I'm in no mood for you today, Order butchers," growled the barbarian.

The eyes of the stunned soldiers in the front ranks darted back and forth between their fallen comrade and the angry barbarian as they began to back away.

From behind, a voice rang out, "Hold to, men! He has the orb." The lieutenant stepped forward, pushing his men out of the way to face Kamahl. "You have done a great service to the Order today, barbarian," he said, smiling. "The Cabal is finished. We owe you a debt of gratitude. Just give us the Mirari, and you may leave unharmed."

"Take it," spat Kamahl as he thrust his sword toward the lieutenant's smiling face. The lieutenant dived underneath the stab and rolled to his feet beside Kamahl. The other Order soldiers advanced, moving in as Kamahl's balance rocked forward after the missed attack.

Kamahl used his momentum to carry him past the first rank of soldiers, then buried his six-foot-long sword into the chest of a sergeant in the second rank. The barbarian swung back around to face the soldiers he left behind, the body of the sergeant still impaled on his sword. He flung the limp body into the advancing soldiers. All three flew back through the rubble-strewn hall into Chainer's chambers, landing with a dull thud.

Kamahl shifted his attention back to the lieutenant, whose sword and armor now glowed from protective enchantments.

"We know who you are, Kamahl," said the lieutenant, stepping forward as he spoke, but Kamahl noticed a quiver in the man's voice. "You are the Butcher!" he continued. "You destroyed the Citadel, killed Captain Pianna and Lieutenant Kirtar. Now you have destroyed Cabal City, killing the Cabal First and who knows how many innocent people. While I applaud the death of any Cabal member, you will pay for every Order death with your head."

Kamahl knew better than to refute the myths that sprouted up around him, especially to an indoctrinated member of the Order. "I have no quarrel with you, Order man. I have what I came for. Let me leave, or I will add you to the list of the dead." With that, the barbarian turned on his heels and advanced on the last two Order soldiers barring his path.

"Face me, Butcher!" screamed the lieutenant. Kamahl could hear the soldier running up behind him. Without even glancing back, Kamahl whipped his sword up over his head, bringing it straight down behind him in a fast arc. The tip of the sword met the top of the lieutenant's helmet, and Kamahl's biceps bulged as he drove the sword down through the officer's skull, chest, and abdomen, never once touching the enchanted armor or sword. With a screech, Kamahl's sword drove down into the floor, giving the lieutenant a third leg.

Kamahl released his sword, which stayed perfectly still holding up the frame of the dead lieutenant, and stared at the two remaining soldiers, privates both.

"Leave. Now," he stated, simply. Glancing first at each other and then briefly at the barbarian and the carnage behind him, the two privates turned and fled back down the corridor.

Kamahl turned back to the Order lieutenant, who now resembled a scarecrow more than a soldier. Grasping the hilt of his sword with both hands, the barbarian heaved the sword out of the stone floor and high up over his head once again, allowing the limp body to crumple to the floor beside his dead soldiers.

"You never told me your name. I guess I won't be able to add you to that list after all," muttered Kamahl as he wiped the blood from his blade on the lieutenant's pants.

Kamahl sheathed his sword, no longer glowing with the power of the orb, slung the sheath over his shoulders, and trotted down the hallway looking for an exit.

The pit was dark and silent. A single ray of light penetrated the gloom from the hole Kamahl had blasted in the wall during the battle Chainer had started just an hour earlier. That contest was to decide the fate of the Mirari but had instead sealed the fate of both Chainer and the Cabal. Picking his way through the dead bodies and pools of blood, Kamahl glanced one last time at the box where Chainer had presided over the pit for the first and last time.

"Goodbye my friend," said the barbarian.

The chaotic scene outside the pit was dramatically different from the deathly calm inside. Looters smashed windows and grabbed goods. Gangs of thugs roamed the streets picking fights. Children stood by

ruined homes and tossed bricks, shards of glass, or broken chunks of mortar at Order patrols, dogs, and any adult who came too close.

While technically a city of thieves and cutthroats, Cabal City had been, until an hour ago, an orderly town governed by the power of greed-governed by the Cabal. But then Chainer had used the Mirari to try to destroy the city, to wipe the Cabal clean so he could rebuild it in his own visage. The Cabal was no longer here. Orderly greed had been replaced with wanton avarice.

Twice before, Kamahl had seen the power of the Mirari manifested with disastrous results. The first time was in the Citadel, capital city of the Order, when Lieutenant Kirtar brought a final and irrevocable order to the city, freezing all within the orb's extensive radius in the perfection of icy crystals. The second use Kamahl had only seen from afar but had been able to piece enough information together to know that the Emperor of the Mer Empire had set off the Mirari for some unknown reason, flooding much of northern Otaria and destroying the Mer capital in the backwash.

Today, his friend Chainer had succumbed to the power of the Mirari and unleashed the demented terrors inside his mind upon Cabal City. The blue sky had turned a mustard color, and the landscape of the city had been replaced with a kind of hell. Now, the sky was blue once more, the streets were again made of stone, and the hellish creatures that had spewed forth from Chainer's mind were entombed inside Chainer's crypt for all time.

But the Cabal was no more, and Cabal City was quickly destroying itself without the control that the Cabal had given its citizens over their own demons.

"I swear I will not succumb to your seductive power," Kamahl muttered as much to himself as to the Mirari. "Either I will control *you*, or I will bury you deep beneath Otaria if I have to. But I will not allow you to destroy lives again."

Kamahl stood for a moment surveying the riots raging through the streets, watching the ebb and flow of the chaos swirling around him, looking for an opening that would allow him to discretely leave the pit and make his way out of the city. Unlike the natural chaos of fire, which obeyed certain rules he had learned early in his life, human chaos offered too many variables to discern a meaningful pattern.

I could wait for nightfall and slip out amongst the deepening shadows, thought Kamahl, or I could just try the direct approach. He strode out into the street, keeping a wary eye on the looters, gangs, and unwanted urchins of Cabal City.

As Kamahl walked down the street, the rioters parted before him as waves part before the prow of a ship. And like a ship cutting through the waves, Kamahl built up and made of people behind him, as the citizens of Cabal City, who moments before had no purpose left in their lives but to finish destroying their own city, found purpose once again in the object that had destroyed their lives.

Kamahl could hear the calls and murmurs coming from his wake.

"He has the orb."

"Challenge him for it."

"I challenge you, barbarian!"

"No, I do!"

The challenges multiplied as more people joined the wake, but Kamahl looked closely at each new member of his entourage as he passed and felt safe. They were all shop workers, kids, and students. None of them had the air of a jack, a pit fighter, and none seemed willing to attack.

Order patrols held back as well while the procession moved through the streets. Whether the two privates Kamahl spared earlier had spread the word of his newfound power, or whether they merely didn't like their odds against the growing band of angry citizens, Kamahl didn't know and didn't care. He would much prefer to leave the city without having to wield his orb-empowered sword again.

That hope faded as Kamahl came to the hill leading up to the gate. At the top stood Bullock, a burly dementia summoner Kamahl had seen in the pits but had never faced.

"Hail, Bullock," called Kamahl as he began up the hill.

"Stop where you are, barbarian," called Bullock. "The orb belongs to us. I challenge you in the name of the Cabal for the orb."

"But the Cabal is no longer here," replied Kamahl, continuing his ascent up the hill.

"I am here," said Bullock. "That is all you need care about." With that, the cabalist clapped his gauntleted fists together in front of his face and began murmuring his dementia summons.

Kamahl stopped halfway up the hill and reluctantly drew his sword. He had hoped to get closer to Bullock before the summoning began, but that couldn't be helped now. Bullock was a devotee of Chainer's style in the pit. He used his dementia monsters to soften up and distract an opponent, then moved into melee for the win. But where Chainer manifested chains that he whipped around and flung with deadly accuracy,

Bullock used his fists, with the nasty addition of spikes that grew out of the gauntlets he wore.

Kamahl was more than a match for Bullock on any normal day, but he was exhausted from the fight with Chainer and couldn't afford to let the large jack wrestle him to the ground. Better to stay at range for now, thought Kamahl, setting his feet on the incline and holding the massive sword, glowing red-hot again, in front of him.

Bullock spread his forearms apart in front of his face, creating a dark, roiling cloud of energy. From that cloud sprung three large, black lions with long tentacles where their manes should be. The monstrous felines advanced on Kamahl, spreading out to either side, their tentacles whipping back and forth.

Kamahl had seen this ploy before. The cats would encircle the jack and wrap their tentacles around his limbs, immobilizing the fighter so Bullock could enter the fray unmolested. What Kamahl didn't know was how long those tentacles were, a fact he learned as the first creature flung several tentacles toward Kamahl's hands from nearly twenty feet away.

The barbarian slashed down in a circle, cutting the tentacles off at the tip. The strange feline howled, sounding more like a wolf than a cat. The second black lion leaped high in the air, lashing its tentacles down at Kamahl as it passed over his head. At the same time, the third creature bounded to Kamahl's left and whipped *its* tentacles toward the barbarian's feet.

Kamahl reached up at the tentacles above him, letting the ropelike membranes encircle his wrist and forearm. He pulled down hard and swung his body around, tossing the leaping cat at the creature to his left. As the two beasts collided, Kamahl raised his sword in his other hand, sighted on the tumbling creatures and let loose a jet of flame that engulfed both cats in a ball of fire.

The third cat landed its front paws on Kamahl's chest, slamming the barbarian onto his back and pinning his sword arm against the ground. The barbarian could hear Bullock chuckling as he advanced on his pinned foe.

"That's two thousand pounds of fury on your chest, barbarian. I doubt even you could lift it from that position."

Bullock was right. With the massive cat sitting on his chest and his left arm pinned to the ground, Kamahl could barely move. He tried to lift his head to see how close Bullock was, but the lion beast clapped its jaws over his neck, slamming his head back down onto the ground.

"I don't want to kill you, Kamahl," said Bullock. "Yield, and I'll just take the orb and let you leave, escorted by my friends of course."

Kamahl could hear the padding feet of two new beasts coming up beside him.

"I pledged my life to protect the orb," wheezed the barbarian through the pressure on his larynx. "If you want it, you'll have to kill me."

"If that is what you wish," came the reply.

Kamahl summoned his strength and punched at the beast's ribs with his free hand, trying to topple it. Just as his blow landed, a searing pain shot through his body as the tentacles from the two new beasts lashed at him, wrapping themselves around his arms and legs.

As the tentacles tightened their grip, cutting into his exposed flesh, Kamahl felt as if he'd been punctured by hundreds of tiny needles. Then a sudden wave of nausea almost overtook the barbarian, causing bile to well up in his throat. The beasts must be injecting poison through their tentacles, thought Kamahl.

"I do not wish to kill you," said Bullock, "but you give me no other choice. The Mirari belongs to the Cabal."

Kamahl heard the words, but they echoed inside his head as if his skull were a cavernous tomb. He had to focus through the pain, through the poisoned barbs, and locate Bullock.

"I told you," Kamahl rasped, barely able to form words. The Cabal is no longer here!"

"And I told *you*," replied Bullock. "I am here, and that is all you need care about."

This time, Kamahl closed his eyes and concentrated as Bullock spoke, focusing on nothing but the jack's taunt. Kamahl managed to twisted his left wrist just enough under the weight of the massive beast's paw to raise the tip of his sword off the ground. With the blackness creeping over him, Kamahl shot a beam of lightning from the end of his sword.

The bolt streaked up the hill and slammed into the knees of the burly Cabalist, disintegrating the cartilage that held the kneecaps together and ripping muscle from the bones of his legs. Bullock fell forward on his face, his legs no longer able to support his large frame, and passed out. His creations immediately faded.

No longer pinned to the ground but still groggy from the lingering poison, Kamahl slowly pulled himself to his feet and surveyed the crowd. As a show of strength, he raised the sword level with his shoulders and

turned a complete circle, menacing the gathered spectators with the power of his weapon. None seemed willing to challenge him anymore, so Kamahl walked as steadily as he could the rest of the way up the hill before anyone grew brave. Luckily, his lightning beam had continued past Bullock's legs and smashed into and through the gate. Kamahl stepped through the hole and left Cabal City.

An hour later, as twilight descended upon the plains outside the city and some of his strength had returned, Kamahl came upon three familiar figures. The barbarian had brought with him several apprentices to the final battle for the Mirari. He had sent them all packing midway through the battle when he left to face Chainer. Kamahl was glad to have the company again. He was tired of fighting everyone he met.

"Well met, boys!" called Kamahl as he came up behind the three mountain mages.

The apprentices turned to face their teacher and almost as one, focused upon the Mirari attached to the end of Kamahl's sword hilt.

"You have it!" the eldest called before the other two could react.

"Yes," sighed the weary barbarian. "Though it cost me the life of my best friend."

"May I have the right to first challenge, Kamahl?" replied the eager student. "Only the strong shall prevail. It is the way of the mountain."

CHAPTER 2

Laquatas, former mer ambassador to the now-defunct Cabal City, former advisor to the now-dead Emperor Aboshan, and former failed usurper of the still-ruling Empress Llawan, was not a happy merman. He floated in a circle around his chamber, looking at velum-coated maps tacked onto sea urchins, flipping his tail methodically to move precisely from one map to the next.

"Nothing!" roared the angry mer as he ripped a map off the wall and flung it toward the corner of the room. As the ambassador slumped into his chair, the torn map floated to the floor next to the stoic Burke, the mer's jack. Burke was a bruise-black lump of a humanoid, with no eyes, no nose, and no mouth. Completely featureless, he looked like nothing more than an unfinished statue standing in the corner.

Yet at a mental command from Laquatas, Burke stooped over, retrieved a crumpled-up map from behind him, swam effortlessly to the wall, and tacked the map onto the urchins.

Laquatas watched Burke and thought back to the day that Chainer had created the jack for him, back before the Mirari destroyed the young dementia summoner, and with him the ambassador's chance to take over Llawan's throne. On that fateful day, just weeks earlier, Chainer had dispatched dementia creatures to aid in the ambassador's civil war, but those reinforcements disappeared at a crucial moment. Laquatas had felt the surge of power and subsequent shift in the Mirari from Chainer to Kamahl and had deduced what had happened to his mercenaries.

Now I am stranded in this damnable chasm by that sea witch's trickery, thought Laquatas as he slammed his fists on the table, dislodging the snails that held yet another map spread out before him. That was what galled the ambassador the most. He had been outmaneuvered, outwitted, and outsmarted by the Empress—a cephalid. A female cephalid!

"I will kill her!" screamed Laquatas as he slammed his fist down on the nearest snail, smashing it into powder and sludge.

Now the ambassador spent most of his days in this chamber, waiting for word from one of his subordinates that somebody had found a way to get his armies past the magical barriers that Llawan's sorcerers had created to trap him in this large, worthless, underwater prison.

Laquatas altered his tail into two long legs with a thought and plopped his legs up on the table. He began contemplating the horrible tortures he would inflict upon Llawan once he had tracked down and killed that brutish barbarian and taken the Mirari from his cold, dead hands. A knock at the door broke Laquatas out of his favorite reverie. "Come," yelled the ambassador, looking up at the door.

The door slid open slowly, and a crablike creature scuttled into the room. "I have news for you, sir, from your royal mages."

As soon as Laquatas saw the crab enter the room, he knew she bore bad news. Her name was Simone, a minor bureaucrat who had joined his rebellion only when it looked as if he would win. Nothing more than a bean counter during her days in the empire, she had no real value in the chasm.

Laquatas only remembered her name because she had the annoying habit of wearing her abacus on a long chain on her back. The fact that his senior advisors had sent Simone in to deliver the news told Laquatas to expect the worst. He wasn't disappointed.

"The council of mages has determined that levitation is not a viable alternative. The constant winds that assail the cliffs of Onara are simply too treacherous, and they cannot control the ascent long enough to

reach the top...." Her voice trailed off as Laquatas flipped his legs off the table, transformed them back into a tail, and floated up from the chair.

"Go on," smiled Laquatas. "I'm sure you have more to report."

Simone scuttled back a step before continuing. "The mages say they have lost fully two dozen subjects in their trials, and they are hesitant to continue the experiments lest they severely deplete our forces."

"Is that all?" asked Laquatas, gliding toward the back of the room.

"N-no, sir," replied Simone, her voice quivering even more.

"I didn't think so," said Laquatas, smiling once again at the crab. "Please, tell me everything. I need to know."

"Your mages have also finished their research on the portals that have sealed us in the chasm," continued the crab. "They report that it is impossible to destroy the portals from inside the chasm, and that even if we had some way to escape, they would not have enough power to destroy the portal generators, even from the outside."

Laquatas flipped his tail violently, spinning around to face the chattering crab. "How am I to destroy an empire when I can barely get a frog out of this prison alive, let alone unleash my army on Mer City?" bellowed the mer as the silver-tipped horns on his head began to glow.

Simone tried to scuttle out the door, but before she even got a claw on the latch, the water around her began to seethe and roil as the liquid's temperature rose sharply. The water around Simone reached a boil, and bubbles appeared all over her reddening shell. They floated up to the ceiling where they created a growing pocket of air. Simone turned to face the ambassador, her face contorted by the pain of being boiled alive. Before she could speak again, her heart burst from the heat, and her claws sagged.

Laquatas continued to boil the crab for several minutes, watching her body tumble in the heated water. Some of the heat made its way to the back of the room where the ambassador floated, but he had enjoyed saunas during his decadent days amongst the land walkers in Cabal City and knew his limits. He ended the spell long before he was in any danger.

The report finished and his anger soothed for the moment, the ambassador decided to return to his maps once again to look for some means of escape. As he turned, Laquatas noticed the torn map still on the floor near Burke, and his horns flashed again as the anger welled up at the incompetence surrounding him.

The lanky mer quelled his temper quickly, though, for he knew of no way to actually punish a creature that had no bones he could break or organs he could boil. So he simply picked up the map, intending to put it back himself. But as the ambassador turned toward the wall, he noticed that where there should have been a bare space, there was, in fact, a map.

"What is this?" asked Laquatas as he swam over to the wall. The map Burke had retrieved showed little more than a large, blackened-in representation of the chasm.

"Veza's map," sneered the ambassador. "Her little joke come back to haunt me again."

The black map had materialized within the barrier only a few days after his defeat, along with a message from the empress's pet mer, Veza. Laquatas had tried to turn her against Llawan, but in the end, the mer bitch had turned on Laquatas. This was her final barb: a blackened-in survey map of the trench with the words "Loqar's Folly" scrawled across the top. Laquatas had crumpled the map and tossed it into the corner of the room, vowing vengeance against Veza and her cephalid ruler.

Laquatas looked back at where Simone floated by the door. "You see this he said to Simone. "She is the one I should boil. She and her precious empress. The gall of that mermaid to help trap me here and then send me a featureless map as a present."

Laquatas ripped the map off the wall and floated over to show it to the dead crab.

"A picture of my prison, you see?" he said. "I squirm in this black hole like a tuna enveloped in squid's ink while they sit out there, in my throne room, and laugh at me."

Laquatas stared at the map as the anger welled up inside him again. Completely featureless, just like the huge prison cell he had been tricked into, the map was useless except to fuel his anger.

"Not like these other maps, no!" ranted the mer as he turned to survey the room. "These show me everything and nothing at the same time. They show me a prison that I can leave anytime I wish, for I have the power to escape by myself, just not the power to destroy the walls and unleash my army."

Turning back to Simone, Laquatas tossed the map onto the crab's still-hot shell.

"And what is a ruler without his army?" he asked jetting around the room and preaching to the walls. "I'll tell you-a dead ruler. So here I stay, a prisoner of my own making in a cold, black cell."

As the map lay on Simone's heated shell, an inky cloud began to rise, turning the water above the crab black. Irritated that the blasted map would not go away, Laquatas swam back over to rip it to shreds and be

done with it once and for all. But as he swished his hand through the cloud to clear the water, Laquatas noticed that the black ink covering the map was liquefying from the heat and lifting off the velum, showing details underneath the inkblot.

The mer began to rub the map lightly to clean away the black area. Underneath was a complete topographical survey map of the chasm and the surrounding area, just as Veza had promised in her note. Whether by design or by accident, the empress's mer had given Laquatas a more detailed map of the trench than even his own squid engineers had been able to produce.

Laquatas scanned the survey lines closely. Much of the detail was lost on the mer, for he was no cartographer. But one feature—a system of underground canals marked on the inland portions of the map—he instantly recognized.

The mer empire had long used subterranean canals to spy upon and stage raids within the towns of the dry landers. Some of these water-filled canals went as far inland as the foothills of the Pardic Mountains. Laquatas had never seen the canals shown on Veza's map before. They must be long forgotten and rarely used, although it appeared they connected to the entire subterranean system. More importantly, one of the canals marked on Veza's map came quite close to the cliffs of Onara.

"Loqar's Folly?" muttered Laquatas. "I would call this Veza's Folly, for you have given me the key to my cell, you stupid girl. The key to my ultimate victory over you and your empress."

Turning to the door, the ambassador yelled, "Talbot!" The door opened, and a merman swam into the room. Not as tall as the former ambassador, and with horns and scales tinted a metallic greenish-blue instead of Laquatas's more regal silvery-blue, Talbot was, nevertheless, one of the few noble mermen left in the seas surrounding Otaria. He had come to the rebellion very early on and had risen quickly to sit at Laquatas's right hand.

"Yes, Lord Laquatas."

"Talbot," said Laquatas as he pointed at the canals on the map, "I believe your old friend Veza has given us a valuable gift—a permanent route out of this Norda-forsaken pit."

"Really?" said Talbot, cocking his head to look both at the map and at Laquatas. "That is very unlike her."

"I agree," said the mer, smiling. "And we shall definitely repay her for her many kindnesses as soon as we find a way to access the canals on this map. I want you to take the map and a team of squid engineers out to the cliffs of Onara to determine if we can open up a tunnel to the canals."

"Yes, my lord," replied Talbot as he took the map and rolled it up. "Shall I dispose of this refuse for you as well, sir?"

"Simone?" asked Laquatas. "Heavens no. We owe this fine subject our debt of gratitude. She has shown us the route to freedom. No. Simone will be my guest for dinner tonight as a reward for her loyal support."

As Talbot left the room, Laquatas grabbed the chain draped across Simone's shell and pulled her lifeless body over to his table, letting it settle onto the map. Changing form into a legged mer once again, Laquatas sat in his chair and mentally called for Burke. As commanded, the strong, yet viscous creature extended and slid an arm up into Simone's shell, breaking open the carapace, so Laquatas could feast on the succulent pink flesh underneath.

"In honor of the great service you have given to us, Veza, we would like to give you a little gift," purred Empress Llawan as her tentacles undulated around the arms of her throne.

"That is not necessary, my Empress," replied Veza kneeling before the throne, her legs covered by a long, shimmering gown. The tailless mermaid could almost feel the stares of the nobles in the gallery upon her. Try as she might, she had been unable to change back into her tailed form since Burke had broken her ankle during the battle, and she knew she had become the talk of the court.

Now, surrounded by the denizens of the deep—the cephalids, the crabs, the prawns, the sharks—all the noble houses of Empress Llawan's underwater kingdom, she felt very much alone. Not only was she the lone mer in the empire, but she wasn't a proper mer at all. She had no tail! Polite applause from the gathered nobles startled Veza from her reverie.

"Veza?" called Llawan.

"Yes, Empress?" asked Veza, still kneeling.

"I said, 'You may rise, Ambassador Veza.'" repeated the empress.

"Thank you, Empress," replied Veza as she regained her feet. Ambassador, thought Veza? What just happened here? Veza followed the empress's entourage out of the royal hall, down a luminescent, shell-like corridor, and into the royal dining room.

"Sit next to me, and we shall discuss your first assignment, Ambassador," called the empress from the head of the procession.

"Yes, Empress," replied Veza automatically. But her mind was already racing ahead, trying to deduce the meaning behind her appointment as ambassador. It's obvious, actually, thought Veza. I am to be outcast once again. Emperor Aboshan sent all of the mer away out of distrust, or fear, or loathing. That's how Laquatas became an ambassador to that backwater Cabal City, and that's how I ended up as a lowly harbor master.

Veza took her seat next to the empress and continued pondering as she worked her way through the kelp salad and krill sauce. The empress came to me because I was an outsider to both courts, thought Veza. She knew she could trust me. I had no power base of my own. Now that the civil war is over and Laquatas's forces are imprisoned, Llawan has no need for my loyalty, so she's sending me away again.

"I suppose you are wondering why we have made you an ambassador, Veza," began Llawan as her attendants cleared the salad orbs to ready for the main course.

"The question had crossed my mind," replied Veza.

"Yes, we could tell you were lost in thought," remarked the empress. "You do tend to chew on your lower lip when you are pondering a difficult problem. I'm surprised you have any skin left on that lip after all the problems you have solved for us."

Thank you, Empress. You are too kind," said Veza as she thought to herself, here it comes. Damn with faint praise to soften the blow, and then lower the boom.

"We have a very important mission, actually two very important missions for you. But, unfortunately, to accomplish these missions, you will have to leave us ... for a time," continued Llawan. "I need you go to Aphetto and be my ambassador to the southern Cabal. You leave tomorrow."

"Another mer ambassador to the Cabal, Empress?" said Veza as she took a sip of jellyfish wine from her bulb to bolster her courage. "Aren't you afraid that I will turn on you as Laquatas turned on Aboshan? Are you that ashamed of my presence here that you would risk that?"

"My dear, we would keep you by our side always if we could. Yours is the best counsel we receive. This is not a punishment. We need your loyalty again, Veza. We need you to be our eyes and ears within the Cabal. We hope that the First does look upon you *as* another Laquatas. For if he does, he will greatly underestimate you."

Into the awkward silence that followed, the attendants brought forth the main course for Veza's farewell banquet, stuffed sea cucumbers and steamed anemones.

"Veza," began Llawan again after taking a few bites of the twin delicacies. "My dear friend, Veza. We ... I need you in Aphetto now. But you will return and stay by my side when all this is finished."

"Yes, Empress. But must I leave so soon? I am still having some trouble with my ... ankle."

"Yes, Veza," replied the empress. "Laquatas's forces will not remain trapped in the prison we have fashioned for him forever. We know him too well. And when he does escape, he will try to reestablish his contacts in the Cabal. It is vitally important that we get there first."

Laquatas once again floated near his desk, scanning the map that lay there. Only this time it was a map of all Otaria.

"We are nearly there, Burke," the ambassador said to his stoic companion. Laquatas knew Burke would not answer- could not answer. He had neither vocal cords nor lungs to push air past them. But that made Burke the perfect companion. Burke listened to all of the ambassador's ideas and never once contradicted his master.

"The engineers should break through today, and then we will be free," continued Laquatas. "But what is freedom without power, hmmm? The canals will give me access to the mainland, but I cannot launch my attack on the empress until I can destroy her portals."

The ambassador pointed to a lobster claw placed in the middle of the map. "There is where the power is," said the mer. "I can feel the Mirari moving toward the mountains in the hands of that blasted barbarian. With that power, my mages can destroy the portals, and I can seek my revenge on those who imprisoned us."

A knock came at the door.

"Come," called the ambassador. The door opened, and Talbot floated into the room.

Ah, good news at last, thought Laquatas, seeing his senior advisor enter.

"My lord," said Talbot. "The squids have broken through to the canals. The chief engineer reports it will take several days to shore up the tunnel, but we have access to the mainland at last!"

"Excellent news, Talbot," exclaimed Laquatas. "Now it is time to retake that which is rightfully ours."

"But, sire, our forces are still no match for the empress's army!" cried Talbot, cringing immediately as he realized what he had said. -

"Relax Talbot," smiled Laquatas. "I do understand the need for more power before we can challenge the empress. But I have a plan." Laquatas gestured to Talbot to come closer. "Take a look at this map."

As Talbot swam closer, the ambassador pointed to the red claw again. "Here is the Mirari headed for the Pardic Mountains. You will notice that our canals do not reach past the foothills. A problem? No. An opportunity."

Laquatas traced his webbed hand southeast from the mountains to a small square printed on the map that Laquatas had surrounded with black pearls.

"This is Aphetto, site of the southern pits. If we can trust what little information we have been able to gather, we know that the Cabal First was exiled there. By now, he will have cemented a power base that we can use to launch an attack on the mountains."

"I see," grinned Talbot. "You will use the Cabal to get the Mirari out of the mountains. A cunning plan, Sire."

"Not quite cunning enough, I'm afraid, Talbot," replied Laquatas. "The First is a powerful ally but also a chaotic and fearsome enemy. He will want the Mirari back as the prize in his new arena, and I cannot just take it from him. For that, I will need the help of a more orderly and less powerful ally."

The ambassador traced his fingers north, past the Pardic Mountains, past the Krosan forest, to a large rectangle-the Order Citadel-surrounded by a circle of white pearls.

Laquatas swam around the desk to Talbot. "You will go to phetto as my ambassador to the Cabal. Request an immediate audience with the First, and take a scrying mirror with you so that I may lay out my plans to him personally."

"But wouldn't a personal visit carry more weight with the First?" asked Talbot.

"Perhaps," replied the ambassador, "but it cannot be helped. I must set the rest of my plan into motion as well, and that I must do in person. You know how the Order loathes the use of artifacts."

The ambassador ushered Talbot to the door. "Now, go!" he said. "This must be done with all due haste. The empress may be a cephalid, but she is not stupid. She will eventually establish a relationship with the Cabal to further cement her power base. It is vitally important that we get there first."

CHAPTER 3

Laquatas knew his way through the tunnels that led to the Citadel. He'd swum them before in his pursuit of the Mirari. Yes, he knew these damnable tunnels all too well, but this time they would be his salvation.

"Perhaps when I am emperor, I will rename them 'the Northern Laquatas tunnels,'" mused the former ambassador.

As before, Laquatas opened the portal to the surface well outside the walls of the Citadel for himself and his new jack, Burke.

"Mustn't alarm the locals," he told Burke. "If the land dwellers knew about our little system of tunnels beneath their precious continent, they would find it hard to sleep at night. And we want them asleep when we finally do attack."

Taking a moment to change to his legged form, Laquatas urged Burke through the portal to scout ahead. Laquatas could no longer smell the odors or feel the sensations of his jack, as he could with Turg, for Burke had no sensory organs. But he could still see through the eyeless face atop the bruise-black lump of matter that made up the body of Laquatas's bodyguard and enforcer.

All was still on the plains above him. The first streaks of light were seeping into the air at the horizon as dawn crept across the land.

"Perfect," said Laquatas. At this hour, no one would be about and he could reach the gates of the Citadel by midmorning, claiming to have camped in the plains during the night. A moment later, Laquatas slid through the pool of liquid mana, his horns gleaming in the first light of morning, his long legs dripping water onto the portal, where it disappeared back beneath the ground.

By the time Laquatas reached the Citadel, he was once again in a foul mood. The two hours it took to reach the gates were torture to his muscles, which had not needed to support his body's weight in quite some time. In addition, his beautiful, luminescent skin had quickly dehydrated and begun to crack in the dry air of the plains. So, when he was challenged by Order guards at the gates to the city, Laquatas's rage boiled over.

A quick mental command to Burke, and the jack extended his forearms past the merman to grab both

guards by their throats. With incredible strength, the huge beast lifted both men into the air and jammed them against the gate, never moving from behind his master.

Laquatas ducked beneath his jack's arms, and came up to the guards who had challenged him. After kicking each guard in the groin, Laquatas calmly extended his thoughts into their minds, gently tugging here and pushing there until the memory of this altercation was erased and their disposition toward the mer ambassador and his bodyguard were altered.

After spending a few more minutes inside their minds to glean some much needed information about the current state of affairs in the Citadel, Laquatas commanded Burke to release the two guards.

"Good morning, Sergeant-Treal isn't it?" smiled the merman broadly. "I believe we met when last I was in your beautiful city."

Treal shook his head briefly and then smiled back at the ambassador. "Yes. Ambassador Laquatas. It is good to see you again. Do you have business with the Order today?"

"That I do," replied Laquatas. "Very important business for the safety of both our peoples. Would you be so kind to escort me and my companion to my former quarters and then send a message to Commander Eesha that Laquatas, leader of the New Mer Nation, wishes to speak with her about the capture of the butcher barbarian and the destruction of the Mirari."

As Treal turned to open the gates and lead Laquatas into the Citadel, the mer added, "And if it isn't too much trouble, Sergeant, I would like to request you as my personal bodyguard while I am in the city. I'm sure your commander would want to ensure the safety of a friend of the Order with one of her finest soldiers."

Ambassador Veza paced the antechamber, nervously rehearsing her opening remarks. It had been a whirlwind few weeks since her appointment to ambassador, and now she finally stood one step away from an audience with the First, leader of the Cabal, and she dare not mess up the greeting.

As she tried several different inflections of her words, the door to the antechamber opened, and a snake-headed attendant entered the room.

Bowing low, it hissed, "The First will see you now. Come this way."

Veza followed the snake man down the lavishly appointed hall to a set of large oaken doors guarded by two more snake men, though these appeared to be a different breed of snake. Whereas the attendant had the cowed head of a cobra, these two were much larger with bulbous heads, large, sinewy limbs, and long, thick tails. Veza guessed them to be pythons.

The two python guards opened the massive doors that led into the First's audience chamber. Veza followed the cobra attendant.

"Have a seat, ambassador," hissed the attendant. Veza saw only a single chair in the middle of the chamber but did not hesitate to move forward and take her seat in the high-backed armchair.

As soon as she sat down, leather straps appeared from the arms, legs, and back of her seat, encircling her limbs and torso, holding her in place.

"The restraints are for your own protection, my dear," said a melodic voice from across the room. "I once had attendants who encircled me, spoke for me, touched for me," said a tall figure, dressed from head to toe in long, flowing, black robes as he glided across the floor toward the helpless Veza. "Now I must do many things for myself, including protecting my guests from themselves. It is widely known within the Cabal, but perhaps not to denizens outside these walls, that no one is allowed to touch the First."

Veza stared at the robed figure, breathed deeply to calm her inner voice, and said, "The Cabal is here." "And everywhere," intoned the First. "We bid you welcome, Veza, ambassador of Llawan. What news do you bring from the depths?"

"The empire is secure, and the empress is in good health," replied Veza. The civil war with the former ambassador's forces has been successfully quelled, and in the process, the empress has opened a portal in the shipping lanes that brings wealth to the empire and ease of travel for the merchants."

The First tossed back his cowl and smiled deeply at Veza. "All this we already know, my dear." The First paced around behind Veza's chair before asking, "Why are you here now, Veza? What prompts the empress to once again court my favor?"

As the First came near, a sickening smell invaded the mer-maid's nostrils, evoking a sudden fit of intense nausea that threatened to expel her last meal. Veza had to swallow the bile welling up in her throat before she could reply.

"As I'm sure the First knows, Laquatas and his forces were trapped within the trench by the portals, but the empress believes that this makeshift prison will not hold him forever. Further, she believes that Laquatas's thirst for power will bring him to your doorstep before too long to seek help in his next grand

scheme to overthrow Llawan and claim the throne he has so long desired."

"And Llawan wishes me to kill this rogue mer?" purred the First in her ear.

"Not at all, my lord," whispered Veza, staring straight forward, concentrating on keeping her food in her stomach, afraid that if she vomited, she would accidentally touch the First. As the black-robed figure once again glided into view in front of her and the sick sensation began to fade, Veza continued. "The problems of the mer empire will be dealt with by the empress herself. Llawan merely wishes to re-establish a relationship between the empire and the Cabal that will be mutually beneficial."

"Interesting," replied the First as he waved his cloaked arm, making a lounge chair appear behind him. Reclining into a pile of pillows, he continued, "What does the empress have that I might need?"

Veza swallowed hard to clear the nausea and took a deep breath of the now-clear air. "In exchange for refusing to aid the enemies of the empire," she said, "Empress Llawan will provide no aid to the enemies of the Cabal, namely the Order forces that still hound your people to the north and draw ever closer to Aphetto."

"Not enough," replied the First, who was now levitating grapes from a dish on the lounge into his mouth. The empress does not like dealing with surface dwellers. I doubt she would get involved in our affairs even if the Order asked, which they won't due to their distrust of anyone outside of the Order. Certainly she can do better than that."

"Yes. Well," stammered Veza, "I am authorized to offer the Cabal an interest in the empire's shipping business."

At this, the First stopped eating his grapes and looked more closely at Veza. Gaining some confidence from his apt attention she continued. "As you say, Empress Llawan does not like to deal with surface dwellers any more than she has to. Therefore, running the business of these portals is stressful to her and a burden to the court.

"In exchange for a mutually agreeable percentage of the profits off the top and the aforementioned refusal to aid the enemies of the empire, Llawan is willing to hand over the running of this business to the Cabal."

"And the refusal to aid the enemies of the Cabal, of course," added the First.

"Of course, your eminence," replied Veza. "The empress wishes for nothing more than peace for the entire continent."

"Yes. The empress's power is tied to land-based economics, and free trade depends upon free trade routes," said the First, smiling once again. "We accept the empress's offer. My advisors will iron out the details and percentages with you."

The First flipped back the sleeves of his robes, and Veza thought for a moment that he wished to shake her hand to seal the deal. Instead he folded his fingers together in front of him and bowed slightly.

"Does the empress also wish us to keep her advised of Laquatas's attempts to curry the Cabal's favor?" asked the First.

"No, my lord," replied Veza. "As I said, the problems of the mer empire will be handed by the empress-

"Or her representative," finished the First.

Veza flushed. "Yes, First. And that reminds me. I have another appointment I must keep. If our business here is concluded . . ." Veza's voice trailed off as she looked down at the straps holding her to the chair.

"Yes. We have done good work here today, ambassador," replied the First as he rose from the lounge chair and began floating toward the rear of the room. "Otaria is a dangerous land, but civilized people can tame her if we work together."

With that, the straps on Veza's chair disappeared. She rose and intoned, "The Cabal is here."

"And everywhere, mistress," came the hissing reply from behind her. "This way."

After a relaxing day soaking in the bath in his quarters, Laquatas's mood had softened to the point that he was no longer sending poor Sergeant Treal on petty errands.

"Thank you, Sergeant. That is all for today," he said, waving the gate-guard-turned-task-boy out the door. "Please return promptly at dawn. I shall need a guide tomorrow as I prepare for my meeting with your commander."

As soon as the door shut behind the sergeant, Laquatas heard a buzzing sound coming from his wardrobe. "Damn," muttered the bathing mer. "It never fails." Quickly changing his long tail into two slender legs once again, Laquatas exited the bath, donned a luxurious robe Treal had brought him earlier, and crossed the room to the large oak wardrobe. Inside, an ornate pearl and silver mirror lay buzzing on a shelf.

When Laquatas picked up the mirror he did not see himself in its reflection, but instead the blue-green scaled face of his mer assistant, Talbot.

"Speak," said the ambassador to both the mirror and to Talbot.

As soon as the command word was uttered, he could hear Talbot's voice.

"... calling Lord Laquatas. This is Talbot calling ... Ah, my lord. I have news to report."

"Yes, Talbot. I have been expecting your report," said Laquatas as he crossed the room and sat in a high-backed, velvet-cushioned chair that Treal had searched several hours to find. "Have you been able to get an audience with the First?"

"Not as such, sire," began Talbot slowly, fidgeting with the mirror as he spoke. "The First is apparently too busy with Cabal business to meet with envoys from other nations at this time."

"That's just bureaucratic double-talk, Talbot. Did you impress upon his advisors the financial as well as the political gains that could come from our meeting with the First?"

"Yes, my lord," replied Talbot, "but I was shut out at every turn. I got the impression from the minds of some of the minor functionaries that I was expected."

"Damn!" growled Laquatas as he slammed his fist down on the arm of his new chair. "The empress has beat us to the punch. Did you see any indications of her representative in the city?"

"Yes sir," replied Talbot. "That was the main reason I contacted you. One of the bureaucrats mentioned I was the second mer he'd seen this week. When I pressed him on it, he refused to answer, but I was able to extract Veza's name from his memory."

"Our Veza?" exclaimed Laquatas. "Former Harbor Master Veza? Traitor to all merfolk Veza?"

"Actually, Ambassador Veza now," replied Talbot. "It seems Llawan has promoted her. What should I do about her?"

"Nothing at the moment," said Laquatas, smiling to himself at the irony of naive Veza in the city of thieves. "Although I do have plans for her later. You two were once . . . together . . . were you not?"

Talbot blushed. "That was another lifetime, my lord, and has no bearing on my loyalty."

"I never said it did," said Laquatas, smiling. "No, that relationship might prove useful to us later. But for now, you must continue to get us as close to the First as you can."

"But I have, sire," said Talbot. "Using several of our better artifacts as bribes, I was able to get an audience with the First's primary advisor."

"Well done, Talbot," congratulated Laquatas, his smile broadening further. "Excellent work. With a little luck, and some mental trickery, this advisor will be happy to present our case to the First—perhaps even grant us an audience. When is your appointment?"

"Noon tomorrow, my lord."

"And what is this functionary's name?"

"Braids, sire."

Laquatas's smile faded. "Braids," muttered the suddenly weary mer to himself. "I hoped she had died when that fool Chainer destroyed Cabal City."

Looking once again at Talbot's face in his mirror, Laquatas said, "This will take a level of deception I don't think you've quite attained, Talbot. Take the mirror with you to this meeting, and I will handle Braids. Afterward we will discuss what to do with Ambassador Veza," snarled the mer through clenched teeth.

CHAPTER 4

Kamahl approached Auror village with a mixture of relief and dread. It felt good to be nearing the home of his youth, and he longed to see his sister, his master, and those childhood friends who had not yet succumbed to the rigors of the barbarian life. But how long would it be before the challenges came, and could he control his power within the chaos of a barbarian challenge battle?

Kamahl had sidestepped those same questions when he had met his apprentices outside Cabal City. Feigning fatigue and injury that would tarnish the outcome of the battle, Kamahl put off the eldest apprentice's challenge for several days and then slipped away from the trio in the dead of night.

Trotting away from the sleeping mountain mages, Kamahl touched the black smudges that still darkened his face and said, "We have come full circle, friend Chainer. You have gone to Fiers to become a barbarian, while I slink into the night like a Cabal assassin."

Still, one small dishonor is far better than three deaths staining my hands, thought Kamahl as he came over the hillock that rose above Auror village. But how long until they're stained anyway?

The barbarian had arrived home as the hearth fires burned low, well after midnight. The village, bathed in moonlight, would sleep until the sun crested the mountains in the morning. Perhaps I can enjoy one more

night of peace, thought Kamahl as he descended into the village.

As soon as Kamahl opened the door to his house, a dark form rushed at him out of the shadows cast by the last few embers in the hearth. Kamahl sidestepped quickly and pushed off of the charging figure. Crashing into a bureau, Kamahl's assailant rolled off the chest and rebounded back into the fray.

Kamahl caught the glint of an axe head in the ember light, coming at him chest high. Jumping up just before the deadly weapon struck home, Kamahl grabbed a beam and swung himself over his axe-wielding foe. Unable to stop his forward momentum, the axe bearer hit the wall with a dull thud, embedding his weapon a full three inches into the wood.

"Stand still and fight like a man, ye metal-skinned behemoth!" roared Kamahl's attacker, as he tugged on his axe.

"Watch your backside, you overgrown gnome," called Kamahl. He spun around in a vicious roundhouse punch that caught the dwarf full in the temple as the little man struggled to free the embedded axe. The dwarf went flying past the hearth, the force of the blow sending him eight feet through the air.

Landing on his backside facing the big barbarian, the dwarf shook his axe, which was still clenched in his hands. "Hah!

Thanks for freeing me axe, ye big oaf. This is for calling me a gnome." With that, the dwarf jumped up, swung his axe up over his head, muttered several ancient dwarvish words, and heaved the now glowing weapon straight at the barbarian's face.

The axe tumbled through the air, lightning crackling along its blade. Unfazed by the show of magic, Kamahl whipped his sword out of its scabbard up over his head and swung the red-hot blade at the incoming missile. When the two magically enhanced weapons collided, the room erupted in light and sound, and the concussion knocked the dwarf back to the ground.

"Your axe is stuck in the wall again, Balthor," stated Kamahl as he sheathed his sword and walked over to help his mentor back to his feet.

"Where did ye learn that trick, son?" asked Balthor as he dusted himself off. "That was a mighty impressive display of power. And where did ye learn those moves? I never taught ye to jump and weave like that."

"The moves I picked up while fighting in the pits next to Chainer," replied Kamahl.

"Aye, we met this Chainer, Jeska and I, when we went out looking for ye," cut in Balthor as he dusted off his breeches and headed over to get his axe out of the wall again. "Good fella. I believe he has a bit of barbarian blood coursing through his body."

"Had!" interjected Kamahl.

"Hrmph?" huffed Balthor as he heaved on his axe, which was embedded up to the haft this time.

"Chainer *had* a bit of barbarian blood," repeated Kamahl as he strode over to the wall beside Balthor. "Chainer is dead, Balthor, and I was powerless to save him." With that, Kamahl grabbed the axe handle and popped the weapon out of the wall as easy as if he were pulling a grape off a vine. Setting the weapon into Balthor's hand, the large barbarian dropped onto a heap of firecat skins with an audible sigh.

"If ye were powerless to save your friend," said Balthor as he probed the huge hole in the wall with his short fingers, "then whoever killed him musta been a god, or .. ." Balthor paused a moment to look around the darkening room, "... a planes-walker."

"This is what killed Chainer," said Kamahl as he pulled his sword out once again and held it up for Balthor to see the pommel. "The Mirari. The artifact I've been searching for. The magical orb that seems to yield both ultimate power and ultimate destruction. In the end, Chainer couldn't control it, and it killed him. Now I must see if I am powerful enough to control it."

Balthor marveled at the glistening orb. For a time he didn't speak, hardly breathed, just stared into the depths of the orb's mirrored surface.

"Balthor," Kamahl called. "Balthor!"

Balthor shook his head, closed his eyes, and after a moment opened his eyes and looked once again at his pupil.

"What did you see, my master?" asked Kamahl.

"I was atop Fiers mountain in a glorious battle, fighting beside the Lady herself," said the dwarf. "I was invincible, like no power on Dominaria could dare face me. I felt like I could make it all happen if only I had the power of this here orb in my hands."

"Everyone sees something different, some personal dream or desire," said Kamahl. "But desire and power without control leads to destruction. You taught me that, Balthor. Now I have seen the truth of your words in this orb . . . this artifact that I must learn to control."

"Aye. And I will help ye. You're a strong man, Kamahl. Ye proved that to me again tonight. Together

we'll control this here orb and bring honor and glory to the village." Balthor leaned down and pulled a firecat fur up over the large barbarian. "Now, get some sleep. Remember, fatigue is the thief of control. We'll start your training anew in the morning."

Although neither man got a full night's sleep, Balthor and Kamahl were out running through the mountain passes before the sun's light hit the village. By the time the sun was straight above them, the odd looking duo had covered a dozen miles of rough, rocky passes, mostly in silence.

"Just like the old days, eh Kamahl?" huffed Balthor, who had to pump his legs twice as fast as the much larger barbarian, yet never fell behind.

"Yes," replied Kamahl easily, not even breaking a sweat despite the hours of exercise and the steep angle of the path. "It's good to feel the chill, Pardic winds. You wouldn't believe the stench of the city. Too many people and never enough air to breathe. My head and lungs both feel cleansed."

"Good. Now ... we can ... get... to work," gasped Balthor between breaths. Sweat streamed down the dwarf's long red beard, matting it against his neck and shoulders.

Kamahl came to a halt, as much to give his mentor a break as to ask his question. "What did you have in mind, Balthor?" he asked after a moment, a certain amount of dread creeping into his voice. Kamahl didn't fear any training regimen his old master could dream up, although one or two so-called exercises had nearly killed him as a boy. No. Up until now, Kamahl had been able to avoid contact with other barbarians-contact that would ultimately, he feared, lead to challenges over the Mirari.

"Shall we start with a firecat hunt?" he asked, hopefully.

"Nah. Don't be daft, boy," spat Balthor. "That's just tracking and shooting bolts. Ye need to work the body and mind together if you're to master your strengths and your fears."

Kamahl knew what was coming next and loathed the thought of using his power so close to the village.

"Ye need to face the Judgment."

The Judgment. The barbarians called it Balthor's Judgment. The weapon's master had set it up as the ultimate test of power when he first began training barbarian warrior mages shortly after the end of the Phyrexian war. Over the course of several generations, the Judgment had become a rite of passage for the proud warrior race. Now no barbarian could offer or accept a challenge until he had first passed Balthor's Judgment.

"I mastered your little obstacle course years ago," countered Kamahl, still trying to steer his training away from the village. "And I think that my experiences in the pits have taught me a thing or two about strength and control."

"Aye. Ye have learned a few tricks that I never taught ye," admitted Balthor as he started off down the mountain pass toward the village. "But those won't help ye pass through me 'little obstacle course.' And if ye think any two trips through the Judgment are ever the same, ye need more training than I thought," he yelled over his shoulder.

The Judgment was part obstacle course and part magical battle. The apprentice had to make his way through a maze of deadly obstacles while fending off attacks by seasoned Pardic mages. As he knelt at the beginning of the course, mentally preparing for the challenges to come, Kamahl toyed with the idea of running the Judgment without his sword to avoid any undue complications from the Mirari. But Balthor was right. This would be a good test of his control and would be meaningless without the extra power that the Mirari provided him.

When Balthor's horn sounded, the barbarian mage unsheathed his sword and tossed open the gate to the course. The first section looked the same. He must navigate a series of obstacles while evading the attacks of a mage who would have the advantage of higher ground. Kamahl ran toward the twelve-foot-high wall in front of him, jumped and grabbed the top, and easily hoisted his large frame up and over the wall. He would have liked to stay on top and scan for his adversary, but he knew that would leave him too open. Better to force the mage to hit a moving target and show Kamahl which direction he should guard against.

As he hit the ground on the other side and began moving toward a stone tunnel, Kamahl heard the unmistakable shrieking whistle of an incoming missile. With no time to spot the attack, Kamahl sprinted forward and dived into the tunnel just as the fireball exploded on the ground behind him. A wave of flames and heat rolled through the tunnel, singeing the barbarian's back and legs.

That's one for me, thought Kamahl. But now he was trapped. As soon as he showed himself on the other side of the tunnel, he'd be lit up like a firecat.

"Time for a diversion," said the pit veteran. Crouching on one knee in the low tunnel, Kamahl pulled his sword in front of him, tip down, and looked through the Mirari as he began his spell. Out the other side of

the Mirari leaped a simple Pardic firecat, its mane a wreath of flames.

The flaming cat bounded out the far side of the stone tunnel, smoke ringlets rising from the dirt as each paw slapped the ground. Kamahl scanned the course for the telltale signs of magic. He saw the bolt of flame coming at his decoy almost before it left the mage's hands. Rolling out of the tunnel into a standing position, Kamahl whipped his sword around and flung a lightning beam from its tip at the stone tower where the first Judgment mage stood.

Just after the flame bolt incinerated Kamahl's diversionary firecat, his beam of crackling lightning slammed into the base of the tower. The beam tore a huge hole through the stone structure, toppling it and sending the short, screaming, red-haired mage flying into the dirt outside the course. Never looking back, Kamahl turned and dashed through the rest of the first section before Balthor could recover.

As he vaulted over the last low wall, Kamahl could see the gate to the second section off to the left. This was different from his last time through the Judgment. During that run he had exited the obstacle course to the right. Kamahl didn't know what to expect, so he approached the gate with caution.

It seemed simple enough-an open slope rising up the face of the mountain, strewn with giant boulders to obstruct vision.

"Apparently, the next mage hides somewhere within this maze of rocks," mused Kamahl. "A foolish man would run from rock to rock seeking cover from his assailant. I shall pick and choose my route more carefully."

But when the huge barbarian stepped into the field of rocks, he quickly and forcefully learned the error of his assumptions. A stream of lightning bolts cascaded down through the rock maze, bouncing from boulder to boulder like the metal balls in a peg game Chainer had once shown him. Lightning soon filled the entire field, slamming Kamahl in the chest and knocking him into the nearest boulder, where the magnetic web of electricity held him tight.

Hardly able to draw a breath for the pain pounding in his chest, Kamahl reached deep inside himself to center his mind and body and find the strength to lift his sword up over his head. With lightning dancing across his biceps, the barbarian's massive forearms bulged as he drove the blade deep into the slab of granite behind him. When the blade entered the rock, the electricity coursing over and through the barbarian's body flowed through his arms, across the Mirari, and down through the blade into huge rock.

Free from the magnetic forces that had held him captive, Kamahl dived to the ground just as the boulder exploded behind him, disintegrating into a fine dust that fell like snow over the barbarian's prone body. With his ears ringing and blood trickling down his neck from his mouth and nose, Kamahl pulled himself back to his feet and looked for his sword. Hearing the unmistakable crackling sound of another lightning waterfall charging down the field of boulders, Kamahl grabbed his sword from the ground and lurched up the hill to take the place of the destroyed boulder.

As the lightning cascade came toward him, Kamahl cast a spell on his sword and held it in both hands, pommel up, in front of him. Acting like a lightning rod, the sword drew power into itself from the electricity flowing down the field. When the Mirari glowed bright white, Kamahl spoke the words for a second spell and plunged the sword into the ground. The electricity from the cascade flowed through the sword into the ground and reversed direction back up the slope, making the ground tremble as the energy coursed through it.

When the redirected current hit the first boulder, a large crack formed and spread to the top of the large slab, branching over and over again as it grew until the entire surface was covered in a web of cracks, and the boulder fell into a pile of rubble. The trembling current continued on and pulverized boulder after boulder until at last the entire field was strewn in mounds of pebbles and rocks.

Kamahl pulled his sword out of the ground and pointed it at the mage he could now see standing at the top of the hill. Although he could not see the man's face well enough to even identify him, Kamahl was certain his display of power had cowed his opponent.

"Although you have drawn first blood, you have lost this round my worthy opponent!" shouted the dirty, bloody barbarian. "Yield the field with honor or face the wrath of my blade."

After only a moment of looking at the rubble caused by the man who by all rights should have been unconscious on the ground, the distant mage bowed low and walked off the top of the hill. Kamahl dusted himself off and wiped the blood from his face before once again walking slowly and deliberately up the hill to face the next challenge.

At the top of the hill, a path wound on up the mountain to a crevasse spanned by a swaying bridge. This must be the third test, thought Kamahl, as he peered across the long rope-and-plank bridge, searching for signs of the mage who would surely battle him as he tried to cross. Kamahl longed for Emerald, the sure-footed gecko he'd ridden from the Krosan forest to the sea while chasing Laquatas.

Instead, Kamahl borrowed the spell that had kept him in Emerald's saddle even when upside down. Directing the spell at his feet, Kamahl made the soles of his boots as sticky as if they were covered in thick tree sap, then began moving across the bridge slowly as his boots stuck fast to the planks and had to be pulled free for each step.

As expected, Kamahl came under attack halfway across the chasm. From out of the sun, a huge hawk, easily the size of wolf, dived at the barbarian's face. Slamming his raised boot down to cement his footing on the bridge, Kamahl pulled out his sword and shot a burst of flame at the summoned bird, which dropped out of site, a blackened mass of feathers.

Two steps later, two more hawks dived at the barbarian. Although he blasted one, the second flew through the fire, past the charred remains of its brother, and opened up a long gash on Kamahl's shoulder before flying back up into the glare of the sun. Struggling to move as fast as possible before any more monstrous hawks could attack, Kamahl pulled hard on his sticky boots and made five more steps on his trek toward the chasm wall before the next attack.

This time, three more hawks joined the one that still had Kamahl's blood dripping from its claws.

"Fiers's blood!" raged the barbarian. "They're coming in too fast! I need to even the odds."

With that, Kamahl swept his sword in a circle over his head while muttering a few magical words. A moment later, red-hot coals began spewing from the tip of his sword, flying up into the air and falling like rain all around the frustrated barbarian, burning everything they touched.

Kamahl was happy to see the smoldering hulks of four birds plummet beneath the bridge. He was less happy to see the bridge ropes smoking and bursting into flames in several places from the heat of the coals that had fallen on them. Dispelling the enchantment on his boots, Kamahl sprinted toward the other side of the chasm, hoping to reach the end of the bridge before the ropes burned through.

Still several long strides from the edge of the cliff, Kamahl felt the bridge lurch under his feet as the ropes snapped behind him. As he dived forward toward safety, the final rope snapped and the bridge gave way beneath the barbarian. Coming up short on his final lunge, Kamahl's hands missed the edge of the cliff, and he began to fall. He jammed his sword into the cliff face, stopping his plunge, and hung there for a moment swinging underneath the lip of the chasm.

Using his momentum, Kamahl swung himself up and over the edge of the cliff landing roughly on his knees. Pulling his sword free, he popped to his feet, and whirled around to face his opponent.

"Your minions are vanquished!" he yelled at the mountain. "Do you dare face my blade?"

"As always," came the lilting, yet stern reply from the female warrior who stepped out from behind a rocky outcropping. When Kamahl saw the tall, lanky barbarian, her thick red hair tied into a bun around two ornate, iron hair pins, he dropped his sword tip down to the ground and stared. "As always."

Fortunately, the tension of the moment was broken by the unmistakable shouts of a very angry dwarf.

"That's enough!" yelled Balthor as he came down the path behind the female mage. "This Judgment is over. You've destroyed three whole sections of me course, ye daft barbarian. Ye call that control? Tomorrow we try meditation."

As Balthor stepped in between the two barbarians, he looked up at their faces and said, "What are you two staring at?"

"Well met, Jeska," said Kamahl.

"Well met, Brother," said Jeska.

"I have much to tell you," they said together.

CHAPTER 5

Even Treal's constant doting could not ease the tension Laquatas felt over having to once again deal with the foul dementia summoner, Braids. In fact, the stress was causing the mer's control over the simple Order soldier to slip, so he sent the sergeant out to guard the door to his quarters for the day. The problem was that Braids was so out of touch with the world from living in her own visions that he could not magically control or deceive her. But she had once held the Mirari-stolen it from Laquatas as Aboshan's palace fell into ruin in the northern seas-and that could be the key to controlling her now.

As the sun rose to its pinnacle in the sky, Laquatas's mirror began to buzz.

"Right on time," said the mer. "Is everything ready?" asked the ambassador into the mirror.

"Yes sire," came Talbot's response.

"Then show me the room, so that I may make my entrance." Laquatas watched as the scene in the mirror slowly spun around the small, dark room. A table with three chairs, walls lined with bookshelves, a couple braziers giving off precious little light but a great deal of smoke. Braids not yet in the room.

"Perfect. Now, hold the mirror, so I can see the chair beside you."

Laquatas sat in his own chair and placed the mirror on the table in front of him. He then raised both hands over his head, palms toward the ceiling. As he slowly lowered his arms, Laquatas turned his palms over to face the floor, closed his eyes, and concentrated.

When the ambassador opened his eyes, he was sitting next to Talbot in the dark, smoky room. He looked at Talbot who was about to put his mirror away.

"Keep the link open, Talbot. I need it to maintain this projection. Now, what is keeping that infernal dementia summoner?"

"She should be here momentarily, my lord," reassured Talbot. "I was told we would meet precisely at noon."

"I doubt the crazy witch even knows whether it's day or night, let alone what time it is," replied the testy mer. "We could be in for a long wait. Still, my body should be safe with Burke nearby and that idiot guard at the door."

Leaning his projection in toward Talbot, Laquatas whispered through his simulacrum at his assistant. "When she does arrive, let me speak. This will be delicate. Do not allow any hint of disbelief to cross your features. I may not be entirely truthful with her today, and I don't want her reading my lies in your reactions."

"Why do we whisper, my lord?" asked Talbot.

"I do not trust any of these Cabal mages," replied Laquatas, "least of all Braids or the First. They say he can scry anywhere on Otaria, and right now, if I were the First,

I would be scrying this room. Just because he doesn't want to speak to us doesn't mean he doesn't want to hear what we have to say."

At that moment, the door opened, and in walked Braids, backward. "Stay there, all of you!" she yelled through the door. "No, you can't come in with me, you'll scare the poor merfolk. No. Stay. Good boys."

Laquatas, who had a fine view through the door, could see nothing on the other side except a bare hallway.

"To whom do you speak, my fine friend?" he asked as Braids finally closed the door, continuing to back into the room until she reached the table.

"Just my pets," she replied as she spun around and sat down, all in one fluid movement.

"Dementia pets?" asked the mer.

"But of course," said Braids, smiling. "What other kind are there? They provide me with such fun, just as your pet did when we first met at that party so long ago. But I forgot, you lost that pet, didn't you. I'm so terribly sorry to bring up such a sad memory."

"Not to worry, dear lady," said Laquatas smiling through bared teeth. "Your friend Chainer provided me with a new pet, and I am quite happy with it."

"Wonderful! Perhaps our pets could play together some time."

"I would like that," replied Laquatas, glancing at Talbot and shrugging. "Now, perhaps we could get down to business."

"Yes," said Braids, suddenly staring at a point in space somewhere in between Talbot and Laquatas's image. "Your associate here said you had a proposition for the First."

Laquatas turned his head, trying to determine what Braids was staring at, and then turned back to the crazy dementia summoner, smiled broadly, and began his well-rehearsed presentation.

"I come to you today with a proposition that will make you and the Cabal a great deal of money and cement the relationship between our two peoples for decades to come. I speak, of course, about the Mirari-

"Ah, yes. The Mirari," interrupted Braids. "Chainer found that originally, did you know that? I miss him."

"Yes. Well," began Laquatas again, "when good old Chainer lost the Mirari, it ended up in the hands of that barbaric Pardic warrior, Kamahl. The orb is now lost in the mountains where it can be of no use to anyone. I propose to help you retrieve the Mirari and bring it back to the pits where it belongs."

Laquatas paused for dramatic effect but realized the old witch was still staring into space, so he continued. "Think of what you can do with the Mirari in your hands. Think of the revenue the orb can bring in as a new wave of jacks descends upon Aphetto. All of them will be looking for a chance at the greatest power in all Otaria. All will be spending time in Cabal inns, taverns, and gambling houses. All will be fighting in the pits for the benefit of the huge crowds who not only pay to get in but lose money to the house. All that power for *you* and the Cabal."

"Did you know that you're not truly here in this room?" asked Braids, finally looking at the image of

Laquatas. "In fact, I believe you are in the city of our enemies!"

"Yes, my dear lady," replied the exasperated mer. Thinking quickly, Laquatas found a plausible lie that tied directly into his proposal. "I have projected myself here through the mirror on this table for I am at the moment in the Citadel, attempting to broker a peace between the Order and the Cabal. This is the kind of service you can expect from a broader relationship with my mer empire. I have certain influences in the Order, and I can assure you that once I am back in power, the Order will no longer be a problem for the Cabal."

"Yes, the Order is tiresome," said Braids, now staring at the mirror. "Why can't they be more fun, like you, my old friend. Say, where is your pet? I'd like a crack at him."

"I'm sure that can be arranged," said Laquatas, thinking he too would like to see that battle, but later. "All I ask in return for our services is some help in settling the little feud I am having with Llawan, the usurper of the mer throne. Once I, the rightful ruler of the sea, am installed as emperor, our two peoples can enrich the lives of each other through open trade, open business arrangements, and the strength of our two militaries allied together against incursions from enemy powers. Think of it, Braids. You, with the Mirari, will own the pits. I, with my throne, will own the sea. Together we will own all of Otaria."

Laquatas sat back in his chair, his projection mimicking the movement. Satisfied with his presentation, he glanced over at an inscrutable Talbot. Good boy, thought the former ambassador. He could even fool me with that rock-solid demeanor. As Laquatas looked back at Braids, he was shaken to see that she was looking straight at him for the first time during the entire meeting.

"Your proposal is intriguing, ambassador," she said, smiling. "What is it you wish me to do?"

"You do realize we can't trust her sire," said Talbot through the mirror later that night.

"Of course, Talbot," replied Laquatas. "If she had any wits about her, I'm sure she would have gone straight to the First to tell him how I tried to buy her loyalty with that trinket."

"Then why did we go through with the meeting?" asked the confused mer.

"Look, we know Veza got to the First before we did, and that he most likely has everything he needs from Llawan's empire already. We could not buy his help at this point even if it was offered. But Braids will want the Mirari back for all the reasons I gave her, plus the draw of that power is too powerful to ignore to those who have touched it. Even if she betrays us in the end, she will still do what we need of her in the interim."

"What if Braids gets the Mirari herself?"

"Oh, I have faith in our barbarian friend. No single force will be able to wrest the Mirari from his hands, and once she flushes him out, we'll be ready to lend a helping hand in its retrieval. Then, once we have the Mirari, it won't matter if Braids betrays us or not. And, if by some chance she does get it, our friends from the Citadel will be there to make sure she never gets it back to the Cabal."

"A fine plan my lord," said Talbot. "Will there be anything else? It has been a long day, and I wish to retire to a pool."

"One last thing," said Laquatas, who was already lounging in his own pool. "About Veza. Is there anything still between the two of you?"

"Oh, sire, I assure you that was over long ago," said a quite flustered Talbot. "There is no love between me and that traitor now."

"I believe you Talbot," replied Laquatas. "But I wish for you to rekindle those old passions once again, for the good of the new mer empire."

"Sire?"

"That low-born mer has been a hook in my fins for far too long," said Laquatas, grimacing at the memories. "It is long past time for her to pay for her sins against her fellow mer. You will rebuild your relationship with her, so you can get close to her and find out what Llawan is planning. At the same time, you can feed her false information about our own plans to keep that old octopus on the throne from interfering again."

Laquatas looked hard at Talbot's face in the mirror. "That won't be a problem, will it, Talbot?"

"No, sire," replied Talbot, unable to bring his eyes up to meet the gaze of his ruler. "I am sure I can make her believe that I still care for her, and I will do as you ask. I will not kill her, though, my lord."

"Perish the thought, Talbot," said Laquatas smiling again. "When this is all over she will be welcomed into the new mer empire. There will be an honored place in my sea for all mer. If she recants her deeds against us, I might even give her back her old job. If not, she can be your slave."

"The Cabal is here," intoned Braids.

"And everywhere," responded the First.

"I have met with the slimy merman as you asked, Pater," said Braids, looking from the First to the bindings on the chair- bindings she had never found a way to break.

"I know," replied the First, smiling.

"As expected, he offered me the power of the Orb in exchange for my help in his private little war."

"What did you say?" asked the First, as he circled around behind his guest's chair.

"As you requested, I agreed to his terms and sent him away feeling he had won the negotiations," said Braids as she attempted to summon a small pet to peer behind her at the First. As usual, the attempt failed. "Is the chair still necessary, Pater? Haven't I tirelessly proven my loyalty to you and the Cabal?"

"Yes, you have Braids. You are as loyal as Chainer ever was, up until the time he banished me to Aphetto," replied the First, once again pacing around in front of his second in command. "But to answer your first question, no the chair is not necessary as you well know. It merely amuses me. Now, what shall we do about the poor, former ambassador?"

Braids stopped squirming in the chair and tried to concentrate, but without her shadows constantly swirling around her head and inside her mind, the almost total silence of her world made it hard to think.

"You do realize, Pater, that he will betray us at his first chance. Already he is scheming with the Order, though he professes it is only to help the Cabal."

"Of course, Braids," said the First. "Laquatas is constantly scheming. He plots against everyone, trying to pit his allies against his enemies and his enemies against anyone but himself. His constant lies will eventually be his undoing-not because he's evil. He's just not very good at it."

Braids nodded her agreement. "I have told Laquatas that I will send a large force into the Pardic Mountains to raze Kamahl's village and retrieve the Mirari from the ashes," she said.

"Obviously he knows that won't work," said the First. "An open assault on the mountains is suicide for any single force. We are merely to be a diversion for his real plan."

The First circled behind the bound dementia summoner again. "As I told you, he is a poor liar."

"Yes, Pater," replied Braids, "but he was correct in one thing. The Mirari would bring great profit to the Cabal coffers. It would be foolish to pass up a chance to retrieve it."

Braids heard a rustling sound behind her as the First moved, but he did not reappear in front of her. Instead she heard the massive doors open and then silence.

"Pater?" she asked. "Are we to pass up this chance, or should we try to help that despicable mer get hold of the orb? Pater?"

"Neither," said the First as he walked around to face Braids once again. "We shall choose a different course entirely. A frontal assault would be suicide, but we do have other tactics we can utilize."

As he finished speaking, Braids suddenly heard an ominous rattling sound from all around her. Looking up and back around as far as she could, she saw several snake-headed men surrounding her. She didn't even hear them until they began rattling. Their heads swayed back and forth as she watched them

"Meet my new assassination squad, direct from Chainer's mind to my service," said the First. "Five rattlers, each with the strength of a barbarian and the poisonous tongue of a mer. The perfect foils for our two enemies. You will lead them into the mountains where they will eliminate the barbarian problem and retrieve that which is ours. Once we have the orb back in the coffers, I will deal with that deceitful mer myself for the role he played in my banishment. That is all."

"Yes, Pater," said Braids, fearful of a dementia monster for the first time in a very long time. "The Cabal is here."

"And everywhere."

CHAPTER 6

Over a meal of hard bread and jacke-lope stew, Kamahl regaled Jeska and Balthor with his adventures chasing the Mirari around Otaria and the people he'd met along the way.

"Chainer was strong," said Kamahl as Balthor cleared the bowls from the table. "Strong of will and a cunning fighter. How can I hope to control the Mirari when he couldn't?" "By learning from his mistakes," replied Jeska as she gnawed on the last hunk of bread. "Chainer gave into his desires. You know that now and understand the danger. That is a strength that Chainer did not have. Cultivate that strength."

"Perhaps," muttered Kamahl. "But what if there's no time? Everyone wants the Mirari. The only reason I agreed to take it when Chainer died was to keep it from the likes of Laquatas. His warriors could attack at any time. If I don't learn how to control its power quickly, I could destroy us all trying to keep it safe."

"Why not just give it to them Order fellows, then?" asked Balthor who'd brought some mead to the table. "Let 'em destroy it likes they want."

"Even the Order can't be trusted with the Mirari. They've proven that already when Kirtar destroyed half the Citadel," said Kamahl. "Besides, they don't trust me. I'm the 'Citadel Butcher' to them. I'd have to kill half their forces just to talk to them." Kamahl downed his flagon in one gulp and stared into the fire.

Jeska leaned in toward her brother and said, "What about the dwarves?"

"Bah!" snorted Balthor.

"You be quiet old man!" spat Jeska at the dwarf. "We all know your opinions about your brethren. But I've lived with them, too, and I know the truth about the dwarves." "What truth is that, girl?" asked Balthor. "That the dwarves are, at their heart, a peace-loving race, you old blowhard," replied Jeska. "Yes, they're great fighters- perhaps the best in the world-"

"Perhaps?" roared Balthor. "There ain't no 'perhaps' about it. The dwarves are descendants of Fiers himself. There's not man nor beast that is the equal of a dwarf in battle."

"Fine," conceded Jeska. "But they never fight for the sake of the fight itself. Look at you, Balthor. You're more barbarian than dwarf. You've lost your way in the work of the Lady."

"Don't ye tell me how to do the Lady's work, ye insolent filly. There's more to defense than simply putting a barrier between yourself and the rest of the world!" screamed Balthor as he jumped to his feet.

Balthor was reaching for his axe before Kamahl reacted. "Stop it, you two. You're like an old married couple," said the barbarian as he grabbed his mentor and set him back down at the table. "I've heard this argument too many times to even care who's right, anymore. Can't you two try to get along for one evening?"

After making sure that Balthor would stay in his seat, Kamahl sat back down and turned to his sister. "Now. What about the dwarves?"

"I never talked much about my time with the clan," started Jeska. "You were Balthor's star pupil and didn't have time to listen your sister's odd ideas. I guess that's why I left the village in the first place." Jeska got up and paced over to the hearth to prod the fire.

"The dwarven clans aren't like the tribes," she said, staring into the jumping flames. "They don't fight over who's the strongest or best to lead. They all work together for a common goal. Whether it's rebuilding the world or merely defending their home against invaders, each member of the tribe is part of something greater than themselves-a community-and each one would die to protect it."

Jeska came back to the table and stood by her brother. "I learned much about the world while living with the clan," she continued. "It's not just their way of life that sets them apart. The dwarves also know more about the past than any race on Otaria. Their history is the history of our world, and they know all about artifacts-"

Kamahl jumped up from the table.

Jeska stumbled back from her brother and dropped into her chair. "What?" she asked. "I wasn't finished. I was just about to tell you how the dwarves could help."

"You already have!" said Kamahl, pacing quickly back and forth around the table. "The dwarven clans! Don't you see? That's what we need. The dwarven clans." Kamahl stopped at the table and looked from Balthor to Jeska for signs of comprehension. Seeing none, he spelled it out for them. "If I can bring the barbarian tribes together, like the dwarven clans, no invading army could defeat us."

"You're missing my point," started Jeska.

"We are more numerous than the dwarves," continued Kamahl. "And most of our warriors have been trained by the greatest dwarven warrior in the world, right, old friend?"

"Aye. Perhaps the best since me old ancestor, Balthor Stone-face," said Balthor, getting into the spirit.

"But the dwarven way of life is more than just battle, Brother. What about your control?" asked Jeska. "I think they can help you with that."

Kamahl was no longer listening. "Laquatas would need to unite all of Otaria against us to wrest the Mirari from my hands."

"But how do ye unite a bunch of head-strong mavericks who can't be together for more than a day without coming to blows over who's the strongest?" asked Balthor.

"By proving to all of them at once that I am the strongest," replied Kamahl. "We'll have a tournament, just like in the pits, with the leadership of the tribes as the prize. After I beat them all, I can lead them to a better life."

Jeska, fuming and grumbling to herself about "men" got up from the table and left the room. Kamahl and Balthor spent the rest of the evening making plans for the tournament. In the morning, Kamahl crafted a notice to be hand delivered to the leader of each tribe. It said:

"For too long, the tribes have been divided, wandering from place to place to stay alive, challenging the strongest in our villages to gain personal glory. We are a great people, but we have never achieved greatness as a people because we waste all our efforts grasping at glory. It is now time to put away our petty jealousies, forget the old feuds, and come together as a people for the glory of all Pardic tribes. It is time to find a strong leader who can lead us to greatness.

I, Kamahl, champion of the Auror tribe, veteran of the Cabal City pits, and holder of the Mirari, do not ask you to select me as your leader, though I would gladly accept the title. No, that is not our way. Instead, I invite you to a tournament of champions to be held in Auror village the first week following the new moon—a tournament that will determine who is the most powerful among us, who can truly lead all barbarians as the champion of the tribes."

"I still don't think most of 'em will go for it lad," said Balthor, reading the notice over the barbarian's shoulder. "Ye'll have to offer more than personal glory and some mythical title to get them to come. Ye'll have to offer up the Mirari as the prize."

"No. It's mine!" snapped Kamahl at Balthor, his face red with rage. After a moment, Kamahl calmed down, and Balthor began to breathe again. "I'm sorry, old friend. We've been working on this notice for hours, and I'm tired."

Kamahl pushed himself away from the table and stretched his arms and back. "You have to understand, Balthor. Chainer entrusted the Mirari to me, and I can't offer it up as a prize."

"I know you're still grieving, lad. Ye still haven't washed his marks from your face. But there's no way ye can lose!" said Balthor.

"It wouldn't be right," replied Kamahl. "Maybe the champions won't come for the tournament based on this notice, but perhaps we can get them to just listen to my proposal, so I can make them understand how important this is. If it comes down to it, I'll offer the Mirari, but only as a last resort.

"Now, get this message out to all the tribes," continued Kamahl. "Tell them we'll discuss the tournament in the village square one week from tonight."

"All right, lad," said the old dwarf with a sigh. "I'll get them there. But ye'll have to convince them to fight."

Veza paced back and forth in the little room, scratching at her drying scales, as nervous as a fish in a net, waiting for the summoner to arrive. She almost preferred the First's chair to this horrible waiting. Almost. When the door finally opened, she swiped the remaining loose scales from her elbow onto the floor and sat down to face Braids.

"Ah, you're here finally. Good. We have much to discuss," said Braids, as she sat down opposite the new mer ambassador.

"I'm finally here?" asked the confused Veza. "Yes. Yes, of course. I am sorry to keep you waiting, Mistress Braids. I know you are busy with Cabal business."

"No matter, no matter, my dear," replied Braids, glancing around the room as if looking for someone else. "You're really here, aren't you. Curious. The other ambassador was here, but he wasn't, you understand."

"Of course," said Veza, nodding her head more in confusion than acknowledgement. "Here but not here."

Then the rest of what Braids had said finally registered with Veza. "Oh! Other ambassador? Yes. That is why I have come to talk with you, Mistress Summoner. I represent the interests of the mer empire—the official mer empire, as I am sure the First has informed you."

"Hmm? Oh yes," said Braids, swatting at objects in the air that Veza could not see or merely did not exist. "You know, I worked for Emperor Aboshan before the cataclysm. Horrible man. Kept all of his artifacts underwater."

"Yes. Well. Empress Llawan is much more sensible in her dealings with artifacts and people than Aboshan," said Veza, trying to steer the wayward dementia summoner back to the conversation. "That is why the First has agreed to deal with the empress and not aid the traitor Laquatas. What can you tell me about your meeting with the traitor?"

"Nothing you don't already know I'm sure, my dear," said Braids, winking at Veza.

"Yes. Well, I do know that you met with the former ambassador and that he attempted to enlist your help in the recovery of the Mirari. What I do not know is whether you plan to help Laquatas and in doing so break the agreement the Cabal has with the mer empire."

For the first time during their conversation, Braids looked Veza in the eyes. "I assure you, Ambassador, that I have no intentions of doing anything that will break the trust of any agreement the First

has with Empress Llawan ... or her representative."

Flustered, Veza could only stammer, "Then what do you plan to do?"

"Have a little bit of fun, my dear. Have a little bit of fun."

A week after drafting his note to the tribes, Kamahl found himself in the toughest trial of his life. He had to face the best and strongest warriors in the Pardic Mountains and convince them to give up their freedom-their very way of life-all for a chance to rule it all.

Over a hundred warriors showed up for the meeting, the champion of each village in the mountains. In reality, Kamahl knew he only had to convince a half-dozen or so champions. Even though there had never been a massive tournament such as this, the pecking order in the mountains was well established by the challenge system. The Elite Eight warriors were well known and respected by the rest of the tribes. If Kamahl could convince them, the entire barbarian nation would follow.

"I don't see all of the Elite," said Kamahl to Balthor as he scanned the crowd. Both warriors were standing on the watchtower at the Judgment training grounds where the meeting was to take place. "Where are they?"

Balthor stared at Kamahl with his eyebrows furrowed. "Oh, that's right. I keep forgetting ye've been gone so long," he said, suddenly. "Ye didn't think the challenge battles would stop while ye was off the mountain, did ye?"

"Well, no."

"There's been quite a few changes since ye left," said Balthor. "Many of your challengers retired or got beat. Of the seven below you when you left, only three remain. The newest members of the Eight are Joha, whom ye knew from your days in the challenges, two upstarts named Thurmon and Brue-I don't think ye ever met them-and Tybiel."

"Tybiel?" asked Kamahl, sneering at the name. "How did that fool find a spot at the top after what he did?"

"The challenge battles remain separate from tribal wars," said Balthor. "Ye know that."

"Fine," huffed Kamahl, "I can always demote him once I'm leader. But that's only four. Who's the fifth member?"

"Why, your old mate Talon," said Balthor. "I thought ye knew he was now the leader of the Eight. After you left, he moved up the ranks like a storm coming up the mountains. He's the one ye have to convince. Get Talon to go for your plan, and the rest of the Eight will follow."

"Talon?" asked Kamahl. "He was a scrappy fighter but never had that much power."

"True, true," said Balthor. "I almost didn't take him on as a student at first, he was so puny. If he hadn't been your best friend . . . But now look at him, a fine warrior mage, the leader of his tribe and the key to your plan. Let's hope he doesn't carry a grudge over your last battle."

"What last battle?" asked Kamahl.

"Why, who do you think it was that ye met in the Judgment last week?" replied Balthor. "You nearly burned him to a crisp when you turned his own chain lightning spell back on him like ye did. Not to mention destroying that section of me course-"

"That was Talon?" asked Kamahl, incredulous at the power his friend had gained while he'd been busy chasing down the Mirari. "No wonder he's the leader of the Elite Eight."

Almost on cue, Talon yelled up at the duo on the tower. "Well met, Kamahl! You have assembled a mighty throng of warriors here today. Do you plan to turn us into your own little army? Or do you truly just wish to see who is the mightiest?"

Because I think a battle between the two of us can settle that right now."

"It may come to that, old friend," replied Kamahl, pushed into his speech faster than he would have liked. "But if any of us is to lead this mighty army, we all know that leader's prowess must be proven absolutely. That is why I proposed the tournament."

"Why should anyone lead us all?" asked Talon, and there were murmurs of assent from all around him. "We have survived this long without banding together under one general. What has changed that we need to alter our very way of life? What new challenge awaits us that we cannot face alone?"

Holding up his sword so all in the throng could see the Mirari throbbing with power at its hilt, Kamahl yelled, "This is the challenge that will forever change our mountain! This is why we must come together as a people or perish one by one in our villages. This is the Mirari, the most powerful artifact in all Otaria, and I have brought it here for the glory of the Pardic people and to protect it from those who would yield its power against all that we hold dear. But the only way to hold this power in the Pardic Mountains where it rightfully belongs is to band together to face the challenges of all who would steal it to use against us."

The entire throng of warriors was enraptured by the glow of the Mirari. All were caught up in its power—all except Talon, who stared hard at Kamahl, holding his gaze for a moment.

Then Talon began to clap his hands, very slowly, and said, "A wonderful speech, old friend. And this Mirari is truly a wonder. I assume, then, that the champion of this tournament will yield its power against our enemies?"

"No," admitted Kamahl. "The Mirari belongs to me. I fought for it. I chased across Otaria and back. I gave my oath to my dearest friend that I would keep it safe. But I will lend my arm and my sword to the barbarian army and follow the orders of whoever among us becomes our leader."

"Noble words, Kamahl," said, Talon, still stoic and obviously unconvinced. "Tell me, will you yield your sword during the tournament? Will you use this most powerful artifact in your bid to lead this proud group of warriors.

As Talon spoke, the barbarians surrounding him began to look at the Mirari differently. Before they were in awe of its power. Now Kamahl could see the hint of fear in their eyes. Fear and, perhaps, envy.

"This is my sword, Talon. Given to me by my father. Given to him by his father. Forged by Balthor from the staff of the mighty Urza after he returned from the great war. You cannot deny me my sword. And I have brought the Mirari to our people. It is I who have brought this great power to the Pardic Mountains."

"And it is you who have brought the challenge of protecting it from outsiders. Now you wish to use your people as you would use your sword to protect yourself from these challenges."

Kamahl didn't immediately have an answer for Talon's accusations, and the crowd around Talon began to get unruly as the large barbarian remained silent. Swords were being drawn, magical words were being muttered under the breaths of many. The air in the Judgment course was charged with mana and anger. Kamahl, angry at Talon for backing him into a corner, saw no way out other than to offer the Mirari as the prize. But he couldn't allow Talon to take his sword away from him during the tournament.

"Do something lad," said Balthor as Kamahl tried to think. "Ye cannot fight them all at once."

"You're right!" exclaimed Kamahl as an idea struck him. "Warriors!" he called, trying to get their attention back on him before the first spell flew. "Talon is right!"

That got their attention.

"In trying to keep a death oath to a friend, I lost sight of the proud history of our people," continued Kamahl, and the murmurs stilled as he paid tribute to them all. "Honor, strength, and loyalty are what we all live and die for on the mountain. I must honor my oath, but I cannot turn my back on the loyalty I owe to my people. I *will* offer the Mirari and my father's father's sword to the champion of this tournament."

Kamahl paused to see what effect this had on the crowd and on Talon specifically. The crowd was again silent and staring at the Mirari. Talon's head was cocked slightly to the side, as if considering Kamahl's words but not yet convinced.

"However," continued Kamahl, "I also cannot forego the strength I have rightfully gained through combat. If my sword and the Mirari make me powerful that is because I have earned that power, and any who wish to yield this power in my place must win it from me on the strength of their own power. Therefore I will fight any and every last man on this mountain. He who can best me in a challenge battle will earn the right to yield this power. If none can best me, then you must all yield your power under my banner."

Looking straight at Talon, Kamahl slammed his sword tip into the floor of the tower, shattering the air with a thunderclap that echoed against the mountains for minutes. In the stillness following, he delivered his final challenge.

"Do you accept the terms for the tournament, Talon, or should we fight for the Mirari here and now."

CHAPTER 7

Treal acted more as a tour guide than a bodyguard as he led Laquatas and Burke through the Citadel. But with Burke at his side, Laquatas knew he had nothing to fear, even in this police state.

"As you can see, Ambassador, Order forces patrol every street of the Citadel," said the guard, pointing to an orderly column of troops marching through the newly rebuilt city square. "And we have guards posted night and day anywhere that people might congregate within the city to insure that violence does not erupt. This is the safest city in all Otaria."

"And the most oppressive," muttered Laquatas under his breath. Still, thought the mer, I could use this stratagem to maintain order within my own empire, at least until I root out all of the dissidents.

Turning to the guard-turned-guide, Laquatas smiled and said, "Very impressive, Treal. I would love to

discuss the particulars of Citadel security with Commander Eesha. It has been a week now. When may I expect to have an audience with her?"

"Ah, yes," replied Treal. "I must have forgotten to tell you, your audience has been set for this afternoon. I'm terribly sorry, sir. I have been awfully forgetful lately."

"Not a problem, Treal," said the ambassador. His mental control on Treal was beginning to have adverse effects on the man. Always happens, thought Laquatas. His brain will be nothing more than a five-pound lump of goo in a few days. I had better make arrangements to acquire a new guide.

The trio toured the square, going from statue to statue as Treal told Laquatas about the Citadel's past glories, describing in minute and excruciatingly boring detail the histories of every past commander who had been memorialized in stone. Laquatas was more interested in watching the troops march up and down the square, accosting any group of farmers, students, or businessmen who accidentally clumped together in a group of four or more.

"And here we have Captain Pianna," said Treal, "who was, of course, the first victim of Kamahl the Butcher. Perhaps the greatest commander of the Citadel, her teachings of peace and compassion with other races were her eventual undoing."

Laquatas looked at the statue with sudden interest. Pianna was not captured in a formal or heroic pose, as were the other commanders. Instead, it appeared she was in agony-her hands thrown up in front of her, her legs buckled at the knees as if she couldn't stand the pain any longer. The image sparked a memory in the depths of the mer's mind. He had seen Pianna's crystallized body through Turg's eyes shortly after Kirtar set off the Mirari, destroying half of the Citadel and killing many Order forces. Turg had barely made it out alive with the Mirari. The crystallizing effect had nearly swallowed him as well.

"This isn't the actual . . ." started the ambassador, his eyes wide with shock. Even he thought it would be barbaric to put the poor captain on display.

"No, of course not!" said Treal. "Pianna, Kirtar, and all of the order forces lost to the barbarism of that mountain man are entombed beneath the rebuilt portions of the Citadel. This sculpture is an exact replica of Pianna after her death, created as a warning to future generations that the price of freedom is eternal vigilance against our enemies."

"Then I am glad to be counted among the friends of the Order," said Laquatas as they moved on from the eerie statue. A second flash of memory sparked another question from Laquatas. "Didn't Pianna have her sword out that day?"

"You sound as if you were there, Ambassador."

"I ... remember hearing about a magnificent sword Pianna wielded in battle," stammered Laquatas, momentarily losing control of himself and his mental hold on Treal. "I assumed she had it out to face the barbarian when he unleashed this horrible spell on her and the Citadel. Only there was no sword in the hands of the statue."

"The Sword of Leadership it is called," explained Treal, firmly under the mer's control again. "It had been handed down from commander to commander since the time of the great war. It is the symbol of power in the Order once wielded by . . ." Treal faltered. "Blast, I can't remember his name. Great Order hero of the war. Damn. What is that name?"

"What happened to the sword after Pianna's death?" asked Laquatas to steer Treal away from worries about his increasing memory loss.

"It was carefully removed from the captain's hands after the massacre and given to Major Teroh as the new leader of the Order. After his death, the sword was brought back to the Citadel, and now Commander Eesha wields it. Funny thing. The sword is now made of glass, right? It's a crystal sword, but they say it is harder and sharper than ever."

"Interesting," said Laquatas who actually was interested in seeing what the Mirari had done to this sword. Perhaps I can get a closer look at it once I get Commander Eesha under my influence, thought the ambassador as he switched off the continuing history lesson he was getting from his guide with a minor mental command.

Later that day, Laquatas, Burke, and Treal stood in front of Commander Eesha who was flanked by a high-ranking warrior and a priest. Laquatas could see that the aven warrior did indeed have the sword of leadership. He could see the crystal hilt protruding from the large bird's sheath.

Prying his eyes and mind off of the sword for the moment, Laquatas focused on his mission. "Commander, I bring grave news about your enemies," stated the mer. "News of great urgency and secrecy. May we speak in private?"

"That is not possible ambassador," replied Eesha. "Even though you are a friend of the Order and a hero in the eyes of many, no Order business with outsiders may be conducted in private. It is a harsh lesson

we have learned from experience. Lieutenant Dinell and Brother Themis are my two closest advisors. I trust them both with my life."

"Of course, Commander," said Laquatas as he pondered his next move. Smart bird, he thought. She's flanked by muscle and a mage.

"But perhaps the sergeant should leave if this information is as sensitive as you say," continued Eesha. "Sergeant, you are excused."

Caught in his reverie Laquatas didn't hear the commander's order.

"Sergeant, leave us this instant!" roared the aven, her wings unfolding, making her look even larger than she was.

Laquatas provided a mental nudge, and the sergeant said, "Yes, ma'am," turned on his heels, and left the room.

"Now, what is this grave news, Ambassador?" asked Eesha. "As I am sure you know by now, Commander," began Laquatas, "the Mirari is in the hands of your most-hated enemy, the Citadel butcher, Kamahl."

"Yes. He stole the accursed orb from my own men, killing several of them in the process. He disappeared shortly afterward, leaving destruction in his wake once again. Our soldiers still have not quelled the rioting that broke out after he destroyed Cabal City."

"Well, ma'am," continued Laquatas, "what you may not know is that the barbarian has returned to the Pardic Mountains and even now is amassing an army that my sources say he plans to lead into battle against the Order."

"My scouts *have* reported the movement of many barbarian warriors in the past week, much more than normal for such a chaotic people."

"Really?" asked Laquatas, glad to know there was some truth to his lie. It would make the rest of the deception that much more plausible. Noticing the stern gaze the aven commander was now giving him, Laquatas added, "I did not know your scouts traveled so far west."

"We have been scouting the mountains ever since that butcher left Cabal City," replied Eesha. "Once we find him, he will be brought to the Citadel to pay for what he did to Kirtar and for the rest of the Order forces he's killed. And we will finally destroy that foul artifact."

"If the Cabal doesn't get to him first, of course," said Laquatas, smiling to himself, feeling he'd finally found a chink in the commander's armor. "I also have news that Cabal forces have been dispatched to deal with the barbarian and bring the Mirari back to Aphetto, where it will once again be offered as a prize in the pits."

"What?" roared Eesha. "Have they not learned their lesson yet? If those Cabal dogs get their hands on the orb again, there will be a war on Otaria the likes of which hasn't been seen since the end of the last age!"

"It may not need to come to that, Commander. I can help you capture the butcher and bring the orb back here for its rightful destruction."

"Why would you do this?" asked Eesha, a note of distrust creeping into her voice. "What do you want from us in return?"

"I am a man of peace, Commander," said Laquatas, bowing low in front of the suspicious aven. "I wish for nothing more than peace between merfolk and Order. Think of the cost of a war against the Cabal—the lives of your men, the damage to the land, the destruction of your beautiful cities. Believe me, I understand the horrible price of war. Llawan was vicious in her slaughter of my people. All I would ask in return is your help against this brutal cephalid that rules beneath the sea."

"You would have me forsake my war merely to help you in yours?"

"No, of course not. All I ask is for the Order to back my bid, politically." That and retrieve the Mirari for me, thought the ambassador. "I believe Llawan is courting the Cabal's backing in our conflict—may have even offered the First her aid against you in return," lied Laquatas. "But the First will not provide troops to the empress if he knows I have the backing of the Order. He would be risking the same war that I wish to help you avoid."

"I'm not sure I follow your logic, Ambassador," said the commander, stretching her wings again and walking to the back of the room. As she did, the priest and the lieutenant turned slightly to watch her. When the commander turned, Laquatas thought he saw an exchange of hand signals between the three.

Returning to the table, Eesha continued, "But if the Cabal wishes Llawan on the throne, that is reason enough for us to back you. You are after all, the hero of the Order. We owe you no small debt of gratitude for all you did to help save the Citadel on that horrible day when Kamahl the Butcher killed Kirtar and Pianna and tried to destroy us all. We will do what we can to aid you, provided you can help us retrieve the

orb and capture that butcher."

Laquatas accepted the praise graciously, smiling to himself. For only he and Kamahl knew the truth about that day-that it was Kirtar who killed both himself and Pianna ... and nearly destroyed the Citadel with the power of the Mirari. Laquatas and Kamahl were there only to claim the Mirari, but through a nasty turn of fate, neither of them walked away with the prize. Laquatas became the hero of the Order just like he did everything else, through his own lies.

Braids and her assassins had been on the road for over a week, and the snakes were restless. Braids could tell they longed for action, though they remained silent and focused on the task. Now they were three days' travel outside Cabal City, and while the summoner had enjoyed her return home, the boys had little to do in the dead city. Few people still lived in the city, and those who remained were quickly turning feral.

The mass exodus of the city caused by Chainer's torment made it impossible for the snake men to pick up Kamahl's trail inside Cabal City or on any of the roads leading out from the city. However, Braids had other ways to elicit information. The streets of Cabal City were littered with dead bodies, and it was a simple thing for Braids to call those spirits back to reanimate the bodies. They weren't truly alive, but they were no longer dead either. By interrogating these zombies about the final days, she was able to track Kamahl to the northern gate and out into the desolate plains, leaving behind a city that was still dead but now no longer quiet or still.

Outside the city, Kamahl had joined up with three other barbarians, but the rattlesnake assassins assured Braids that Kamahl left alone two days later. The squad also found a new scent that crossed and intermingled with the barbarian's trail, the scent of an Order patrol that must have spotted Kamahl and given chase. Kamahl had veered from his original northerly course and turned northeast followed by the Order patrol. The other three barbarians had continued north.

"Follow Kamahl," said Braids to her squad, "and if we find the patrol-or their bodies-we'll question them." Digging her feet into her beastly mount, Braids followed the strong and fast snake men, the wind forcing her braided hair and the dark dementia cloud that always surrounded her head to fly behind her. Exhilarated by the hunt, the dementia summoner began to whistle.

That night the assassins caught the smell of a campfire in the cool evening breeze. Off in the distance, about a half-day's trip to the north, Braids could just see the wisps of smoke drifting lazily up in the darkening purple twilight.

"Are you sure it's the same patrol?" she asked the leader of the squad, a snake she called Leer due to the odd slope of his brow that made it look like he was always staring down at her.

"Yes, mistress," hissed Leer.

"Wonderful! Let's go pay them a visit, shall we? I'm certain they won't mind answering a few questions about our friend Kamahl."

As permanent dementia creatures created by Chainer at the height of his Mirari-enhanced power, the snake men never tired and never slept, so they started off for the Order encampment at once, followed by Braids on a newly summoned mount. Her steed looked like a cross between a giant spider and a stallion. It had eight multijointed legs attached to the body of a large black horse with flaming, red eyes.

Several hours before dawn, the assassins came upon the sleeping camp of the Order patrol. A half-dozen guards were on watch around the camp. The five snake men quietly fanned out and surrounded the camp, leaving Braids to handle the last guard.

Almost as one, the five assassins leaped from the shadows onto unsuspecting guards, slashing out with wicked claws to rip the larynxes from the necks of their prey before plunging second clawed hands through each guard's rib cage to shred the heart within. Five Order guards dropped into bloody pools with nothing but a gurgle as blood welled up in their punctured throats.

As she saw her assassins attack, Braids cast a spell at her target from the safety and seclusion of her hiding place. An instant later, the guard stiffened, threw his head back, and opened his mouth. A wispy, white smoke began to stream into the air from the guard's mouth, rising up and hanging above his head like an unbottled djinn. Once the stream ended, the guard fell to the ground dead, his mouth still open, his eyes bleeding from the strain of regurgitating his very essence. Detached from its body, the essence cloud dissipated into the night air.

By the time Braids got to her victim, her assassin squad had ripped the throats from two dozen sleeping Order guards. The snakes made no sound as they moved from body to body, and with no one left on watch, the entire camp would be dead within moments.

"Leer," whispered Braids as loudly as she dared. The slope-headed rattlesnake loped soundlessly over to his master. "Leave the throat in at least one guard, preferably the patrol leader. Even zombies can't talk

without a larynx, and this one can never return," she said pointing at the guard she had killed.

"Well, we've done it, Talbot," said Laquatas into his mirror. "The first two parts of my plan are in motion. The Cabal will flush the barbarian into the lowlands where the Citadel forces will bring the holy might of the Order down upon them and take the Mirari back to the Citadel."

"But how does that help us, my lord?" asked Talbot.

"Look at this map, Talbot," said Laquatas as he pointed the mirror down at the map on his table. "The Order forces will follow the same route home that they took when they last had the Mirari. All we need to do is prepare an ambush for them here at the edge of the Krosan forest. We take the orb from the Order, but they get the blame for its loss by the Cabal. Then, when we are done with it, we can use it to buy our way back into the First's good graces."

"Brilliant, sire," said Talbot. "Shall I return to the trench to marshal our forces?"

"No. I need you to stay in Aphetto and maintain your watch on the lovely Veza," said Laquatas, looking into the mirror once again. "We can't afford any interference from Llawan. Have you made contact? Does that despicable girl know anything about our machinations?"

"I have met with Veza several times as you ordered, sire," replied Talbot as he wiped a wet sponge across his brow to moisten his scales. "As you suspected, she has tried to win me over to the empress's side, and I have been able to provide her with much false information. As far as the empress knows, you are bartering for mercenaries for a direct assault on the capital."

"Be careful what you tell her, Talbot," said Laquatas. "We may do just that once we have the Mirari in our hands and can destroy that interminable portal. But that is as good a lie as any for now. You are sure Veza knows nothing about our plans to retrieve the Mirari?"

"Absolutely, sire," said Talbot, wiping his brow with the sponge once again.

"Good. I will leave for the trench in a day or two to muster our forces. I will be in contact again before we leave for the forest's edge. Update me at that time about Llawan's plans. I don't want any surprises."

CHAPTER 8

"This is no way to choose a leader!" yelled Jeska. "You cannot unite the tribes by fighting each tribe's champion. All this will do is drive a spike between you and the rest of the warriors."

Kamahl had been listening to this argument all week and knew that nothing he said would sway his sister's mind, so he merely continued to gnaw on the leg bone in his hand.

"She's a stubborn one, eh, Kamahl?" asked Balthor, adding more fuel to this ever-burning fire.

"And you," bellowed Jeska at Balthor. "You condone this competition just to prove that your boy is the strongest of the strong." Jeska threw her hands up in the air in exasperation. "But you can't lose, old man. Every one of those warriors was trained by you or trained by one of your 'boys.' What will this barbaric tournament prove, anyway?"

Before Balthor could answer and make things even worse, Kamahl stood up, grabbed his sister by the shoulders, and looked deep into her eyes.

"It is what we are, dear Sister. If this tournament is barbaric, it is because we are barbarians." He sat her down in front of her untouched plate of food and knelt beside her. "You know the only thing barbarians respect is strength in battle. That is why the challenge battles came to be. In the old days, before the great war, entire tribes fought over nothing more than the right to drink from a mountain stream. The challenge battles changed all that. Now, there is honor in battle. Honor and glory. The champion of a tribe is the leader of the tribe. And the more battles a champion wins, the more power and prestige is bestowed upon that tribe."

"And the Auror tribe has been among the elite for three generations," added Balthor in between bites.

"Is that what this is all about?" asked Jeska. "You're returning to take your rightful place leading the Elite Eight?"

"I left because there were no more challenges for me here, no more battles to win," said Kamahl. "But now I see there is one more challenge. The challenge to change the tribes forever. If the tribes cannot come together under a single leader, we will all die, separate and alone. And, if anyone is to lead our proud people, he must earn every warrior's respect in battle because that is still who we are. That is what this tournament is for-to prove to the champions that I am fit to lead them all in battle."

"All it will prove is that they fear the power of the Mirari," countered Jeska.

Kamahl slammed the floor with his fist and stood up again, towering over his sister. "If that is what it takes to band my people together to face the storm that is so surely coming, then so be it!" raged Kamahl,

his face purple with anger, his hand raised as if to strike his sister.

"Look at you," said Jeska calmly in the face of her brother's rage. "Any mention of the Mirari and you lose yourself in anger. With every passing day, these outbursts come more frequently. I fear you will not be able to control its power when pressed in battle."

She grabbed his hand, which still quivered in the air beside her face. "And if you kill a fellow tribesmen in this tournament, who will respect you then? If you truly wish to win their respect, Brother, then fight without the orb."

"I cannot risk losing," he mumbled, pushing himself to his feet and dropping back into his chair. "I must wield my sword if I am to win."

"Then promise me you will rest between battles to regain your strength and control," pleaded Jeska. "I am worried about you Kamahl."

"Bah, woman!" growled Balthor. "Save your tender mercies for the weak, the women, and the children. A warrior never backs down from a challenge."

"Who is my first challenge?" Kamahl asked Balthor as he swung his sword in an arc in front of him, practicing his moves.

"Some young upstart by the name of Murk," replied Balthor. "He's made a bit of a name for himself in the last few years, while ye were out gallivanting about the continent. He's not that strong yet, but he thinks he's ready to challenge the Elite Eight."

Kamahl stopped his sword practice and looked at Balthor. "So, the Eight convinced him to test his mettle against me to see if he was ready *and* to see just how powerful I have become, eh?"

"Aye, lad," replied Balthor. "Talon plays this game well. I'm sure he'll be picking all your fights if ye let him."

"No matter. I will win every battle Talon throws at me, and then I will tear him apart like a rag doll in front of his precious Elite Eight." Kamahl sheathed his sword and stalked off to the arena.

Kamahl surveyed the arena. It was set in Balthor's obstacle course, but most of the walls and stone tunnels had been removed to provide a large open space for the battles. A few obstacles remained in strategic points around the arena to provide cover or higher ground. The walls of the Judgment course were lined with warriors and villagers who had come to watch the spectacle.

Murk was a tall, lanky warrior with a shock of black, spiky hair on top of his head and what he obviously thought was a severe looking goatee on his chin. He jumped and wove around one corner of the arena as Kamahl entered, tossing taunts at the much larger barbarian.

"Big Kamahl and his monster sword. You gonna throw your weight around, big man? Well, if you want to hit me, you'll have to catch me first."

"If all you can do is bounce and bray, little man, this will be a short battle," replied Kamahl. Then looking up at Talon, who stood in the watch tower, he said, "Is this the best you could get to face me today, Talon?"

Goaded into making the first move by the man he had just tried to taunt, Murk brought both hands up in front of him and created a ball of red and blue flame between his hands, which then sped away from the young mage toward Kamahl.

Kamahl unsheathed his sword and brought its tip up in front of him, concentrating on the razor-sharp edge. As the ball of fire reached the larger barbarian, it split in two on the sword as if sliced by the blade. The two smaller fireballs whisked past either side of Kamahl's face and hit the wall behind the barbarian in small explosions.

"Speed is not what wins a battle. Power is," said Kamahl as he began to stalk around the arena toward the younger, smaller warrior. "Try that one again, and I'll show you how powerful this sword really is." The Mirari pulsed with energy as Kamahl spun the blade over and over between his hands.

Murk continued to dance and weave, moving in the opposite direction around the arena, never letting Kamahl get any closer as he prepared his next spell. The young mage stopped for just a moment to let loose another barb and a spell.

"You lumber around the arena like an elephant on its way to its final resting place, old man. Let's see you parry this attack." With that, Murk raised both hands above his head, spread his fingers, and whipped his hands down toward Kamahl.

Kamahl heard the sizzle of heat above him. Looking up, he saw a torrent of lava cascading over an invisible precipice. Kamahl dived forward, trying to roll out of the way of the lava fall, but the leading edge of the cascading molten rock washed over his lower legs, burning right through the barbarian's boots and singeing his calves and ankles.

Spinning around, Kamahl kicked off his boots, which landed in the river of lava that now poured toward him on the ground. The boots melted down into the red-hot liquid adding a puff of smoke to the steam rising from the lava. Kamahl pushed himself away but was too slow to escape on all fours and wasn't sure if his legs would hold him if he tried to stand and run.

Instead, Kamahl pointed his sword toward the river of lava that threatened to overtake him. Suddenly, a wide spray of lightning leaped from the tip of his sword, hitting the ground in front of the lava and opening up a crack that expanded to over a foot in width. The lava flowed harmlessly into the crack until the spell's mana expired.

Testing his singed legs, Kamahl stood, grimacing at the pain that shot up his body from the charred flesh. Turning back to find Murk, Kamahl saw that the younger barbarian had moved around the arena again to remain opposite him.

"I thought you were going to show me the power of your sword?" taunted Murk. "All I see is a hole in the ground where your boots once were."

Kamahl chuckled to himself. The youngster obviously relied on his speed to keep him out of trouble, his mouth to push opponents into rash decisions, and his spells to win battles. That's why he didn't advance while I was down, thought Kamahl. He has no defense against physical attacks except his feet. Well, his speed might prolong the fight, but his wit was lost on Kamahl, who had heard and uttered much worse while fighting beside Chainer in the pits. Perhaps it was time to show Murk the true power of his sword.

"Let's get this over with, shall we?" he said and pointed his sword at Murk. Flames erupted from the tip of the sword, and Kamahl heard Balthor gasp behind him. But the barbarian had no intention of incinerating this pitiful warrior. He just needed to change the rules and scare the poor little man. As the flames jetted toward Murk, Kamahl jerked his sword around in a circle, sending a wave down the length of the line of fire, creating a ring of flames ten feet across encircling the young mage.

Still feeding fire into the ring, Kamahl slowly walked over to the imprisoned barbarian, barely feeling the pain in his legs as the power of the Mirari washed over him. By the time Kamahl reached the firewall, he was bathed in a blue-white light coming from the orb, and the crowd gasped as he walked right through the flames.

"Yield, little man. There's nowhere to run now," growled Kamahl as he stalked Murk around the much smaller arena, sword raised and ready to strike.

"Never!" yelled Murk as he raised his hand and shot a beam of white-hot fire across the circle that erupted when it hit Kamahl's chest, obscuring the large barbarian's vision as white flames danced all around him. But when Murk's spell dissipated, Kamahl still stood, his sword raised, his eyes glowering bright red at his foe.

Murk cast yet another spell, but Kamahl just walked toward the mage, slowly, letting the blast wash over him. Then he struck the brash, young barbarian in the head with the flat of his blade.

"Yield!"

Sprawled on the ground with the huge Kamahl standing over him, Murk gasped for air, hyperventilating from fear and unable to utter a word. As Kamahl's chest heaved up and down ready to strike again, he heard Talon's voice over the roar of the flames.

"He yields, Kamahl. You are the victor. Stand down."

The two warriors remained right where they were for a moment longer before Kamahl lowered his sword and stepped back through the wall of flames to the center of the arena. As the fire died down, Murk was helped from the field by two of his village brethren. Kamahl no longer glowed, but his face was still flushed from the heat of the fight, and his chest still heaved with lust for battle.

"Who's next?" he shouted. "Who will challenge me now? Are you ready to face me yet, Talon, or will you send another one of your lieutenants to battle for you?"

Before Kamahl could rail at his fellow tribesman anymore, Balthor ran into the arena and grabbed his pupil's arm.

"Kamahl," he hissed. "Lad, get a grip on yourself. Ye cannot alienate the very man ye must win over to your side."

Pulling the large barbarian around to face him, Balthor looked Kamahl in the eyes and said, "Maybe your sister was right boy. Perhaps ye should rest a little before the next battle. I'm sure they'll send someone more worthy next. This was just a test. Don't fail on the first test, lad."

The fires had dimmed a little in Kamahl's eyes, but he still shook his head. "No. We don't have time to wait. Laquatas's forces could attack at any time. I must press on. At least let me face one worthy challenger before this day is done. If I am to win their respect, I must battle the best of them, not some young fool who should never have been in the same arena with me."

"All right. One more battle today and that's all. Ye need some rest, lad, or ye'll lose it for sure. Let's see who they send this time. If it's not a member of the Elite Eight, heads will roll I assure ye."

"This is the place, mistress," hissed Leer as he and Braids looked down on a small village that consisted of nothing more than a couple two-story wood houses, several smaller thatch-roofed huts, and a granary-three silos and a shabby warehouse. "If that Order man was telling the truth."

"Zombies can't lie," replied Braids. "Not to me, anyway. Besides, your own nose confirmed his story. Kamahl was here. Let's go find out why."

"But the merman said the barbarian went home to the mountains," said Leer, who had become much more talkative since Braids had named him. "Why waste time in the plains?"

"Because the merman is a liar, and the First sent us out to find the truth," said Braids. "Now, let's go find some townsfolk to talk to us about our barbarian friend."

"Yes, mistress," said Leer. "I have sent Barrel, Nod, Soot, and Grim on ahead to deal with the locals."

"You've named the boys?" asked Braids as the two made their way back to the wheel ruts that passed for a road down to the village.

"They asked for names, mistress, so you can speak to them as well," replied Leer. "No one ever spoke to us before, except to give us orders."

"Well, I see the world a bit differently than most," said Braids, blushing. "No one speaks to me all that much either. Now, let's get into town before the boys kill everybody. I'm a little tired of talking to zombies."

Barrel, Nod, Soot, and Grim had already swept through the two large buildings-the cooper's house and the tavern-and had split up to enter the smaller hovels that surrounded them. Braids and Leer headed for the granary to check out the ramshackle warehouse.

Inside were three burly men sitting on large crates and smoking cigars. In the corner of the room sat a fourth man behind a desk with a leather-bound book open in front of him.

"What in the depths is that?" gasped one of the cigar-smoking workers when Leer barged into the room, tearing the door from its hinges and tossing it aside like so much kindling.

"Your destiny, my good young man," said Braids as she stepped in behind Leer and allowed her dementia space to settle over her eyes. "Handle *them*, Leer," she said, pointing to the workers, "and leave *him* to me."

As Braids walked toward the back of the room, the three workers dropped off their crates and came toward Leer.

"Look, beastie," said brave one, "we don't want no trouble, so take your ugly face and your uglier wife and leave."

With that the talker took a swing at Leer, which hit the snake assassin full in the chest and knocked him back about a foot. The other two circled around the snake and cheered on their friend.

"What are you doing in my granary?" asked the owner as the cloud-covered dementia summoner strode toward him. "What do you want?"

"Information about a big barbarian man," said Braids as she wound a black cloud of dementia space around her hand behind her back. "Now don't flinch, or this will hurt even more." Braids whipped her hand forward and flung the cloud at the little man like a hand full of pebbles.

Getting no reaction to his first punch, the leader jabbed at Leer again, this time with his lit cigar clenched between his knuckles. Leer quickly stepped to the side and grabbed the large man's wrist as it passed, adding his own arm strength to pull the man off balance and ram the cigar-burning punch into the face of the worker behind him.

The force of the blow crushed the second man's nose and broke several fingers in the attacker's hand. Still holding the attacker's wrist as the man screamed in pain, Leer lifted the large worker off the ground, grabbed the man's head with his other hand, opened his jaws, and chomped down on the exposed neck. With deadly venom coursing through his veins, the brave worker went limp in Leer's grip.

As the dementia cloud reached the owner, it broke apart into tiny bits that circled the man's head like a cloud of gnats surrounding an open flame at night, diving periodically to pierce the man's skin, ears, and eyes. He shook his head and flailed his arms at the cloud, but the agitated particles merely descended faster and began eating away at the flesh on his hands.

"Just let my little babies do their work and you won't suffer . . . much," said Braids as she waited for the cloud to finish penetrating the man's brain.

Leer turned toward the worker with the broken nose, grabbed the man's face, and curled his claws around the back of the worker's head. With a quick, violent flip of his wrist, Leer snapped the man's neck and dropped him to the floor like a rag doll. Before Leer could grab the third worker the man turned and

fled toward the door, but he stopped suddenly and then backed up with Orim's claws skewered through his body.

"We need him alive?" asked Grim.

"No," replied Leer.

"Good thing," stated Grim.

The cloud had completely disappeared from around the owner's head, and the man was no longer struggling. The tiny dementia creatures had bored into his brain and begun taking control.

"Now, about the barbarian," said Braids, sitting on the man's desk and leafing through his ledger. "What can you tell me about his recent visit?"

"Thank you for seeing us on short notice, First," said Llawan, "and for accommodating our special needs."

"My home is your home, Empress," said the First, smiling. "If we cannot accommodate our allies we risk turning them into enemies."

"We were worried you would strap us to your chair when we asked Veza to set up this meeting."

"Believe me," said the First as he paced around the tank where Llawan swam in the middle of his meeting room, "the chair-and this tank-are as much for the protection of my visitors as they are for my own. Now, what may I do for you today?"

"We are concerned that the traitor Laquatas will obtain the Mirari," said Llawan, jetting to the back of the tank as the First rounded the corner.

"Which is why I have sent my most powerful dementia summoner and five of this world's most fearsome killers to track down the rogue barbarian and retrieve that which belongs to the Cabal," replied the First.

"We believe you underestimate the former ambassador," countered Llawan. "Laquatas deals in lies. Even when he tells the truth, it is based on some underlying lie. You may believe that mistress Braids and her snake-headed assassins are working for you. But in the end, they can do nothing but play their part in Laquatas's plot, for he has scripted it for them."

"You know much about Cabal business, Empress," said the First as he ran his hand along the outside of the tank, etching the glass with his acidic touch. "I am impressed."

The Empress swiveled around and sent a jet of ink over the tank to stream down perfectly over the First's scratches, diluting the acid. "We make it our business to follow closely the dealings of Laquatas," she said, "For example, did you know that he has somehow mobilized Order forces, which will attempt to steal the orb from your assassins before they can return with it?"

"I do keep my eye on local politics as well as troop movements, Empress," replied the First, returning to the front of the tank. "I do not believe even a garrison of Order troops could stop Braids."

"We do not share your optimism," said Llawan. "We would feel more secure about the Mirari and about our business dealings with the Cabal if you sent extra troops into the lowlands surrounding the Pardic Mountains to help Braids deal with the traitor's Order forces."

"Are you threatening the Cabal, Empress?" asked the First. "I hear those naval trade routes have become quite lucrative for the Cabal, have they not?"

The First stroked his chin thoughtfully and smiled broadly at the empress. "Yes, I believe I can spare some Cabal forces to aid in the recovery of the Mirari. I believe that would be a prudent business decision. Would any of your forces be available as well, Empress?"

"Our forces?" asked Llawan. "How would mer forces come to your aid in the middle of Otaria?"

The First walked slowly and steadily up to the tank, stopping a fraction of an inch from the glass. "Why, via your network of underground tunnels of course. Had you forgotten?"

Llawan stoically faced the gaze and proximity of the First, insulated by the glass and the seawater from the pungent odor that had made Veza ill, but she blanched at the mention of the tunnels.

Quickly recovering her royal demeanor she said, "Now it is our turn to be impressed. Unfortunately, we cannot spare any of our forces for this venture. They are needed elsewhere. That is why we have come to our friends in the Cabal for help."

"And you shall have it, Empress," said the First, backing up to his normal position at the head of the room. "You shall have it."

Balthor looked up at the crowd and called out, "Kamahl will take one more challenge today. Let's not make a mockery out of this tournament by having another mismatch. Who here feels worthy of facing the greatest Pardic warrior of all time?"

Kamahl saw Talon nod to someone off to his right, and Joha, a devout follower of Fiers and the spiritual leader of the Elite Eight, dropped off the wall and strode over to take his place opposite Kamahl.

"Face me, Kamahl, and may the strength of Fiers flow through us both."

As Balthor left the arena again, Kamahl focused on his new opponent. Joha was taller than Murk and almost as broad as Kamahl. He strode across the arena with the confidence gained from many successful battles. In his right hand he carried a lead-tipped staff made of ironwood. His short, tightly curled hair shone with sweat in the light of sun, which was now close to its zenith.

Joha twirled his staff in front of him and sidestepped around the arena as Kamahl prowled around opposite him, his sword held low in front of him. Neither warrior spoke as both concentrated on the movements of the other, waiting for the twitch that would indicate an imminent attack.

Kamahl had never fought Joha, but he had seen some of his early battles when the spiritual warrior had first challenged the Elite Eight. Like Murk, Joha liked to stay at range and pummel his opponents with fire and lightning. Unlike Murk, Joha had considerable power, a decent intellect, and little speed. As they prowled around each other, Kamahl tried to imperceptibly narrow the circle of their prowling and guide Joha toward one of the few remaining walls in the course.

But Joha must have deduced his strategy, for just as Kamahl rushed the slower warrior in an attempt to trap him against the wall, Joha sprinted in the opposite direction and let loose with a blast of fire from the end of his staff toward the very wall Kamahl was rushing toward. Unable to halt his momentum, the large barbarian slammed into the suddenly molten wall, burning the flesh on his palms, chest, and legs when he hit.

Rebounding to the side, Kamahl spun himself around and around, letting the revolving movement of his body carry him behind the wall as another blast impacted on the ground where he had stood. Cheers erupted from the crowd.

Unable to see his opponent now, Kamahl summoned a fire-cat and sent it out to the left of the wall. When the cat rounded the corner, Kamahl rolled to his right and scanned the arena for Joha. As he had hoped, the mage's attention had flashed to the firecat long enough for Kamahl to clear the barrier and lock onto him. But Joha was quicker than Kamahl had thought, and the large barbarian had to dive back behind the wall to avoid a third ball of fire.

Another cheer erupted from the crowd, but Kamahl ignored it. He sent a mental command to the firecat, which had bounded off to the corner of the arena, then he readied one spell that would turn the tide and mentally prepared another that would put Joha on the defensive.

As the firecat loped around the arena, Kamahl slammed his sword into the stone wall, sending a cascading wave of lightning across its surface. A moment later the wall exploded into shards of stone that rocketed toward Joha. Spreading out as it flew, the wall of shards was easily thirty feet across when it reached Joha. The mage threw his hands up in front of his face, interposing his staff between himself and the shards.

Most of the rocks passed by the magically shielded mage, although his legs and arms were bleeding in several places after the blast passed by. But then the firecat lunged at Joha, slamming into his side and landing on top of the warrior, who toppled to the ground. The jaws of the beast snapped at Joha's neck as he struggled to free himself from the mass of flesh and fire that lay on top of him.

As the mage worked to get his staff up in front of him, Kamahl unleashed the second spell he had been preparing. Raising his hands over his head, one hand on the blade of his sword and the other on the hilt, Kamahl looked to the sky, then dropped both hands down to his waist.

Hundreds of black, steaming chunks of coal sprang from the Mirari in an arc over the arena, spreading out in a circular pattern before falling back to the ground above Joha and the fire-cat. As the heated chunks of coal fell, they burst into flame, sending a firestorm down upon the trapped mage.

Everything the fiery rain touched bubbled from the intense heat and burst into flame, including Joha, the firecat, and the very ground around the downed mage. Joha and the firecat screamed while the area around the two trapped beasts became a mire of boiling mud.

Even if Joha could focus through the pain long enough to stand, he couldn't move until the ground cooled. And that was exactly what Kamahl had wanted.

He walked over to the edge of the bubbling mud, pointed his sword at the burned and mauled mage, and said, "Now I finish it, Joha."

Before Kamahl could unleash his final blast, a bolt of lightning flashed in front of his eyes, blinding him for a moment.

"That was a warning, Kamahl," called Talon. "This battle is over. Joha yields the field to your prowess."

By the time Talon finished speaking, Balthor was at the side of his pupil, leading him toward the gate. As he left, Kamahl looked back to see mages cooling the boiling mud with ice spells and hauling the unconscious Joha, his face, arms, and legs covered in welts and charred black flesh, out the other end of the arena.

"What have I done, Balthor?" asked the weary warrior. "What have I done?"

CHAPTER 9

"Is he asleep?" asked Jeska when Balthor came back to the table.

"Aye," replied the dwarf, taking his seat and drawing a large gulp of ale from his mug. "He's tossing and turning and moaning like he's fighting demons in his nightmares, but he's sound asleep. I doubt he'll wake until morning. He had quite a day." "What about Joha's day?" asked Jeska. "He won't be stirring in the morning, I bet you. He won't be stirring for a week or more."

"I know, girl!" hissed Balthor under his breath. "Don't you think I know that? What Kamahl did today was nearly unforgivable. Barbarians love chaos and all that, but there is a code to the challenge, and your brother stepped over the line today."

Jeska leaned in closer to Balthor and kept her voice low. "So, you'll call off this foolish tournament, then? Call it off before Kamahl kills somebody?"

"Why should I do a daft thing like that, girl?" asked Balthor, letting his voice rise to the point where Jeska had to shush him. "Sure, he lost control today, but he just needs to pace himself and reign in his power a bit. We can jus-•"

"Do you really think he can do that, old man?" interrupted Jeska. "He's changed, Balthor. Sure, my brother can be rash, but not like this. That orb has changed him, and not for the better. I say again, call off the tournament before someone gets killed."

"No," said Balthor, who held his finger up in front of Jeska's face as she started to interrupt again. "And I'll not hear another word about it. I will manage the battles and make sure Kamahl rests between each challenge, just like ye said. With a little coaching he'll calm down and win this tournament without losing control."

Jeska glared at Balthor for a full minute before pushing her chair back from the table, slowly rising, and walking toward her room.

As she got to the door, she turned and said simply, "This discussion is not over, old man," and shut the door behind her.

"It never is, lassy. It never is."

In the morning, Kamahl was up before dawn and out running in the mountain passes. When he returned, Balthor had food on the table waiting for him.

"Did you have a good run, me lad?"

"The mountain air does me good, old friend," said Kamahl as he sat down and cut into his hawk eggs and firecat steak. "My head is clear, and I'm ready for the next battle. Won't you join me?" Balthor shook his head and said, "No. Jeska and I already ate."

"Where is my sister?"

"She left right after breakfast," said Balthor.

"Wants to get a good seat for today's battles, eh?" asked the big barbarian as he wolfed down the rest of his eggs.

Balthor shook his head. "No. I don't think Jeska will come to any more of your battles."

"She doesn't want me to continue, does she?"

Balthor shook his head again.

"And you two fought about it, didn't you?"

"A wee bit, perhaps," said Balthor. "Look, Kamahl, she's worried about ye and about what happened yesterday. I mean, don't ye think ye took that last battle a bit far, boy?"

Kamahl put his fork down and stared into the hearth. "I was just trying to win the battle," he sighed, still staring into the fire. "You know, outwit my opponent like you always taught me. I never meant to pour so much mana into that last spell. Fiers! Is Joha going to be all right?"

"Yes, Kamahl," said Balthor coming over behind Kamahl and placing his hand on the big barbarian's shoulders. "He'll bear the marks of that battle until his dying day, but he will recover."

"I'm so sorry, Balthor. I'm so sorry."

"Look, son. You're the most powerful mage in the mountains," said Balthor as he turned Kamahl

around and looked into his eyes. "Bah, probably the most powerful mage on the continent with that orb on your sword. There's no one in this here contest that can best ye as long as ye pace yourself. So reign in that power, and don't waste it on the lesser mages."

"All right," said Kamahl. "I'll stick to simple spells and the strength of my right arm. That's always been enough for me in the past. It shouldn't be any different now." Kamahl managed a weak smile and turned back to his plate.

"That's the spirit, me boy! We'll get through this together."

That day's battles went fine. Balthor was able to guide Kamahl through three challenges with ample time in between each for the large barbarian to cool down and maintain his control. After the Joha battle, all of the lesser mages had been dropped from the tournament.

Over the course of the next week, Balthor managed every aspect of the tournament. He set the time for every battle, prepped the barbarian on each opponent, and kept Kamahl focused and in control.

The only aspect of the tournament that was out of Balthor's control was the choice of opponent for each match. That was left to the Elite Eight, which meant it was up to Talon. Each day the battles got tougher as Talon sent better and better warriors in to test the champion. This fact was not lost on Kamahl.

"Damn that Talon!" yelled the barbarian at his mentor after the last match on the sixth day. "He is purposely wearing me down to give himself an advantage."

"Aye," sighed Balthor, staring into his still-full mug of ale. Balthor had not slept well the last two nights, and the strain of the battles was wearing on him almost as much as on his student. "Today ye faced your two hardest matches yet, but ye came through fine, boy. Nobody got hurt, and you're only three matches from the end."

"I could have handled one more challenge today," grumbled Kamahl, picking at the bread on his plate.

"Nah, ye couldn't. I could see the bloodlust rising in your eyes after ye defeated Tybiel," replied Balthor. "Ye never really liked him, did ye?"

"No. He should have died at that fiasco on the Kard border," said Kamahl. "Many good warriors paid the price for his decisions that day."

"See?" said Balthor. "Ye couldn't handle one more battle with that buffoon still on your mind. Ye need to stay focused to make it through these battles. And tomorrow will be your toughest challenge yet. Tomorrow ye'll face Talon."

"Only after he sends Thurmon and Brue to soften me up," spat Kamahl. "Fiers smite him! He's controlling this tournament like a Cabal pit master. Where's his honor?"

"Focus, lad," prodded Balthor. "Only three more battles stand between ye and your goal. Think about that and not about the rage ye be building up inside against a man who once was your best friend."

The battles against Thurmon and Brue were a challenge. The most recent additions to the Elite Eight, both had considerable power and could push Kamahl just enough to tire him before the final battle, but not so much that Balthor would postpone the final battle one more day to give his pupil more rest.

In the first battle, Thurmon began very cautiously, using his firepower only for defense and forcing the more powerful barbarian to expend a lot of energy wearing him down. Was this also part of Talon's plan, Kamahl wondered?

Thurmon started with a wall of protective flames around himself. Kamahl tossed several beams of fire and lightning at the wall, trying to pierce the flames and find the warrior hiding inside, but they impacted and dissipated harmlessly on the wall, releasing great jets of steam with each impact.

Kamahl prowled around the flame enclosure, testing it here and there with his spells, trying to find a weak point, but Thurmon had considerable power, and without the Mirari adding to his sword's power, Kamahl didn't think he could get through the wall.

Kamahl was worried about expending too much time and energy on this opponent when he knew he had two more battles yet to fight, but he saw no other way to win except to use the Mirari. Then Kamahl remembered the protective aura the orb had given him in his battle against Murk. He could use that to get inside the defensive ring and finish the battle. But he knew Thurmon must be listening to him move around the arena and would unleash some spell on him as soon as he walked through the barrier. Thurmon's power would get through Kamahl's Mirari-enhanced defenses where Murk's had failed.

What he needed was a diversion. Kamahl circled Thurmon's flame circle once more, sending a spell at the wall periodically while he looked for rocks. Taking an armload of fist-sized chunks of old walls and barriers back to the center of the arena, Kamahl began charging the rocks with mana and muttering spells under his breath.

The crowd was hushed, and Kamahl paid them no heed, concentrating on his task and sending the odd spell at the wall to keep Thurmon thinking that he was still trying to beat down the warrior's defenses. After charging each rock, Kamahl set it down in the dirt, fiddled with the placement for a moment, then moved a few feet and began again.

Finally, the barbarian had arranged eight mana-charged rocks in a pattern on one side of Thurmon's circle. He sent one last attack toward the wall and moved slowly and quietly away from the rocks. A moment later, the first rock grew red-hot and shot a beam of molten fire at Thurmon's defensive wall. Kamahl continued moving around the circle as another and another rock unleashed its energy in flames, lightning, and streams of lava at Thurmon's wall.

Once behind Thurmon, hoping he had the other mage's attention fully on the fireballs and lava storms hitting him from the front, Kamahl encased himself in the blue-white shield and rushed through the wall of fire. The crowd couldn't see what happened inside, but moments later the firewall dissipated, and Kamahl stood over an unconscious Thurmon. The large barbarian's brassy skin was burnt raw, and his hair smoked from running through the fierce flames, but he was victorious nonetheless.

Balthor came up beside his student, who reeked of burnt flesh and coughed as he breathed, sending clouds of smoke and ash up into the air from his face, hands, hair, and lungs. Sweat streaked down the warrior's face and glistened on his raw, red skin, but he was smiling.

"Are ye all right, me boy?" asked the dwarf.

"I can heal when it's over," replied Kamahl.

"That's not what I meant," said Balthor.

Kamahl looked down at his mentor and smiled. "I am in control, Balthor. My wits and my sword will win the day, not the power of the Mirari."

"Fine. Then I will call the next battle," replied Balthor.

Brue began with a ferocious barrage of spells. He tossed a lightning bolt, then a lava jet at the large barbarian as soon as the battle began. Kamahl held his sword out in front of him to deflect the attacks, but the force of the lightning bolt nearly ripped the gleaming blade out of his hand, leaving him open to the lava jet as the sword tipped toward the ground.

Kamahl tried to follow his sword down to the side to evade the spell, but caught the brunt of the jet on his left shoulder, which twirled him around and slammed him to the ground. Kamahl glanced down at his arm. Puss and blood oozed from the smoldering wound. When he looked back, he could see the barrage had not ended. A thunder hammer was coming at him, spinning end over end, trailing a stream of sparks and smoke.

Kamahl pushed himself off the ground, doing a back flip to retreat from the incoming attack. Breaking into a run when he landed, the barbarian quickly headed for a corner of the arena.

As the next attack came, though, Kamahl dived to the side, did a somersault, and popped back up to his feet, heading in a different direction.

Kamahl continued to run, keeping an eye on Brue and swerving back and forth to keep the mage guessing where he was headed. As soon as Kamahl saw an attack coming he would dive to the ground and change directions, heading off in what he hoped looked like a random direction.

But there was a method to the barbarian's mad charge. Each turn brought him closer to the hammering mage, shortening the distance between Brue and Kamahl's deadly sword.

As he drew near, Kamahl could see sweat dripping off Brue's chin from the heated air all around him. He could see the young mage strain to pour more and more power into his attacks, and the explosions grew larger and larger. He could see the frustration and fear in Brue's eyes as all of his firepower did nothing more than create holes behind Kamahl. He could see the smaller mage's arms slowly drop lower and lower with each and every bolt as Kamahl inched closer and closer.

Just as Kamahl was about to charge at the young mage, Brue dropped his arms to his sides, totally exhausted. The walls of the arena were scorched, charred, and cracked from the heat and concussions of his spells, but Kamahl still stood, his large sword poised to strike. The wound on his shoulder had stopped oozing, but the large barbarian heaved from the exertion and pain of the tiring battle.

"You have nothing left, Brue," Kamahl stated after drawing a deep breath to calm himself a little. "Yield the field of battle to me."

"I yield," said Brue with his last bit of strength, and he fainted.

Standing over Brue's still form, Kamahl could see Balthor heading his way. He knew what the dwarf would say, but he wanted to finish the battles now.

Looking past the dwarf, he scanned the crowd and yelled,

"Talon! I have defeated all of your warriors. Face me now or declare me the winner!"

Kamahl could see Balthor open his mouth and raise his hand to object, but from across the arena came another voice.

"I will face you, Kamahl," said Talon, standing at the entrance, his two-headed axe held in front of him in both hands.

Talon was taller than Kamahl and nearly as broad across the chest. His blond hair, which normally flowed down over his shoulders, was pulled back behind him and wrapped with a thick bronze wire tight against his head. He looked much like the images of Fiers, the god of fire, which graced barbarian temple walls.

"We both knew it would come to this, didn't we, Brother?" said Talon as he slowly advanced on Kamahl, passing his axe effortlessly back and forth from hand to hand in an hypnotic pattern.

"I knew!" spat Kamahl, "and yet I had to fight twenty men to reach you. Were they also your brothers or merely fodder in your war against me?"

As Kamahl watched Balthor shake his head and move back toward the wall, he heard scratching noises behind him. Kamahl whirled around, ready to throw a lightning bolt, but it was just Tybiel and the recovered Joha pulling Brue back toward the rear entrance.

"Get him out of here!" roared the anxious barbarian. "This battle is between Talon and me. There will be no interference by his followers!"

"A little jumpy aren't you, Kamahl?" asked Talon. "Perhaps we should fight tomorrow. I wouldn't want to take advantage of your fatigue."

"You wouldn't, eh?" asked Kamahl, turning back to his adversary, but keeping an eye on Tybiel and Joha until they left the arena. "Then what were you doing this week? Studying me? Looking for weak spots? Tiring me out?"

With that, Kamahl leveled the tip of his sword at Talon, which was white hot from the two previous battles, and let loose a streak of blue lightning that flew at the golden-haired barbarian.

Talon dived into a forward roll underneath the wave of lightning that crackled over his head, but as he came to his feet again, the trailing end of the wave caught the barbarian in the shoulder and slammed him back to the ground.

Kamahl moved in on his fallen foe, but Talon was quick. The taller barbarian used the momentum from the blow of the lightning to twist his body on the ground and pop up to his knees. From there, Talon jumped up and kicked his legs up over his head, landing on his feet, axe at the ready, facing Kamahl.

"Yes, I watched you this week, Kamahl," said Talon as he sidestepped around his advancing opponent. "You're strong but impulsive. You forge ahead when an opening presents itself and use deception when that fails. I studied your moves, and I am prepared to defeat you. Where is the dishonor in that?"

"I say you orchestrated this entire tournament to your advantage, Talon," said Kamahl. "You sent your troops in one at a time to give you and you alone a chance to beat me. That is your dishonor. You call the barbarians your brothers, yet you use them like so much cordwood in the hearth."

Talon glanced at the crowd at the mention of the Pardic warriors, and Kamahl rushed forward to attack. He swiped his sword down and across as he moved through, giving the taller barbarian nowhere to dodge but straight back.

Talon seemed to have anticipated Kamahl's move, for he quickly sidestepped just as Kamahl charged. From there, Talon had enough room to feint back and then step in and bring the handle of his axe up inside Kamahl's reach. As Kamahl moved through, Talon smacked the shorter barbarian in the chin with all the force he could muster.

Any other warrior would have been laid flat on his back, but Kamahl took the hit and continued his charge, letting the force of the blow to his chin turn the rest of his body around, as he swung his sword back in a swift arc toward Talon's chest.

With the deadly blade rushing back at him, Talon turned his hands over on the haft of his axe, spinning the twin heads around and down on Kamahl's white-hot blade. As the weapons collided, Kamahl's blade diverted down and away from Talon's chest, but not before it cut halfway to the center of one of the axe heads.

Talon backpedaled several paces before taking up his wary, sidestep dance again. Looking at the four-inch gash in the blade of his axe, Talon let out a low whistle.

"If I *have* worked this tournament to my advantage," he said to Kamahl, who was rubbing his chin, "don't you think that makes me the better leader? All of the champions gladly followed me this week. We knew we had but one chance of defeating you, so we all worked together to give me that chance."

"So you admit it!" roared Kamahl. "You all conspired against me. Me! The chosen leader of the tribes."

Me! The wielder of the Mirari!" Kamahl pointed his sword at Talon again. But instead of a lightning wave, he unleashed a huge boulder of lava and fire that rolled straight and fast toward the blond barbarian.

With only a moment to react, Talon slammed the haft of his battle-axe down into the ground and cast a spell, spraying lightning out of each axe head. As the twin sheets of lightning arced out, they intertwined into a network that curved forward and down into the ground.

When the lava ball hit the lightning net, the ramp created by the curving intertwined bolts of electricity sent the rolling sphere up into the air and back toward Kamahl. But Kamahl was already on the move, charging into battle right behind his spell. Skirting around the lightning net to reach his foe, Kamahl found Talon at the ready, axes swinging in their hypnotic pattern from arm to arm.

Trying to time his attack with the downswing in Talon's axe dance, Kamahl uttered a word that extended his blade and turned it into a blue-white rod of pure lightning. Then, stepping in, he swung with every ounce of his strength straight over his head and down at the tall barbarian.

Talon abruptly changed the rhythm of his axe dance and whipped the weapon up over his head to deflect the incoming attack again. At the same time, the dexterous warrior twisted his body back and to the side to move out from under the blow.

The lightning blade arced down, catching the double axe at the juncture between the two heads. When the weapons collided, the area around the two barbarians exploded in light as a white ball of energy expanded out twenty feet and blinded the spectators for a moment.

When the ball of light dimmed, all could see Kamahl standing over the supine form of Talon. His strong right arm-cut off at the shoulder-lay next to his broken axe near the taller barbarian's hip. Kamahl had driven his blade straight through the axe and down into Talon's body. Only the taller warrior's quick reflexes had kept him alive, for had he not dodged at the last moment, more than his arm would have been severed by the blow.

Mustering strength that none of the tribesmen thought possible, Talon pushed himself up with his one hand and looked up at Kamahl.

"Look at yourself, Kamahl. Joha nearly gave his life for defying you."

The fallen barbarian took a moment to take a few shallow breaths, looked down at his oozing shoulder, burnt black from the heat of the lightning sword, then continued, grimacing at every word.

"Am I to be next. . . ? You can't control your power or your battle rage . . . old friend. How can you expect to lead . . . the tribes? Yield the field to me . . . and allow me to lead you and the tribes against our common enemies. Stand at my side, Brother . . . don't stand against me."

"Never!" cried Kamahl, his eyes glazed over, and his face flushed with blood lust. Kamahl raised his sword, which still rippled with cascading lightning, up over his head, and swung it down toward his helpless foe.

Before the weapon could strike, a dark form rushed into Kamahl from the side, knocking the legs out from under the large barbarian and bringing him down in a heap on the ground next to his stunned mentor, who had also fallen from the impact. Balthor then jumped on top of his large student.

"Stop this now!" yelled the tough, old dwarf.

Getting no resistance from Kamahl, Balthor stood on the barbarian's chest. "This tournament is finished," yelled the dwarf from atop his living podium. "Talon is now unconscious, so I declare Kamahl the victor of this battle and the champion of the tribes. The victory celebration will commence at sundown."

As Balthor finished, the hushed crowd erupted in noise. Many warriors cheered Kamahl's victory, but many others booed the dwarf's proclamation and jeered at Kamahl. Finally Kamahl saw Joha jump into the arena and walk toward Talon. The crowd hushed again as Joha spoke.

"I know I speak for the Elite Eight and for many of the champions gathered here," began the scarred warrior, "when I say that we will not follow anyone as brutal, ruthless, and callous about honor as Kamahl. With the full support of the Elite Eight, I declare Talon to be the victor and the rightful leader of the tribes. Who is with us? Who will follow Talon?"

Many of the warriors began cheering and chanting Talon's name at the proclamation until Kamahl pushed Balthor off his chest, rose to his feet, and stared down the crowd.

"Tribesmen," he began, calm again even in the face of what he saw as treason. "I am the rightful leader. By trial of battle I have claimed the title. Any who would follow Talon are turning their backs on the honor of the challenge battle. Follow me, and I will lead the tribes to greatness. Follow me, and all in Otaria will know that we are the fiercest and most powerful warriors in the land. Follow Talon, and you will surely divide the tribes into a civil war that will tear us apart and leave us weak before our enemies."

An equally loud cheer erupted at Kamahl's words, but the rest of the Elite Eight quietly extracted themselves from the crowd and filed onto the field to surround Talon. While the finest warriors in the

mountains picked up their fallen comrade and his sundered weapon, Joha turned back to Kamahl.

"If civil war is what you want, then that is what we shall give you."

With that, Joha turned and led the Eight out of the arena. "Any who would follow the leadership of Talon, follow him now," he yelled at the warriors still standing at the edge of the field.

Fifty warriors left the walls. At the entrance to Balthor's Judgment, Joha turned one last time to look across the field at Kamahl.

"We give you one week to renounce your claim and yield to Talon's leadership. If not, there will be war. It is your choice, Kamahl!"

CHAPTER 10

Braids and her snakes headed across the moonlit plains, following Kamahl's trail from the village toward the mountains. Leer carried Braids on his back, so she could sleep. Neither the extra weight nor the constant buzzing of the black cloud of dementia space that swirled around the mage's head seemed to bother the snake-headed assassin as he led the squad silently across the continent.

"So the water mage told the truth," said Leer in the morning as Braids rode next to him on a rhino-headed bull. "At least part of the truth," said Braids. "Which is what worries me. That one is even more dangerous when he uses the truth." "I do not understand," said Leer.

"Neither do I most of the time," replied Braids. "But you can be sure that if Laquatas is telling the truth about anything, it's only to mask a larger deception. I would be happier if we knew more about his dealings with the Order."

"We could ask those guards we saw last night."

"Guards? What guards?" asked Braids, pulling back on the reins, which had little effect on the stubborn beast.

Leer came up next to Braids's mount, grabbed its horn in one hand as he ran beside it, and slowly twisted the beast's head down and to the side until it slowed to a halt.

"We came upon the camp of an Order patrol while you slept last night, mistress," he told Braids.

"Did you take care of them?" asked the summoner.

"They did not notice us," replied Leer. "We slipped past and continued on. You told us not to stop for any reason."

"So I did," said Braids as she tried, unsuccessfully, to turn her mount around. "So I did. Blast this beast!"

With lightning reflexes, Leer struck out at the rhino head, driving his fist deep into the beast's skull. As the summoned creature fell dead, it dissipated into a roiling black dementia cloud that settled around Braids as she landed hard on the ground.

"You told me to blast the beast," explained Leer as he helped Braids back to her feet.

"I must learn to watch what I say around you," said Braids. "Now, where was this Order patrol?"

"Back several hours," said Leer. "They will be heading north, I believe."

"Take the boys, find that patrol, and bring the leader back to me," said Braids. "I need to rest. This constant pace tires me."

"Yes, mistress," replied Leer, bowing to Braids. "Nod, Barrel, Soot, Grim, come with me. We have work to do."

"And boys," said Braids to the departing snakemen. "Don't leave any witnesses."

"We never do," said Leer.

A few hours later, the assassins returned with a single unconscious human guard.

"Good, you kept him alive for me," said Braids. "Let's have some fun, eh, boys?"

The guard woke up, spread-eagled on the ground, with the boys steadily pulling each of his limbs in a different direction. Leer held the man's head, applying pressure to his temples to prevent any movement. Braids knelt on the guard's chest, holding her hand, like a claw, over his face. From her palm hung a thin strand of sticky filament with a bloated, black and red spider dangling at the end, just inches above the man's mouth. "She's quite pregnant, you know," said Braids, "and they love to lay their eggs in dark, warm, wet holes. Now, tell me, what do you know about the Order's plans for the Mirari?"

Laquatas floated before his elite merfolk marines, quite pleased with himself. The reports he'd been receiving showed his plans were coming together nicely. Braids's death squad was terrorizing the continent. The Order, though slow to mobilize as always, had finally sent troops toward the Pardic Mountains. And the empress seemed oblivious to it all.

Talbot's last report had assured the ambassador that Veza and Llawan knew nothing about the complicated plot he had hatched to reclaim the Mirari. While Laquatas doubted the veracity of this claim—the empress was intelligent and must have some inkling—the ambassador was sure she could do nothing to stop him now, he was simply too far ahead in the game for her to catch up.

"Fellow mer, we embark today on the first leg of a long journey toward bringing our people back to power under the waves," began Laquatas, addressing his troops, who were arrayed below the entrance to the caves that would lead them all to the Krosan forest. "You are the best fighters and mages in all the ocean, and you have but one task—retrieve the Mirari, so we may destroy the walls of our prison and take back the seas from the cephalid scum that control the capital."

A great cheer erupted from the troops, sending thousands of tiny bubbles spiraling toward the surface of the trench. Laquatas smiled. After a sufficiently long celebration, the ambassador raised his hand, quieting the obedient marines immediately.

"Make no mistake," continued Laquatas as he swam down the ranks, "this will not be an easy task. The dry landers are decent warriors, and we will be forced to fight in their element. Some of you will die, but know that you will die heroes of the new mer empire, and your sacrifice will not be in vain, for with the Mirari in my hands, we *will* rule the seas forever!"

Another cheer was immediately quelled by the mer lord's raised right hand. "Your troop leaders have your orders. You are to make best time for the Krosan border and await my command. Norda speed your way and clear your path of dangers."

As the marines broke ranks and began filing into the chasm, Laquatas swam toward the leader of his marines. Commander Havelock was a short, stocky mer, as wide at the shoulders as a manta ray, with the bulk of a hammerhead shark.

"Havelock!" shouted Laquatas at the retreating marine.

"Sir," responded the commander as he turned to face his lord.

"I need to speak with you for a moment in private."

"Yes, sir."

Laquatas led the shorter but stronger mer back to the bottom of the trench and away from the queuing marines. "I will travel with you into the mainland," began Laquatas once he was sure they were far enough away not to be overheard. "However, I will need to go topside once we reach the plains to keep track of the enemy's movements,"

"Is that wise, sir?" asked the commander. "You will be vulnerable and behind enemy lines."

"Believe me, Commander," said Laquatas, smiling, "I will be safe. I will have my bodyguard, Burke, with me at all times."

"Very good, sir."

"While I am scouting, you will be in charge of the troops," said Laquatas. "Have you ever used one of these?" Laquatas handed Havelock a mirror.

"Yes, sir. I was issued such a device during Aboshan's last war on the empress."

"Good. I will keep in touch with you through this mirror," said the mer lord. "Do not contact me until you reach the rendezvous point inside the Krosan forest. If I have need of your assistance before then, I will contact you. Keep this mirror with you at all times."

"Yes, sir."

"Good luck, Commander," said Laquatas. "Now get your troops to the forest. Everything is riding on those warriors."

"Report!" ordered Eesha to her scout. "What news do you bring from Lieutenant Dinell?"

"Dinell reports meeting no resistance on his march toward the mountain commander," said the aven scout handing the detailed report to his commander.

Commander Eesha grasped the report in her claws and skimmed through the summary. "What is this about missing patrols?"

"Dinell has heard tales from others in the field of a death squad making its way across the continent," said the scout. "The reports are sketchy at best, but at least two patrols are missing, and two others are overdue. Also, another scout has reported that the village of Alewell is completely deserted. There was evidence of an attack in the village, but it must have happened quickly, for there were few signs of struggle. Everyone in Alewell is missing and presumed dead, ma'am."

"This is troubling news, Corporal," said Eesha, paging through the report. "It would seem that the ambassador was correct about the Cabal's interest in the orb. If you plot these attacks on a map, they form a line between Cabal City and the Pardic Mountains."

"Yes, ma'am."

"How many troops does Dinell have?" asked Eesha.

"Ten infantry units and five aven units, ma'am."

"How many mages?"

"The standard, ma'am-one mage in each aven unit plus an extra mage per two infantry units. Ten in all."

"Yes, I can count, Corporal," sneered Eesha as she unruffled her wings and rose from her seat.

"Sorry, ma'am."

Commander Eesha strode across the room to a wall covered by a huge map depicting half of the continent in painstaking detail. It was Eesha's major achievement since assuming the leadership of the Order. Aven mages had spent months flying over every square mile of the continent, using magic to capture the lay of the land onto parchment, which was then transferred onto Eesha's wall map. Even now, many of the commander's mages flew reconnaissance over the southern portions of the continent, working to finish the map.

"An accurate map is more important in a war than a hundred infantry units, Corporal. Remember that," said Eesha as she peered at her wall. "Now, tell me, where were Lieutenant Dinell's forces when you left them?"

The corporal pointed to an area just south of the Krosan forest, which was the only spot on the northern half of the map that had no details. The forest was nothing more than a dark, featureless area.

"Allowing for normal troop movements since you left, that would put Dinell here," said Eesha as she jabbed a pointed flag into the wall between the forest and the mountains. Leafing through the report, Eesha continued placing flags on the map. "The attacks and the missing patrols were located here, here, here, here, and here," she said, pointing to the new flags.

"Do you see a problem, Corporal?"

The corporal studied the map for a minute and then shook his head.

"If the reports are accurate, this so-called death squad will intersect Dinell's troops here," she said, jabbing a larger flag into the map at the base of the Pardic Mountains. "Right where Laquatas told us we would meet the Cabal."

"Then what is the problem, ma'am?" asked the corporal. "It would appear the ambassador was telling the truth."

"That in itself is a problem, Corporal. I never trust an enemy, even when he is an ally," said Eesha. "And there is the matter of poor Sergeant Treal, who suddenly took ill shortly after Laquatas left. But that is not *the* problem. I have also received a report of a large Cabal force moving directly toward the mountains from Aphetto, which will arrive in the lowlands shortly after Dinell's troops. The lieutenant will be overmatched, especially if he gets caught between the two Cabal forces." . "Shall I warn the lieutenant, ma'am?"

"Yes, Corporal," said Eesha as she moved over to her table and picked up a quill in her claw. "Take these orders to Dinell. Tell him to halt his march and wait for reinforcements." Eesha wrote a quick note affirming the orders.

"What reinforcements, ma'am?" asked the corporal.

"Five more aven units led by myself, Corporal," stated the commander. "This mission is far too important to leave anything to chance. We will overwhelm the Cabal forces and then march into the mountains ourselves to take the Mirari and the Citadel Butcher by force."

CHAPTER 11

Several days after interrogating the Order guard, Braids and the assassin squad arrived in the foothills of the Pardic Mountains, about a day's march south of the Order troops the guard had been so forthcoming about during their conversation.

"We are close now, boys," said Braids from atop her latest dementia mount, a twelve-foot-long, five hundred-pound, pitch-black mountain lion.

"Very hard to track the barbarian here, mistress," hissed Leer. "The terrain is rocky and many barbarians traveled through here recently."

"Good, then we should have no trouble finding someone to question," said Braids, smiling. "Follow the most recent scent. Today we hunt barbarians."

Later in the afternoon, as the sun began to dip behind the tallest peaks of the mountains, the assassins crept up on a trio of mountain warriors who were sparring with one another on a rocky outcropping.

"Good luck, mistress," whispered Leer, after silently creeping back from the shrub where Nod, Barrel, Soot, and Grim still hid. "They bear the scent of Kamahl on them. These are the same barbarians he met outside Cabal City."

"How ironic," said Braids. "We could have simply followed them into the mountains, but that wouldn't have been nearly as much fun."

"Shall we save one for you, mistress?" asked Leer. Braids swept her hand into the dementia cloud above her head, grabbing some of the dark matter in her clenched fist.

"No," she said. "Too dangerous. If they fought with Kamahl, they won't be as easy to capture as that poor Order guard. Best to simply kill them first and ask our questions afterward."

As Leer crept back to the bushes, Braids brought her fist up to her mouth and blew a puff of air into the recesses of her clenched fingers. From out of the other end came a tiny black gnat that flew past Leer and settled on the top branch of the tallest shrub. Braids closed her eyes and concentrated on her summoned gnat until she could see the three mountain mages through its eyes.

Suddenly, Nod, Soot, and Grim jumped from the bushes into her view, landing just behind the three barbarians, who turned at the sound of the bushes moving. Nod slashed his massive claws at the first warrior, easily cutting through the mage's leather shirt and gouging out a chunk of flesh from his arm.

At the same time, Soot swiped his tail around at the barbarian in front of him, knocking the man to the ground while Grim grabbed his opponent by the shoulders, lifted him off the ground, and began pulling the mage toward his open jaws.

The third barbarian immediately thrust both hands against Grim's scaly chest to push away from the snakeman's poisoned fangs. As Grim pulled him ever closer despite the man's efforts, the mountain mage sent bolts of electricity out of both palms, blasting Grim to the ground and sending the barbarian flying back toward the edge of the outcropping.

The barbarian on the ground in front of Soot rolled to the side as the snake's tail slapped down where the man's head had been, shattering a rock and sending a cloud of dust up into the air. Grabbing an axe from his belt as he rolled, the warrior popped up to his knees and heaved the axe at Soot.

Soot slapped at the incoming missile with the back of his hand, sending it clattering to the rocky ground but slicing his hand on the axe head. He roared at the pain and dived on top of the kneeling mage, scraping his claws across the man's back and digging his fangs into the tough, leathery flesh of the Pardic warrior's neck.

Nod's opponent wasted no time readying his great sword in both hands and advancing on the rattlesnake assassin. He thrust high, right at Nod's head, which the snake dodged easily, ducking down and to the side while pulling his arm back for another slash. The barbarian immediately spun his body around, swinging the large blade around and down at the now off-balanced, crouching snake.

Unable to dodge the incoming blade, Nod dropped to the ground and rolled under his opponent's feet, knocking the man to the ground as his blade dug into Nod's shoulder. Continuing his roll until he lay on top of the barbarian's chest, Nod pulled his arm back and struck it into the man's midsection, digging his claws through the brassy skin to reach the mage's stomach, then curling them up under the rib cage toward the man's heart.

With his last bit of strength, the barbarian reached up and grabbed the sword, which lay on the snake's scaly back, still stuck in his shoulder. Twisting it in the wound to get a firm grasp, the warrior plunged it into the beast, shattering Nod's shoulder blade and ripping through the muscles in his upper arm.

Soot's opponent struggled to free himself from the beast's death grip before the snake could release the venom into his veins. The mage grabbed Soot's jaws with both hands and tried desperately to pry them apart. But the snake's jaws clamped down, and the mage's face went white as the venom entered his body.

With only seconds to live before the deadly poison reached his heart, the mage brought his arms together above his assailant, cupped his hands into a ball, infused them with mana, and dropped a small glob of molten fire onto the snake. As the fist-sized glob of fire struck Soot on the back, it erupted into a huge fireball that engulfed both the dying mage and the snake assassin.

Just outside the fiery conflagration, Grim glanced down at the twin scorch marks on his chest and then clambered to his feet and advanced on his opponent. On the other side of the fire, the last warrior had also regained his feet and bore two long daggers, one in each hand. The two opponents circled around each other cautiously, the barbarian waving his daggers in front of him and Grim swinging his large clawed hands back and forth as he moved in.

As Grim and the last mage danced around one another, looking for an opening, Leer stepped silently into Braids's view—right behind the Pardic warrior. Lashing out at him with his long, forked tongue, Leer struck the barbarian hard in the neck, thumping a pressure point that paralyzed the man for a moment. Leer

moved in quickly, grabbed the mage by the head and shoulder, and broke his neck with a quick snap.

Looking at Orim's scorched chest, Soot's burned back, and the sword pinning Nod's arm, Leer shook his head, and said, "This is not good. Not good at all."

Breaking her gnat's eye spell, Braids sauntered up the hill to the battle scene to give her opinion. "There's a moral here for us, boys. We can't fight these warriors face to face. They are much too powerful. Leer and Barrel, tend to the boys' wounds while I talk to our dead barbarian friends. I'm sure they'll be willing to tell us where to find Kamahl."

Jeska barged into the meeting room of Auror's great hall to see Kamahl standing before a table encircled by a half-dozen barbarian warriors.

"Brother, we must talk," she said as she strode up to the table and pushed her way into the circle.

On the table was a roughly drawn map of the Pardic Mountains with a hundred hand-carved wooden warriors placed around the map to represent members of the two warring factions.

"Are these your little toy warriors, Lamar?" Jeska asked the barbarian standing next to her as she pointed at the figurines on the table. "I remember you playing with these as a boy. Haven't you outgrown such childish games."

"War is not child's play," stated Lamar, his face red.

"We are busy here, Sister," said Kamahl, saving Lamar from Jeska's wrath. "Can this wait until later?"

"No, it cannot. I'm afraid there won't be any later."

Jeska pointed to the two factions represented by Lamar's toy warriors on the map. "Talon's forces are camped at least a day away from Auror. Either you talk to me now, or I will disrupt this meeting until he attacks."

With Jeska's ultimatum hanging in the air, the siblings glared at each other for several tense seconds until Kamahl broke the silence.

"We will complete our battle plans this evening, men. We can do nothing more until Balthor brings back the latest scouting reports, anyway. Return once the moon rises. Until then, look after the warriors under your command. We must all be prepared for battle, both mentally and physically."

After his warriors left the hall, Kamahl turned back to his sister. "Never talk to me that way in front of my generals again," he said, crimson rising in his cheeks.

"Generals?" huffed Jeska. "Hah! They're nothing more than boys, most of them. And you are going to get them all killed in this foolish war of yours."

"Foolish am I," yelled Kamahl as he clenched his hands in frustration. "Is it foolish to try to unite the tribes? Is it foolish to work for a better life for my people? Is it foolish to prepare our people for the invasion that is surely coming?" Kamahl slammed his fist down onto the table, knocking over most of the toy warriors.

"It is when you begin your work by pitting our people against each other," countered Jeska. "How many must die before you realize the folly of this civil war, Brother?"

Jeska picked up one of the fallen toy warriors. "Must Talon die?" she said as she tossed the figure into the corner of the room.

She picked up another fallen warrior, this time from Auror village and threw it on top of Talon. "Must Lamar die?"

She continued scooping figures into her hands and flipping them across the room. "What about Joha, Thurmon, Brue? Must they die as well?"

Jeska picked up two more figures from the warriors surrounding Auror village and showed them to Kamahl.

"What about Balthor?" she said. "Must Balthor die to prove you are right? And what about me? What about me, Brother? Are you willing to sacrifice your own sister to extend your power throughout the mountains?"

"If that is what it takes," said Kamahl through clenched teeth as the last two figures clattered to the floor in the corner of the room. "The safety of the mountains is far too important to worry about the life of any single person. I am only thinking about the future. Surely you can see that, Jeska."

"I can see that you are thinking only about a future where you are hailed as the hero of the Pardic Mountains," said Jeska, coming around the table to face her brother. "Look at yourself,

Kamahl. This is not like you. You are so caught up in your own glory that you can't see how destructive your actions have become. If you aren't careful, you will destroy everything you are trying to build, just like Chainer did."

"Get out!" bellowed Kamahl in his sister's face. "You know nothing about Chainer. I am doing this as

much for him as for the tribes. I must keep the Mirari safe. I made a death oath."

Jeska reached out and grasped her brother's clenched fists in her hands and held them tight. "I know you did, Brother, and I am trying to help you keep that oath. If you go through with this war, you will certainly destroy any chance you have of uniting the tribes and keeping the orb safe from that horrible mer mage."

Kamahl refused to look at his sister, instead glaring at something behind her, but Jeska pressed on. "Talk to Talon. Find a way to end this strife before it's too late. Even if you have to give him the Mirari, it will be safe in his hands. You know Talon. He is an honorable man and a good friend."

"Never!" shouted Kamahl, as he pushed his sister's hands away from him, shoving her so hard that she fell back onto the table, shattering it and sending the rest of the wooden warriors flying across the room.

Sprawled on the floor amid broken boards, Jeska peered up at Kamahl, trying to find her brother somewhere behind his wide, bloodshot eyes, but all she could see was the seething rage that now consumed him.

Pulling his sword slowly out of its scabbard on his back, Kamahl lowered the blade until it was mere inches from his sister's face.

"The Mirari is mine. The tribes are mine. Only I can lead our people to victory over Laquatas. If you do not stand with me, then you stand against me. Which will it be?"

Without flinching an inch, Jeska said, "I cannot stand with you this day, Brother."

"Then leave," he said, waving the sword at the door. "The next time we meet, we will be enemies."

Jeska stood up, dusted off her long, leather skirt, and deliberately turned her back on Kamahl and the sword before walking toward the door.

"If that is what it takes, Brother, then so be it," she said without looking back, slamming the door behind her.

Outside the meeting room, Jeska took a deep breath and leaned against the wall. What now? she asked herself. I need an ally. I need someone who's not afraid to stand up to Kamahl, someone Kamahl will listen to. I need to find Balthor.

News of the argument between Jeska and Kamahl spread quickly through the village, and by midafternoon none of the warriors in Auror would speak to Jeska. They stared at the ground as she passed or turned and walked away when she approached. Conversations stopped when she entered the ale hall, and she could feel everyone's eyes staring at her back and hear the whispers start up when she left.

Jeska didn't care what anyone thought. She was a Pardic warrior, more than a match in battle for any warrior in Kamahl's army, and used to being on her own. But the silence made it impossible for her to find Balthor, especially without calling attention to herself.

Kamahl had said that Balthor was returning today with new scouting reports, thought Jeska as she drank an ale by herself in the back of the hall. So he's either out scouting, or he's gone to the watchtower to wait for the scouts to return. Balthor's not that good at waiting, but I doubt Kamahl would risk him on a scouting party. I'll head to the watchtower first.

As Jeska left the ale hall, she barely noticed the warriors, Lamar among them, who were busy ignoring her while staring and whispering. She was too worried about her brother and what she would say to Balthor to care what boys thought of her anymore.

A half-mile past the edge of town, down a rocky path that hadn't been used in years, Jeska found Balthor atop the stone and wood village watchtower. Each village had similar structures, but most had fallen into disrepair as the barbarians had few enemies in the mountains. This one had been hastily patched and shored up.

"Balthor!" called Jeska as she approached. "May I speak with you?"

"Climb on up, girl," called Balthor. "I'm just waiting for the scouts to return, and I'm bored out of my skull. I could use a good argument."

Jeska clambered up the makeshift ladder that had been erected to replace the crumbling, stone stairs.

"I suppose ye want to talk about Kamahl and the Mirari," said Balthor when she reached the top.

"You heard?"

"Aye," said Balthor. "Kamahl was here earlier ranting about how ye had turned traitor."

"You know that's not true, Balthor," said Jeska, leaning against the stone crenellation opposite the dwarf.

"I know, girl. I know," said Balthor. "Your brother's not seeing everything too straight right now. Give him some time to cool down."

"That's just it, Balthor," replied Jeska. "It's like he's in a different world."

"Aye," said Balthor. He turned and peered over the wall to check for the scouts. "I keep telling meself

that he'll come to his senses. I hoped that once the stress of the tournament was gone, he'd be back to his old self, but now we have this blasted war on the horizon."

"It's the Mirari," said Jeska. "We both know it."

"Aye, that we do. Do ye suppose it's controlling him?"

"I don't know," said Jeska. "I don't think so."

The top stone in the crenellation behind Jeska moved slightly, coming loose in its mortar, so the red-headed barbarian stepped away from the wall.

"Look, I went to see the dwarves during the tournament to find out what they might know about the orb."

"Ye did what?"

"I didn't tell you or Kamahl because I knew you'd both object," said Jeska, "But we need more information about this artifact."

Balthor raised his finger and opened his mouth but then stopped, dropped his hand to his side, and said, "What did ye find out?"

"They have no records of anything quite like the Mirari in their histories, but they have been tracking its course around Otaria," said Jeska, pacing the top of the watchtower. "Everywhere this orb goes, destruction follows. It possesses great power, but no one seems to be able to control it. The orb reportedly reflects the bearer's ultimate dreams and aspirations. I don't think the Mirari controls or corrupts so much as it amplifies the wielder's true nature to such an extreme that his dreams and desires get distorted, perverted."

"Aye, that pretty much describes what Kamahl's doing."

"Right," said Jeska. "Chainer was a dementia summoner with a strong sense of family. I could sense that when we talked to him after our battle. He tried to remake the Cabal to strengthen his family and ended up destroying it. Kirtar, the aven Order lieutenant, was, according to Kamahl, a cold-blooded warrior who longed for order in the world. He turned half the Citadel into solid crystal. Kamahl lives for battle and is obsessed with proving his skills to the world, and now he's brought the tribes to the brink of civil war over a challenge match."

"All right, ye convinced me," said Balthor. "What can we do, girl?"

"We must get the Mirari away from him," said Jeska, as she stopped pacing in front of the dwarf, "and then calm him down, so he'll talk peace with Talon. After that, I don't know. That accursed orb should be destroyed or at least buried in a deep hole. I say we take it to the dwarves, but I know how you feel about them."

"Nah, it's a sensible plan," said Balthor. "The clan's got no dreams beyond moving rocks. The orb should be plenty safe there. But how do we get the thing away from Kamahl? It's attached to his sword."

"We take it tonight while he's asleep."

"Steal it? That's not very honorable girl," commented Balthor.

"Would you rather try to take it by force?" asked Jeska. "Besides, according to the stories grandpapa used to tell, you weren't above a little larceny in your youth."

"That was a long time ago," said Balthor with a smirk. "All right, I'll sneak into Kamahl's room tonight and bring the Mirari back here for ye to take up to the clan."

"No. I should be the one," said Jeska. "Kamahl already doesn't trust me. If you get caught, we won't get a second chance. Besides, he'll kill you if he catches you. I, at least, have a chance against him in a battle."

"I may be getting old," said Balthor, "but I survived the great war against the phyrexians, and I can still handle meself against one slow barbarian carrying a big sword—a sword I forged for your grandpapa, if ye remember from the stories."

"Look, I don't want to argue about this," growled Jeska, as she pressed her hands against her head in frustration. "He's my brother and my responsibility. Besides, we barbarians are a bit faster than you give us credit for."

With that, Jeska grabbed her steel hairpins, pulled them from the bun atop her head, and whipped them down on either side of Balthor's face. Instantly, lightning crackled along the metal spines and arced from one hairpin to the other, right through the dwarf's ears. Jeska held the spell for a full ten seconds, remembering how grandpapa had told her that dwarves have very thick skulls.

Balthor dropped to the wood floor, twitching as residual electricity coursed through his body trying to find some place to ground.

"Sorry, Balthor," said Jeska. "You're going to have a horrible headache when you wake up, but you left me no choice."

Jeska leaned down to make sure Balthor was still alive and to make him as comfortable as she could atop the watchtower, but then heard a rustling in the brush below.

"Fiers's blood," hissed Jeska. "It must be the scouts."

Jeska stood up and peered down at the ground. She saw Lamar, crouched low, slinking back toward town.

"Damn!" growled Jeska. "He'll ruin everything."

CHAPTER 12

Worried about how much Lamar had seen and heard of her treasonous meeting with Balthor, Jeska unleashed a stream of falcons from her palm to pester the general long enough for her to reach him. Jumping onto the watchtower ladder, Jeska swung her legs over the parapet and kicked away from the stone tower. As she fell toward the rocky ground below, Jeska flipped over on top of the ladder and dived forward, hitting the ground and rolling as Balthor had taught her long ago.

After rolling several times to slow her momentum, Jeska sprung to her feet and sprinted after the fleeing Lamar. She had to handle the young general quickly and quietly, for they were close to the village.

She came upon Lamar as the bare-faced barbarian cut the last falcon out of the air. Wasting no time, Jeska pulled her hairpins back out of her pocket and flung one at Lamar like a dagger. As soon as the pin stuck the boy in the neck, Jeska pointed the other hairpin at him and sent a jolt of electricity arcing between the two metal rods. As with Balthor, Jeska used just enough energy to knock out the barbarian but not enough to do any lasting harm.

"Sorry, Lamar," said Jeska as she came up to the unconscious barbarian to retrieve her hairpin, "but playtime is over. I have a war to stop."

Jeska knew her time was short. She could have bluffed the scouts from the tower with Balthor out cold at her feet. But Kamahl was expecting his generals back soon, and if both Balthor and Lamar failed to show, the whole town would be on alert. She had to act now and hope she could knock out her brother with her hairpins long enough to grab the sword and escape into the mountain passes.

As she crept back to the edge of town, the sun set behind the mountains, sending the village into a murky twilight. The town was nearly deserted as most of the barbarians were enjoying their evening meal. From the sound of singing, the generals and many of the troops were taking their supper in the ale hall. Luck was with Jeska as she crept past the tavern to the door of the great hall.

Inside, torches illuminated the darkening hallway with pools of light. Jeska peered down at the door to the meeting room where she and Kamahl had argued earlier. Pulling her hairpins out once more, Jeska stole up to the door and listened for voices. Hearing none, she decided that either Kamahl was alone or the room was empty.

Taking a moment to tie her hair back, Jeska breathed deeply. Grasping a hairpin in each hand, she threw open the door, spotted Kamahl sitting in his chair behind the table, and threw the first hairpin at him as hard and as fast as she could.

Kamahl looked up, saw the incoming missile, and whipped his hand up to snatch it from the air just before the pin dug into his neck.

"What is the meaning of this, Sister?" roared Kamahl as he stood up.

Jeska merely smiled and poured mana into the pin still in her hand, unleashing a bolt of electricity that arced through the air toward the lightning rod her brother now held. When the bolt reached the large barbarian, electricity ran up and down his arm, shaking the limb so hard that Jeska feared Kamahl would drop the hairpin.

As the lightning searched for somewhere to go to ground, the Mirari flashed from atop Kamahl's sword, which was slung behind his back, and the electricity began pouring into the orb, eventually bypassing the hairpin entirely. The Mirari drew the power in, draining Jeska, who fought to stop the flow before it was too late. Jeska slapped her own hand to jar the hairpin loose and break off the contact with the Mirari.

Her legs buckling, Jeska rested her hands on her knees and gasped for air. Looking up, she saw Kamahl standing, now in front of the table, his sword in hand.

"Now, what is the meaning of this, Sister?" demanded the barbarian again.

"It's the . . . Mirari, Brother," said Jeska, still fighting for air. "You have ... to give it up. Let me take it... to the dwarves. They can . . . keep it safe for you."

Kamahl tossed his head back and laughed. "I see what is happening here," he said. "You want the Mirari. You were always jealous of my power, and now you skulk in here to steal my power for yourself."

"No," panted Jeska. "I just want to save you from ... its destructive power." She took one last deep

breath and straightened up to face her brother.

"Save yourself, Sister. If you can," stated Kamahl as he lowered his sword to point it at Jeska. "If you want the Mirari, you'll have to battle me for it, like everyone else." A huge bolt of lightning erupted from the tip of the sword, unleashing all the power the orb had stolen from Jeska.

Jeska dived back down the hall, rolling once and coming up running. Looking back, she saw the blast rip a huge hole in the outer wall of the great hall. Kamahl came out of the meeting room and headed down the hall toward her. She continued running, slamming the door open and rushing headlong into the torch-lit village.

"Jeska! Stop!" Kamahl roared from behind her, but Jeska continued on, hardly looking where she was going. Suddenly, she did stop, running into a throng of warriors exiting the ale hall to check on the commotion.

"Hold her!" called Kamahl, and Jeska found herself held from behind. Kamahl came up to Jeska and said, "Let us settle this like tribesmen, Sister. A challenge match right here. If you can defeat me, you may have the Mirari. If not, you leave Auror and live out your days with your precious dwarves."

"If that is what it takes, Brother," said Jeska, pulling her arms free from her captors and standing up straight to face Kamahl, "then so be it." Jeska strode out into the street in front of the ale hall and pulled out twin daggers from her boots.

Kamahl took up his position just outside the great hall, and the two siblings faced off in a one-on-one challenge battle for the first time in their lives. Jeska began by summoning a couple of cougars, while keeping a wary eye on Kamahl's sword. Like Talon, she too knew how Kamahl fought.

Jeska continued trying to reason with Kamahl. "Can't you see this has gone too far, Brother? You tried to kill me over a shiny ball. Everyone admits you are the greatest warrior. You don't need some artifact to prove your worth."

"Nice try," spat Kamahl, as he shot a gout of flame from his sword, engulfing the first cougar. "But you can't distract me with your pets or goad me into rash action."

When the second cougar leaped for Kamahl, he flung his arm out straight and caught the beast by the throat, snapping its neck with a quick flip of his wrist. "You'll have to do better than that."

Summoning more mana, Jeska unleashed a Pardic firecat and then another and a third. She had to keep him occupied with creatures, or he'd turn his sword on her. She had to remove the sword from the fight, somehow.

As the firecats prowled around Kamahl, Jeska continued her verbal assault. "Look at these people, Brother. They fear you but not because of your prowess with the sword. It's all because of that foul orb and what it has turned you into."

"They do not fear me," said Kamahl as he struck one firecat with a bolt of lightning while dodging the attack of the second. "They follow me-into glory."

"They only follow you because you will kill them if they don't-as you tried to kill me, as you will try to kill Talon and his followers."

Jeska pressed her numerical advantage by summoning a flock of falcons. She needed him to concentrate on them for just a moment more. "I am the only one with enough courage to face you and tell you the truth, Kamahl. Drop the sword, and I will follow you. Drop the sword, and Talon and the Elite Eight will follow you. Drop the sword, Kamahl, and we will all follow you to glory."

Kamahl wavered, staring at his sword and the silvery orb in the pommel, while the two remaining firecats and the falcons circled in closer.

"You know I am right, Brother," continued Jeska. "I can see it in your eyes. Think about what you have done in the last few weeks. Joha. Talon. Me. That wasn't you in those attacks. It was that foul orb unlocking a beast within you. Just like Chainer."

Jeska thought Kamahl was going to drop the sword and walk away from the Mirari, so she held her beasts at bay, hoping the nightmare could end without any more bloodshed. Then another voice broke the silence.

"Don't listen to her, Kamahl," called Lamar as he pushed through the crowd. "She's a traitor. She attacked me, and she killed Balthor!" The crowd gasped.

Jeska cried, "No!"

The fire in Kamahl's eyes flared brighter than ever as he grasped his great sword in both hands and struck down the nearest firecat with a stream of boulders.

"No, Kamahl. No!" cried Jeska, seeing her last chance to reason with her brother burn away in his seething anger. She had no other choice now. Commanding her falcons to descend, Jeska flipped the daggers over in her hand and watched for her opportunity.

It came quickly. Kamahl swatted at the first few falcons, but then roared like an enraged animal. Spinning the pommel of his sword between his fingers, the barbarian grabbed it in both hands and pointed it up into the air, unleashing a geyser of molten lava that incinerated bird after bird.

With her brother's attention up in the air, Jeska let her daggers fly, burying them in between the middle knuckles in the back of the barbarian's hands. Kamahl screamed in pain, dropping the sword as he brought his bleeding hands down in front of his face. Immediately, Jeska's remaining firecat loped in, grabbed the sword between its teeth, and bolted for the ring of spectators.

"You conniving bitch," spat Kamahl, wincing as he slowly withdrew the slim daggers. "You killed Balthor, and now you intend to kill me."

"It's not true," said Jeska while Kamahl ripped strips of cloth from his shirt and bound each hand to staunch the bleeding. "What Lamar said is simply not true. Balthor and I talked. He agreed with me that we should take the orb from you. He wanted to do it himself, but I couldn't let him take that chance, so I knocked him out with a jolt of lightning. He's not dead Kamahl. I would never kill Balthor."

Kamahl looked up at his sister, the fire in his eyes replaced with a cold, murderous stare. "You and Balthor never agree, not on anything," he said. "You went to enlist his aid in your treachery, and when that failed, you killed him."

"That's right, Kamahl," said Lamar. "They argued, and then she electrocuted him with those wicked hairpins. She held the spell for a minute. Held it until Balthor dropped."

Kamahl let out a primal scream that reverberated off the mountains, then he rushed at his sister in a blind rage. Jeska rolled to the side, kicking her legs out as Kamahl came in, knocking the large barbarian to the ground. She had no choice now. She had to win this battle to keep the orb away from her brother.

Kamahl bounced *off* the dirt and rolled away from his sister as Jeska hopped to her hands and knees. Kamahl, covered in dirt and blood, ran right at his sister again.

As he closed, Jeska tightened the muscles in her legs, preparing to jump. But instead of diving to the side, Jeska leaped right at Kamahl, flinging her hands out in front of her and clasping them together over her head, intending to bash into the large barbarian's chest with her full weight and knock the wind out of him.

Jeska missed the mark. Kamahl veered off course and tossed his arms out to each side. Instead of landing a finishing blow on her brother, Jeska slammed into Kamahl's outstretched arm, catching his wrist in her neck. Suddenly stopped in mid-jump, Jeska's head and ponytail whipped forward over her brother's arm while her legs and torso continued on underneath. Her body flipped around the arm, where she hung for a brief moment, before she fell on her back with a dull thud.

A few minutes later, Jeska opened her eyes, still groggy from hitting her head. She could see nothing more than streaks of light from the torches, could hear the low rumblings of the gathered crowd, but could not pick out any faces through her blurred vision. Then she heard her brother's booming voice.

"Stand aside!" he cried. "It is time to finish this once and for all. The witch must pay."

Jeska tried to stand but could not yet feel her feet. Trying to wipe away the blurred images with the back of her hand, Jeska could just make out her brother pushing his way through the crowd.

Kamahl tossed the bloody daggers into the dirt and came at Jeska, his great sword, burning white hot, held high over his head in his bandaged hands. Tiny blue flames danced all along the edge of the six-foot blade, mesmerizing the groggy Jeska as her brother advanced upon her.

Jeska tried to crawl out of the way, but her legs failed to move. All she could do was mouth the word "no" as Kamahl plunged his sword deep into her abdomen, puncturing her stomach and tearing a huge gash through her intestines, before exiting right next to her spine.

The momentary shock and pain that Jeska felt from the metal ripping through her belly was nothing compared to the searing heat that spread from the wound throughout her body, as if the blue flames had leaped from the blade and ignited inside her.

As the internal fire radiated out from the wound, engulfing her legs, her lungs, her heart, and finally her head, Jeska crumpled to the ground at Kamahl's feet, her green eyes open, searching for some hint of her brother left inside the creature that had struck her down.

CHAPTER 13

Balthor walked into Auror, one hand resting on his axe handle and the other massaging his bruised temples.

"Blast that girl," he grumbled. "Me head is going to ache for a week." While making his way slowly toward the great hall to inform Kamahl that the scouts had not checked in, the dwarf noticed a crowd gathered outside the ale hall. A shout pierced the still night air. "Stand aside! It is time to finish this once and

for all. The witch must pay."

"Oh, Fiers! No!" said Balthor. "Jeska." The dwarf ran. Fighting his way through the mob, Balthor pushed to the center behind Kamahl just as the large barbarian plunged his father's sword into his sister's body.

"Kamahl! No!" roared Balthor as Jeska crumpled to the ground. Rushing up to the man he'd treated as a son even before the boy's father died, Balthor looked down at Jeska, the daughter he had adopted and cherished. The massive sword that Balthor had forged a century earlier had torn a huge gash in Jeska's stomach. But there was no blood. Instead, small blue flames danced within the wound, slowly burning the flesh, which seared and fused together.

"What have ye done, me boy?" asked Balthor as he grabbed Kamahl by the arm and tried to pull him around. A deathly silence washed across the gathered barbarians. "What have ye done?"

As Balthor pulled on him, Kamahl whirled around, the fire in his eyes flaring, his sword drawn back in his bandaged and bloody hands, ready to strike again. But when the barbarian saw Balthor's face, the rage washed away from his eyes, replaced by a look of confusion. Kamahl dropped the tip of his sword to the ground and stared at Balthor.

"You ... you're dead," said Kamahl. "He said you were dead." Balthor merely shook his head.

"Dear Fiers, what have I done," cried out Kamahl, dropping his sword to the ground and burying his face in his huge hands. Falling to his knees as the assembled generals and army watched in stunned silence, the barbarian leader threw his head back and roared at the night sky like a wolf howling for a lost mate. "Noooooooo!" he cried. "Please Fiers. Noooo!" With his cries echoing off the mountains, Kamahl crawled over to Jeska and cradled his sister's head in his bloodstained arms, whimpering, "No, Jeska, no," as he rocked back and forth, holding her limp body to his chest and burying his face in her hair.

As the dwarf walked over to comfort Kamahl and the gathered warriors began to disperse, Balthor heard an explosion from behind him and turned to see a wall of smoke rising from the ground and rolling toward him. "Talon!" cried the dwarf. "Not now!"

Rushing into the smoke, Balthor heard cries and explosions coming from all around him. The city was under attack, and Kamahl was in no shape to lead his men into battle.

"Lamar," hollered the dwarf. "Do something about this smoke. Janvel, assemble your men and form a phalanx. Pyke, guard Kamahl."

Unable to see his axe in front of his face through the dense smoke, Balthor closed his eyes, slowed his breathing, and focused his mind on his remaining senses. Through the confusion of shouting and explosions, Balthor could sense enemies approaching from behind the great hall. Opening his eyes and swinging his great axe around in front of him, Balthor sent a stream of lightning toward his foes, and he rushed forward behind the curved, moving wall of electricity.

The lightning discharged, illuminating several forms in the smoke. As Balthor rushed in, he realized these were not barbarians. They moved on four legs but were much larger than firecats. Hooking the head of his battle-axe on the soles of his boots, Balthor threw himself into a forward roll, barreling into the first beast and slicing through its chest as he spun underneath the huge animal.

Popping up behind the massive creature he'd just split open, Balthor spun around and buried the head of his axe in the flank of the second beast. The dwarf then released his weapon- which held fast in the wound-jumped up and used the axe handle as a springboard to vault over the back of the creature, landing with all his weight on the beast's head, driving it into the ground and crushing its skull.

Facing the last creature with no weapon, Balthor stared at the form outlined in the crackling energy of his spell, waiting for it to attack. The creature was built low to the ground like a mountain cat but was easily five feet across at the shoulder and had long boar tusks jutting out from its mouth. Balthor knew the mountains had no such creatures and doubted they were even natural.

"This be Cabal magic," said the dwarf. "They've come for the orb."

The dementia monster charged, lowering its head to spear the dwarf with its massive tusks. Diving to the ground as it charged, Balthor grabbed the beast's front paws in his hands and hooked his feet over its tusks, forcing the creature to stumble and pulling its head down into the ground.

Unable to stop its forward momentum, the monster flipped over forward, breaking off its tusks as it rolled and landing on its back with the dwarf on top. Balthor rolled to the side of the beast, snatched up the broken tusk and jammed it down into the creature's exposed neck, pinning the beast to the ground and leaving it there to bleed to death.

Balthor returned for his axe, and the second beast melted away into a dark, dense cloud amidst the smoke.

"Aye, dementia monsters," said Balthor. "Definitely. I'd better get back to Kamahl afore they reach

him." Grabbing his axe off the ground, Balthor attuned his senses to the battle once again and raced back to the ale hall, avoiding pockets of battle along the way as barbarians faced off against summoned horrors.

Coming up to where Kamahl still sat, holding his sister and sobbing, Balthor sensed a beast creeping up on the grieving barbarian. That's no tusked cat, thought Balthor. Let's see what we've got here. Balthor tucked his axe handle under his arm and slapped his hands together, producing a booming thunderclap that split the smoke in front of him.

A tunnel of clear air spread out from Balthor to Kamahl, and the dwarf saw an eight-foot, snake-headed beast about to take a swipe at the prone barbarian. Balthor grabbed his axe in his strong right hand and heaved it end over end at the assassin. The blade bit into the beast between the shoulder blades. The snake man roared in pain, straightened up, and began flailing about with its hands, trying to find the weapon embedded in its back.

Rushing in to press his advantage, Balthor leaped into the air, spun around, and slammed his boots into the head of his axe to drive it deeper into the beast's back. When he landed beside the scaly creature, Balthor was surprised to see it still standing with both blades of his axe buried in its back.

The snake man leered down at Balthor, its sloped forehead spattered with its own green blood.

"Now you die, little man," it spat at him, then spun around and slapped Balthor in the gut with its tail, sending the dwarf flying into the smoke that engulfed the village.

Balthor fell hard on his back, rolled to his side, and doubled over in pain, wrapping his arms around his stomach. Gasping for breath, the winded dwarf tried to attune to the battle to determine where he'd landed. He felt the movement of the smoke just before the massive, clawed hand slashed down at him.

Unable to roll out of the way, Balthor shot his fist up, jabbing at the incoming attack and hitting the beast's open palm dead center. As the bones in the creature's hand shattered from the impact, the sudden halt of its attack caused it to over balance. The snake man shifted its weight to regain its balance, but Balthor reached up with his other hand, grabbed the scaly wrist, and pulled the beast forward.

The assassin fell forward onto Balthor, and the dwarf kicked his legs up into the beast's groin to shove the creature up over his head. Balthor pulled down on the captive arm to twist the beast in the air, so it landed hard on its back. Jumping up, Balthor clapped his hands together to clear the smoke away again. The huge, snake-headed man lay dead next to Balthor, one blade of the dwarf's double headed axe sticking completely out of its chest and neck, the point of the blade pinning the beast's head back under the chin.

Balthor waited a moment, assuming the beast would disappear back into the dementia space from whence it came, but the assassin's body was permanent, and the dwarf's weapon was stuck fast. Leaving the weapon for later, Balthor ran back to Kamahl.

The sounds of battle were fading away, but Balthor wasn't sure that was a good thing. His battle senses told him there were far more tusked panthers than barbarians left, and there were other creatures still out there, moving almost too silently for the dwarf to detect.

"More snakes, I'll wager," said Balthor to himself. "Lamar, Janvel, Pyke! Report," he called into the smoke but got no reply. "Damn!" he muttered. "And me with no axe." Turning to Kamahl, Balthor pleaded with the barbarian, who still sat, rocking back and forth. "Kamahl. Snap out of it, boy. Ye can't help her now. Stand up and fight, or ye'll lose everything."

"I already have," came the whispered response. "I already have."

"Then this is it," muttered Balthor. "Me last battle, and I don't even have me axe." Bending down, Balthor saw Jeska's bloody daggers in the dirt next to Kamahl, and he scooped them up. "Here I am, ye Cabal bastards. Show me your worst."

As the forms in the smoke closed in upon Balthor, the dwarf sensed something else moving in fast beyond the Cabal beasts. Before he could identify the new targets, a quick succession of thunderclaps shook the buildings in the village and cleared the remaining smoke away.

Beyond a dozen tusked panthers and four snake assassins stood Talon and the Elite Eight. In the torchlight, Balthor could see Talon twirling his now single-headed axe in his left hand as he advanced upon the beasts, who seemed unsure whether to proceed forward or turn to fight.

Talon's army made the decision for them, screaming and charging into battle.

"Mind the lizards," yelled Balthor. "They be pretty nasty."

The dwarf watched for fear of letting one of the assassins get past him to Kamahl, figuring he'd help if Talon's forces got into trouble. Looking around, Balthor saw most of Kamahl's army lying dead in the street. Lamar had fallen in a heap, his neck snapped. Pyke was on his back, his chest ripped open by a set of massive claws. Janvel had been torn in two with only a pool of blood connecting his legs and his body.

Talon was the first to reach the Cabal beasts, swinging the notched blade of his axe down and through the neck of one of the dementia panthers on his way to the first snake man. Tybiel shot past a panther to

get to a second lizard, while Joha, Brue, Thurmon, and the rest spread out and hunted the rest of the tusked panthers.

But it was Talon whom Balthor watched. Even with only one arm, he was a mighty warrior. Coming in full speed on a snake man with a bandage wrapped around its shoulder and upper arm, Talon stopped short, just out of reach of the beast's attack. He swiped his axe around in front of him, cutting the creature's good arm off at the elbow.

Talon then spun around, dipping his chest down low and kicking his leg up and into the bandage on the creature's other arm. Balthor heard a loud snap as the beast's arm shattered just below its shoulder. Continuing around, Talon whipped his axe into the lizard's face, smashing its nose and shattering its skull.

After shooting a quick lightning bolt at an approaching panther, which exploded in the creature's face leaving nothing but its lower jaw and tusks behind, Talon ran off toward his next target—a snake with twin scorch marks on its chest.

Taking a quick look at Tybiel, Balthor could see the brash young mage was in over his head. He'd lost his weapon and was doing everything he could just to dodge the huge, scaly beast's slashing attacks.

"Damn fool," said Balthor, as he flipped one of Jeska's daggers over in his hand and heaved it at the beast. The long, thin blade flew like a dart and embedded up to the hilt in the barrel-chested lizard's shoulder. As the beast screamed in pain and tried desperately to grasp the weapon's handle, Tybiel darted in and grabbed his sword from between the creature's feet.

By the time Balthor found Talon again, the one-armed barbarian was tangling with the scorched lizard. He'd caught the creature's attack with the shaft of his axe and then kicked his leg out to shatter the beast's wrist. Hooking the lizard's other wrist underneath the notched blade of his axe, Talon twisted the shaft and forced the beast's hand back until the bones snapped and the tendons ripped.

Enraged by pain, the snake man bared its fangs and snapped its head down toward the barbarian's neck. Talon ducked underneath the incoming attack and swung his arm up and over his head, holding the shaft of his axe hard against his forearm. Talon slashed the blade clean through the beast's jaw, and the top of the creature's head hit the ground even before the body crumpled in front of Talon.

Glancing back at the rest of the Elite Eight, Balthor could see they had finished off most of the dementia panthers and that Joha and Brue were rushing to help Tybiel. The brash barbarian hung six inches off the ground, held by the neck by the beast's massive, clawed hand. Tybiel pushed at the beast as it pulled him closer and closer to its open mouth, but he was losing the battle.

Loath to give up his last weapon, Balthor nevertheless flipped the remaining dagger into his right hand and pulled his arm back to throw. But the dwarf saw another missile hurtling toward the huge lizard. Talon had thrown his own weapon away to try to save his warrior. Just before the axe hit, though, the snake man snapped his head forward, clamped down on Tybiel's neck, and ripped out the barbarian's throat.

With Tybiel's blood running down the beast's scaly chin, the creature tossed its head back in triumph, only to have that victory cut short as Talon's axe imbedded in the back of its head, shattering the beast's skull and destroying its brain.

Balthor looked back at Talon just in time to see the last snake warrior closing on the unarmed barbarian.

"Talon, look out!" yelled the dwarf.

Talon whirled around as the beast attacked. Seeing its clawed hand too late to dodge, the one-armed barbarian tried to duck down and away from the blow, but the creature's claws dug into Talon's cheek and ripped the soft flesh from his mouth to his ear.

Knocked off balance by the blow, Talon fell back and away from the creature, bleeding profusely from his face. Talon took two halting steps backward and then fell to the ground, landing on his back facing the snake beast. As the creature stalked forward, Talon wiped the blood from his cheek, gathered mana in his palm and then sprayed the droplets of blood at the advancing snake man.

The blood flew through the air, the spell transforming it into a fine mist of acid that soaked the chest of the beast. Balthor noticed this snake man was already badly burned and had lost most of the scales on its torso. When the acid hit the thin layer of scar tissue on its chest, the beast screamed in pain and began scraping at its chest with its clawed hands, which merely transferred the acid to its palms.

While the beast dealt with the burning liquid on its chest and hands, Talon rolled over and stood up. As Talon searched for a weapon to use to finish off the beast, Balthor noticed Kamahl's great sword lying at his feet.

Hooking his foot under the flat blade, Balthor yelled, "Talon! Sword!" and kicked the six-foot-long weapon into the air toward the one-armed barbarian.

Talon caught the tumbling sword by the hilt and spun the blade around once in his left hand. Whipping

the sword up and around his body, the tall, blond barbarian sliced the snake beast in two from its hip up to the opposite shoulder, shredding organs, shattering its rib cage, and severing its spine.

The beast fell to the ground in two pieces, its torso still smoldering from the acid. Talon turned to survey the battlefield, but the battle was over, and the remaining members of the Elite Eight were beginning to search for survivors amongst the bodies littering the village.

Walking over to Balthor, Talon stuck the tip of Kamahl's weapon into the ground before the dwarf, and said, "Fine sword. Thank you."

"No. Our thanks go out to you and your warriors, Talon," said Balthor. "Ye saved us all. I can't speak for Kamahl, but I think ye earned that sword tonight. And I don't think he'll want it after this."

"If Kamahl offers, I will consider it," said Talon, "but I've seen the chaos that orb can cause, and I don't believe any amount of power is worth the risk of this happening again."

The two warriors looked down at Kamahl.

"Help me get him to bed, will ye, Talon?" asked Balthor, and the two former enemies grabbed their friend and led him home.

From her hidden vantage point in the rocks above the village, Braids saw her chance to get the Mirari slip away as the dwarf and the one-armed barbarian took Kamahl, his sister's body, and the huge sword into a house at the other end of the village.

She watched to see if she might have a chance at the sword and that blasted dwarf in the middle of the night, but the tall barbarian came back out and posted a guard outside the house—the two warriors who had defeated most of her feline pets.

"Well, it was fun while it lasted," said Braids to herself. She felt an odd sadness as she crept away from the village and began to descend the mountain. She had grown to like Leer and the boys. Their loss left an empty place in her gut. The Cabal was her family, and Braids was completely devoted to the First, just as if he were her father. But her dementia space left Braids detached from the world, and she had never truly loved anyone before. As she stored their forms in the black cloud of dementia space that floated always above her head, Braids decided something. She must avenge Leer and the boys, for that's what people do for those they love.

"The barbarian and that dwarf will suffer for what they did to you, boys," she said. "They will suffer."

CHAPTER 14

"I killed her, Balthor. I killed my own sister," said Kamahl the next morning while sitting at the table, staring at the food Balthor had put in front of him. "She tried to warn me, but I wouldn't listen. In my arrogance I killed her."

"It wasn't your fault, boy," said Balthor, patting his friend on the shoulder. "Ye thought she'd killed me, and ye acted without thinking."

"Acted without thinking," said Kamahl wistfully as he speared a falcon egg with his knife and pushed it around his plate. "The curse of the Mirari."

"Aye, ye've been acting on instinct, primal instinct, for weeks now," said Balthor. "It's just like Jeska said before she ..."

Balthor stopped and glanced up at Kamahl, who finished the sentence for the dwarf. "Before I killed her," he said.

"Except that she's not dead, my friend," said Talon as he walked into the hearth room, closing the door to the room where they had laid Jeska's body the night before.

"What did you say?" asked Kamahl looking up from his plate for the first time since sitting down at the table.

"I said Jeska is not dead, so you did not kill her," said Talon smiling. He came over to the empty seat at the table and sat down between Kamahl and Balthor.

"That can't be," said Balthor. "I checked last night when we laid her on the furs. She had no breath. Her heart no longer beat. Me girl was dead."

Talon clapped his hand on Balthor's shoulder and said, "I'm happy to tell you that you're wrong for once, dear Balthor. 'Tis true that her breath is shallow, but air does pass her lips. And while her heart does not beat, blood does move through her body."

"I don't understand," said Kamahl. "That wound was deadly. Nobody could survive even a night after what I did to her body."

"I can't explain it either, my friend," said Talon. "There is a blue fire in her belly, and her whole body is

hot to the touch. It's like she's burning up from the inside-as if that fire is keeping her alive while consuming her for fuel."

Kamahl buried his head in his hands and cried out. "Oh, Fiers!" he said. "I wanted her to burn for what she'd done to you, Balthor. I wanted her to burn in Fiers's forge until there was nothing left but ash, and the Mirari has made it happen."

The three warriors sat in silence as Kamahl stared at his plate, unable to eat, unable to look his friends in the eyes, unable to deal with all the pain he'd caused since his return. Balthor finally broke the silence.

"She's not dead, Kamahl," he said grabbing the barbarian's wrist. "Look at me, boy. She's not dead. Think about that and not about what ye've done. Think about helping your sister."

"She needs a healer," said Talon. "Perhaps one of the Order mages. I know nobody on the mountain who can cure a wound like that. It will take powerful healing magic."

Kamahl shook his head. "The Order will not help me. They believe I murdered their leader. And the Cabal now blames me for the death of Chainer, not that I would let one of their butchers near her."

"What about that druid ye met in the pits, boy?" asked Balthor.

"Yes," said Kamahl. "That's right. Seton. The centaur druid from the Krosan forest. He knows the healing arts as well as any Order priest."

"Can you trust this forest creature?" asked Talon. "We fought together in the pits. He has the honor of a Pardic warrior. I would trust Seton with my life. And for now, Jeska is my life!"

"Then I will go to the forest and bring this Seton here," said Talon, banging his fist on the table and standing up to leave.

"No," said Kamahl as he stood up and put his hand on his friend's shoulder. "Seton would not believe you. The forest people do not trust outsiders easily. This is my journey. I will take Jeska to the forest and find Seton."

"Then let me ride with you, my friend," offered Talon. "Someone has to keep you out of trouble along the way."

"That's me job," said Balthor. "I raised these two like they were me own children. If anyone's riding with Kamahl on this trip, it'll be me."

Kamahl nodded. "I need you here, Talon," he said. "That attack last night was only the beginning. The tribes are in danger, and only you can lead them. You proved that again last night, and now I'm finally listening."

Kamahl walked over to the hearth, pulled his sword off the mantle, and brought it back to the table. "Take the sword Talon. Take it, and lead our people to greatness. I pledge my life and my strong right arm to you."

"I will lead the tribes Kamahl, but only in your name . . . until you return," said Talon. "As for your father's sword, it belongs in your two hands, not my one."

"If that is your decision, I will respect it," said Kamahl. "But I will never wield this sword again. Not after what I did to my sister-and to you-with it."

"Then leave it here, and I will guard it until you return," said Talon. "But do the world a favor, and bury that orb in a deep hole."

"Done." Kamahl reached out with his right hand to shake on the deal, then hesitated when he remembered, but Talon clasped the offered hand with his left hand and nodded his acceptance to his friend.

"Mistress Braids," came the call, but Braids couldn't see anyone on the path. "Mistress Braids, over here! We have been waiting for you."

Braids grabbed a bit of the dementia cloud that swirled around her head and crept forward, prepared to call forth any number of horrors. From a small copse of trees jutting up from the lowland brush stepped a couple of low-level Cabal members and a jack named Griggs whom Braids vaguely recognized from the Aphetto pits.

"The Cabal is here, mistress," said Griggs.

"And everywhere ... it would seem," said Braids. "You were expecting me?"

"Yes mistress," said the pit fighter. "Master Traybor sent us out to watch for you. He got word from the First about your descent from the mountain."

"Traybor? Here?" asked Braids as she released the dementia particles from her hand to rejoin the cloud. "Why?"

"Master Traybor will explain everything," said the jack. "Please come with us, mistress."

"Of course," said Braids. "Only do not call me 'mistress.' That is a name I should never like to hear again."

"Yes . . . ma'am."

The young jack led Braids to a Cabal encampment nestled in a secluded area of the foothills at the base of the Pardic Mountains. As she walked, Braids closed her eyes and saw the camp through her dementia cloud. It all seemed so familiar to her. There were at least fifty runners, pickpockets, and other minor Cabal members who had come to prove themselves and move up the ranks. They were the fodder, of course, and most would die. She had seen it all before during the Order wars. Or perhaps her dementia space was merely echoing this event into her memory. She could never be sure.

Past the low-level Cabalites were the jacks and dementia summoners. These two dozen warriors were the true power of the Cabal raiding party. Trained for battle in the pits, any one of them could take on an Order patrol, especially if the patrol didn't see them coming. Expanding her vision to the edges of the camp, Braids was both relieved and somewhat disappointed to find no snake guards on this expedition.

"Braids!" came the call from ahead. The dementia summoner brought her consciousness back into her body and opened her eyes to see a tent with Traybor standing outside waving her in. Traybor was the master of the games, or would be once the games began again after she retrieved the Mirari.

An accomplished dementia summoner, Traybor rarely used his gifts, which made him an even better leader and master of the games. Traybor had quite shrewdly kept both feet firmly planted in the Cabal, while keeping the power of dementia as his tool, both inside and outside the pit.

"Step inside, Braids," said Traybor. "Tell me of your exploits, and I will bring you up to date on Cabal matters."

"From what I hear, you already know the critical information," said Braids.

Expecting a lavishly appointed command center befitting someone of his high rank, Braids was pleasantly surprised to find that Traybor's tent was spartan and functional. A single table with the remains of his breakfast sitting atop the maps and battle plans, two chairs, and a pile of blankets in the corner were all that the tent contained.

"Yes, the First has been keeping tabs on your progress and informed us last night of the defeat of your . . . men," said Traybor as he led Braids to the table. "Very powerful, these barbarians. Perhaps we can persuade a few to come back to the pits."

"They don't persuade easily," said Braids.

"I suppose not," said Traybor. He sat down, moved his breakfast plates to the floor, and grabbed a sheaf of paper and a pen. "Tell me about last night's battle. We should make plans for our next assault."

Braids wasn't listening. She had drifted back into her dementia space, her head lying on the back of her chair.

"Did you ever see Kamahl battle in the pits?" she asked.

"No."

"He was incredible, unbeatable," she said, reveling in the images of past battles playing themselves out for her enjoyment inside her mind.

Suddenly Braids snapped her head forward, opened her eyes, and glared at Traybor. "Now imagine fighting a dozen Kamahls . . . two dozen . . . a hundred, with no pit rules, no mercy, no chance of survival. Can you imagine it? No? Here let me show you!"

Braids grabbed a handful of her dementia cloud and threw it at Traybor. It expanded and enveloped his head, floating like motes of dust in the sunlight. Traybor's eyes rolled back into his head as the cloud projected images from the battle between the assassins and the Elite Eight.

When the show was over, Braids said, "You see? Planning is useless against their savage power."

Traybor dropped his pen and massaged his temples for a moment before speaking. "This is not good," he said.

"What?" asked Braids. "The games can go on without the Mirari. They just won't be as big."

"It's not that," said Traybor. "There's a massive Order army descending upon the Pardic Mountains. We barely got past them on the way here. If we leave, they'll attack. We don't stand a chance against them."

"Which would you rather face, Traybor, the entire Order army or that one-armed barbarian and his dwarf friend?"

Traybor didn't hesitate. "We'll break camp tonight."

"Report, Lieutenant," said Eesha, looking up from her maps as Dinell entered her command tent.

"The Cabal forces have holed up in the foothills, ma'am," said the lieutenant. "They may be planning an assault on the barbarians."

"What of the assassination squad?" asked the commander. "Any news since they slipped past you into

the mountains?"

"N-no ma'am," said Dinell. "One of your aven units located three dead barbarians in the lower elevations that we believe were the handiwork of the squad."

"What makes you say that?"

"They were still walking about," said Dinell. "Zombies. In fact, they attacked the aven unit, which easily destroyed the monsters."

"Zombies!" spat Eesha. "The Cabal has no respect for the order of life." The commander sat down at her field desk and looked at the map of the Pardic Mountains. "Show me where the Cabal forces are, Lieutenant."

Dinell came up to the table and pointed at a secluded area in the foothills.

"You say their forces are planning an assault? What makes you think that?"

"They've had scouts in the lower elevations since last night, ma'am," replied Dinell. "My guess is they're awaiting word from their assassination squad before proceeding."

"Yes, that makes sense," said Eesha. "If their assassins retrieved the orb, they will leave with it. If not, they will ascend the mountain for a larger attack. Either way, we must stop them. Prepare your men to move out, Lieutenant. We attack tonight."

It took Balthor the rest of the morning and part of the afternoon to rig harnesses that would allow two horses to carry Jeska's body, strapped to a litter, between them.

"I'll ride this one, so I can keep an eye on her," he told Kamahl. "My legs are short enough that they won't get in the way of the litter."

"She'll have a rough ride in that, won't she?" asked Kamahl.

"It's the best I can do, especially for mountain travel," said Balthor as he tested the straps on the harnesses one last time. "Once we're in the plains, we'll borrow a wagon from some farmers."

"Well, pad the litter with firecat furs, and take it slow," said Kamahl. "And bring some gold to pay the farmers. I have enough plains folk mad at me as it is."

"I'll get them now," said Balthor as he turned to leave. "Come help me with your sister, boy."

"Not yet, old man," said Kamahl. "We'll leave at dusk. Believe me, it's better to travel at night in the plains."

Kamahl left to say his farewells to Talon and the Elite Eight while Balthor checked on Jeska, who still lay unconscious in her room, her brow damp with sweat from the fever. Her wound had been bandaged, but Balthor could still see the strange, blue glow coming through the cloth. The dwarf dabbed an extra bandage in the pot of water next to the pile of furs and patted her warm brow with it.

Then, checking to make sure Kamahl had not yet returned, Balthor grabbed Kamahl's sword from the chest in his room and slipped it into the specially made pocket he'd sewn into Jeska's litter.

"I hope ye don't mind sharing your bed with this thing, girl," said the dwarf, "but I can't let him leave without his sword." Balthor then pulled a few extra firecat furs out to cover the litter and his stowed cargo.

CHAPTER 15

Laquatas squinted up at the noon sun and cursed. "Norda's fins! I hate the plains. How can people live so far from water with that ball of fire staring at them?"

As usual, Burke did not answer. He merely stood beside the mer lord quietly, waiting for his next command. "I need shelter from this blasted sun, Burke," said Laquatas. "Find the nearest farmhouse, and make it vacant." Following a wooden fence, the mer and his jack made their way toward the manor of the local landowner. "Clear the stables, Burke. I will rest in there while you cleanse the rest of the manor."

As Laquatas and Burke approached the buildings, two large, blond farmhands came out of the stables and spotted the odd duo.

"What d'ya want old man?" asked the first as he grabbed a pitchfork leaning against the doorframe.

"Shelter from the sun," replied Laquatas, smiling. "Burke?" With a mental command the mer sent his fighter forward to greet the farmhands.

"What in the spheres is that thing, Root?" asked the second worker as Burke approached.

Root lost some of his bluster as he looked at Burke. Turning to Laquatas, he said, "This land is protected by the Order, mister. You'd better leave, and take that thing with you."

As Root finished his little speech, Burke, who was still fifteen feet from the farmhands, shot out his arm. It stretched and hardened, hitting Root in the chest and breaking several ribs. The appendage just as quickly withdrew back to its normal shape and size, leaving Root gasping for air on the ground.

Pushing himself up on one hand, Root threw the pitchfork as hard as he could at Burke. The tines speared the jack in the groin, but the featureless humanoid merely reached down and pulled the makeshift weapon free, and the marks disappeared.

Burke then strode up to the gasping Root, stuck the pitchfork into large worker's torso, and raised the burly farmhand up over his shoulder as if his body were nothing more than a bale of hay.

Root's friend turned to run. Burke whipped the pitchfork forward, tossing Root's body through the air at the fleeing worker some thirty feet away.

Hit in the back by a two-hundred-pound missile, the farmhand tumbled to the ground, his arm shattering as he landed, pinned to the ground by the dead weight of his former friend. Burke strode over to the prone worker and drove the pitchfork through Root into the neck of the second man. Burke then looked back at his master, waiting new orders.

"Secure the house. I do not wish to be disturbed. I will wait in the stable for your return."

Burke nodded and then turned and strode toward the house. Laquatas entered the stable. Inside, the mer found horses and farm equipment but no more residents.

"Good," he said. "Now to find out what has been happening while I've been traveling."

The mer pulled the enchanted mirror out of his pack, passed his hand over its surface, and concentrated on Talbot. A moment later, the disheveled face of Laquatas's ambassador to the Cabal appeared in the mirror.

"Is this how you appear to your lord?" asked Laquatas. "At least run a comb through your hair, Talbot."

"Sorry, my lord," groveled Talbot. "I was somewhat indisposed when your call came in."

"Ah, I see," said Laquatas, smiling at his advisor. "I, too, liked to partake of the pleasures of the Cabal. I do hope your recreation hasn't impeded your mission."

"No, my lord," said Talbot. He reached out and produced an ivory comb to run through his fine, silken hair. "I have much news to impart to you, sire. News I have learned from my sources here in the Cabal."

"Excellent, Talbot," said Laquatas. "Havelock and his troops are proceeding on to Krosan. I have come topside to check on our allies and make sure the rest of the plan is proceeding apace. What can you tell me about the Cabal and Order forces?"

"Nothing good, I'm afraid, sire," said Talbot. "Braids has failed to either secure the Mirari or force the barbarian to leave the mountains. Her death squad lies dead in a Pardic village, and she has left the mountains."

"Is that all?" asked Laquatas. "That is but a minor setback. I never expected the summoner to succeed on her own."

"There is more, sire," said Talbot. "Llawan has convinced the First to send a raiding party out to deal with the Order forces and safeguard the return of the orb to the Cabal. Braids has joined forces with these raiders, and it would appear that a battle between the two armies is imminent."

"So the Empress knows more than you had been led to believe by Veza, I see," said Laquatas. "She has taken an active role in thwarting our plan. What of her own troops? What do you know about Llawan's own battle plans?"

"I was informed that she could not spare any of her own troops to protect the orb," explained Talbot, "because she is embroiled in border disputes with the pirates who are plaguing her trade route through the portals."

"Good," said Laquatas, smiling. "She is still too worried about her empire's economics to tackle the real problems. I wouldn't worry about the Cabal and Order forces, Talbot. The more they fight each other, the fewer of them will remain when they reach the forest. What I need to do is scare that barbarian out of the mountains so one side or the other can grab the orb. Manipulating the Cabal and the Order will be easy. It is making that blasted, chaotic barbarian do what I want that is tough."

"What can I do to help, my lord?" asked Talbot.

Laquatas thought for a moment, then snapped his fingers. "Go back to the First and tell him that I will commit troops to safeguard the orb against Order attack. If he asks you why we would do this, tell him it is because we have his best interests at heart and wish to win him back as a trusted ally against the empress. But we need his raiders to secure the orb, so he must push them back up into the mountains."

"Yes, sire," said Talbot. "I will request an audience with the First at once."

"And I shall go handle the Order forces personally," said Laquatas. "I must ensure they do not become overzealous once they have the orb and try to destroy it right away. Ah, I see Burke has returned. I must sign off now, Talbot. I will head out this evening to locate the Order forces. Inform me before then of your progress with the First."

"Yes, my lord."

Laquatas looked up at his jack. "Is the house securer?" he asked.

Burke nodded.

"Then find the well. I wish to spend the day in a bath."

That evening, Laquatas mounted one of the horses in the stable and rode off toward the foothills of the mountains. Talbot's report had not been encouraging. It seemed the Cabal forces were planning to slip out that night, which meant not only would they not be going after the orb, but apparently the Cabal was no longer subject to the ambassador's will. He would have to use the Order to get the Mirari now.

"Burke, raze this place to the ground," said the ambassador from atop his horse. "I do not wish to leave any proof of our passing here. Then catch up to me. I will have need of you again this evening."

While Laquatas rode out into the fields surrounding the homestead, the evening sky lit up behind him as fire engulfed the wooden structures. Not long afterward, Burke came running up behind the mer, easily catching up to the trotting horse, for the jack had stretched his arms and turned his hands and feet into hooves to gallop like a horse. Pushing his steed to match the jack's pace, Laquatas and Burke galloped off into the night toward the mountains.

Guided to the Cabal camp by Talbot's information, Laquatas and Burke arrived in the foothills a few hours after the moon rose over Otaria. The mer's horse had been pushed to its limits to keep up the pace and wouldn't last the night, but Burke seemed tireless.

As they neared the secluded camp, Laquatas could hear the sounds of battle and knew the Cabal forces had not been able to slip past the Order troops. Laquatas reigned in his steed and dismounted, mentally commanding Burke to halt beside him.

"We must not be seen to take sides in this battle Burke," said the ambassador, "but we also cannot allow the Order to lose.

They are the key to Mirari now that I can no longer control the Cabal. Go and aid the Order, but leave no Cabal witnesses. We may yet have need of them."

As Burke transformed back to his humanoid shape, Laquatas crept to the top of a hillock where he could view the battle without being seen. Order infantry filled the valley between the hills leading into the secluded bluff, completely trapping the Cabal raiders within their camp. Above the battlefield, aven mages strafed the Cabal front lines, reinforcing their warriors with defensive magic while eliminating any troublesome beasts the Cabal mages summoned.

From his vantage point, things looked bad for the raiders, but Laquatas knew a little about Cabal battle tactics and realized this part of the battle was merely a diversion to give the Cabal summoners enough time to mount their true offensive. Moments later, the mer saw explosions rock the Order troops just behind the front lines, killing troopers and expelling huge amounts of smoke throughout the Order ranks.

Laquatas commanded Burke to skirt the Order camp and make his way toward the front line to help the infantry against what he knew was coming next. From within the ever-widening void of smoke, Laquatas could hear the screams of dying Order warriors and the snarls of Cabal horrors. Unable to see through the smoke, Laquatas focused on the aven mages, who seemed at first confused by the explosions but quickly rallied together to create strong winds that began blowing the smoke back into the Cabal ranks, exposing the imps, ghouls, and shades that were tearing through the front ranks of the Order troops.

Laquatas knew this was a mistake even before the inevitable happened. Unable to see the Cabal dementia summoners, who were now hidden behind their own vale of smoke, the aven mages were caught unaware as wispy blue creatures with long claws and razor-sharp teeth rose up out of the smoke and attacked them from below.

The tide of the battle was turning. The foul dementia beasts on the ground tore through the overmatched Order grunts, using their claws to catch swords and spears and their strength to first disarm their opponents and then disembowel them. Above the battle, the aven mages could no longer protect or heal their warriors, for they were fighting for their lives as well. The blue horrors strafed the mages, shredding aven wings with their vicious claws as they passed or ramming into the flying warriors and sinking their claws and teeth into aven flesh as they pulled the Order mages down to the ground.

Glancing back down, Laquatas saw a new horror enter the melee as Burke pushed his way into the midst of the fighting. The Order guards fled from him, which only made Burke's job easier, for it opened up a passage to his real target: the Cabal demons. The first imp he met seemed confused by the large creature's presence, for it offered no resistance as Burke grabbed its small head in his huge palm and squeezed until it popped.

The nearby demons did not hesitate after that, piling on top of the lumpish creature and raking at his

rubbery flesh with their claws, teeth, and barbed tails. In a moment, Burke was completely covered with a squirming pile of deadly creatures, but Laquatas was not worried. The summoned creatures could not hurt Burke. Nothing could. And the smoke obscured his jack's handiwork from the dementia summoners, so there was no chance they could see or recognize Burke as he single-handedly dismantled their summoned army.

Looking back to the skies, though, Laquatas was disappointed by the effectiveness of the aven mages. They were flying to and fro, merely trying to evade the horrors when they should have been mounting their own offensive against this airborne threat.

"Must I do everything in your little war?" he asked no one.

Laquatas pressed his forefingers against his temples and gathered the mana needed to complete his spell. Azure energy licked at his fingertips, arcing back and forth across his forehead.

Laquatas concentrated on the closest horror until the energy leaped from his fingers to fly through the air and engulf the dementia creature. The creature fell for an instant as it lost control of its body, control that traveled back down through the energy beam. As the mer took control, he righted the creature's flight and gave it new instructions.

"Kill the horrors," Laquatas said into the beast's mind.

Laquatas watched his new warrior for a moment to make sure it understood the simple directions. It flew off toward a battling aven, and the mer worried that these beasts might be uncontrollable. But then he laughed at his own doubt when the horror interposed itself between the aven and another demon. Flashing its claws and teeth, the controlled beast ripped through its brother's wispy wings and body, sending large gobs of gauzy, blue matter floating toward the ground.

Satisfied with his beast's performance, Laquatas looked again for Burke, not worried about his jack but worried he might need new instruction after killing the Cabal's summoned ground troops. He needn't have worried, for the jack had just emerged from the pile of demons, which Laquatas noticed had shrunk considerably.

Surrounded by summoned demons, many of which were still clawing at his legs and body, Burke calmly grabbed the nearest two ghouls by their necks, one in each massive hand, and smashed their heads together. As the ghoul bodies dissipated back into dementia, Burke pulled an imp off his leg and impaled it on the extended finger of his other hand, which had grown six inches and ended in a needle-sharp point.

The jack next grabbed a shade in both hands, its hazy body difficult to hold. Spreading his lump of a body into a large blue-black net that enveloped the summoned creature, Burke oozed around the shade, squeezing the beast as if it were a bunch of grapes in his fist. Burke finally released the creature, leaving its broken body to return to its dementia space while he reverted back to his normal, featureless form.

Laquatas enjoyed watching his jack work, but he knew that Burke needed no help while the aven mages were still in trouble. His controlled horror had destroyed three of its fellows, but another three had banded together to handle the rogue beast, grabbing it by its wings and head and ripping its body into pieces.

Laquatas began to tap into his mana once again to control another horror, but as he looked for a creature to control, he saw one of the smoky, blue creatures loop up and over an aven mage, landing on its back. The Order mage tried desperately to reach the enemy on her back, but the horror grabbed the aven's wings and ripped them off her body, then pushed off the falling mage and flew away from Laquatas.

As the mage fell, she cast a spell, creating a white glow around her body. Laquatas watched her fall, streaking through the night sky like a shooting star. She landed on the hillside of the bluff, far behind the Cabal lines, and Laquatas was astounded by what he saw the instant before the mage's protective spell went dark: a barbarian and a dwarf picking their way around the rear of the Cabal camp.

They ducked behind some rocks as the illuminated mage hit the ground, but Laquatas knew in that instant that Kamahl had come to him. All thoughts of helping the Order win this battle vanished as Laquatas saw his prize within his grasp at last.

"Burke, come to me," commanded the mer. "Our quarry is near, and we don't have much time." Laquatas crept down the hill and began to make his way around the battle toward the fallen aven, trying to stay in the shadows and out of the battle.

One of the blue horrors must have noticed the movement and dived toward Laquatas. As the beast came out of the black sky, Laquatas thrust his arms up at the beast and unleashed the built-up mana he had prepared for the control spell. This time, though, when the blue light enveloped the beast, it didn't fall. It merely winked out of existence, returning to the dementia space from whence it had been summoned with nothing more than a faint popping sound.

A short while later, Laquatas neared the edge of the frontline battle, and Burke rejoined him. But a trio of dementia summoners blocked their way as they followed their prey.

"Hold," said the first. "You're not Order or Cabal. Who are you?"

"I don't have time for this," said Laquatas. "Burke, kill them."

The jack moved so fast the first dementia summoner had no time to react before Burke grabbed his head and chest and snapped his neck, dropping the Cabal mage to the ground before turning to face the next. The second Cabalist shot a stream of magically created daggers out of his palm at Burke, pelting the jack in the chest, head, and arms with dozens of blades while the third mage began to shape a piece of dementia space.

Unfazed by the daggers sticking out of his body, Burke leaped atop the second summoner, pushing him to the ground and landing on his chest. With a quick kick to the mage's head, Burke crushed the man's skull and stepped off the unbreathing chest to face the last Cabalist.

The third mage finished his summoning and stepped back behind the creature he'd called out of his dementia space. The eight-foot-tall monster towered over Burke. It had a huge, misshapen head with bull horns and a double row of vertebrae sticking out of its hunched back. Its arms hung down to its knees and ended in razor-sharp pincers instead of hands.

As the horror stepped forward, it swung its arms out, almost daring Burke to come close enough for a death hug. Timing his lunge to slip inside the creature's arms as they swung around, Burke grabbed the horror's jaw in one hand and a horn in the other and began to pull its mouth open. The creature closed its arms around the jack and cut deeply into Burke's back with both pincers, spearing him with one while the second tried to cut him in half.

Oblivious to the monster's attacks, Burke continued to pry the creature's huge mouth open, finally ripping its jaw off and dropping it to the ground. As the huge horror continued to hack away at Burke with its pincers, the jack punched up into the roof of the monster's mouth, easily smashing through the cartilage, ramming his fist into the beast's brain and out through the top of its skull.

As the summoned horror dropped to the ground, Burke pulled its pincer out from his side and jammed it into the chest of the surprised mage standing behind the dead monster, piercing the summoner's heart with the appendage.

Not even waiting for Burke to deal with his wounds, Laquatas ran off toward the hills rising up behind the Cabal camp. When Burke caught up with him, he still had numerous daggers sticking out of his face and arms, but the deep gashes from the horror had been repaired.

Seeing the injured aven ahead, Laquatas dashed up the slope and frantically searched for signs of Kamahl or the dwarf. Hearing the mage moan, Laquatas dropped to his knees and questioned the aven.

"Did you see a barbarian and a dwarf after you fell. Do you know which way they went?" he asked.

"No," replied the injured and wingless aven. "I blacked out when I struck the ground. Can you help me? Did you come to save me?"

"Blast!" uttered the mer. "Useless aven." Laquatas held his hand over the aven's forehead and concentrated, forcing the Order mage to relive the battle in her head so Laquatas could see everything she saw. Right before the end, he saw in her mind the rear of a horse moving north into the brush.

"Thank you, my dear," said Laquatas. "You have been very helpful. For that I will spare you a painful death at the hands of my jack." Pressing a little farther into the aven's mind, Laquatas found a particular spot deep inside and snapped his fingers, quickly and painlessly cutting the link between life and death within the bird warrior's brain.

"Come, Burke," said Laquatas as he stood up. "Kamahl has gone this way."

Never looking back at the battle that still raged behind them, the mer and his jack headed north, picking their way through the rocks and brambles of the foothills of the Pardic Mountains.

CHAPTER 16

"What do you make of that?" asked Kamahl, pointing up into the night sky at a bright object plummeting to the ground.

"Looks like that battle is getting a might too close to us," said Balthor as he pulled on two sets of reins to cut both horses back up the slope. "Move back up the hill. It's an aven falling out of the battle and bringing an infernal light right at us."

"I'm glad to have your eyes tonight, Balthor," said Kamahl, nudging his horse to climb up the slope after the dwarf's mounts.

"I'm glad this battle is keeping them busy while we get past," said Balthor. "If I were a hundred years younger, I'd ride right through that battle, but I agree with ye that for the sake of Jeska we should avoid fights."

"With any luck, we'll be well into the plains before this battle is finished," said Kamahl.

"Follow me up to that ridge. There's a pass through there that leads out of the bluff and down to a stream that will mask our trail in case those Cabal summoners have any demon dogs up their dementia spaces."

The two rode in silence up to the ridge. Kamahl could see forms and shapes in the moonlit night, enough to keep his mount and himself out of trouble, but he was relying on Balthor's keen, dwarven eyes to detect dangers before they presented themselves.

As they reached the crest of the ridge, Balthor glanced back toward the aven one last time, then spurred his horse into a trot.

"Move it," he said. "That aven's light attracted attention."

"What did you see?" asked Kamahl as he pressed his knees into his mount.

"Two men," said Balthor. "One tall and shining in the moonlight, like the light was bouncing off him in every direction. And I swear he had . . . horns!"

"A mer? Here?" asked Kamahl. "Laquatas! The other?"

"A big lump of a man," said Balthor, picking his way down the back of the ridge as quickly as possible. "I couldn't make out any features, but he was massive and dark, almost black. If not for the moonlight, I wouldn't ha' been able to pick him out against the rocks."

"His new jack," confirmed Kamahl, following his mentor as closely as he could in the dark. "I heard stories about this creature when I returned to Cabal City the last time. They say Chainer made him using the Mirari. They say he can't be killed. They say he's deadly."

"Anything can be killed," said Balthor. "Ye just have to find its weak point."

"They say he has no weak point," added Kamahl.

"Bah!" said Balthor. "I'll find one for ye."

"But not tonight," said Kamahl.

"Not tonight. No."

The two warriors rode on, keeping a watchful eye behind them for signs of the mer and his jack as they cut back and forth down the steep slope toward the stream below. Balthor caught glimpses of them through the scraggly trees and shrubs that somehow thrived in the shallow soil of the ridge, but as they neared the stream, Laquatas and Burke were only half way down the long slope.

"That jack is sure-footed, but the mer keeps slowing them down," said Balthor. "Every time he slips, the beast has to catch him."

"Laquatas values his own safety over everything else, even the Mirari," said Kamahl. "That has always been his failing."

"I wouldn't say we've won yet," said Balthor as he negotiated the last switchback and started down toward the water, "but once we reach that stream, we should be able to outrun those two. Unless that mer has a couple horses hidden in his robes."

"I wouldn't be surprised by anything that one does," said Kamahl. "He's as shifty as he is cowardly."

"Best to keep moving then," said Balthor. "It's going to be a long night."

"Damn these mountains!" swore Laquatas as he skidded several feet down the slope before Burke shot out his arm to catch him.

"How do dry landers put up with all this . . . dirt?" he asked, slapping his hands together to wipe them clean and then wincing at the pain from the scrapes on his palms.

Burke simply stared at his master. Laquatas peered down the ridge, watching for movement behind the trees and shrubs. Having spent most of his life in the depths, the mer's eyesight was as good as a dwarf's.

"Blast Norda to the depths!" swore the ambassador, as he spotted the horses nearing the stream. "They're getting away. I'm so close. I can feel it. The Mirari is down there, and I can't get to it. I don't even know where they're taking it. . . ."

Laquatas snapped his fingers. Pressing his forefingers and thumbs against his temples, the mer concentrated on the dwarf whom he could just barely make out in the distance, looking for the entrance to his mind, the pathway to his thoughts.

"Got you," he whispered. "Jeska . . . hurt Mirari . . . Kamahl . . . Seton . . . Krosan."

Laquatas broke the contact and rubbed his temples. "Norda bless me," he said. "They're headed right to the forest. If I can just herd them into my ambush, I can take the Mirari, and no one will ever know."

Turning to Burke, Laquatas smiled. "Come, Burke. Krosan Forest is a large place. Our allies can still be of some use to us, assuming they haven't all killed each other."

"Anything?" asked Kamahl.

"Nah," responded Balthor. "I haven't seen that mer or his jack since we took off down the stream. And I swear the last time I saw them they were headed back up the ridge."

"Well, he hasn't given up," said Kamahl. "He must have some other plan."

"We should plan to find some place to hole up during the day," said Balthor, patting his horse and slowing down to a walk. "The horses need to rest, and we need to stay out of sight once we get into the plains."

"Did you bring the coin pouch?" asked Kamahl.

"Aye," grumbled Balthor.

"We'll have to pay for silence in the plains, old friend," said Kamahl. "You know that. There are plenty of farmers and ranchers who will hide us for the right price. Most have no allegiance to the Order. The just work the land."

The two rode on through the darkest part of the night. The moon had finally set behind the mountains, and the sun would not rise for another hour. Then, as the morning's first light touched the flat plains that stretched out ahead of them, the stream they were following met up with another stream to form a river that flowed out into the fertile grasslands-land that burned with more than just the sun's rays.

"Fire," said Kamahl as he squinted into the sunrise. "Headed this way."

Balthor scanned the horizon. "If we cut northwest now, we can outrun it," he said. "Or we lose half a day going around to the east."

"Shouldn't we do something about the fire?" asked Kamahl.

"Why?" asked Balthor. "That fire's not our problem, not if we head northwest now. Our problem is the fire that's tearing through your sister's gut." Balthor kicked his heels into his horse and pulled on the reigns, pushing the horses into a gallop. "Now, come on, ye big oaf. We've got a fire to race."

Kamahl pushed his horse into a gallop and followed Balthor across the two streams and north between the foothills and the fire. The horses would get no rest until noon at best. He hoped they could handle the stress.

"Commander Eesha," said Laquatas, bowing low in front of the Order military commander. "Thank you for seeing me this morning."

"We are quite busy here, Ambassador, so please make it quick," said Eesha, as she grabbed a stack of orders from her table and handed them to the lieutenant who had escorted Laquatas and Burke into the tent. "Dinell, distribute these to the aven scouts. I want them in the air before you return."

"Yes, ma'am," said Dinell, saluting his commander and then rushing out of the tent.

"You may want to recall him when you hear what I have to say, Commander," said Laquatas as he pushed a stack of maps off a chair and sat down, kicking his long, slender legs up onto Eesha's command table.

Eesha spread her wings abruptly, filling the tent from side to side. "You forget yourself, Ambassador!" she growled. "This is my command post. I am in charge here. You are here at my consent only. I have overlooked your past breaks with protocol because you are a trusted ally of the Order. But you will stand in my presence, Ambassador, or I will have you removed."

"Lord Laquatas," said the mer, leaning back in the chair.

"Excuse me?" roared Eesha.

"You will address me as 'Lord Laquatas,' not ambassador," said the mer calmly. "I am the Lord of the merfolk, so you will therefore call me 'Lord Laquatas.' And if you think you can remove me while my jack is in the room, you are welcome to try. Until then, I suggest you calm down and listen to what I have to say, or you will lose your one chance to capture the Butcher of the Citadel."

Eesha had raised her clawed hand to protest again but stopped when Laquatas mentioned Kamahl. She pulled her arm down and folded her wings back behind her, slowly and methodically. Laquatas could swear he saw her counting to ten as she did so.

"I am terribly sorry, Lord Laquatas. I meant no disrespect," she said after calming down. "The last two days have been rough. We battled a Cabal raiding party last night-

"I know. I arrived last night," said Laquatas. "I had hoped you would wait until the Cabal had actually captured the barbarian and recovered the orb before attacking, which was why I had come to find you. To tell you that my sources reported that the Cabal had failed in their attempt."

"If you were here last night," said Eesha, "why didn't you and your jack aid us in the battle?"

"We did. I dare say you would not have survived without our help," said Laquatas. "But, this is, as you

say, your command, and I would never presume to overstep my authority as nothing more than a representative of the mer people. But as Burke and I aided in your little nighttime excursion, I noticed that amidst the chaos of the battle, your quarry was slipping right through your . . . claws."

"What?"

"Kamahl, his dwarf friend, and the Mirari were a stone's throw from this very tent not more than twelve hours ago, and I was the only one to notice."

Laquatas stood, prowled around the desk, and stopped just inches from Eesha, staring down into her birdlike face. "You marched your army down here to bring the butcher to justice, and you let him ride right past you because you were blinded by your hatred of the Cabal!" he shouted.

Eesha staggered back several steps in the face of the mer's verbal onslaught.

"And yet," said Laquatas, smiling again, his voice calm and almost lilting, "the fates have smiled upon you, for your trusted ally and friend was watching out for your best interests. I know where the butcher is headed."

Laquatas turned and sat down in Eesha's command chair. "But I wouldn't want to overstep my bounds and tell you how to command your army. I'm sure the Cabal would pay handsomely for this information that I am giving to you out of my deep respect and loyalty to the Order. Shall I leave and pursue other allegiances?"

"No!" said Eesha, coming up beside the mer. "Of course not. We are grateful for everything you have done for the Order, Lord Laquatas. Please forgive my outburst earlier. You truly are a trusted friend of the Order. Deliver the Butcher to us, and I will pledge all the might of the Order to help you regain your throne."

Laquatas smiled. That's better, he thought. The mer then stood and offered the chair to Eesha, saying, "Sit commander, and I will share with you a plan I have devised that will insure that Kamahl and the Mirari never fall into Cabal hands."

Having ridden hard most of the day to get past the fire and find another river to cool down and refresh their horses, Balthor and Kamahl followed the river to the nearest ranch and paid for a night's lodging.

"A huge ransom for a night in the barn," said Balthor as they wiped down their mounts and tossed the horse blankets in the straw for bedding.

"We're paying for their silence after we leave," said Kamahl. "Plus, we got a wagon for Jeska."

"Aye," said Balthor as he sat down on his blanket. "A broken-down old wagon they don't even use anymore."

"Do you always complain this much, you scruffy, old dwarf?" asked Kamahl, smiling at his mentor's discomfort.

"Only when I'm on the road," said Balthor, smiling as well. "Fiers! I miss this life."

"You can have it," said Kamahl. "I'm tired of running, and I'm tired of fighting. There has to be more. Maybe I should stay here and raise sheep. What do you think? Would I make a good shepherd?"

Kamahl looked down at Balthor, a staff in his hands and a piece of straw in his mouth.

"Nah," Balthor said, chuckling. "Farming is for common folk. You are definitely the most uncommon man I've ever known."

"Well, somebody has to tend the land, don't they?" said Kamahl, setting the staff aside and sitting down on his blanket next to his mentor. "Take that fire today. It's ruining the plains. Who cares for the plains?"

"Eh?" spouted Balthor. "What do ye mean?" "I mean, the dwarves care for the mountains, and the elves and druids care for the forests. But who cares for the plains?" "The Order?" "Nah. All they care about is enforcing their laws."

"Well," said Balthor, "I guess the farmers and the ranchers. Ye said they had no allegiance to the Order. They must stay on the land 'cause they love it, just like the elves and the dwarves love the forest and the . . . rocks."

"Exactly," said Kamahl, "and I'm starting to wonder what that's like. I have a fondness for Auror, but it's more for the people than for the land. I guess it's the restless tribal spirit in me. I never stay in one place too long. I just think that maybe I should give up the constant running battles and settle down to become a druid like Seton or tend to the mountains like your brethren."

"Bah!" said Balthor. "Ye'd hate it boy. Too much toil and not enough excitement. That's why I never went back to me people after the war. You and me, we were bred for war, not for tilling the soil."

"You're probably right, Balthor," said Kamahl as he lay down on his side and pushed the horse blanket under his head for support. "But maybe, just for a while, it might be good to take some time to listen to the trees."

Balthor stared at the back of his friend. "What in Fiers's name does that mean?"

"It's something Seton said once," said Kamahl, sitting back up. "Everything in life has a story—a beginning, a middle, and an end. But, according to Seton, if you listen to the trees, you find out there's more to it than that. That somehow all the stories are connected together, and there are no endings, only new beginnings." Kamahl shrugged his shoulders. "I guess to truly understand it, you have to stop and listen to the trees, and they talk pretty slowly."

"Well, ye won't catch me talking to no trees," said Balthor. "Now, get some sleep. We've got a long day ahead of us tomorrow, and that fire won't stop Laquatas for long, ye can be sure of that."

CHAPTER 17

"Well, Talbot," said Laquatas into his mirror. "It would appear that Braids was more successful than earlier reports had indicated."

"How do you mean, sire?" "Kamahl has left the mountains and is heading straight for the Krosan Forest." Laquatas reclined into the furs piled on his cot and snapped his fingers at Burke who stood silently next to the tent flap. At the mental summons, the jack brought a plate piled high with breads and cheeses, courtesy of Commander Eesha.

"Why would he do that, my lord?" asked Talbot. "I'm not entirely clear on the details," said Laquatas. "Some drivel about his sister dying. He's off to find a druid he met in the pits. It doesn't really matter."

Laquatas took a few pieces of cheese and some bread from the plate then waved Burke back to his corner. "What does matter is that he and the Mirari are headed for Krosan, and all we have to do is make sure he enters the forest where Havelock and the marines are stationed."

"How do we do that, sire?" asked Talbot.

"Norda's tears, man. Do I have to lay everything out for your

"Forgive me, sire," said Talbot. "I don't have your talent for intrigue."

"Quite all right, Talbot," said Laquatas. "It is a skill I have cultivated all my life. It comes naturally to me now. We will, quite simply, herd Kamahl into Havelock's ambush by cutting off all other routes. The Order commander has graciously offered her forces for the task. The units here will drive the barbarian north, and she has sent word to the Citadel for reinforcements that will push him west. I will travel with the commander to make sure there are no mistakes and to position Havelock for the finale. It will be like spearing fish in a school."

"Excellent, sire," said Talbot. "What do you need of me?"

The mer lord dropped another hunk of cheese into his mouth and chewed it slowly. "I need to know what Braids is planning. I have both Kamahl and the Order managed at this point, but she is an unknown variable and impossible to control. Find out where Braids and her Cabal raiders disappeared to and what they plan to do next. I may not be able to control her, but I may be able to use her."

"Yes, my lord."

Laquatas put the mirror back in his pack and snapped his fingers for Burke again.

"Have you talked with the First yet, ma'am?" asked Traybor as he entered the tent he had formerly occupied.

"Not yet," said Braids, forcing her eyes to focus on the papers in front of her. Reading had never been easy for the summoner, and looking at the world through the gauze of her dementia cloud tended to make the words crawl around on the page. "I am still trying to make sense of all these reports."

"May I be of some assistance, ma'am?" asked Traybor, sitting opposite her at the table.

"Have you read these reports?" she asked, tossing the sheaf of papers across the table.

"Not all of the unit reports, no," said Traybor, "but I compiled the major reports." He picked up the papers and quickly put them back in the proper order and laid them on the table in a neat stack.

"Then summarize those for me, so I may make my report to the First."

Traybor picked up the top report, skimmed the first page, and said, "This is the casualty report. We lost thirty of our fifty grunts, but only five summoners during the battle with the Order. Interestingly, one entire summoner unit was destroyed well behind the battle line."

"That is odd," said Braids. "Which unit?"

Traybor checked the casualty list. "A three-man unit under the control of Trost."

"Trost?" asked Braids, looking through Traybor with her brow crinkled as she stepped briefly into her dementia space. "Why is that name familiar?" she said wistfully, not entirely in the room anymore. "Oh, yes," she said, snapping her head back straight, her eyes clearing again. "I fought with Trost in the pits. He

was a powerful summoner with a menagerie of huge dementia creatures. Who or what could have killed him?"

"This report doesn't say," said Traybor. "We would have to check the unit reports to see if any of the unit leaders saw Trost get killed."

"Check them," said Braids as she swirled her hand through her dementia cloud, turning the morass of black particles into a vortex.

"I felt something odd on the fringe of my perception during the battle, but I couldn't afford to delve too deeply into my dementia space to see it clearly. Escaping from the Order trap was our top priority, but I know that frost's death is connected. We must find out who or what killed him."

Traybor flipped through the reports. "Four units were in that quadrant of the battle-----I need to find the reports of the other units. . . . They should be together. . . . Here they are."

Traybor skimmed the unit reports while Braids used her dementia space to create a scale model of the battle from memory and began pushing pieces around the table, moving the battle forward and backward in time, looking for any oddity that had escaped her attention during the battle.

"Here," said Traybor. "I found something in Isolde's report. She was stationed between Trost and the command post."

On the table the three men in Trost's unit turned yellow while Isolde and her two summoners turned a golden hue.

Traybor read the report. "About midway through the battle I heard one of Trost's men confront an intruder. We were busy dealing with a wing of aven mages and the inexplicable loss of most of our summoned ground troops, so we could not move to assist. By the time we drove off the avens and replenished the frontlines, Trost and his men were dead. Livia reported later that she had seen a large, black-skinned beast tangling with one of Trost's slicers."

Traybor looked up from the report and said, "That's all there is. What do you think?"

Braids didn't answer. Her eyes had rolled back into her head, and she was staring, white-eyed at the top of the tent. On the dementia-map of the battle a blue-black, hulking figure bashed its hand through the skull of the slicer and pulled the beast's pincer out of its side and use it to skewer Trost.

"Great Kuberr!" whispered Traybor. "What could do that?"

Another figure appeared behind Trost's assassin-a tall, thin, silvery-blue man with short horns and semi-webbed fingers. As Traybor waited for Braids to return so she could answer his question, two red dots appeared at the edge of the battle simulation, near a glowing white aven.

"Laquatas . . . Burke . . . here?" gasped Braids, her eyes still halfway into her forehead, her mouth open as she gulped for air between words. "What were they doing running through the battle?"

"Braids?" called Traybor to the entranced summoner. "Braids? Focus on my voice. *What* are those two dots? The two red dots near the fight between the beast and Trost? Behind the downed aven. Braids. Focus on the red dots."

The battle between Burke and the sheer reversed, and the two figures ran back into the chaos of the frontline battle and disappeared. The aven flew back up into the air to the point where her light splashed across the two red dots. The battle froze there and then rotated around, bringing the rear echelon into focus. The edges of the melee then melted away as Braids enlarged the red dots. Finally, all that was left of the simulation were two figures on horses-a dwarf and a barbarian.

As the dementia memory turned to smoke on the table. Braids came back fully to the present. "Kamahl and the dwarf who killed Leer," she said. "It must have been the Mirari I felt last night. I'd better contact the First."

Kamahl and Balthor continued northward, pushing their mounts as hard as they dared given the condition of the cart that held Jeska. An Order patrol had tried to cut them off from the east by creating a wall of billowing, white clouds, but it was now falling behind. Balthor had tossed a huge ball of fire, which erupted inside the cloud, turning the solid cloud into a thick fog of steam that shielded the warriors from the infantry attacks as they rode through.

"That's the third patrol today," said Balthor, cracking the reins over the heads of the horses. "And this one had a mage."

Ye gotta let me fight, Kamahl, or one of those Order pups is going to get lucky."

"No." said Kamahl. "No more bloodshed. We'll have to find another way to stop these attacks. I told you, I'm tired of all of the killing, and I won't use that sword you've hidden away back there, either."

"How did ye know?" asked Balthor. "Did ye see me stowing it in the stable?"

"I can sense the presence of the Mirari, you old fool," said Kamahl. "I've followed that thing to the end

of the continent and back. Did you think you could hide it from me in some cloth? I only let you bring it along because I plan to bury it in the Krosan Forest. It's the one place in Otaria that both the Order and Laquatas fear to go."

"What about the Cabal?" asked Balthor.

"Summoners do enter Krosan to add beasts to their dementia space," admitted Kamahl. "But it's a significant ritual, and many do not survive the trip. I went with Chainer on his ritual, and we barely made it out of the forest alive. Even the strongest Cabal mages have never been all the way to the center of the forest. The Mirari will be safe there."

"If we make it there," said Balthor. "Ye'd better come up with a way to beat the Order right now me boy, because that foot patrol was just a diversion. Look up there."

Balthor pointed to a flock of what looked like large birds coming toward them from the northeast. "Aven warriors," said Kamahl. "Cut back to the west to give us more time."

The warriors turned their horses and spurred them on again, trying to outdistance the winged mages, but the aven were faster than the wagon, and each minute brought the two warriors closer to a deadly confrontation. Balthor snuck a look over his shoulder and saw the trailing aven in the formation casting spells on the leaders.

"They're getting ready to attack, Kamahl," yelled Balthor. "Now would be a good time for that new plan."

"Cabal mages often summon beasts they've tagged during their Krosan ritual to distract opponents in pit battles," said Kamahl, "like Jeska used her falcons against me."

"That's bloody interesting, Kamahl, but how does that help us?"

"Like this," said Kamahl, as he swung his legs around on the horse. Facing backward and still guiding his mount with his knees, Kamahl raised his hands above his head and began to concentrate.

A moment later, a swirling vortex of emerald and crimson formed between the large man's hands. Pulling his arms apart, Kamahl enlarged the vortex until it was big enough for a giant, silver-feathered eagle to fly out of it and soar up into the air.

"Nice trick, Kamahl," snorted Balthor. "But how will a single eagle slow down five aven mages?"

The brassy skin of Kamahl's cheeks glistened with sweat and darkened into a deep reddish-brown. Another eagle appeared, followed by another and another. The giant birds, with wings that spanned six feet, kept flying out of the vortex until the sky behind the two Pardic warriors was darkened by the huge flock.

Kamahl fell backward onto the neck of his horse and just barely held on while he rolled over to face forward again.

"Let's go," he said. "That should cover our escape and slow down the aven for quite a while."

Balthor snapped his reins again, but stared at his friend in wonderment. "I've never seen you summon birds before, and so many of them at once. How did you do that?"

"I'm not sure," said Kamahl. "It seemed to happen naturally once I got it started."

"You do realize that battle won't be bloodless," said Balthor, glancing over his shoulder. "In fact, those eagles may actually take down one or two aven mages before they're all destroyed."

"The aven could always turn and flee," said Kamahl. "Either way, it will be their choice, not mine."

"Are ye feeling all right boy," asked Balthor, staring at his friend with an eyebrow arched.

"I feel better than I have in a very long time," said Kamahl. "I am at peace with myself, finally." Looking back at his sister, wrapped in furs and strapped to the bed of the wagon, he added, "I only hope I get the chance to make peace with Jeska."

"Make this quick, Talbot," said Laquatas from the edge of a stream. He and Burke had moved away from the rest of the Order forces, so the mer could talk to his ambassador. While Burke stood guard, no Order warrior would approach, not even Eesha.

"Eesha has us on a forced march to catch up to the barbarian, and we've only stopped long enough to eat and refill our water skins. To think this morning I was lounging in a tent, and now I'll have to sleep on a horse. So report. Where are Braids's raiders?"

"My sources say that Mistress Braids and her raiders are headed for the forest as well sire," said Talbot. "The First knows that Kamahl and the Mirari are headed for Krosan."

"Interesting," said Laquatas. "The First's information gathering has always impressed me, but this is quite incredible. . . . Almost too incredible." The mer lord stared hard at his ambassador.

"B-believe me, sire," stammered Talbot. "I did not divulge the information to the First."

"Not directly, no," said Laquatas, softening his voice and his gaze on Talbot. "I trust you, Talbot, but I do not trust the First. He may have gotten the information out of you without your knowledge. That is my

fault. I should be more careful in the future."

"Shall I attempt to derail their pursuit, my lord?" asked Talbot. "I could feed them misinformation and send them to the wrong side of the forest."

"No," said Laquatas. "The First would see through such an obvious lie. No. Leave the matter alone. The First knows just enough about our little game to be dangerous, but Braids will find more than Order forces between her and the Mirari when she gets to Krosan. Havelock and his men are in position and waiting for my order to ambush Kamahl. Besides, I may be able to use her raiders to distract Eesha once we reach the edge of the forest. Stay away from the First until this is finished, so he cannot pick your brain again."

"Yes, sire," said Talbot. "Anything else, my lord?"

"Yes," said Laquatas. "I am troubled by the lack of action against us by the empress. Surely she is not blind to what is happening on the land. She's far smarter than that oaf of an emperor she replaced when dealing with the air breathers. Can you reliably tell me that Llawan has no intention of directly interfering with our plans?"

"No, sire. I cannot," said Talbot. "I believe only Llawan herself knows what Llawan is thinking. You know how inscrutable she is, my lord. But my sources tell me that she is still embroiled in that border conflict, and I do not believe she can divert her forces from that in time to stop us."

"Do me a favor, Talbot," sneered Laquatas. "Check other sources. Go to her court and dissect the bitch's brain if you have to. The next few days will be critical, and I need *reliable* information, not hearsay."

"Yes, my lord."

"Do you think it was wise to antagonize him like that?" asked Veza when Talbot returned to their bed. "You know how volatile he is."

"A few days from now it won't matter," replied Talbot. "Besides, what can he do to me from out there on the plains. Is everything in place?"

"Yes, my darling," said Veza. "Everything is in place. There is nothing more for us to do." Veza patted the silken bedding beside her.

"Nothing official anyway," said Talbot as he lay down next to Veza.

CHAPTER 18

The privateer ship, *Twilight*, sailed toward the portal on the eastern end of the Aboshan Trench with a special passenger aboard. Her captain, a wealthy pirate by the name of Dar, prowled the deck yelling at his men.

"Stow the main-sail, men! Helmsman, hard to starboard! Sailor, climb the rigging. Watch for signs of incoming ships through the portal. Ballista, keep your weapons trained on that portal."

After making sure all his orders were being carried out, Dar strode over to the hold to check on his passenger. Flipping up the trapdoor, Dar peered down into the watery darkness of the hold.

A cephalid surfaced, and Dar said, "You know with a bow full of water, it's awfully hard to steer this boat."

"Are we in position?" said Olsham, his mouth opening and closing at odd intervals, not completely in sync with the words that came out.

Dar had found this magical effect disturbing at first, but without the spell, the sea creature could not converse with humans out of the water, and Dar wasn't about to dive down into the tank to talk to an octopus, even if he was the empress's chief wizard. Besides, Dar found he could get used to just about anything if the price was right.

"We are holding as steady as we can just outside the east portal," said Dar. "I don't know how long we can hold this position, so you'd better make this fast."

"Your services to the empress will be greatly rewarded," said Olsham.

"I know," said Dar, smiling. "Now do it."

Olsham flopped out of the hold and slithered across the deck to the railing. The shimmering portal rose high up into the air, reflecting the waves, the sky, and the ship in a fractured array of blues and greens.

Dar walked up behind the mage and stared at the portal with him. "How's this going to work?" he asked.

"I will open a hole in the portal," said Olsham, "above the waves so as to not alert the traitorous mer trapped inside. The empress's attack force will jump through the portal and amass just on the other side."

Your job is to guard this escape route and not let any of the traitors get away."

"And my payment?" asked Dar. "When do I get the rest of my payment?"

"Once the battle is finished, I will enlarge the hole in the portal, so your ship may enter. Our forces will then recover all the wealth from the bottom of the trench and deposit it on your ship. For this service, you will help Llawan keep the peace within the portal trade routes by taking your pirate fleet to a different climate."

"As long as the haul is as large as you say it is, we may all retire," said Dar as he smiled and clapped the cephalid on what he assumed was the creature's back.

"Now, let me concentrate on my spell please, Captain Dar." Dar walked back to the door to the hold and watched the odd sea creature begin moving his tentacles in an intricate pattern, weaving the appendages around and through each other. After a minute of sliding tentacles into and around each other again and again, Olsham stopped and held his position. The cephalid's tentacles all pointed in different directions, but each wove its way through at least two other tentacles before protruding out to its final destination.

Even more amazing, Olsham held this position, balancing on the tip of just one tentacle for at least two minutes as power built up at the tip of each tentacle. Then, as Dar was sure the creature couldn't hold himself up in the dry sea air for another moment, blue beams shot from his tentacles toward the portal. The beams hit the portal at eight equally spaced points, forming a huge octagon above the waves. Sparks flew off the magical barrier, and the beams bent inward, racing toward the center of the octagon until an eight-pointed star formed on the surface of the portal. As the beams collided in the center, they created a small hole in the portal that radiated out along the lines of the beams. The wedges then folded in toward the trench, shortening as they moved away from the ship until they completely disappeared, leaving a gaping eight-sided hole in the portal, just above the waves.

Olsham slumped to the deck, untangling himself as he fell, and slowly pulled himself back toward the hatch to his watery cabin. As Dar walked over to the rail to look inside the Aboshan trench for the first time, five hammerhead sharks broke the waves and dived through the hole. A moment later, two giant squid arched above the waves, trailing jets of ink behind them as they splashed on the other side of the portal, followed by a series of orcas, more sharks, and dolphins carrying octopi on their backs. It was the damndest thing Dar had ever seen, and as he watched the invasion force enter the trench over the course of the next hour, it made him truly consider retiring after all this was over.

"You truly believe that Llawan has no political agendas, no ambitions beyond ruling fairly for all?" asked Talbot as the two mer lounged half in and half out of the water on a small island in the middle of Veza's backyard pond.

"Yes," said Veza. "Don't you?"

"Let's just say I have yet to meet anyone in power who didn't spend every waking moment trying to stay in power, no matter who got hurt in the process."

"Then why did you agree to help us, if you don't trust the empress any more than you trust that conniving, so-called lord of the merfolk?" asked Veza, turning to Talbot and raising her voice.

"I never said I don't trust Llawan," said Talbot as he stroked Veza's forearm to calm her down. "In fact, it was the way you talked about her and the way I saw her talk with you and not just to you that finally convinced me I was working for the wrong side. I just don't know the empress as well as you know her, and I still have some reservations about what we're doing."

"Then why did you help us?" asked Veza, her voice softening again.

"Hope, I guess," said Talbot as he stared into the ripples radiating out from his body. "Hope that this will make a better world for us and for all the merfolk left in the sea. Laquatas wanted to bring back the old days, where the mer were the lords of the seas and all other creatures were nothing more than our minions-to live and die as we please. That's really no different than it was under Aboshan, except that we were at the bottom of the food chain then. It's time for a change, for an undersea world where our children will treat the cephalids and the cetaceans and the sharks as equals and be treated as equals in return. I have . . . hope . . . that your empress can make this happen."

"Our children?" asked Veza.

"Perhaps," said Talbot, taking her hand. "Perhaps."

"But what of the rest of the merfolk?" she asked. "How many will join us in this new world?"

"At least half, I believe," said Talbot. "I've had to be careful who I contacted within the trench, but I believe most of those who doubt Laquatas will help us when the time comes."

"And they will be accepted back into Llawan's realm with no questions asked, I assure you," said

Veza.

"That is my hope," said Talbot, "as I have asked them all to turn their backs on what we once believed was our only chance to return to prominence."

"How soon do you think it will be over?"

"Soon," said Talbot. "We should hear something soon."

As the invasion force descended upon the residents of the trench, the squids filled the water with ink. Cephalid mages altered the eyes of the hammerheads and the orcas, so they could see through the inky, black clouds that enveloped them. Talbot's mer within the trench had done their work well, and most of the trench guards on duty at the eastern portal were sympathetic to the empress, so the invasion force was able to hit critical areas before the alarm was sounded.

The orcas, hammerheads, and squids attacked the marine barracks first, guided there by Talbot's information, while the dolphin-backed cephalids swam on to the mage caves. Under cover of ink, the hammerheads broke through the driftwood doors into the barracks, slowing only long enough for the squids to inject their ink inside.

The hammerheads attacked from the side, catching the first few mer still in their kelp beds, biting them in half before moving on. The orcas bashed through the coral roofs and gulped down many of the marines in the middle of the barracks. Any mer wearing or bearing the pirate Dar's insignia were left alone. These were Talbot's people.

The cephalids entered the caves just as the first hammerheads bashed into the barracks behind them. As they entered, each cephalid mage touched his dolphin mount and turned it invisible, then slowed down. Turning the last comer before the mage quarters, the cephalids prepared yet another spell. They spewed forth a jet of ink at the first mer mages they saw, ink imbued with mana and crafted to immobilize an opponent.

Cut down to half their number in the first barrage, the mer mages fought back, creating steaming hot jets of water that shot out at the invading cephalids. But the invisible dolphins could move much faster than mere cephalids, and most of the mer spells failed to hit their marks. The cephalid mages then released their hold on the dolphins as they launched their immobilizing ink spells once again. Those mer who resisted the effects found themselves battered about the chest and head by invisible foes. In a few short moments, the battle of the caves was over.

Swimming back out of the caves, the cephalids saw the destruction of the marine barracks below them and the shark and whale units swimming about rounding up the non-military residents of the trench. Looking up and around them, the cephalids could see a ring of mer guards descending, several of them holding dead mer whom they dropped, letting them settle to the bottom.

"All hail Empress Llawan!" they cried in unison. The invasion of the Aboshan trench was complete.

"What will happen to Laquatas now," asked Veza as she slipped out of the pond, transformed into her legged form, and walked over to her towel.

"Leave him to the dry landets to deal with," said Talbot as he pulled himself out of the water behind Veza. "The Cabal knows not to trust him. It won't be long before the Order figures it out. They can't be that blind."

"He could still do immeasurable harm to the continent," said Veza, patting her wet scales with a large cloth. "Especially if he gets his hands on that orb."

"But without his power base how can he hope to stand up to that barbarian and his Mirari-enhanced sword?" asked Talbot as he snapped his fingers to magically repel the excess water from his body. "You read the reports. Kamahl is the strongest warrior on the continent, and he wields the most powerful weapon in the world. What can Laquatas do against that with no marines, no elite troops, and no allies?"

"He'll still have Burke," said Veza as she donned a silken blue skirt.

"And he'll have his lying tongue," said Talbot, "which has gotten him quite far in life. Fine, you've convinced me . . . again. What should we do?"

"I will go see the First and brief him on the success of the first wave of the Imperial invasion," said Veza as she finished dressing, "and make sure he upholds his end of the bargain with respect to the Cabal raiders in the field."

"And what do you command of me, Mistress?" asked Talbot with a wink.

"You wait for the report on the second wave from the elite imperial forces," said Veza. "Bring that report to me as soon you get it, and then pack. We're taking a trip north."

In the tunnels beneath the northern plains of Otaria, the imperial elite marines swam in the darkness, moving swiftly and silently thanks to cephalid spells. Two hundred tiger sharks and another hundred eels escorted the fifty cephalid mages through the intricate tunnel system beneath the continent. They were now nearing their destination, the southeastern tip of the Krosan Forest.

"Our scouts report Havelock's troops are just another league ahead of us, Admiral."

"Good work, Commander. Continue silent swimming and maintain this distance. We attack immediately after Havelock's next daily report to Laquatas, assuming Talbot's information is accurate."

CHAPTER 19

Laquatas barged into Eesha's command tent, leaving her human guard wrapped in the strong arms of Burke.

"Why have we halted, Eesha?" demanded the mer, "when your own scouts report that the barbarian has camped not five leagues north of here?"

"For that very reason, Lord Laquatas," replied Eesha, calm before the onslaught. "And please have your beast release my man. There's no reason for violence between allies, is there?"

Laquatas was taken aback by the cool demeanor of the aven commander. Not days before he had her cowed to the point where she would have ordered the death of her own men if he so commanded it. What had changed, he wondered?

"Of course not, my dear Commander," said Laquatas, smiling broadly and snapping his fingers toward Burke, who promptly dropped the choking sergeant to the ground. "Forgive my agitation, ma'am. I merely wished to voice my concern that you might lose your quarry if you discontinue your pursuit."

"I thank you for your concern, Laquatas," said Eesha as she folded her wings back and sat down facing the mer. "But do not worry. I have aven scout patrols reporting in every half-hour. We will know when the butcher breaks camp, and we will continue our pursuit when he does."

Laquatas looked at the aven commander and tried to read her face, but these bird people were impossible to understand. He even had trouble probing their minds. They were far more complicated than humans. The mer stood facing Eesha, deciding not to sit in her presence, hoping his sudden interest in protocol would put the aven at ease and make it easier for him to crack her secret. He had a timetable to keep and couldn't afford to bicker. The barbarian must enter the forest tomorrow, or the Cabal might beat his troops to the ambush spot.

"Why not pursue Kamahl now?" asked Laquatas. "He and the dwarf must be fatigued from the constant pressure your patrols have applied this past week. Now is the time to strike."

"This has not been a simple or easy campaign," replied Eesha. "That wretched barbarian has summoned herds and herds of animals to slow us down and beat us back. Eagles, wolves, mountain lions, caribou, buffalo, and even elephants have attacked us. Every day his animals get larger and more numerous. Lieutenant Dinell was almost trampled by a mastodon today!"

Eesha stood and paced behind her table. "My troops are exhausted," she said, stopping to look at Laquatas. "I am exhausted. And tired warriors make mistakes. If we attack tonight, who knows what the Butcher will summon to drive us off, and we may lose him in the darkness of this moonless night. So, my scouts are watching his camp, trying not to alert him to their presence, and tomorrow we will bring him down . . . before he enters the forest."

Laquatas wondered if that last part was a veiled implication that she knew more than she let on about his own troops, waiting to ambush Kamahl inside the Krosan.

"The forest?" asked Laquatas, attempting to sound naive and draw the truth out of Eesha.

"Yes, Lord Laquatas," said Eesha pointing at the large, dark area of the map spread out on her table. "You, yourself told me the barbarian was heading into Krosan, and I would rather capture him before he does. Ever since the failed attempt by Kirtar to tame the forest, all Order troops who have entered the forest or even ventured too close have been lost under mysterious circumstances. I instituted a standing order shortly after taking command that no troops were to enter Krosan. If Kamahl makes it inside the veil of the trees, he and the Mirari may well be lost to us forever."

Either Eesha was a skillful liar, which Laquatas doubted, or her only concern truly was the forest. Laquatas decided to play his trump card.

"What about the Cabal forces?" he asked. "Surely your scouts have informed you that the Cabal raiding party is closing in on the forest as we speak?"

Eesha grabbed a handful of black figures from a sack sitting next to the map on her table. She meticulously placed them in a tight group north and west of the larger group of white figures. The black and

white groups, along with the two red figures due north of the white group, made a small triangle near the edge of the forest.

"My scouts place them here," said Eesha, pointing to the black figures. "Also camped, and also, I'm sure, watching the barbarian and his dwarf. If they attack, we attack. If we attack, they attack. I prefer our chances against the Cabal under the light of the sun. We camp tonight." "But Commander-" began Laquatas. "I still command here," cut in Eesha. "We may be allies, Lord Laquatas, but as long as I hold the crystal sword, I command the

Order." To emphasize her point, Eesha pulled out her sword and held it in a defensive stance across her feathery chest.

Burke immediately moved into the tent, but Laquatas held up his hand to halt his jack's advance. So this is her game, thought Laquatas. She feels the need to reassert her control over her people. I pushed her too far, and she's pushing back. Good. I need her strength right now. But she will pay for this insolence later.

Laquatas bowed low in front of Eesha, making sure she saw how completely vulnerable he was to her blade, while at the same time sending a mental command to Burke to kill her if her sword moved toward him an inch.

"Commander Eesha, forgive me," said Laquatas, still bowing. "I merely wished to offer an alternative, a suggestion for you to consider among your options for dealing with this current standoff. Obviously the final decision is yours to make."

"You may make your suggestion, Lord Laquatas."

Laquatas straightened up but kept his hands at his side, palms forward. "I offer the services of myself and my jack to ensure the barbarian never makes it into the forest," he said, his head still bowed slightly. "Burke and I can slip past Kamahl's camp tonight and block his path into the forest tomorrow should the barbarian elude your forces."

"A cunning plan," said Eesha as she sat back down at her table and stared at the map, picking up two pieces from the white group. "But can you pass by the Butcher undetected by both him and the Cabal scouts?"

Laquatas struck a more forceful pose, looking straight at Eesha and stepping forward slightly. "I am a gifted mage in my own right, Commander," said the mer. "I am sure my magic can guide me safely and secretly to any point on this map you designate."

Eesha paused as she was about to place the two white pawns down between the red figures and the forest.

"Anywhere, Lord Laquatas?" she asked, peering up at the mer while holding the pawns tightly in her claws. "You wouldn't be planning to betray the Order and join forces with the Cabal, now would you?"

"Of course not, Commander," said Laquatas, bowing his head again. "You give the order, and Burke and I will travel to any point on that map you designate. If you are worried about the Cabal, I would humbly suggest that you engage them in the morning as well. Your forces far outnumber theirs, and with the light of the sun behind your backs, they won't be able to stand against you."

"Split my forces?" asked Eesha.

"Yes," said Laquatas, smiling as he attempted a very slight magical manipulation on the commander's mind. She needed only a gentle nudge in the direction he was already pointing out to her, and reaching out with his thoughts, he pushed his way into her consciousness to tap a single emotion into action- pride!

"You need only a few platoons to take the barbarian now," he suggested, both verbally and magically. "I will block the barbarian's path long enough for you to crush the Cabal, and then come claim your prize."

Eesha dropped the white figures onto the map at the edge of the forest, her eyes clouded over slightly and her claws unsteady. A moment later, she shook her head and looked at the two pawns lying on their sides, straightened them, and said, "Place yourself here Lord Laquatas, and keep the Butcher out of the forest. I will lead my main forces into battle to crush the Cabal raiders and then come for Kamahl and that accursed Mirari."

"As you command," said Laquatas, who then bowed and left the tent, smiling the whole time.

As he and Burke prepared to leave the Order camp, Laquatas laughed out loud. "We nearly have it now, Burke. With Eesha and the Order squabbling with Braids and the Cabal, we can snatch the orb and head for home, and neither side will ever know what happened. They will probably blame each other for the loss of the Mirari."

Balthor and Kamahl broke camp just as the eastern horizon began brightening, an hour before the sun would burst upon the plains. Balthor checked Jeska's wound before lashing her body across the back of a

horse.

"How is she?" asked Kamahl as he climbed on his mount.

"The same," said Balthor. "The tissue in the center of the wound has turned gray and cold, but the blue fire still bums her from inside."

"What about the cart?" asked Kamahl indicating the shabby wagon they'd bought from the farmer several days back. "She'll get knocked around a lot like that."

"It don't seem to matter," said Balthor. "She's been jostling around for days now, and nothing's changed inside her. Besides, we're going to need speed today to outrun them Order bastards to the edge of the forest."

"I wonder why they didn't attack last night," mused Kamahl.

"They've been herding us along the whole way," said Balthor. "I think we're heading right into a trap-not that we've got much choice." Balthor picked up Jeska's bedroll, which held Kamahl's sword, sewn into a hidden pocket. "Ye sure we don't want this on your back today, boy? We're in for one hell of a fight."

"No." said Kamahl sternly. "I will give it to Seton to be buried in the forest, but I will not wield it."

Balthor nodded, then rolled up the bedding and strapped it down in front of Jeska. Climbing up on his own horse, Balthor lead the way out of the abandoned mill where they'd slept. The two warriors galloped north, pushing their mounts as hard as they dared, not wanting to lose a horse or harm Jeska in their race to the edge of the forest. Balthor continually scanned the sky ahead and the plains behind them, watching for signs of the Order attack he knew was coming. As the forest loomed and the sun crested the horizon, the dwarf felt the vibration of thundering hooves coming up from behind at the same time he noticed a dark speck in the middle of the rising sun.

"Here they come, Kamahl!" yelled Balthor. "Flyers from the east and riders from the south. Are ye ready?"

Kamahl answered by dropping his reigns and raising his arms above his head. A swirling vortex of mana exploded into existence between his palms as his horse continued to gallop toward the forest's edge guided only by the large man's knees. As Kamahl swung his arms down to each side, the vortex grew larger, forcing the barbarian to tip his head back or be swallowed by the whirlpool.

From inside the swirling mana, a huge claw reached out and grabbed the edge of the vortex, and then another. Balthor watched as a massive bird pulled itself out of the whirlpool above his student's head, its body completely filling the vortex as it passed through. The huge bird resembled a legendary raptor Balthor had once described to a young Kamahl from a story about the days when Fiers walked Dominaria.

Kamahl's great rawk was easily twenty feet long from the razor-sharp tip of its curved beak to the edge of its golden-hued tail feathers. The rawk launched itself from the edge of the vortex and spread its silvery wings, which spanned twenty-five feet, gliding off to the east, rising steadily into the sky with each beat of its huge wings.

As soon as the first rawk launched, Balthor saw another set of claws grab the edge of the vortex.

"Right," he mumbled to himself. "Ye got the flyers. I'll jest see what I can do about that army coming up from behind us, shall I?"

Balthor slipped his reins between his teeth and chomped down on the gritty rope. He grabbed his battle-axe and began to infuse the blade with mana until the weapon thrummed with power and threatened to vibrate out of the dwarf's grip. Standing up on his horse, Balthor raised the battle-axe up over his head and threw it with all his strength straight over his horse's head toward the ground ahead of them.

When the empowered weapon struck the dirt, it unleashed its force in a massive explosion, shooting bolts of electricity into the ground in every direction. With energy coursing through the ground in front of him, Balthor snapped his head back to yank on the reins, prodding his mount to leap over the imbedded battle-axe and the growing lightning field.

As the horse vaulted over the weapon, Balthor dived to the side, swinging to the ground with the reigns in his teeth, and yanked his battle-axe out of the dirt as he passed by. Pushing off the ground, the dwarf swung back up into the air to land on the horse again, battle-axe in hand.

Looking back, Balthor was pleased to see the ground begin to buckle, break apart, and open up from the power of the electricity quake he'd unleashed. The quake rolled through the ground back toward the pursuing Order warriors, who would have to find their way around the affected area or take their chances riding through the unstable ground.

Who says mountain magic has to be lethal? thought the dwarf as he glanced up at Kamahl's rawks winging their way to meet the avens flying out of the sun.

"I bet he draws more blood with them rawks than I do with me quake. Hmmph."

The warriors galloped on, leaving their Order pursuers behind to deal with their respective spells. The

edge of the forest grew nearer and nearer with each moment. But with barely a hundred yards of plains stretching out in front of them, a hundred yards of tall grass standing between their horses and the forest's edge, they finally reached the trap that Balthor had been dreading.

As Balthor pushed his mount to catch up with Kamahl, hindered by the tether lashing his horse to the one carrying Jeska's body, the dwarf saw a blue-black blur of motion in front of Kamahl. He watched in horror as his adopted son flew over the head of his horse, which had been stopped dead in place and ripped in half by a huge lump of a beast. Balthor pushed his horse even harder as the massive humanoid casually tossed the horse's forelegs, which it still held in each hand, to the ground and began moving toward the prone Kamahl.

"Keep away from me boy, ye beastie!" screamed Balthor as he stood up on his horse for the second time that day and launched himself through the air toward the retreating monster. While in midair Balthor hooked the head of his battle-axe between his heels and began rolling. When he hit the ground, he went head over heels toward the beast, his blades flashing.

Balthor rolled right between the creature's legs, opening a huge gash in the beast's groin that would have shredded the stomach of any normal creature. Kicking his feet at the ground as he rolled, Balthor popped up in front of the beast, spun in the air, and swung his battle-axe back up from his feet. Using the full force of his momentum and his arm strength, Balthor landed a massive blow in the monster's torso, embedding the axe head deep inside the creature's chest.

"Here I come, Balthor!" yelled Kamahl. "Hang on!"

"I ain't got much choice," said Balthor, his feet hanging about a foot from the ground as he held on to his battle-axe, which he could not yank out of the beast's side. "Get yeself into the forest boy!" he yelled as he dropped to the ground and rolled back underneath his foe's legs to avoid the beast's massive hands. "Take me horse, and get Jeska to safety. I'll take care of this beastie."

As Balthor rolled back up to his feet, he saw Kamahl jump on the horse and ride off toward the forest's edge just before the creature turned and swung his great fist, hitting Balthor square in the jaw and sending the dwarf and his iron helmet flying in different directions.

"You're a strong one," said Balthor rubbing his jaw as he staggered back to his feet, "and quicker than ye look. Let's see ye outrun this." Balthor clapped his hands together and shot a beam of lightning, striking the beast in the stomach just below the embedded axe and burning a hole right through to his back.

Still, the blue-black monster came on.

"Great Fiers!" said Balthor. "What in the nine hells are ye?"

"His name is Burke," came a reply from behind Balthor. "And you can't kill him."

Balthor glanced over his shoulder to see a tall, silvery-blue man with small horns on his head.

"Ye must be Laquatas," he said, moving to the side, so he could keep both the mer and his monster in sight. "Nothing's unkillable, believe me. And when I'm done with your pet, I'll be coming for ye."

"I'll be waiting for you over here, old man," said Laquatas. "If you live, you can take your best shot."

As Balthor looked back at Burke, he began to believe that the mer was telling the truth, for the flesh surrounding the gaping hole in the jack's torso was flowing together to mend the huge wound, leaving no evidence, not even a scar, of the hole Balthor had blasted through the beast just moments before. However, Burke did nothing about the wound in his chest or the battle-axe still trapped within his blue-black body.

"Won't give me my weapon back, eh?" said Balthor. "I don't blame ye. But having no weapon's never stopped me before."

Balthor danced out of Burke's way as the creature advanced on him. He was just quick enough to avoid taking another shot to the head. Leading the beast ever away from the forest, Balthor gathered more mana, hoping he could burn the creature to ash.

Turning around just after Burke made another pass, Balthor unleashed the lava flow spell that Murk had tried on Kamahl during the tournament. Curling his fingers as though he was about to scratch the beast, Balthor concentrated on the air above Burke. A torrent of lava began to spill from this spot, cascading down upon the jack, searing its head and shoulders with red-hot, molten rock.

Balthor poured more and more mana into the spell, opening the rift in the air wider to release gallons of lava on top the beast until it was covered from head to toe, and the river of lava pooled on the ground, threatening to start a brush fire in the tall grass.

Releasing the spell, Balthor warily watched as the lava cooled, entombing Burke within the black- and red-streaked, still-smoldering rock. The ironwood shaft of Balthor's battle-axe, impervious to the heat, protruded from the rocky prison, but there was no movement from within.

"Unkillable, eh?" asked Balthor, glancing back at the mer, who sat stoically, looking bored and unconcerned with the fight. "There's nothing nor nobody on this world I cannot best in battle."

"Finish this battle first, and then we'll see," retorted Laquatas.

Balthor humphed at the mer and turned back to the lava-encased beast. It still hadn't moved, and Balthor was sure nothing could survive the heat and power of that much lava. He slowly, cautiously, approached, intending to rip his axe free and use it to crush the misshapen black statue.

The rocky shell encasing Burke erupted from within, shooting shards of rock in every direction and blasting Balthor back ten feet where he landed on his back, his face, hands, and arms streaked with blood from wounds caused by the blast.

Balthor could hear the mer chuckling off behind him but was more worried about the freed beast, which was bearing down upon him. Rolling to his side, Balthor pushed himself up and tried to dive between Burke's legs, for the creature was right on top of him. He felt a searing pain across his back as he rolled through.

Looking back as he ran for safety, Balthor could see Burke's fingers, which had turned into long thin blades, retracting back to a normal size as he turned to follow.

"I can't cut him. I can't blast him. And I can't bum him," said Balthor to himself as he ran, blood trickling onto the ground from his back. How do I kill him, he thought to himself.

I told you, came the reply in his mind. You can't. Give up now and serve me . . . and I may let you live.

"Get out of me head, ye devil!" screamed Balthor as he dived to the ground again to get out of the long reach of the mer's blue-black minion. "I will find a way to kill your beast. I always do."

But nobody short of a god can kill Burke, came the mental reply. Believe me. And once he's done with you, I'll send him into the forest to kill Kamahl. Live with that failure dwarf . . . but not for long.

"A god, eh?" mumbled Balthor as he dived out of Burke's reach to avoid yet another swipe from the beast's strong arm. "I may jest have something for ye then. But first I gotta get me axe."

On Burke's next pass, Balthor tried to sidestep the incoming attack, planning to get inside the beast's reach and make a grab for his axe, which still impaled the creature. Burke's arm grew another six inches and caught Balthor in the shoulder, shattering his collarbone and knocking him to the ground.

"Damn ye-" started Balthor, wincing in pain and trying to move his now useless arm, but his curse stopped short as the beast plunged its fist into his mouth. Burke extended the flesh of his hand and arm down into Balthor's throat, choking the dwarf and closing off his air passage. Balthor could see the shaft of his battle-axe sticking straight out of the beast toward him and flailed with his one good arm trying to grasp it. It was just out of reach.

About to black out and gagging on the rubbery flesh of Burke's arm, which continued to flow down his throat, Balthor bit down hard, severing the arm. Still choking, the bloody and battered dwarf ducked under Burke's flailing appendage as the beast tried to shove it into his mouth once again. He leaped high up into the air to grab his axe.

Fighting to stay conscious, for he still couldn't draw a breath, Balthor began to summon the mana he needed for his final spell. A spell handed down in his family from generation to generation. A spell, it was said, that had been given to the great Balthor Stoneface by Fiers himself. A spell so powerful it often consumed the caster as well as the target.

Burke grabbed the dwarf's head and began to squeeze his skull, but Balthor ignored the attack as he infused more and more mana into his axe, draining all of his reserves and calling for more from the distant mountains. With darkness intruding on him, blood welling up in his eyes and seeping out of his ears from the pounding pressure on his brain, Balthor unleashed the spell. A beam of white light shot up into the sky from the head of the axe, which still lay deep inside Burke's body.

When the beam touched the sky, clouds began to form around it, roiling, black and brown clouds that emanated from the beam and quickly covered the sky, blotting out the sun. Then, as Balthor passed out, the beam ended, rising up into the clouds and disappearing.

The last thing Balthor heard was the merman laughing again. But he knew. He knew he had won. Before Burke could drop the unconscious dwarf to the ground, the clouds above opened up once more, and from the very spot where the thin beam had disappeared, a five-foot-wide bolt of crackling lightning shot down to the ground, engulfing Burke and blasting the unconscious dwarf he held at arm's length halfway to the forest.

The beam opened up a hole in the ground beneath Burke's feet, boring deep into the earth, burning everything it touched to ash. Burke withstood the electrical onslaught for several minutes, but the beam continued to bore into him and into the ground until it began to flay the skin, layer by layer, from the beast. Inch by inch, Burke's flesh was ripped away and burned to ash by the wrath of Fiers until nothing was left save the hand that had held Balthor.

Balthor woke with a start when he hit the ground, but he still couldn't breathe with the large chunk of Burke still clogging his throat. He lay on the ground, gasping for air, well after the spell ended, unable to dislodge the rubbery flesh. Finally, he saw two silvery-blue, webbed feet stop in front of him.

"I should kill you for that, dwarf," said Laquatas. "But I see that most of my work has already been done. Perhaps I'll just sit here and watch you die, choking on the marvelous creature you just destroyed."

"I won't . . . give ye . . . the pleasure," gasped Balthor as he started to reach into his mouth to pull the dead flesh of Burke out of his throat.

"Unh unh unhh," said Laquatas. "I can't have you doing that."

Balthor looked up to see Laquatas gesturing and gathering mana. A moment later, his arms and legs were frozen in place. He couldn't move. He couldn't clear his throat of the blockage. He could only lie there as the darkness settled back in.

"I'd love to stay and watch the end of the legendary Balthor Rockfist," said Laquatas, kneeling down, so Balthor could see his face and the battle-axe he now carried with him, "but I have your weapon for my trophy case. That's enough revenge for me. Besides, I have a destiny of my own to fulfill. Goodbye, dwarf. Good luck with your death."

"I'll . . . be coming . . . for ye," gasped Balthor right before he blacked out again.

CHAPTER 20

Laquatas strode toward the edge of the Krosan Forest, noticing once again how clearly defined the edge was. The high grass of the savanna ended just yards from the broad trunks of the first trees, replaced by the spongy moss that covered the ground beneath the forest. The mer knew that once he stepped into the forest he would be entering a different world, a world of shadows and danger much like his undersea world. The light of the sun did not penetrate the dense canopy of the trees just as it could not penetrate to the bottom of his ocean. Death could as easily come from above or below you in the forest as from the side. The creatures of the forest lived and battled at all elevations.

"Damn that dwarf," muttered Laquatas again as he peered into the shadowy darkness from the mossy edge of the forest. "This won't be easy without Burke."

Laquatas focused his mind on the forest, pushing his senses out to their limits. After a few moments, he could hear spiders spinning their webs, see termites burrowing into the rotting hulk of a dead tree, and feel the breeze created by moths fluttering inside the forest. Summoning up even more mana, the mage raised his hands up near his face, snapped the fingers of both hands simultaneously, and disappeared.

"Now I can see you," said Laquatas to the forest, "but you can't see me." With that, the invisible mer inched his way into Krosan, picking his way around the dense foliage to avoid providing any visible clues to his location.

As he moved silently and carefully toward the ambush spot and his ultimate prize, Laquatas scanned the forest around him with his enhanced senses, searching for lurking dangers as well as the wayward barbarian. But the forest was strangely silent.

Kamahl must have aroused some response from the forest when he barged through here, thought Laquatas as he stopped to survey his surroundings more closely. I should be able to hear the sounds of battle from Havelock's troops. I know I'm near the ambush spot. What in Norda's depths is going on here?

Laquatas released the invisibility spell and poured more mana into his sensory spell, pushing his senses out to their limit to look for Kamahl, the Mirari, or any sign of his marines. The barbarian had passed through here, Laquatas could tell. He could now see tiny horse hairs sticking to burrs in the underbrush, could smell the wet leather straps and the musty woolen blankets tied to the horses, could feel the thrum of power emanating from the mirrored orb he so much desired.

All of these sensations were minutes old. There was no evidence that Kamahl or the Mirari had been stopped by his ambush. So where is Havelock, Laquatas asked himself.

Just then, the mer sensed a buildup of power nearby, and his acute senses told him that a water portal was opening behind a tree just a few yards to the north. Laquatas ran ahead, pushing brush out of the way, no longer worried about his safety.

Laquatas rounded the large tree expecting to see his elite marines, and more than half hoping they already had the Mirari in their possession. He found only Havelock, lying against a tree, a long gash across his shiny, blue forehead, one eye swollen shut, and a large bloodstain on the front of his tunic.

"Havelock," cried Laquatas as he dropped to his knees next to the injured mer commander. "What's happened? Where are my marines? Where is my orb?"

Havelock slowly lifted his head and looked at Laquatas through his one good eye. "We were . . .

hunhh . . . ambushed, my lord . . . hunhh," said Havelock, wheezing from the wound in his chest.

"By the barbarian?" asked Laquatas, wondering at the power of the man and the orb. "Did the Mirari do this?"

"No . . . m'lord," wheezed Havelock. "The empress's . . . forces attacked . . . from behind . . . never had a chance." The commander's horned head dropped onto his chest, and his long, thin body slumped over onto the ground beneath the tree.

"Havelock! Havelock!" yelled Laquatas as he shook the commander's body. "Damn! Why is this happening to me?"

Laquatas could see the injured mer's gills still moving. He must get him away from this area in case the empress's forces came to the surface. But Laquatas couldn't leave the forest with the commander either, for he'd have a hard time explaining the presence of another mer to his Order allies, especially after losing Kamahl to the forest. Laquatas would have to brave Krosan a while longer until he could get answers from his marine commander.

Levitating Havelock's body, Laquatas refocused his senses to the forest to make sure the eerie calm still protected him from predators. Pushing the commander's floating body in front of him, Laquatas quickly made his way toward the edge of the forest. If danger loomed, he could at least save himself with a quick exit and then go find Eesha's troops or Braids's raiders for help.

Laquatas lowered Havelock to the ground within sight of the bright edge of the shadowy forest and rooted through the commander's pack for anything that might help the injured mer.

"I can't believe I've been reduced to combat medic, but I need you alive, Havelock, if I am to find out what's happened to my empire."

Inside, Laquatas found an algae pack that he applied to the commander's forehead and eye and a roll of woven seaweed netting that he used to bind the wound in Havelock's chest. Standard items in a marine warrior's pack that would help to close wounds and hasten the healing process. Now all Laquatas could do was wait for Havelock to regain consciousness.

Fifteen minutes later, Laquatus decided to delve into Havelock's mind to find the information he needed about the attack. Focusing on the injured mer's recent memories, Laquatas was able to work backward to the moments just before the attack. The commander was holding his mirror and talking to Laquatas about the ambush, and just seconds after ending the mirror connection, Havelock heard a commotion from the rear of the forces. Laquatas could see, through the commander's memories, great gouts of bubbles rise up to the top of the watery caverns as the empress's shark troops tore through the ranks of Havelock's mer marines, cutting mermen in half with their strong jaws and serrated teeth.

Before the marines could react to the shark attacks, eels slipped into the front lines from above, appearing from amongst the stalactites that dotted the roof of the cavern. The eels surrounded the middle ranks and stunned dozens of marines with jolts of electricity as the mer warriors readied themselves for the oncoming sharks.

In a matter of moments, the water was nothing but a cloud of blood and bubbles, and Laquatas could see no more of the chaos that had erupted just moments after he had last talked to his commander. Odd timing, thought Laquatas. Could the empress have known that much about my plans? And where did those forces come from? Talbot had said that the bulk of Llawan's forces were embroiled in some dispute with pirates. Oh dear Norda-Talbot!

Laquatas pulled out his mirror and tried to contact his chief advisor, but Talbot did not answer the mirror's summons-or could not. Laquatas did not know which. He tried again and again to activate the distant mirror, but he couldn't even sense where the mirror was located, which could only mean it had been destroyed.

"Damn!" yelled Laquatas. "I'm completely alone out here." Looking down at the unconscious Havelock, Laquatas's anger flared. "It's all your fault!" he yelled over and over as he kicked the injured mer again and again in the ribs until blood began to flow from beneath his bindings.

"Unhh," moaned Havelock. "My lord?" Laquatas dropped to the ground next to Havelock, grabbed the seaweed netting and began to dress the commander's wounds again.

"I'm here," purred Laquatas, "just fixing you up, Havelock. Lie back and conserve your energy."

"My lord," began Havelock again. "Where do we go from here? What should we do next?"

Laquatas stopped the blood flowing from the aggravated wound and bound the commander's torso again as he pondered that question.

"We need the Mirari," he said more to himself than to Havelock. "Without it, we have no chance against the empress. But I can't march into the heart of this dark jungle alone. I need an army. Norda's tears! Even the Order is afraid of this place. The only warriors who ever brave the mysteries of Krosan are

in the Cabal, and they're all insane.

"Even if I could convince Braids to go into the forest with me, I can't control her. She's the craziest one of them all. And I doubt she's got enough raiders left to make a dent in this place anyway. If only Braids had Eesha's troops, then I could do something. If I could control her during the endgame . . ."

Laquatas's voice trailed off, but his mind continued to spin together the details of a new plan. He'd finished rebinding Havelock's wounds, and the commander had drifted back to sleep, but the injured mer no longer wheezed when he breathed.

"Good," said Laquatas. "Sleep and heal, my friend. I will have need of you yet before this is done."

"You want us to do what?" asked Eesha, jumping up from her desk.

"Join forces with one enemy in order to hunt down and kill a greater enemy," replied Laquatas.

"We engaged the Cabal all day, Lord Laquatas," said Eesha, pacing back and forth behind her desk. "We suffered heavy casualties at the hands of those murderers. Now you want me to work side by side next to those . . . those ghouls?"

"Kamahl killed Burke," yelled Laquatas at Eesha, forcing a note of hysteria into his voice for emphasis. "My closest companion, my . . . friend. And he nearly killed me before I was forced to retreat. He has the Mirari, and with that power he's not even afraid of the terrors of Krosan."

Laquatas paused for a moment, breathing hard through his mouth as he'd seen other dry landers do when they were emotional. He was inwardly pleased when Eesha poured him a drink and placed it on the table in front of him.

After taking a sip of the harsh Order liquor, Laquatas wiped his mouth, appeared to calm down, and said, "Thank you, Commander. Perhaps . . . perhaps we can do this without the Cabal. How many aven units do you have left after today's action?"

Eesha dropped down into her chair, wincing at some pain, and then shifted forward to unfurl her wings slightly. "None," she said. "Those Cabal bastards seemed to focus all their attention on my aven comrades, even as we broke through their front lines on the ground."

Laquatas took another sip of the foul, brown liquid, stifling back his own wince at the taste and nodded sadly. He'd already known the answer.

"I'm sorry for your loss, Commander," he said. "What a horrible waste of life war is, especially when the deaths of the fallen are in vain."

Laquatas stared hard into Eesha's eyes, into Eesha's mind, as he continued. "Without those aven units, I fear there's no way we can retrieve the Mirari from within the forest. Order infantry, while superb warriors, cannot survive Krosan without support. Don't let the death of your fellow avens be for nothing, Commander. The Cabal wants the barbarian as badly as you do, so use their raiders to help you complete your mission. Let the murderers of your brothers be the fodder for your war within the forest."

Even though his last line had the force of a magical suggestion behind it, Eesha was still unconvinced. "But what of the Mirari?" she asked. "Surely the First would never allow us to retrieve it, and I will not allow it to fall into their hands again."

The mer continued the force of his suggestion spell boring into Eesha's mind. "The First is motivated by greed," Laquatas said in words and thought. "He wants the orb to rebuild the pits, but he can't rebuild the pits if he's at war with you. He knows that. Offer him peace in exchange for the orb. Which is more important-the destruction of die Mirari or a bunch of heathens killing each other? You can rebuild your forces while he plays his games. Who will be the stronger ten years from now?"

Laquatas held his breath as he watched for some sign that his manipulations had worked.

Eesha finally nodded her head slightly and, in a voice that sounded more resigned than convinced, said, "What do we do next?"

Laquatas breathed again and thought, one down, one to go. To the aven commander he replied, "I will arrange a meeting. We must work fast before the forest swallows Kamahl and the Mirari. Be prepared to meet at dawn near the edge of the forest."

"Can we trust you, Lord Laquatas?" asked Eesha as the mer stood to leave.

"As always, Commander," replied the mer. "As always."

Laquatas arrived at the Cabal camp shortly after nightfall. He was certain he'd been followed by Order troops but had expected as much from Eesha and did nothing to dissuade or harm his pursuers. He hoped the troopers would be able to remain hidden from the Cabal sentries long enough for him to finish his business, so they could stay alive to report what they saw.

As soon as Laquatas walked into the camp, he was surrounded by dementia summoners, who

escorted him rather roughly, after some simple mental prodding, to the largest tent in the middle of the camp. Let them report that back to Eesha, thought Laquatas as he allowed himself to be prodded along by knives and barbed staves.

Inside the tent, Braids sat smiling. At her side stood a dementia summoner whom Laquatas had never met but who must be Traybor, if the mer could now trust any of the information he'd received from Talbot.

Braids slammed her fists on the table and pushed herself up from her chair. As she strode around toward Laquatas, he wondered if this meeting had been such a good idea.

Braids grabbed the taller mer in both hands and pulled him into a tight hug, saying, "It's good to see you, my dear friend. I had heard you were dead, but I knew you were too stubborn to die." Braids released her hug and thumped Laquatas in the chest. "At least not while the Mirari still eludes you, eh?" she said, winking at him before returning to her chair.

Laquatas was taken aback by this welcome. The last time the mer had been in the raiders' camp, Burke killed three dementia summoners and scores of dementia creatures on his orders. And while he was certain there was no way Braids could know he'd been behind those deaths, the Cabal had either killed Talbot or turned him against Laquatas since that last foray into this camp. Why, then, the warm welcome?

"You know me too well," said Laquatas, putting as large a smile on his face as his worried mind could summon. "In fact, it is the Mirari that brings me here tonight. I know where it is, and I have a plan to retrieve it."

"Another plan from the wise Laquatas," said Braids. "I know it has been more difficult to retrieve the orb from the barbarian than I first thought," continued Laquatas, unnerved as always by the deranged summoner. "But Kamahl has entered the Krosan Forest and has nowhere left to run."

"It will be like old times, eh, Ambassador?" said Braids, winking again. "Me searching for a small silver sphere while you plot the downfall of the cephalids? It worked out well the last time, didn't it?"

Laquatas sighed. Talking to Braids always gave him a headache. "As I remember," said the mer, "you ended up with the Mirari that time, and I lost my jack. Well, I've already lost my jack this time, but I do have something you need."

"Burke's gone?" asked Braids, who now looked through Laquatas instead of at him. Her eyes rolled back into her head, and the dark cloud descended around her head.

Seconds turned into minutes, and Laquatas was unsure if the meeting was finished or if he should continue to wait. Finally, the cloud rose and began swirling once again.

"Ah, yes," said Braids. "The dwarf. Very powerful, that one. Destroyed a Mirari creation using only his own power. Impressive. You left him to die. What a waste. I had plans for that one."

Laquatas was stunned by her access to information contained only in his brain, which no mage had ever before penetrated.

"I am sorry. I did not know you two had a history," he said, responding by instinct while he tried to sort out what had just happened. He quickly probed his own mind to sense for any tampering, but found none. "If I had known, I would have saved the dwarf for you."

"No matter," she said. "Dead or alive, it's all the same. You said you had a plan and something to offer?"

"Yes," said Laquatas, his head pounding from all the twists and turns of this conversation. "I noticed on my way in that your infantry was completely depleted by the Order attacks this morning."

"Yes," interrupted Traybor, "but we destroyed their aven mages in return for the loss of our grunts—a clear victory for the Cabal."

Laquatas nodded. "I agree," he said. "Without their aven units they have no advance scouts, so they cannot possibly venture into the forest. But without your grunts keeping the terrors of the forest at bay long enough for you to summon your own horrors, you cannot afford to enter the forest either."

"What do you propose, Ambassador?" asked Braids, seemingly lucent and following the course of the conversation.

"I can provide you with more than enough warriors for a prolonged strike within Krosan," said Laquatas, regaining his rhythm again. "In return, you will allow me to use the Mirari to crush the empress. Once I have done that, I will gladly give the Mirari back to the First and provide military support to the Cabal in any future wars against the Order."

Laquatas knew it didn't matter whether Braids or the First believed him. They needed those troops now, and it wouldn't matter who got to the orb first in the forest so long as Havelock could find enough mer warriors to complete the ambush in the end.

"And where would these troops come from, Ambassador?"

"That is the ultimate irony, Mistress Braids," said Laquatas. "Your new grunts will be Order infantry."

You can drive them ahead of you like sheep, and every one that dies in our quest to regain the Mirari will be one less you'll have to face as you rebuild the pits."

"The Order has agreed to this?" asked Traybor.

"Well, Eesha plans to use you and your summoners to help her regain the orb for the Order," said Laquatas. "She may even offer to extend the peace indefinitely in exchange for the right to destroy the Mirari. She needs you, but you also need her. The rest is for history and the diplomats to decide. If you wish to join forces, meet at the edge of the forest at dawn. I will await both sides there."

Braids and Traybor looked at each other and, though unsure, Laquatas thought there was some nonverbal exchange between the two.

"We will meet you and the Order leaders at dawn," said Braids. "Now leave, and take your Order shadows with you."

Laquatas led his Order shadows back to the edge of the forest where Burke and Balthor had fought that morning. He was also fairly certain that his shadows themselves were being shadowed by Cabal raiders.

"Nobody trusts anybody anymore," said the mer mage as he retrieved his pack from the tall grass and set about making a fire. "Of course that's just the way I like it."

Laquatas knew he'd have to spend the night alone to allay the fears of both the Order and Cabal that he was merely playing one side against the other, but it was a small price to pay for the Mirari. Besides, he was as safe as if Burke were still at his side, with both of his allies watching over him and watching each other.

"Poor Burke," said Laquatas as he wanned his hands over the first flames of the fire. "When all this is done, I will have you remade. Perhaps I'll even give the orb back to the First in exchange. And then we'll march up into Pardic Mountains and take vengeance upon the dwarves for what he did to-"

Laquatas stopped to glance over where Balthor had lain this morning, suffocating on the length of Burke's arm lodged in his throat. Nothing remained except a trampled area of grass about five feet long and three feet wide, along with two trails leading through the grain up to the edge of the forest. The first path Laquatas knew to be his own when he left the dwarf to enter the forest that morning. The second path the mer could not explain.

CHAPTER 21

Kamahl rushed headlong into the forest, crashing through underbrush, sideswiping trees, and vaulting over fallen logs. He barely watched where his mount took him. He kept glancing over his shoulder, worried about possible pursuit and about the safety of his sister, who was still tied to the horse behind him.

Seconds turned into minutes, and the large barbarian began to feel secure that there was no immediate danger from outside the forest. He became more aware of his surroundings. He slowed his horse to a walk and scanned the area for signs of large predators. The forest seemed remarkably quiet, especially considering the noise he and his horse had been making.

Kamahl jumped down from his horse and led it by the reins, watching the leaves for movement, scanning the ground for tracks or broken brush that might indicate danger nearby. What he found was absolutely no evidence of large animals having moved through the area any time in the last few days, and that worried him even more.

"What is going on here?" wondered the barbarian out loud.

"We have been waiting for you, my friend," came the answer from behind him.

Kamahl whirled around, automatically reaching for the sword on his back, which had not been there in days. Barehanded, the barbarian took a defensive stance and scanned the dense vegetation behind him, trying to locate the source of the voice. He slowly moved around the horses to put himself between his sister and any possible danger, but he could not see who had spoken.

Kamahl caught some movement out of the corner of his eye and rushed forward to grab his foe and pull him into the open. Skidding around the nearest tree, the barbarian caught nothing but air in his hands. When he turned back around, Kamahl was face to face with a huge beast, half-man and half-horse, covered in leather up front and a garland of leaves and berries all the way back to his tail.

"Seton!" cried Kamahl. He grasped his friend's hand and pulled the centaur forward a full pace into a hug. "I had no idea how I was going to find you, but here you are."

"Thriss knew you were coming," said the centaur cryptically. "This area has been pacified for your journey, and I was sent to welcome you to the forest."

"Pacified?" asked the barbarian. "You don't mean the creatures were . . ."

"No," said Seton as he led Kamahl back to his horse. "The natural order cannot be tampered with, but predators go where Thriss wills them. They must follow their prey. It is their . . . nature."

"Thriss?" asked Kamahl, his head whirling from this strange meeting.

Seton smiled. "Come," said the centaur, helping the barbarian back onto his mount. "You will understand in time. But first, we must get you to safety, and I must look after your sister. That is why you have come, is it not?"

"How do you . . . ? How does . . . Thriss know why I am here?"

"All in good time, my friend. All in good time," said Seton. "Now, do you think you can follow me?"

"Of course."

"We'll see," said the centaur as he loped off into the forest, disappearing almost immediately into the vegetation. "We'll see. This is your first test."

Kamahl didn't bother responding, even though he had a hundred questions to ask. Instead, he concentrated on watching for signs of Seton's passing through the woods, which was difficult due to the camouflage of the vines, leaves, and berries the centaur wore on his back. Seton seemed able to move through the dense brush without upsetting even so much as a leaf or a twig.

Relying on the sounds of the centaur's hooves, the motion of trees, leaves, and branches around him, and the smell of Seton's leather clothes to guide him, Kamahl made his way as quickly as he could through the forest, weaving back and forth. Sometimes he moved north for long stretches, other times veering to the east, west, and even back to the south. After a while, he was no longer sure which direction he faced, but the barbarian was sure he was never more than ten yards behind Seton.

Suddenly Kamahl broke into a clearing. Twenty-five yards away sat a round dwelling made of brambles that seemed to grow up from the mossy ground to create a natural dome complete with windows. The barbarian could see light flickering from inside but could see no sign of the centaur anywhere within the large clearing. He crept up to the window to peer inside the bramble hut, finding Seton inside preparing a meal.

Kamahl looped the reins of his horse around a few of the brambles then untied his sister's body from the second mount. Glancing at the bundle that held his sword and the Mirari, Kamahl decided to leave it. He was not yet ready to touch the sword again. Carrying his sister over his shoulder, Kamahl looked for the door to the hut, walking a complete circuit around the bramble building and coming right back to the horses.

"Must be the second test," grumbled the barbarian, walking around the hut again, looking closer at the intertwined branches that formed the wall. He could see no natural breaks that might suggest an opening.

"Perhaps I should get my sword," Kamahl muttered after a second circuit around the hut. "No. I need to think more naturally. Perhaps a hands-on approach will work." The warrior walked around the hut once more to the side just opposite the window and placed his hand on the wall. He could feel it rustle under his touch, the vines still alive. Exerting his will on the brambles, Kamahl slowly opened a hole in the wall as the branches pulled to the side to let him through.

"Well done," said Seton from across the one-room hut. "You've changed a lot since we last met, barbarian. I half expected you to cut through the wall of my house to get to me."

"I thought about it," said Kamahl, stepping into the room. "I thought about it. Now, will you look at my sister's wound? We can get around to my questions later."

"Put her on the furs over there," said Seton as he maneuvered around the table to come to the back of the hut.

Kamahl placed his sister on the pile of furs. "I assume they all died natural deaths?" he asked as he looked at the skins.

"All life is circular," said Seton as he came up to the bedding. "There is no life without death and no death without life. Today they are my bedding. Tomorrow I may be their meal."

"Well, I'm not ready to be someone's meal just yet," said Kamahl. "And neither is my sister. Can you help?"

"I can help both of you," said Seton as he stared at the floor. From beneath the furs, branches pushed out of the wall and raised Jeska up into the air, forming a table in front of the centaur. "But I will need the Mirari. Only the blade that wounded her can heal her now. Please fetch it from your horse."

"Does this Thriss know everything?" asked Kamahl as he brushed the wall with his hand to open the doorway again.

"Only that the Mirari was used recently and that it has caused your sister great, great pain," said Seton, gazing at the glowing, blue wound in Jeska's stomach. "The rest you'll have to fill in."

Kamahl ran back to the horse and untied the bundle. He hesitated only a moment before grasping the

wrapped sword and running back to Seton.

"Unwrap it if you please," said Seton, "and tell me everything about Jeska's wound and how she came to be infected by this blue fire."

While he unwrapped the blade, Kamahl told Seton about the conflict he had waged both against the lure of the Mirari's power and against his sister, who was only trying to save him. He told the centaur druid about their final battle and the curse he'd stabbed into Jeska that had caused her to bum from within until consumed.

Kamahl could feel the power of the Mirari in his hands and wanted nothing more than to gaze upon its splendor once again, but he resisted, holding his great sword down at his side and keeping his eyes locked on his sister. When Seton held out his hands for the sword, Kamahl glanced down at the pommel as he handed it over to the druid and saw the orb, just for an instant, then tore his gaze away from it.

It was as magnificent as he remembered from the first time he'd seen it in the pit treasure room and again later in the ruined hallway outside Chainer's quarters. The orb had grown dull during the tournament, or it had seemed to. Perhaps it was merely Kamahl's jaded memory of that time. Now the orb shone again with an inner light that threatened to outshine the moon on a cloudless, starless night, a dazzling beauty more magnificent than a glittering dragon's horde lit by a thousand candles.

Kamahl paused, not releasing the sword into Seton's hands nor pulling it back either. He just stood there, holding the sword and trying very hard not to gaze into the orb. But it was as if he couldn't let it go until he saw what the orb had to show him.

"What do you see?" asked Seton, seemingly reading his thoughts. "Look at it. What do you see?"

Kamahl slowly allowed his eyes to focus on the reflection in the orb, and it was different. No longer did he see a brave barbarian standing atop Mount Fiers with throngs of barbarians surrounding him.

"I see a mountain," he said in a hoarse whisper. "It's surrounded by forest, and the forest spreads up the slopes, growing faster and faster, trying to reach the top and envelop the mountain.

Kamahl released the sword and allowed Seton to take it from him. Seton held it and gazed at it. Kamahl dropped onto a pile of furs, exhausted from the fights and the flights and the vision of the orb.

"What does it mean, Seton," he asked. "What does it all mean?"

"For the answer to that, you will have to ask Thriss," said the centaur. "Now get some rest. I must determine how to reverse this curse, and that will take some time."

"How did your meeting go with Laquatas and that Cabal witch?" asked Dinell when Eesha returned to camp from her early morning negotiations. "I wish you had allowed me to attend. I do not trust either of those people."

"Would you have been able to see through their lies any better than I?" asked Eesha, testy from a morning of deciphering Braids's gibberish and Laquatas's falsehoods.

"No, ma'am," said Dinell, "but I could have guarded your back should it become a target for more than just a barbed tongue."

"A point well taken, Lieutenant," said Eesha as she flipped back the flap on her tent and strode into her command post. "But the meeting was in the open, and both sides watched from a distance. I was more worried the truce wouldn't hold than I was about one of those two heathens trying something while my own guards watched."

Eesha dropped into her chair and buried her face in the crook of her wing, exhausted from the mental and verbal battles she had fought all morning. When she looked up she saw Dinell, still standing at attention in front of her desk.

"So, how *did* it go, ma'am?" he asked again. "What are our orders?"

"The meeting went about as well as we expected," said Eesha. She quickly rearranged the figures on her map, placing most of the white warriors in a classic wedge formation at the edge of the forest with the smaller squad of black figures in a loose group behind the safety of the wedge. "Our troops will cut a wide swath into the forest, while the Cabal raiders provide support from the safety of our rear. Laquatas will be safely tucked in the middle."

"We have to march into that... that jungle with the Cabal at the ready to stab us in the back?" asked Dinell.

"It's not quite as bad as that," replied Eesha, taking the rest of the white figures and placing them in rows behind the Cabal group. "Your division will guard the rear, to protect their mages, of course."

"And to protect our own troops from their mages," added Dinell. "Braids agreed to this?"

"She knows we will uphold our end of the bargain," said esha. "We are the Order. We honor our agreements."

"And where will you be stationed?" asked Dinell, looking at the formation. "Surely you don't intend to expose yourself in the front?"

"No," replied Eesha. "Do not worry about my safety, Lieutenant. I plan to fly back to the Citadel to bring back reinforcements. We will abide by the agreement and not turn on our new allies. But once we have the aven mages we need, we can finish this campaign by ourselves and leave the fate of our Cabal friends to the forest."

"Does Laquatas know you plan to return to the Citadel for reinforcements?"

"Yes," said Eesha. "He actually encouraged it. Said that if we have to turn this campaign into an all-out war against the forest, we'll need every warrior the Order can offer."

"At least he understands our value," said Dinell. "Perhaps he can be trusted after all."

"I still have my doubts," said Eesha as she unbuckled her sword belt and placed the crystal sword of leadership on the table. "That negotiation was too easy. I believe the mer wants me out of the way to make it easier for him to exert control over our forces. But I will beat him at his own game. Before I leave I will officially place you in command of the Order forces. You will carry the crystal sword as a symbol to our troops. Laquatas will find it very hard to exert influence over our warriors while you carry the sword."

Dinell straightened his back even further and saluted. "Yes, ma'am. Thank you, ma'am."

"Good morning, my friend," said Seton as he nudged Kamahl's shoulder with his hoof. "The forest is awake, and so should you be. Come, I have prepared a meal for you."

Kamahl rolled off the pile of furs, stood up, and raised his hands above his head, stretching his arms backward until he heard a loud succession of pops. He had not slept that well or that long for quite some time, and the aches of many months had finally settled into his body. A hearty breakfast and a good, long run. That's what he needed. That's what Balthor would have called for on a morning such as this.

As the barbarian's thoughts turned to his stalwart dwarf friend, he remembered Jeska as well and went to her side. The operating table had turned into a cot, and she seemed to rest peacefully. Kamahl reached out his hand to brush an auburn lock from her face and was surprised to find her skin warm, not burning hot. Her face was no longer flushed. In fact, it seemed almost too pale, and her hands were actually cool.

"Is she . . . Will she be all right?" Kamahl asked as he turned to face Seton.

"I have done all that I can," said Seton. "Now it is up to Jeska. She will live, or she will die. Either way, the choice is hers to make. I have removed the fire that was consuming her. Whether there is enough left of her will to return, we will know in time. Now she must rest."

Kamahl walked over to the table where Seton stood, eating nuts and berries from a bowl. The barbarian concentrated on the floor and raised up a crude-looking chair of brambles and vines and then, gingerly, took a seat at the table.

"I don't remember you talking in such riddles when we met in the pits," said the barbarian as he filled his own bowl with nuts.

"The byproduct of a contemplative life I'm afraid," replied Seton. "With no one to talk to for weeks on end, I tend to start talking much like I think. Phrases, sentences, words come out in a jumble as my mind races ahead of my mouth. I apologize."

"I never saw you as the contemplative type," said Kamahl as he crunched down on a nutshell to get to the meat inside.

"That was another person you met in the pits," said Seton. "I played the part I was assigned at the time. This is the real Seton you see here today. I have given my life to Thriss and spend my days serving the forest."

"Then why did you leave the forest to enter the pit battles?" asked Kamahl.

"It was the will of Thriss," replied Seton. "When the orb appeared, Thriss could feel its power. I was sent to determine its nature and, if need be, fight for it. I failed to retrieve the orb, but Thriss has watched you and the progress of the orb for a long time. He believes it is in good hands now."

"Well, I don't believe that," said Kamahl dropping the shards of his nutshells back in his bowl and pushing it away from him. "Look at what I did to my sister-what I almost did to my people. I don't want it anymore. I want to bury it in a deep, dark hole."

"I know," said Seton. "That is why Thriss believes you to be the proper wielder of the orb. You are the only person to have ever rejected its power."

"I will not wield it," said Kamahl, stomping his fist on the table. "So your Thriss, whoever he may be, will just have to find another champion."

"The storm is coming, Kamahl," said Seton, cryptic again. "You can either face it with knowledge or

run from it in ignorance. Either way, your path lies through the heart of the forest, through the domain of Thriss."

"What in Fiers's name is that supposed to mean?" said Kamahl. "Who is this Thriss, anyway?"

"Thriss is the spirit of the forest," said Seton as he clomped around the table back toward Jeska. "The guardian, if you will."

Seton grasped the sword, which he'd stowed in a natural sheath in the wall. Backing up and turning to face Kamahl once again, he brought it over to the barbarian.

"You will find Thriss in the heart of the forest itself-in the sacred grove. And that is where you must go, whether you wish to bury the Mirari or embrace it as the champion of the forest."

"What about Jeska?" asked Kamahl.

"I will care for her," said Seton holding the sword out to Kamahl once again. "She needs rest and nutrition, both of which I can provide for her. She will be fine, my friend. She is strong willed. I will take care of her. You must take care of yourself, and for that you need Thriss. I cannot help you here."

"Fine," said Kamahl. He took the sword. "I will go see your guardian spirit, but I promise nothing. I will bury this sword in the ground and return for my sister. I am no champion."

"That is your choice and your path to find," said Seton. "But remember one thing as you journey into the heart. The cycle of life is sacred and must not be broken. Predators kill to survive and prey only lives on when consumed."

"More riddles," grumbled Kamahl. "Great."

The barbarian moved to the wall and opened the doorway to the forest, but turned back to his friend. "One last thing, Seton."

"Yes, my friend?"

"When you looked into the Mirari, what did you see?"

"The heart."

"Yours or the forest's?"

"Both."

"When do we enter the forest?" asked Traybor as he walked beside Braids through the Cabal camp.

"At first light tomorrow," came the reply, but Traybor could tell by the way Braids looked straight forward as she talked, and by the swirling cloud surrounding her forehead, that she was not completely in this conversation.

Perhaps she was conversing with the First. Perhaps she was just having some fun with her own personal demons. He did not know. Wherever the summoner was right now, it was not in the

abal camp on the edge of the Krosan forest, and he would just have to wait for her to return to get his answers. Traybor continued to walk beside Braids as she wove through the camp toward her tent. Her mouth moved, but he could not hear her words. just outside her tent, the cloud lifted back above her head, and Braids's eyes cleared. "You had a question Traybor?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am," said Traybor. "If we wait until morning to begin our hunt for the barbarian, he will be two full days ahead of us. Shouldn't we enter the forest now, tonight?"

"The Order troops are afraid of the dark," she replied. "They wish to wait until daylight. I can't say I blame them. Krosan is a forbidding and dark place even in the full light of day. Keep your senses trained on the trees for attacks while you are in there. And don't worry about the barbarian. Nobody can move quickly through Krosan. You will catch him."

"I will? Where will you be?"

"The First requires my presence," replied Braids. "Some new developments must be discussed. I can't say more."

"The empress? Laquatas? The Order? What?"

"I can't say more," said Braids. "But beware of Laquatas while you are in the forest. He will try to betray us-us and the Order. That much you can always count on with that sea snake. You have my authority to deal with him as you wish if he turns on the Cabal."

"And the Order?"

"They are not our concern . . . yet."

Braids pulled back the flap to her tent but turned back to Traybor before she entered. "Has my gift to Laquatas been delivered?"

"It awaits you in the back of your tent," replied Traybor smiling. "Isolde's unit brought it in this morning while you were in conference with the hawk and the snake. They secured it last night as you instructed."

"Excellent," said the summoner, her cloud sinking down over her head once again. "Then I have work

to do before I leave. Make sure I am not disturbed this evening."

Traybor nodded and turned around as the flap dropped back behind Braids. He would stand guard himself, he decided.

CHAPTER 22

Kamahl ran back through the forest to the spot where he'd met Seton the day before. He was surprised to find that the straight route back was less than a thousand yards. The night before it had taken him an hour to follow the centaur to his grove. Using his newfound power to control vegetation, Kamahl re-grew broken branches and trampled moss to mask his passage to and from Seton's home.

Kamahl then raised his hands over his head and brought forth a summoning circle, easily eight feet in diameter. Out of the swirling vortex stepped two horses-exact duplicates of the mounts he'd left at Seton's cottage. He tied the two horses together, mounted the lead horse, and crashed off through the forest away from Seton's grove. Being careful not to destroy any plants, the barbarian and his summoned mounts left a distinct trail that should be easy for his enemies to follow.

After an hour of planting the false trail, the barbarian rode his summoned mount underneath a large tree, grabbed an overhanging branch, and pulled himself free of the horse as it trotted on. Swinging himself up onto the branch, Kamahl gave the magical mount one last mental command and watched from his perch as it crashed off into the woods.

"By the time that trail suddenly stops, Laquatas will have no idea where to even start looking for me," said the barbarian to himself as he gingerly walked the branch back to the trunk of the large oak tree. "Now to put some distance between my real trail and the false one."

Spreading his arms to produce another summoning circle, Kamahl concentrated on Emerald, his old gecko mount, and summoned a replica. The gecko pushed its head and forelegs through the vortex, grabbed the tree trunk with its sticky toes, and climbed the tree until its tail slipped through the circle. It hung there, clinging to the oak tree in front of Kamahl, its tongue snaking in and out of its mouth to smell the air for danger.

With one hand petting the gecko's head, Kamahl raised his other hand, spread his fingers, and uttered a simple spell to spray a sticky goo out of his fingertips onto the gecko's back. Grabbing a limb above him, Kamahl swung onto the gecko, immediately adhering to the goo.

Kamahl and his new mount moved from tree to tree, ascending and descending as needed to find strong limbs that could support their double weight. They headed north, toward the center of the forest, toward the heart.

Kamahl had yet to see any of the large predators he and Chainer had fought on their previous excursion into the forest. "We must still be in the purified zone," he said to his mount.

"From the warnings I got from Seton, I had thought this trip would be more perilous."

The gecko leaped from one tree to another, almost two hundred feet up in the air, as something large and brown slashed by Kamahl from below, leaving two deep gashes in the side of the gecko. As his summoned mount dissipated underneath him, Kamahl plunged through the branches toward the forest floor.

Kamahl tried to summon a rawk as he plummeted but lost the vortex when he caught a limb full in the stomach, which knocked the wind out of him and broke his concentration. Still falling and bouncing off branches, Kamahl knew he must slow his descent.

Summoning mana into the palm of his hand, Kamahl sent a bolt of energy toward the tree, causing the rapid growth of a thick, tangled vine that snaked back along the beam to his hand and wrapped itself around his wrist. Grabbing the vine with both hands, Kamahl held on as the vine snapped taut, stretching it and his biceps nearly to their breaking point.

Both the vine and the barbarian's grip held fast, and Kamahl began to arc toward the tree. As he neared the trunk, Kamahl twisted his body to the side and bent his legs to absorb the impact. The barbarian used his momentum to swing back up and away from the tree where he'd been attacked, landing on a branch only twenty feet below where he'd begun his descent.

Kamahl crouched on the branch and looked for his attacker, attuning his other senses to the forest. He felt the movement before he saw the camouflaged attacker flash around the trunk of the tree, swinging its long arms at Kamahl's chest.

Kamahl back flipped away from the attack, curling his toes around the branch to stabilize himself for a counterattack as he lit on his feet farther down the limb. He faced what he could only describe as an eight-foot-tall preying mantis, although it was difficult to see it against the backdrop of the forest. Its plated thorax, tail, and claws were the color of the tree trunk, while its long limbs and neck were the deep green of

oak leaves. The mantis warrior walked easily on the branch, shifting its weight evenly across four clawed feet that dug into the branch. As it slowly moved forward, obviously testing the barbarian's boundaries, the mantis raised its arms, baring both its razor-sharp claws and the serrated knifelike ridges on its forearm.

"Do not come any closer. I do not wish to fight you," said Kamahl, raising his own arms up in what he hoped looked like a peaceful gesture, but to a position that also gave him many more options should an attack come.

"Leave Krosan, human," said the mantis warrior in a clipped voice that sounded like two sticks being rapped together. "Leave Krosan ... or die."

"I have other plans," said Kamahl, who sincerely did not want to fight and probably kill the warrior. Instead, he dived off the side of the branch, still holding the vine in his hand. The barbarian swung down toward the forest floor then back up. He released the vine and tried to land on another branch.

Overbalancing as he landed, Kamahl sprawled forward onto the branch and hugged the wood with his arms and legs. A slight vibration in the tree made him look up. From his prone position, Kamahl could see four sets of brown claws dug into the branch in front of him. Hearing a whoosh of air, Kamahl rolled over and off the thick branch to avoid the serrated elbows of the mantis warrior.

Instead of falling, though, Kamahl caught the branch with his hands. The barbarian kicked his body to the side and curled his torso around the branch to strike the mantis's legs with his own feet, kicking the creature off the branch.

As the warrior fell, it slashed at Kamahl again but missed the barbarian and hit the branch instead, cutting through the thick wood as easily as it had sliced through the gecko's soft flesh. Suddenly, Kamahl was falling again, with a huge mantis raking its claws at him from below. Kamahl shot his arm out to create another vine and swung away from the falling mantis, sorry for the loss of such a fine warrior but unable to help a beast who seemed so intent on killing him.

Deciding it would be safer to face the perils of the forest on the ground, Kamahl poured mana into his vine and extended its length. Grabbing a branch on a passing tree, he slid down toward the ground, keeping his eyes on the treetops for signs of his pursuer.

The large barbarian dropped the last ten feet to the moss-covered ground and was immediately surrounded by six mantis warriors. Two of the creatures stepped aside to let another mantis enter the circle. This one limped, noted Kamahl, not putting any weight on one of its four legs-the same leg Kamahl had kicked high up in the trees.

"Who are you?" asked Kamahl, amazed by the tracking and fighting ability of the creatures. An army of these bugs could easily defeat any of the other factions on Otaria.

"We are the natuko," clicked the leader as he limped around the circle of his warriors. "The guardians of Krosan."

"I have no quarrel with you," said Kamahl. "I am a friend of the forest."

"No outsider is a friend," said the natuko leader. "You have fought and killed in the forest before. Why should we trust you now?"

"I was sent by the druid Seton," replied Kamahl as he scanned the forest for some means of escape.

"Seton has no authority over us," said the leader, still pacing around Kamahl. "Leave now."

As the leader limped around him, Kamahl noticed something strange. All of the natuko seemed to be following the leader's movement and only looked at Kamahl when he turned his head or lifted an arm. The barbarian wondered if, in the ever-changing colors of the forest, the bugs saw motion more than color and light.

"I seek the guardian in the heart of the forest. He is waiting for me," said Kamahl as he stood still and built up a small reserve of mana in his palms. "I do not wish to fight you, but I will not turn away from my quest."

"Then you shall die," clicked the leader from behind Kamahl. The leader jumped at Kamahl, and the barbarian closed his eyes as he dropped the twin balls of mana, which exploded in a burst of light and a billowing cloud of smoke. Kamahl dived to the ground and rolled in between the natuko warriors to his side. Ducking behind a tree just outside the circle of mantis warriors, the barbarian backed into the trunk and willed his body to complete stillness, hoping his guess about their vision was correct.

For several tense minutes Kamahl stood there, mere yards from his newest pursuers. Several natuko passed right by him, but none seemed to notice the barbarian. After another few minutes, the warriors left the area, broadening their search for their missing prey.

Kamahl stood and listened, making sure that all of the bug warriors had truly left. He then moved from tree to tree, watching for any movement that might betray his followers. Several times over the course of the next hour, the barbarian caught sight of natuko and dropped to the ground or dived into a bush to

become just another part of the landscape.

After nightfall, Kamahl became somewhat bolder. He needed better camouflage come morning, and he found it on the banks of a stream that ran through the forest. Dipping his hands in the mud, Kamahl covered his face, arms, and legs with wide swaths of dark brown muck.

Heading back into the trees, Kamahl pulled several vines down from a tree, ripped them into strips, and tied them around his arms, legs, and torso to break up the large areas of brown on his body. Taking one last vine, Kamahl tied it around his forehead to prevent the glint of his eyes from betraying him.

The next morning Kamahl headed back into the trees. He walked the branches himself, jumping from tree to tree and creating swinging vines as needed to head deeper into the forest.

CHAPTER 23

Laquatas was quite pleased with himself. Not only had he convinced Commander Eesha to return to the Citadel, but now Braids had decided to leave as well, ostensibly to report back to the First. Perhaps his luck was returning, thought the mer.

Laquatas was no fool. He knew there must be more going on in Braids's mind than a sudden need for direction from her superior. But he must not squander the gift she had given him. He still had at least one trick left up his sleeve if Havelock could muster any of his remaining warriors for one last attempt at the Mirari. And with the orb in his hands, not even the First could stand before him. Chainer had already proven that.

But I must leave nothing to chance, thought Laquatas as he prepared for the morning's march. Tonight I shall begin to exert my control over the two lieutenants, lest their commanders return sooner than I expect.

The morning's march went well for the allied forces. The Order phalanx cut their way through the underbrush, leaving nothing but tall trees alive in their wake. Still nothing attacked the troops. Laquatas reached out with his mind to scan for predators, but it was just as it had been when he pursued Kamahl into the forest-deserted of all wildlife larger than rodents.

"Oddly quiet, isn't it, Ambassador," said Traybor, coming up beside the mer.

Laquatas thought the summoner had overly stressed the word "ambassador," but he decided to let it go. He needed Traybor-for now, at least.

"I quite agree," said the mer, smiling broadly. "I had expected to be fighting for every yard we gained."

"Of course we could have passed right by the barbarian and never known it at this rate," said Traybor. "Especially with those Order idiots destroying the trail ahead of us."

"Not to worry, young man," said Laquatas. "I'm sure your mistress has told you that anyone who has ever come into contact with the Mirari can sense its location. I can tell you that it is definitely in front of us."

"But you can't tell where it's been, can you, Ambassador?" asked Traybor, subtly turning the appellation into a slur with his intonation. "Did you know that Kamahl left this trail two nights ago with a second fully laden horse and then returned again yesterday without his extra load? I would say that the barbarian's sister is at the end of that second trail, which has now been all but destroyed by those overzealous fools."

"Interesting information," said Laquatas, "but useless to us at the moment. Our forces are too small to split up, and we can't afford any delays with Kamahl already two days ahead. If we cannot overpower the barbarian when we reach him, we can always return for the girl. Now, you should return to your task, which is safeguarding the Order troops as they cleanse our path."

Just then, from the sides of the phalanx, a half-dozen creatures dropped from the trees, slashed into the nearest Order warriors, and then vaulted back into the trees, disappearing into the leaves before any of the allied forces could even react.

From behind Laquatas came a call from Dinell. "Phalanx halt," yelled the human lieutenant as he rode his horse up through the Cabal summoners. "What just happened here?"

Laquatas and Traybor followed the lieutenant up to the front ranks. The Order troops were scanning the trees. Laquatas reached out again with his mind but could find no trace of the attackers. He had let his scans lapse while Traybor talked to him. Had the summoner known about the impending attack and diverted his attention on purpose? Laquatas decided he'd better watch that one more closely during this campaign.

"Patrolmen report," barked Dinell from atop his horse. "What happened?"

The Order soldier tore his eyes away from the trees to look at his commanding officer. "Bugs, sir," he

said. "Giant bugs dropped from the trees, slaughtered six men, then disappeared."

Laquatas, Dinell, and Traybor all looked down at the remains of the dead soldiers. Two had been decapitated, another disemboweled, and three more had been cut cleanly in half, right through the rib cages.

"What in the nine hells could do this so quickly?" asked Dinell looking at Laquatas and Traybor. "This was no bug attack."

"Nantuko," said Traybor. "The warriors of the forest."

"You knew about these . . . these warriors and didn't warn us?" asked Dinell. "How typical of the Cabal."

"I only know of them from other summoners," said Traybor. "Believe me, only the craziest Cabal summoners have ever tagged a nantuko and lived to return to the pits. Even in the pits they are hard to control and harder to defeat."

"What are they?"

"Just as your man said," replied Traybor, "giant bugs. They guard the forest, ever-present but never seen—at least not by many who leave the forest alive. Few who have survived the mysteries of Krosan have ever caught more than a fleeting glimpse of the nantuko, and then usually only as they fled from the beasts. The bugs hide in plain sight, attack with blinding speed, and are gone before their foes drop to the ground."

"How can they be stopped?" asked Dinell as he scanned the trees nervously.

"By not being there when they attack."

"Gibberish!" spat the lieutenant. "I noticed you Cabal rats were not there when the nantuko attacked. But what about my men?"

"Most likely they will die," said Traybor with a hint of a smirk on his face.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," interjected Laquatas as the two leaders advanced on each other. "We must work together, or we all die, and we will fail in our common mission. Save your venom for the barbarian."

Dinell and Traybor backed away from each other, but neither relaxed.

"Good," said Laquatas. "Now, Traybor and I shall work on a way to warn of incoming nantuko attacks. Dinell, keep your men ever-vigilant against surprise attack. We will get through this if we all cooperate, eh, gentlemen?"

Both men nodded and turned away to go about their tasks. Laquatas watched Traybor head back to his summoners. He's shrewder than any summoner I've ever encountered, thought the mer. I wonder what else he's holding back? Perhaps I should delve into his thoughts tonight and see what I can find.

The phalanx slowed to a crawl after the first attack. The second-rank warriors all watched the trees while their comrades in the front lines hacked away at the underbrush. But even these soldiers watched over their shoulders, afraid to take their eyes off the forest.

Laquatas continually scanned for nantuko but was often distracted by Traybor. He moved back and forth through the ranks of summoners as they advanced through the forest, talking and laughing with his mages, seemingly totally unconcerned by the threat of impending attack. The mer wanted to call the Cabal commander on his insolence but couldn't spare a moment from his scans, lest he lose more Order troops to the nantuko. Tonight, thought the mer. Tonight I will make you mine.

The nantuko attacked three more times that afternoon, and Laquatas went over each attack in his mind that night while deciding what to do about Dinell and Traybor. Laquatas had been able to raise the alarm moments before each of the first two attacks, and yet the order phalanx still lost four more soldiers, and not a single nantuko warrior was injured. The bugs moved so fast they were almost on the ground by the time Laquatas could yell out a warning. After a few quick slices, they were gone again, lost in the trees. Before the last attack, Traybor had once again distracted the mer, and six more Order troops were killed.

Laquatas saw the second attack. Just after he yelled, two bugs dropped from the trees right beside Order soldiers who were busy hacking through a large bush. The first nantuko warrior slashed down with both arms into the soldier's exposed neck, slicing through to the vertebrae from either side with its serrated forearms. The second bug plunged its claws into the side of its foe as the soldier turned toward Laquatas's call, shredding the man's organs and bursting through several ribs on its way up into his heart.

The second-rank soldiers raised their spears to plunge them into the attackers, but the bugs sprang back into the trees as the spears whisked through the empty space they left behind. Laquatas had thought it odd that he'd scanned six creatures in the area, yet only two had attacked. But he realized now that all of the other soldiers in the area had turned at his call and readied for the attack. Only the two men who had not yet reacted quickly enough were targeted.

Smart bugs, thought Laquatas. They will be tough to stop without some help from Traybor and his summoners.

The Cabal had been oddly silent during every attack. Laquatas's suspicions were aroused even more

during the final nantuko attack of the day. Once again, just before the attack, Traybor came up to ask some inane question of the mer. Laquatas had ignored the summoner and concentrated on his scans, but he noticed the man's eyes kept darting toward the phalanx and back as they walked. Then, just as Laquatas felt the incoming bug attack, Traybor tripped and fell into him, almost knocking both mages to the ground. By the time Laquatas righted himself, the attack was over.

Traybor apologized for his clumsiness, but Laquatas didn't have to read the man's mind to know he was hiding something.

"What is he up to?" said Laquatas to the air inside his tent. "What is he plotting in that little brain of his? He does seem saner than most summoners I have met. Perhaps I can delve into his demented mind. Perhaps I can even exert some control. If not, I will just have to apply pressure instead."

Laquatas stepped out of his tent and looked around the camp. The allied forces had created a clearing after the last attack that was large enough to hold all the troops and still leave a ten-meter space between the camp and the nearest trees. The Order soldiers set up their camp on the north side of the clearing, while the Cabal raiders settled into the southern parts. Laquatas's tent had been pitched in between the two camps.

The mer sauntered toward Traybor's command tent, hoping he could get the summoner alone long enough to probe his mind and implant some control points. As Laquatas pushed aside the flap, his hopes surged inside him. Traybor was indeed alone.

"Good evening, summoner," he said as he moved into the tent. "I hope I am not disturbing you."

"Not at all, Ambassador," said Traybor smiling as he pushed his dinner plate away from him. "I've just finished my meal. What is on your mind this evening?"

Laquatas again vowed to kill this monstrously impertinent mage after he acquired the Mirari.

"It is about the nantuko," began Laquatas as he took a seat in front of Traybor's table. "We must find some way to combat them before they destroy all of the lieutenant's forces."

With his legs blocking Traybor's view, Laquatas folded his hands together and began to build up a reserve of mana in his fingertips.

"They are too fast even for my summoners to react in time," said Traybor. "What would you suggest?"

Laquatas seemed to ponder the question for a moment as he sent a wispy, azure tendril of power out toward Traybor underneath the table. The probe engulfed the summoner's boot and insinuated itself through the leather and the skin beneath, searching for the nerves in the sole of his foot.

"Is there some way your people can detect the bugs before they attack?" asked Laquatas as he sent his awareness through the probe into the man's nervous system. "My own scans are too localized to be of much use."

Laquatas's mind raced through Traybor's body. The distraction of the seemingly innocent question should provide an open door into the man's thoughts and memories. Once inside, Laquatas knew there was no way Traybor would ever be able to get him out.

The physical Laquatas saw Traybor's pupils narrow and his eyes flash black momentarily as if ink had been injected into them and then flushed out again. The astral Laquatas saw the same ink splashing from synapse to synapse, cascading down the spinal cord directly toward him. When the ink washed over him, the mer felt like he was drowning in mud. The ink pushed him down and stuck to him, invading every pore of his essence.

Laquatas nearly gagged from the images he was receiving from his mental trip through the summoner's body. He could feel his power ebbing away as the ink threatened to destroy his astral body. He did the only thing he could—he severed the contact and returned his essence back to his body.

"I suppose we could send out some dementia beasts as scouts," said Traybor, smiling after the ink washed away from his eyes.

"That would be most welcome," said Laquatas, who was suddenly pale and out of breath.

"Are you all right, Ambassador? Can I offer you something to drink?"

"No thank you," said Laquatas, rising from his chair. "I'm simply overtaxed from all the scanning today. Perhaps I should go seek out an Order healer."

"Excellent idea," said Traybor. "Sleep well."

As Laquatas crossed the clearing toward the Order encampment, he went over the meeting with Traybor in his mind. What was that, he wondered. He may be the only summoner to ever completely master his own dementia space. Perfectly sane in most respects, but incredible power at his fingertips, and total control over his own mind.

"I must speak with the lieutenant," said Laquatas to the guard outside Dinell's tent, raising his voice just enough to make sure all of the nearby soldiers heard what he wanted them to hear. "I have reliable

information that the Cabal forces held back aid today during the nantuko raids, aid that could have saved Order lives!"

As the guard held the flap back to allow Laquatas to enter the tent, the mer could hear the whispering spread from fire to fire around the camp. Now I just have to get Dinell to confront Traybor in the morning, thought Laquatas, and then I can step in to save the alliance and exert my control over the Order troops.

Laquatas sat down and told Dinell everything he suspected about Traybor's lack of action during the attacks, embellishing where needed. But, as usual, the truth made for the best lies, and he was able to paint a nasty picture of betrayal and complicity with the nantuko on the part of Traybor and the Cabal.

"You cannot let this affront to the Order go unpunished, Lieutenant," said Laquatas. "I felt it was my duty to bring it to your attention. I shall back you completely when you confront Traybor in the morning."

"That won't be necessary, Lord Laquatas," said Dinell, rising and walking around the table. "We shall deal with the Cabal when the time is right, but you have no proof of any wrongdoing, and I am honor-bound to uphold the treaty."

"But the attacks . . ." started Laquatas. "The Order deaths. The Cabal is not holding up their part of the treaty."

"We do not need their help, Lord," said Dinell, walking over to the tent flap and pulling it back for Laquatas, "and until I witness this Cabal betrayal myself, I will not do anything to endanger the treaty that Commander Eesha signed."

Laquatas was still weak from his encounter with Traybor's dementia space, or he would have simply taken over Dinell's mind then and there. As he rose to leave, the mer had a sudden bolt of inspiration.

"Very well, Lieutenant. I can see you are a man of principle. I will continue to watch out for Order interests, and I will return when I have the proof you seek. You can count on that."

Laquatas left and began the trek back to his tent in the darkness between the two camps. He was pleased to note that there was a certain tension in the air around the Order camp. The news of Cabal treachery had spread as he had hoped. However, he was also dismayed to see that the guards posted around the camp had been doubled while he talked with the lieutenant, perhaps in response to the rumor he'd started.

The beast circled the clearing, watching and waiting. It had but one purpose-to kill. Its quarry was elusive. But in the dark hours before dawn when the fires burned low and the watchmen's eyelids grew heavy with sleep, the creature knew the time to attack had come.

It slipped past the Order guards without incident, bending low to the ground and walking lightly on the trampled moss of the manmade clearing, moving from shadow to shadow. Its prey was in the middle of the camp. The creature planned to take him there, to make him pay, to kill him before he could do any more harm.

The beast circled around the tent, looking for a secluded spot to enter. It heard a muffled cry followed by a soft thump from inside, and it knew it was too late to stop the evil. Losing control of its anger, the creature howled and ripped into the side of the tent, trying to get at its prey.

At the sound of its howl, the camp came alive around the beast. Men began shouting, and the creature could hear footsteps coming near. It turned away from its quarry, vowing to return, and ran back toward the trees. Soldiers converged on the creature, and it knew it would not be able to escape without bloodshed.

The beast turned north and loped toward the trees, only one guard between it and the darkness. Behind it, the fires flared back to life while men shouted and ran after. When it reached the lone soldier who stood in its path to freedom, the creature lunged forward hitting the man in the chest, its claws gouging out two large chunks of flesh as it slammed into the soldier and shoved him to the ground.

Rolling over the prone body of the guard, the beast came up running and fled into the total blackness of the trees. As it ran farther into the forest, the creature heard one last cry from the clearing behind him.

"Dear God! The lieutenant is dead. That creature killed Dinell!"

CHAPTER 24

The next morning Laquatas surveyed the carnage in Dinell's tent. The lieutenant's body lay in a heap beside his cot. His throat had been ripped open, and there was a large, bloody hole where his stomach used to be.

Laquatas looked over a large hole that had been ripped into the side of the tent. "You think the beast came in through that rip?" asked the mer to the assembled Order soldiers-a couple sergeants and several corporals-all that was left of the troop's leadership.

The warriors looked from one to the other, none sure who should speak for the Order now that the lieutenant was dead. Finally, one of the sergeants spoke up. Laquatas recognized him as the guard who had been stationed outside Dinell's tent the night before.

"I'm sorry," he began, obviously uncomfortable about what he was about to say. "None of us know who should speak for the Order now that the lieutenant is gone. You see the crystal sword is missing as well. Whoever... whatever killed the lieutenant must have taken it. We're all... a little stunned by the double loss."

"Perfectly understandable sergeant," said Laquatas, putting his hand on the sergeant's shoulder. "We'll get through this together. As the leader of the new mer empire, I humbly acknowledge you as the spokesperson for the Order ... at least until Commander Eesha returns. Now, tell me what happened last night."

"Several men reported seeing the beast running away from the lieutenant's tent," reported the sergeant, looking more sure of himself now. "It must have entered through that hole. There's no other explanation."

"Sounds logical, Sergeant," said Laquatas. "Did anyone get a good look at the creature?"

"I did," piped up a corporal who had a bandage wrapped around his chest. "It went right over me on its way into the forest."

"Well," said Laquatas, "what did it look like?"

"It w-was pretty dark," stammered the corporal, "and the fires were behind the beast, so I couldn't see its features. It w-was kind of short. Short, but faster than lightning. Its skin was ash gray. It had long claws like a wolf and glowing, red eyes."

Laquatas looked back at the dead body of Dinell. "Claws you say?" he asked. "These wounds look like the work of a wolf, don't they? I believe you are right, Sergeant. The beast killed Lieutenant Dinell. The question is, who sent the beast?"

"The bugs?" asked one of the corporals.

Laquatas shook his head. He would have to lead these poor, feeble men to the conclusion, even after giving them all the clues.

"No, Corporal," he said. "I doubt the nantuko can or need to summon creatures to do their fighting. No, I would guess that ashen-faced creature was the work of a more demented mind."

"The Cabal?" asked the sergeant in a hushed voice.

"That is my suspicion," said Laquatas.

"Those bastards!" swore the sergeant.

"They betrayed us!" said the injured corporal.

"After signing the treaty," said the sergeant. "They'll pay for this."

The soldiers were on the verge of erupting into a mob, and Laquatas knew the time was right to strike.

"Yes, they will pay, my loyal Order allies," he said as he sent tendrils of energy out to each of the men in the tent. "But a battle now, in this deadly forest, would be foolhardy. Wait until we have the Mirari, and together we will strike down the Cabal and all of the enemies of the Order. Who's with me?"

It only took a slight mental nudge to get the assembled men to follow his lead. Laquatas was able to quench their thirst for blood with tantalizing thoughts of a larger feast to come. He had them now. The Order army was his to command, and that was all the power he should need to topple Traybor and take control of the Cabal forces as well.

"Sergeant!" barked Laquatas and was pleased to see the soldier snap to attention in front of him. "Assemble your men and bury the lieutenant. We will break camp as soon as I straighten out those Cabal swine."

"Yes, sir," replied the sergeant.

Laquatas left the Order tent and made his way toward the Cabal half of the clearing, trying to decide how to handle Traybor this morning. He was sure that strong-arm tactics wouldn't work. The summoner was too sure of himself to be cowed. Plus that beast was a like dark cloud obscuring the path. What was it? Why did it attack last night. Who was it after?

These were questions the mer lord could not answer. Laquatas had killed Dinell and made it look like a beast attack, so he could blame it on a dementia creature and thus implicate the Cabal. But to have a dementia creature actually in the camp at the time of the murder was too much of a coincidence. It made the mer's head throb. Until he knew more about that beast, his plan to control the Cabal would have to be a work in progress. There were just too many variables to go completely on the offensive just yet.

By the time he arrived at Traybor's tent, Laquatas had a working plan. He had ripped his silken shirt, slapped dirt on the cuffs of his pants, and given himself a nasty scratch across his cheek. Flipping back the flap, the mer stumbled into the tent and fell to his knees beside the chair before pulling himself up into the

seat.

Traybor looked up from his morning meal, smirked, and said, "Rough night, Ambassador?"

Laquatas's mind raced forward. He knows something, thought the mer. Let's see if I can root out the truth.

Wiping blood from his cheek with the back of his webbed hand, the mer took several deep breaths, exhaling loudly to make it sound as if he'd run a long distance.

"It's . . . the Order," he wheezed. "They were . . . attacked last night. They . . . blame . . . the Cabal. It took all . . . my strength . . . to hold them back. I've come . . . to warn you."

"You have my thanks, Laquatas," said Traybor, "but I assure you, we have nothing to fear from the Order. They signed a treaty and they are, after all, honorable people."

Laquatas took another deep breath, more to prevent himself from hyperventilating than to continue his act. "Yes, but they now believe you have broken that treaty," said the mer. "Some sort of beast attacked the Order camp last night and killed Lieutenant Dinell. From the description of the beast, the Order soldiers believe it was a dementia creature. You wouldn't know anything about that would you?"

Traybor paused with his fork just outside his open mouth and stared at Laquatas over his raised hand for a brief moment, but it was enough of a moment for Laquatas to tell that Traybor knew something.

"None of my people sent that beast," said the summoner after swallowing his food. "I can assure you of that."

"I'm not the one you need to assure," said Laquatas. "Look, I can control the Order troops for now, but if your raiders don't help out more today, I can't say what those soldiers will do. They have lost a lot of men, and you have lost none. They didn't trust the Cabal to begin with, and now a beast roams their camp at night. Help me contain their anger. Use your creatures to stave off the nantuko today, and maybe this treaty can last long enough for you to get the Mirari and finish this conflict for good."

"We will do what we can, Ambassador."

The creature hid in the shadows, watching as tents were stowed and soldiers formed up in a phalanx. It could feel the presence of the nantuko nearby. They too watched the allied forces prepare for the march. It did not fear the mantis warriors. They could not kill it. They could not even find it. It could stand motionless for days if need be. Its only fear was that they would get to its quarry first. That it could not allow.

Traybor was true to his word on the second day. The summoners sent their dementia creatures into the forest around the allied forces. Giant spiders swung through the trees on thick lines of silk. Large cats that once might have been black panthers but now had an extra set of legs or the head of wolf all prowled the forest floor to either side of the phalanx. The nantuko attacked the beasts several times throughout the morning, but never got close enough to the allied forces to kill any soldiers. The phalanx made good time hacking a path through the forest.

Laquatas maintained his scans, at first to insure the dementia creatures were indeed keeping the bugs away but also to keep an eye on those same Cabal protectors to sense any change in their hunting pattern that might be a precursor to an attack. Several times during the day, Laquatas also felt the presence of something else, something that was neither nantuko nor dementia creature. It was always behind the allied forces, and each time he sensed its presence, the creature quickly faded back out of range.

It must be the same beast that entered the camp last night, thought Laquatas after sensing the creature again. But if it's not a dementia creature, then what is it, and who sent it? And what does it want?

Distracted by the beast in the shadows, Laquatas didn't notice that a hole had opened up in the Cabal's dementia web surrounding the forces-until it was too late. Two of the spiders traveling through the trees ahead of the phalanx winked out of existence just as the lead panther bolted into the forest, leaving a path down through the trees for an attack.

Before Laquatas could raise the alarm, three nantuko dropped in front of the phalanx and attacked the nearest Order soldiers. One bug stabbed its claws into his foe, but the Order guard was able to twist out of the way, and the bug hit the man's shoulder instead of his chest.

The soldier next to him was not so lucky. The bug swiped its razor-sharp forearm down, opening up a long diagonal gash across the man's torso. The soldier screamed and fell to the ground.

The third bug advanced on its prey, but before it could strike, the nantuko was thrown to the ground as a six-legged panther barreled into it from the side. Prone with a six-hundred-pound cat standing on its thorax and legs, the nantuko slashed with its serrated forearms, sending globs of skin and muscle flying into the air in an effort to get away.

The other two bugs leaped into the trees and disappeared, but the entire front quarter of the phalanx descended upon the remaining nantuko with their spears and swords. Soldiers hacked away at the creature's legs and arms, trying to immobilize the bug before it could extract itself from the clutches of the dementia cat. As the panther dissipated into inky, black smoke, the sergeant who now led the Order troops, jumped on top of the bug and plunged his spear through its thorax, pinning it to the ground once again.

A great cheer erupted from the Order troops as they reveled in their first victory in the forest. The sergeant brought the head of the nantuko warrior back toward Laquatas on the end of his spear.

"A present for you and your Cabal comrades, my lord," said the sergeant, presenting the head to Laquatas.

"Excellent work, Sergeant," replied Laquatas. "A true team effort. Tend to the wounded, and make preparations for camp. Tonight we celebrate."

While the Order troops cleared the area for a camp, Laquatas reached out with his mind to levitate the severed nantuko skull and headed over toward Traybor with the head bobbing behind him.

"Master Traybor," began Laquatas as he stopped and willed the prize to float up in front of him. "A job well done today. Here is the prize for your cooperation. I think this may help you in your future endeavors, as I believe you have never gotten close enough to tag a nantuko."

"Indeed I have not, Ambassador," said Traybor as he grabbed the head out of the air. "I would have preferred it whole, but the head will make a nice addition to my cats."

Laquatas turned to leave then turned back. "One more thing, Traybor," he said, smiling. "I believe the beast that attacked the Order camp last night was shadowing us today. Did any of your cats spot it? I believe it could be even more dangerous than the nantuko."

"No, Ambassador," smiled Traybor. "We detected nothing but the nantuko today. If you are scared, perhaps you would like to camp with the Cabal tonight?"

Laquatas nearly lost his calm demeanor at this latest aspersion from the arrogant, young summoner. After a moment, he replied, "No. Thank you. I will stay with the Order. They need my leadership after the loss of their lieutenant."

"I understand completely, Ambassador," said Traybor. "Don't worry about us. I'm sure the Cabal will be safe from your shadow."

Laquatas turned on his heels and walked briskly back toward the Order forces. Traybor obviously knows what that beast is, thought Laquatas. But I won't get it out of him. He's too smart for his own good. It may be time to get rid of Master Traybor and find a summoner I can work with more easily.

The beast watched its prey move through the burgeoning camp. The tall, silvery-skinned mage headed back into the heart of the Order forces. After last night, the watch would be doubled again. There would be precious few openings it could slip through to get at the mer. But it could wait, and if an opportunity didn't present itself, it would just have to create a hole in the camp defenses.

Laquatas slipped out of his cot, pulled the satchel out from underneath the bed, and opened it on the wool blanket. He needed no light to see the contents. There was more light seeping into the tent from the dying fires outside than ever filtered down to the bottom of the sea. He reached underneath the cot once more and pulled out the long, thin blade from the spear the sergeant had used to kill the nantuko that afternoon.

"I could not have asked for a more fitting weapon," said the mer softly.

Laquatas laid the spearhead on one side of the open satchel and pulled out several small vials from protected pockets on the other side. He carefully measured several drams of a fine, white powder into a small bowl, then scanned the row of vials arrayed on the satchel.

"This should do the trick nicely," said Laquatas. "Immobilizes instantly, but kills slowly and painfully. I might even get to watch the poor bastard die since he won't be able to talk once the poison enters his system."

The mage uncorked the vial and slowly tipped it over above the bowl. One, two, three drops fell from the lip of the vial, making small, wet circles in the white powder. Laquatas then took his pestle and ground the liquid into the powder until there was a nice white paste in the bottom of the bowl. Taking a stiff brush from the satchel, the mer scraped up the paste and spread it on the tip and edges of the spear blade.

Laquatas then wrapped the blade in a dark cloth and set the spear aside. After closing and stowing his satchel, the mer donned a dark cloak, flipped the hood up over his horns, so they wouldn't glisten in the firelight, grabbed the spear, and headed out into the Order camp. Laquatas wasn't worried about getting out of the Order camp. None of the guards he met would even remember seeing him. Their minds were simple

to manipulate.

No, the trick tonight was getting into the Cabal camp undetected. Laquatas had toyed with the idea of turning invisible or using a water portal, but the mer was certain the Cabal would have wards against such magic. No, he would have to rely on stealth and, possibly, a simple sleep spell. Nothing that would give him away in the morning.

The mer headed out toward the forest, bending the minds of the Order guards he met along the way and then attuning his mind to the forest before he left the protective ring of the night watch.

"No nantuko around," Laquatas said to himself, "and no sign of my shadow either. Good." Laquatas crept through the woods around the clearing, intending to enter the camp from the rear, assuming that the Cabal was more worried about the Order guards than the forest denizens.

About halfway around the camp, Laquatas knew he had made a mistake. He detected the beast above, moving fast toward him. A moment later, the creature landed with a loud thud right beside the mer. Laquatas broke into a run, not even bothering to look back at his assailant.

Not accustomed to running over uneven terrain, the mer bounced off a tree and crashed into a bush. By the time he extracted himself from the thorns, the beast was standing over him. It was just as the corporal had described. No more than five feet tall, the creature wore shabby clothes that hung on him as if made for someone twice his girth. His features were sunken, his ash-gray skin pulled tight across his chin and cheek bones.

But what riveted Laquatas to the spot were the beast's eyes. They glowed red, not bright like the flames of a torchlight, but deep maroon, like pools of blood reflecting a torch. But Laquatas was nothing if not a survivor, and he knew the path to death lie through those eyes. He ripped his gaze away from the beast and pulled the cloth off his spear.

As the beast howled and lunged at the mer, Laquatas jammed the spear into the creature's gut, twisting it as it plunged through the leathery skin. The beast came on still, undaunted by the killing blow to its torso or the venom on the blade. Laquatas pushed on the spear with all his strength, turning the creature's charge to the side. Getting his feet under him, Laquatas ran directly toward the camp, fearing for his life with every step, certain he could hear the beast's footsteps behind but afraid to look back.

Laquatas finally crashed into the clearing, nearly toppling forward as the dense, uneven forest gave way to the trampled moss. After a few final staggering steps, Laquatas came to a stop, rested his hands on his knees, dropped his head down, and gasped for air.

"Problems, Ambassador?" asked a familiar voice.

Laquatas looked up to see Traybor and several other Cabal mages lined up in front of him. Taking a couple deep breaths, the mer stood up, straightened his cloak, and struck a more dignified pose.

"Excuse me, Master Traybor" he asked.

"An odd time to be taking a stroll through the forest, Ambassador," said Traybor. "Many dangers lurk out there."

Traybor was looking right at the spear still in the mer's hand. Laquatas glanced at the weapon, seeing the venom paste quite visible on the blade along with a sickly green goo that dripped from the bottom of the blade onto his gloved hand.

"I was awoken by a premonition of danger," began Laquatas, tearing his eyes away from the blade to look at Traybor. "The beast was coming for you, so I made my way into the forest to try to stop him. As you can see I struck the beast with this blade, but it hardly slowed him down. I was lucky to escape with my life. He's out there right now. Come with me, Traybor. I'm sure together we can kill the beast."

Laquatas doubted his ploy to get Traybor alone in the forest would work, but by the end of his story, his confidence had returned, and sometimes a bold move paid off.

Not this time.

"No thank you, Ambassador," said Traybor, folding his arms as he regarded Laquatas through his narrow eyes. "We'll handle the beast in our own way."

The mer wasn't sure, but he could swear he saw Traybor's eyes flash black, which he knew was a precursor to the summoner's dementia magic. Laquatas decided not to press his luck against the throng of powerful, yet unbalanced, summoners. There would come a better time for disposing of Traybor and his brood.

"Well, good night then," said Laquatas as he turned and headed back toward the Order side of the clearing. He wasn't sure if he'd gotten away with his lies or not and wanted very much to probe the mind of one of the lesser Cabal mages, but he didn't dare do it out in the open.

He got his answer when he stepped into his tent. There, in ten-inch-tall, inky black letters that hung in the air over his cot, dripping on his wool blanket, Laquatas read: POISON ONLY WORKS ON THE

LIVING, AMBASSADOR.

Laquatas dropped the spear on the floor and rushed back out into the camp, but he was already too late. Half of the clearing was completely empty. The Cabal forces had vanished.

CHAPTER 25

Kamahl crouched in the tree, clutching the branch with his fingers and his toes. He'd abandoned his boots the day before, desiring more direct contact with the wood as he ran along limbs and swung from tree to tree on his journey toward the center of the forest. Below him, six nantuko moved swiftly and silently southward, never noticing the motionless, dirt-and-moss covered barbarian above them.

It was the third patrol he'd seen heading south in the past two days. Kamahl knew his pursuers had entered the forest, that Laquatas was coming for him and for the Mirari. But Kamahl knew how to avoid the nantuko, and he knew that the mer was no match for the forest warriors. For the first time since he'd laid eyes on the Mirari, Kamahl was not worried about Laquatas.

Kamahl remained motionless on his limb well after the nantuko patrol passed by, waiting for the other animals to return. Their senses were still far keener than his, and he had learned from experience over the last two days that it was not necessarily safe to move until the other animals returned.

Twice, nantuko raiding parties had double-backed and spotted him when he moved. The second time he had remained motionless for an hour. His patience and his muscle control had grown immeasurably during the past few days.

And yet, they had waited just as long. When the barbarian released his hold on the branch and fell to the forest floor, the raiders were on him in an instant, slashing at him with their razor-edged forearms and cutting him off as he tried to retreat. In that battle, Kamahl had been forced to disable two nantuko, breaking all four legs on one beast with a vicious leg sweep and dislocating the shoulders of another when the nantuko warrior struggled against the vines Kamahl had summoned to entangle the creature.

After that battle, Kamahl realized he could not sense danger as well as small prey could. Each time the nantuko attacked, the barbarian now realized, the forest went quiet, and it was not until he was completely out of danger that he would begin to notice life returning around him—the chattering of squirrels, the buzzing of insects, the songs of birds. He then decided to wait until the sounds of the forest awoke before continuing his quest.

And so Kamahl waited, crouched in the tree, barefoot and covered in mud, twigs, and leaves. He waited for the forest to revive, for danger to pass. Finally, a brown form moved through the leaves. The barbarian slowly raised his upper body until his back was up against the trunk of the tree, keeping his legs bent beneath him.

It was only a squirrel on its way to look for nuts or on its way back home after foraging. Either way, it meant that the danger had passed. The forest, in its own way, was telling the barbarian it was time to move along. Confident that the patrol was gone, Kamahl moved off from his perch in the crook of the tree, running along the limb and springing as the branch began to bend under his weight. For a moment he floated through the air, his arms spread wide, feeling the rush of wind the squirrel must have felt as it glided through the trees.

But the barbarian couldn't fly or glide and had to rely on his arms, legs, and magic to navigate the treetops. His perfectly timed jump sent him past a lower branch on the nearest tree, which Kamahl grabbed with both hands, allowing the momentum of his legs to swing him around and up to a handstand. Bending at the waist, the barbarian lowered himself onto the branch.

Springing up to grab the next branch, Kamahl swung up onto that limb and then sprinted down its length and launched back into the air. As he began to fall, Kamahl shot his arm out and called forth a vine. The barbarian swung past the next tree and twenty feet higher into a tree beyond.

After several hours of moving from tree to tree through the upper reaches of Krosan, Kamahl began to notice a subtle change in the forest. No longer did he have to spend so much time jumping directly from tree to tree. He could move greater and greater distances on the vines, for the trees were now growing farther and farther apart, leaving much more open space up in the bows.

In fact, in many instances he had no choice but to swing from one tree to another. Where once the leaves from different trees intermingled at the ends of their branches, now it was rare that the barbarian could even make it safely from one tree to another without the help of magic.

Kamahl leaned against the trunk of an oak and surveyed the forest, scanning his surroundings with both his eyes and his ears. Looking left and right, he noticed the trees nearly lined up like rows of wheat in the fields he and Balthor had ridden through on their trek to the forest. Were these trees planted long ago

by the guardian? Did Thriss have some control over the plants as well as the animals? Kamahl did not know, but he was certain that this was not a natural occurrence. It looked more like a garden—a very large garden.

The barbarian also noticed that it was much brighter than it had been in the outer parts of the forest. The conclusion was obvious—with fewer leaves, more light was getting through.

Listening to the sounds of the forest, Kamahl noticed one final change. Where the denser, darker parts of the forest had, out of necessity, been governed by silence most of the time—for most of the larger predators hunted as much by sound as by scent—this lighter area was much more alive with the chittering of squirrels, the songs of birds, and the constant rustle of leaves as the small inhabitants moved freely in and around the trees, unconcerned about predators.

Kamahl made a decision. It was time to leave the trees and make the last leg of his journey on foot. He had, over the last few days, turned into a wild animal. With no one to talk to and the constant danger from nantuko and other large predators, the barbarian had become something feral—less human. Now he must regain his humanity and leave the trappings of the wild behind.

Kamahl scrambled down the trunk of the large oak tree, quickly descending the hundred feet between him and the floor of the forest. Kamahl slowly stood up to his full height, flexed his arms up over his head, and stretched out the muscles in his back. He then pulled off the vines he'd tied around his body and dropped them to the ground. Covered with mud and sweat, his feet and hands red and callused from days spent in the trees, and his hair disheveled and full of twigs, Kamahl knew he was still a sight to behold, a wild man from the deep woods.

Looking down at the vines he dropped, Kamahl noticed that even the ground here was different from the wild portions of the forest. Moss and bushes had given way to ivy, flowers, and even grass. In the middle of the row of trees, the barbarian noticed something else—a well-traveled path heading straight north.

For the first hour on the path, Kamahl remained tense, expecting an attack from behind every tree. But as every tree passed and another ambush didn't take place, he began to relax, to stretch out his tense muscles, to walk straighter and taller again.

As Kamahl's tension eased, he began to enjoy the walk and spent more and more time gazing at the tamed wilderness around him. There were patterns in the ivy on the trees. The vines and leaves wove in and around each other to form loops, lines, and swirls that all worked together to create some intricate design the barbarian could not figure out.

Even the flowers seemed to be placed in precise positions. Kamahl could see a panoply of colors lining the path in an intricate, alternating pattern of reds, blues, yellows, and purples. The patterns must mean something to someone, but Kamahl could not decipher what, perhaps because he could only see this one, small section. The meaning might become evident only if he could see the whole forest. Kamahl was now certain that the entire forest had been created by a gardener, albeit one who worked with trees as easily as flowers.

Traveling down the path, wondering at the enormity of the work required to tend this garden, Kamahl suddenly came upon the heart of Krosan, never seeing the end of the path until it was upon him. He hadn't known what to expect when he started on this journey, and even Seton's reverence for the place hadn't prepared him for what he saw as he left the woods and entered the heart. Kamahl stepped into a huge clearing larger than all of Cabal City. That entire city, from the docks outside the east gate to the gently rolling hills rising up from the west gate would fit inside the heart of Krosan.

Looking to the left and right at the tree line, Kamahl could see a gentle hint of a curve as the trees at the edge of the clearing arced ever so slightly around what Kamahl felt certain was a perfect circle. Looking up, Kamahl expected to see blue sky, which he had not seen since entering the forest several days earlier. Instead, he was surprised to see that the entire clearing was still covered by leaves high overhead.

Huge trees dotted the clearing, spaced hundreds of feet apart. The trees that grew perfectly straight, high up into the sky, with no foliage until the very top. There, these amazing trees sprouted long branches in every direction, looking like hundreds of spokes on a wagon wheel. The thousands of wide leaves that grew out of these branches made a roof over the clearing that kept the heart secluded from the outside world, yet allowed light and water to trickle down to the idyllic garden that spread out in front of Kamahl.

Then something made Kamahl's body tense. Between two of the pillar trees that held up the roof of the heart, the barbarian saw a group of nantuko. Kamahl couldn't tell what the mantis creatures were doing, but he didn't think they'd seen him yet.

There was only open ground between the barbarian and the nantuko. He could slip back into the trees and try another route into the heart, but something inside told Kamahl to proceed, so he willed his body to relax and strode forward, keeping a close eye on the nantuko as he moved.

The mantis group didn't seem concerned about the approaching barbarian. Kamahl was certain one or two of them had glanced his way as he walked up the path, but they were busy working and seemed indifferent.

Once Kamahl got closer, he could see what had them so preoccupied. They were working the land. One mantis was guiding a stream of water through the air to a point above the plants where it sprayed onto the ground in a fine mist. Kamahl could not see the source of the water. It seemed to magically appear in the air and went where the nantuko gestured.

Another mantis was standing by a dry area, seemingly clawing at the air. At first Kamahl could not determine what it was doing. But then he saw small claw marks being etched into the dirt beside the nantuko. As the magical, unseen claws raked the ground, they uprooted and dislodged weeds that were choking off the rows of what Kamahl could see now were bean, carrot, and tomato plants.

The other two nantuko were busy picking through the plants to find the ripest vegetables, which they gently plucked from the vines.

I guess some things just can't be done by magic, thought Kamahl as he watched the gardeners tend to their plot. The baskets at the feet of the two pickers seemed to scuttle along the ground of their own accord, though, always staying just behind the nantuko as they moved from plant to plant.

Kamahl could see many other garden plots dotting the clearing in this outer ring, many of which were tended by mantis gardeners. Ahead, small grass huts surrounded the pillar trees near the gardens.

Are these gardeners as deadly as their cousins? wondered Kamahl. He didn't want to find out.

Past the huts lay the true splendor of the heart. A series of huge, wide steps, several hundred feet deep that spanned from pillar tree to pillar tree and encircled one another, rising up toward the largest tree, which towered over the very center of the clearing. As Kamahl began his ascent, he could see the steps were actually the root systems of the trees, risen up above the ground and intertwined with one another to form a rough, flat surface a foot above the ground.

Upon the steps were the true homes of the nantuko. Huts made of vines, thick brush, and small trees rose up from the steps. Some of these homes were quite intricate and much larger than Seton's one-room dwelling near the edge of the forest. Just ahead and to the side, Kamahl could see one that consisted of three huts interconnected to form a trefoil, with another single-room hut sitting on top, forming a second level. A tunnel of briars connected this second level to another trefoil home on the next step.

Standing on the first step, Kamahl heard the sound of branches and vines moving out of the way to form a door into one of these living houses. A nantuko stepped out, coming right toward him.

Kamahl crouched down and brought his amis up as his instincts told him to prepare to fight or run. But the nantuko wore a long robe made of leaves, vines, and bark interwoven into a delicate pattern that reminded Kamahl of the clothing worn by his friend Seton. This nantuko appeared to be a druid, not a warrior. Kamahl forced his muscles to relax.

"Blessed evening, Kamahl of the Pardic Mountains" said the nantuko druid in its clicking voice, as it bowed low in front of Kamahl. "Thriss has been expecting you. Please follow me."

CHAPTER 26

Laquatas stared at the empty space where the Cabal summoners had been camped just moments before, an unknown and unwelcome emotion welling up inside him. The mer was getting desperate. In the course of just a few days, he'd lost Burke, Talbot, his mer troops, and now half of the coalition he'd brokered to pick up the pieces. And he had nothing to show for it. He was no closer to the Mirari now than he had been when he still had all his tools, all his power.

Chaos erupted around him in the Order camp as guards raised the alarm about the missing Cabal summoners. The soldier's voices brought the mer out of his spiraling depression. They were all he had left. And if he didn't act quickly he would lose them as well.

"Guard!" he barked at the nearest soldier. "Bring the sergeant to my tent. We must find out what's happened here! Go!"

After a slight delay, the soldier ran off. He stormed back into his tent. With a wave of his hand he erased the dripping, black message. He then grabbed the poison-tipped spear, concentrated on the ground to open up a small portal to the waterways beneath the forest, and dropped the spear into the portal. The liquid blue gateway snapped shut just as Laquatas heard the sergeant approaching. He still had no idea what to say to the sergeant about the Cabal.

"Sergeant. Come in," called out Laquatas. "What in the seas happened out there tonight, Sergeant? Where are the Cabal forces? What did your men do?"

The sergeant stopped just inside the tent flap, taken aback by the immediate barrage. "I-I don't know, sir," he stammered. "My men woke me just moments ago when it happened. I haven't had time to question them, sir."

"Well, find out, soldier!" barked Laquatas. "I want your report at sunrise. Then we can assess the damage to this mission." "Yes, sir."

The sergeant turned on his heels and left the tent to go yell at his men and probably bash some heads. It was the natural order of things, thought Laquatas. You get beat up by your superior, you take it out on your subordinates. It'll be good for them. Keep them tough and ready to fight and die for the cause. I'll need that tomorrow.

Laquatas knew that the sergeant wouldn't uncover any of the mer's involvement in the evening's escapades. None of the guards who saw Laquatas leave or return to the camp would be able to recall those memories. But the investigation would give the mer time to produce a plausible explanation and, more importantly, a plan for moving forward without the Cabal.

"Desperation?" said the mer to himself. "Hah. Even without the Mirari or Burke or my empire, I'm still the most powerful mage on Otaria. Once I have the orb, I will destroy all who have stood in my way."

The beast watched the chaos in the Order camp and was pleased to know it had played some small part in breaking up the coalition. But it was dismayed at how easily Laquatas had escaped. The mer was simply too fast for the creature. It needed a weapon, preferably something it could throw at the blue-skinned demon to slow him down.

The beast knew where it might find the perfect weapon for the job, but with every Order soldier awake in the camp, there was no way to get to Laquatas again tonight, let alone find the weapon it sought in the mer's tent. It simply watched and reveled in the chaos it had helped bring about, vowing to get what it needed to finish its task.

By morning Laquatas had a new plan. It was daring and dangerous, two things he truly despised in a plan, especially when the danger was to himself. But he could see no other way to get through the forest without the Cabal mages. And, if the Order forces were decimated by the nantuko, he would become vulnerable anyway.

The sergeant's report was exactly what Laquatas had expected. All the men reported nothing unusual until an inky fog suddenly appeared over the Cabal half of the clearing. When the fog disappeared a moment later, the Cabal forces had disappeared with it.

"I believe it was all part of their plan, Sergeant," said Laquatas, "and I'm sorry I became an unwitting pawn in their deception."

"Sir?"

Laquatas reached out and touched the sergeant's mind as he continued. "Obviously the Cabal forces never intended to honor the treaty. Their beast attacked at night, killing the lieutenant. They hung back and watched nantuko kill off even more Order forces. Then, when it looked like the coalition would work, they abandoned us, striking out on their own to claim the Mirari before the Order can retrieve it."

"Yes, sir," said the sergeant. "That makes sense, sir. Those bastards can never be trusted."

"Correct," said Laquatas, smiling to himself. "We cannot allow them to get there first, Sergeant. We must press on, for the glory of the Order."

"I agree, sir. But how? Without mages, we'll get slaughtered by the nantuko."

"You forget, Sergeant," said Laquatas, tweaking the man's mindset once again. "I am a mage. A quite accomplished one as you may know. Today, I will lead the Order forces to victory. Your duty, and the duty of your men, is to protect me, your only mage, at all costs. I assure you by the end of the day, no matter what losses we suffer, we will have the upper hand on the nantuko."

"Yes, sir!"

A short time later, Laquatas found himself near the front lines of the Order phalanx, wondering if he'd completely lost his mind. The prize was worth the risk, he told himself. Still, he decided to make sure the phalanx never strayed too far from the subterranean waterway he'd used to dispose of the spear- just in case he needed to escape.

Laquatas extended his senses out as far as he could, focusing on the area ahead and to the sides and neglecting the rear. If the nantuko attacked from behind, there would be great loss of life, but Laquatas was not at the rear, so it hardly mattered. The soldiers in front of Laquatas all carried ropes, while the ones beside and behind him were armed with spears and swords. He was as protected as he could be under the circumstances. Now to see if his plan could work.

Laquatas didn't have to wait long. No more than an hour into the morning's march, he sensed an incoming bug attack. Six bugs were descending from the trees, fast.

"Now!" yelled Laquatas as he began to build up mana for the spell. It would take some time, so he hoped the Order soldiers could withstand the attack long enough for him to prepare *and* detain one of the bugs with the ropes.

Six bugs dropped to the ground. Bending their legs to absorb the shock, the warriors came up swinging their deadly appendages. Two soldiers to the side of Laquatas dropped before the platoon could even react to the attack. Two more bugs advanced on Laquatas, and the mer had only a single soldier protecting his flank now.

"Get them!" roared Laquatas, pointing at the advancing nantuko.

"Protect Lord Laquatas!" shouted the sergeant from behind the mage as he stepped up and swung his sword at the first bug, clipping a chunk of serrated armor off its forearm.

Two more soldiers interposed themselves between Laquatas and the nantuko. But the mer had problems to his other side as four Order soldiers stood against the last two mantis warriors, trying to keep them at bay by jabbing their spears at the bugs. One soldier already had a huge gash in his shoulder and was losing blood. Another had his spear caught in the armor plates on the nantuko's thorax, and Laquatas watched as the bug pulled the spear loose, yanked on it to bring the soldier near, and then smashed its forearm down into the soldier's head, splitting his skull open and driving the man to the ground.

I've got to even the odds or none of us will survive, thought Laquatas. Using some of the mana he'd built up, Laquatas cast two quick spells in succession at the encroaching mantis warriors. Two ethereal clouds of energy burst into the melee. The first cloud enveloped one of the nantuko in front of Laquatas. The other seemed to devour the two bugs to his left. In an instant, the clouds and the three nantuko had disappeared.

A cheer erupted from the Order soldiers, but Laquatas barked, "It's not over yet. Rope men, prepare to detain one of the bugs. I'm almost ready."

Laquatas returned to building up mana, and he glanced over at the sergeant, who was getting the upper hand on his opponent. He'd cut deeply into the bug's shoulder, rendering one arm useless, and was now defending against the other arm while pushing inside the creature's defenses. Smacking the bug's arm to the side, the sergeant lunged forward and impaled the warrior on his sword, unleashing a torrent of green blood from the beast's thorax.

The bug to the side of the sergeant was faring much better. The nantuko warrior had cut one soldier completely in half with a single swipe of its razor-edged arm. It lifted the second soldier in both claws and slammed the man's back down on its serrated front legs, severing the soldier's spine in two places.

Dropping the crippled soldier to the ground, the mantis turned toward the sergeant, who couldn't pull his sword free from the dying bug in front of him. Before anyone could move to help, the nantuko leaped up in the air and came down on the sergeant, twisting its legs inward and crossing its arms to slice down through the man with all six of its razor-sharp, armor-plated limbs. When it landed, all that remained of the sergeant was a soft pile of pink-and-red flesh on the ground beneath the bug.

"Rope men!" called Laquatas. "Hold that bug."

Eight ropes flew from behind Laquatas, catching the nantuko around its head and arms. As it struggled to cut, snap, and break the ropes, Laquatas concentrated on his spell. He raised his palm, which held a sparkling blue ball of smoke. The mer leaned forward and blew softly on the ball, which drifted toward the bound nantuko.

As the bug snapped through the last of the eight lines and advanced on Laquatas once again, the ball of blue smoke enveloped the beast's head, and it stopped, rocking back and forth as if it wanted to move forward. In that moment of indecision, several Order soldiers advanced on the bug, but Laquatas yelled at them to hold.

The mer gazed right into the bug's eyes and whispered, "You're mine now."

The sparkling blue cloud disappeared, and the bug began to move again. The soldiers backed off, holding their weapons ready in front of them. But instead of advancing on Laquatas and the phalanx, the controlled bug turned and jumped toward the last nantuko, which had just killed another spear-wielding soldier. With two great swipes of its strong and deadly arms, Laquatas's nantuko warrior sliced the last bug into three pieces, leaving the dead creature's four legs standing while its thorax and head slid to the ground on either side.

Another great cheer erupted from the remaining Order soldiers. Laquatas surveyed the battlefield. The Order had lost eight men, including the valiant sergeant. They had defeated only two bugs, and one of those was killed by its own comrade. Still, an excellent trade, thought the mer, nodding and smiling at the

victory. Eight men are a small price to pay for such a prize. A very small price to pay indeed.

The beast watched the battle and realized it now had a new problem. The mer mage had a jack again, and the creature would have to destroy that poor controlled nantuko to get to Laquatas. It'd watched the bugs fight for days now, and while they were formidable foes, a single mantis warrior would be no match for the creature. But if it had emotions, the beast believed, it would feel remorse over being forced to destroy such a noble warrior just to rid the world of a great evil.

The rest of the day's march proved quite interesting for Laquatas and the Order troops. With their captured bug leading the way, the phalanx made quick work clearing a path. The nantuko's serrated forearms made great scythes for clearing away brush and small trees. Laquatas found he had to reinforce his persuasive spell on the beast to make it comply with the orders to destroy the forest, but by noon, the mer felt that he had complete control over the mantis warrior.

The real test came an hour past noon when the next bug attack came. Laquatas had retreated to the safety of the middle of the phalanx and was scanning for attacks. Four bugs dropped into the range of his sensing spell near the front of the phalanx, and Laquatas decided not to raise the alarm. He wanted to see how his warrior handled the fray.

The controlled nantuko seemed to anticipate the attack, for it moved to the side and swung its strong arms at the first bug even before it landed, slicing right through the attacking nantuko's raised arm and cutting a deep gash into the beast's neck that left its head dangling off to the side as it fell to the ground dead. The mer's warrior then turned on a second bug, which had just cut the sword arm off an Order soldier, and slammed its claws into the attacking nantuko's thorax. With its claws embedded in the midsection of the other bug, the controlled mantis lifted its opponent off the ground and smashed its body into the nearest tree. The forest reverberated with the sharp cracks of what sounded like thunder as nearly every piece of the bug's chitin armor shattered upon impact.

Laquatas could see his bug's eyes flaring red after its third murder of the day, and he wasn't sure whether his control would hold much longer. Luckily, the last two mantis warriors disappeared into the trees, perhaps deciding not to test their controlled brother's resolve any further.

After the battle, Laquatas reinforced his control on the nantuko once again before proceeding, but the Order troops faced no more attacks that day. That night, Laquatas kept his new jack inside the tent with him, so he could further condition it to serve only him and never flinch at any order the mer might give.

As Laquatas probed the bug's mind and showed the beast how easy it was for him to activate pain receptors in any part of the warrior's body should it resist, the mer heard a sound coming from his pack. The dull buzzing sound persisted for several minutes until Laquatas realized it was the signal from his communication mirror.

Laquatas gave the bug a mental command to stay and reached under his cot for the pack. Pulling the mirror out, he passed his hand over the dark, cloudy surface and watched Havelock's face fade into view.

"Commander," said Laquatas. "Good to hear from you. You have good news, I hope."

"Excellent news, my lord," replied Havelock. The mer commander looked remarkably better than Laquatas had left him in the forest a week earlier. The blue color in his scales had begun to return, and his eyes were bright and clear. "I have located an entire unit of marines who had escaped the false empress's treacherous attack on the trench. We are en route to your location and should be within portal distance within a day, sire."

"That is excellent news, Havelock," said Laquatas. "Were there no other survivors of the attack?"

The color in Havelock's face faded. "No, sire. I'm terribly sorry," he said. "The trench is controlled by Llawan now, and any survivors have been removed to her court. We are all that is left."

Laquatas burned inside at the treachery of Llawan, Veza, and, most likely, Talbot. "Thank you, Havelock," he told his commander. "Your loyal service to me will be greatly rewarded in due time."

"Thank you, sire," said Havelock. "What are our orders?"

"We are nearing the barbarian, and I believe we will have him in a few days," said Laquatas. "I will draw up a pla-

"The beast!" came a call from outside the mer's tent. "The beast has returned!"

"Havelock," hissed Laquatas, "I have a problem here. I will portal into the waterways tomorrow night to meet with you. We will formulate our battle plans then. Now I must go."

Laquatas passed his hand over the mirror and quickly stowed it back in the pack just as a corporal, now the ranking member of the Order troops, entered the tent, flushed and out of breath.

"Lord Laquatas," he said, coming to attention.

"Yes, Corporal."

"The beast entered the camp again, sir."

"I assume it is dead?"

"No, sir," said the corporal, fidgeting slightly and glancing over at the bug not more than two feet away. "It has escaped into the woods. Shall we pursue?"

"No, Corporal," said Laquatas, enjoying the man's discomfort at having to report bad news and stand next to the very beast that had killed his sergeant just that morning. "That would be foolhardy. It is merely the Cabal trying to terrorize us and force us to leave the forest. There was no harm done, correct?"

"Actually, sir," said the corporal, beginning to sweat a little along the ridge of his nose, "the beast killed a guard before the alert was raised. It was the sentry just outside your tent. It happened so quickly. We were lucky a passing guard startled the beast, or else it might have made it inside."

Now Laquatas felt uncomfortable. The mage's silvery-blue scales went suddenly dry as terror gripped him. That's twice the beast has come after me, thought Laquatas. Three times-it was after me that night in Dinell's tent.

"Sir?" prodded the corporal. "Sir? Are you all right, Lord Laquatas? Shall we post extra guards around your tent?"

Laquatas forced himself to relax and smile at the soldier. "No," he said. "No. That won't be necessary. I'm sure the beast was just crashing through the camp, inciting terror. Besides, I have our friend here to keep me safe tonight. Thank you, Corporal. That will be all."

After the corporal left, Laquatas commanded his nantuko jack to guard him with his life and drifted off into a night of fitful sleep, dreaming of poison blades, inky black letters, and an ominous, gray beast, with glowing, red, eyes peering at him from the shadows.

CHAPTER 27

The nantuko druid led Kamahl up the seemingly endless steps toward the great tree at the center of the clearing. As he walked across the tree-root platforms, taking in the grandeur of the living city, the barbarian saw many more nantuko and quite a few centaurs working, playing, and moving around the dwellings. Young, old, and even children filled the heart of the forest.

Kamahl had never thought of the forest as a civilized place with cities and structure and families living together. But the heart was no city- It was more like an enormous garden oasis in the middle of a forbidding, overgrown desert. Everything here was of the forest, and a serene calm encompassed the clearing. The heart was in total harmony with the forest and its inhabitants. It was quite a different feeling from the chaos of the tribes.

As they drew near the central tree, Kamahl could see just how truly massive it was. It dwarfed all the other pillar trees in the clearing, being at least a hundred feet across at the base and sending out limbs and leaves well past the second ring of pillar trees surrounding it. Looking down, Kamahl began to suspect that most of the root system platforms he'd been walking across came from this central tree.

The nantuko directed Kamahl to a huge, circular doorway that led inside the heart tree. The interior was dark beyond the pool of light near the doorway. Kamahl looked at his guide, raised his eyebrows, and motioned at the tree with his thumb.

"Thriss is in there?" he asked.

"You will find what you seek inside the heart," said the druid.

"Great," sighed Kamahl. "More riddles." He stepped through the doorway and entered the heart of the forest.

Inside, Kamahl found himself in a circular chamber, roughly twenty feet from side to side at its widest point and twenty feet high. Both the floor and the ceiling were curved as well, making him feel like he was standing on the lip of a huge bowl. The room itself was featureless, save for the grain of the wood running vertically through the walls and the curved lines on the floor and ceiling, which showed the growth of the tree through what must have been hundreds of years.

"Hello?" called Kamahl, but there was no answer. Kamahl produced a small ball of flame in his open palm. It sputtered a little bit before flaring to life, and the barbarian realized it was the first fire magic he'd used since he'd left the mountains with Balthor. "I must be out of practice," he said to himself.

In the flickering light, Kamahl could see no one else in the room, but there was an opening off to the left. Heading across the room, Kamahl had to bend forward and pump his legs like he used to when hiking in the mountains to maneuver on the steep side of the bowl. On the other side of the circular doorway, the barbarian found an empty room much like the last one with nothing but a doorway back and to the right that

led farther into the tree.

Kamahl inched his way down into the bowl of the room and clambered back up the other side to the next doorway to find yet another bowl-shaped room.

The barbarian hiked through room after room, meandering back and forth through the tree, and each room was slightly higher than the last. This wasn't a maze, it was a corridor cut out one chamber at a time that was zigzagging its way up into the tree.

It took Kamahl nearly an hour to traverse the winding corridor through the heart tree. Finally, a warm, green glow emanated from the room beyond. Kamahl extinguished his red and yellow flame and trudged up to the doorway to peer into the chamber of Thriss.

The room was huge, nearly a hundred feet across, encompassing almost the entire width of the heart tree. But special care had been taken to ensure nutrients could flow up and down the tree through the room. Natural wooden pillars dotted the chamber as if the room had been carved out around them. A foot across, the pillars seemed to hold up the ceiling, which towered overhead.

The living pillars were moist and warm. In fact, the entire room was warm. The light came from lichen growing on the walls and ceiling that pulsed with a green glow from within. Kamahl could better see the rings of the tree on the floor in this grand room, and the circles seemed to beckon him into the center.

In the middle of the room he found Thriss, the guardian spirit of the forest, and for the briefest moment, Kamahl was terrified. Thriss was a huge mantis, easily fifteen feet tall, complete with the razor-sharp ridges on his arms and legs, each of which was longer than the blade on Kamahl's two-handed sword.

"Thriss, guardian of the forest," started the barbarian, "I have come to ... I have come to . . ." But Kamahl wasn't sure why he had come. Up until this point, the journey had been all he had. That and those damn druid riddles.

"You have come to find your heart," boomed Thriss, lifting his head and spreading his arms wide. "The heart of the forest champion."

Kamahl shook his head. "No, I don't think so," said the barbarian. "I have learned much about life and the forest and magic from this journey, and I believe I am finally at peace with myself and with the Mirari. But I am no champion. I have come here only to bury the orb and be done with the eternal quest for power that surrounds the accursed thing. I have come here to lay it to rest, so that I may go make peace with my sister."

"You are wrong," said Thriss in the tone a father reserves for a child who must be taught life's lessons. "The orb is not cursed. It is but a tool, and its true purpose and power lies beyond what any who have touched it can imagine."

"What do you mean?" asked Kamahl. "What do you know of the Mirari? It is not of the forest. That much even I can tell."

"I have been observing the orb since before Chainer discovered it," said Thriss, bringing his arms up to his face again as if praying. "It is of this world but comes from beyond this world. It seeks knowledge not power, for it has no need of power. It is alive but has no thought, no purpose beyond the search for knowledge."

"But what of the visions it gives?" asked Kamahl. "And how can you say it isn't cursed after all the devastation it's caused on Otaria?"

Thriss dropped his arms and stared into Kamahl's eyes. "Who caused the devastation?" he asked. "The tool or the mage who used the tool? Did the orb create the visions or merely reflect what was already in the heart of those who gazed into it?"

Kamahl considered the guardian's questions and thought he was beginning to understand, but he didn't like the implications.

"Are you saying," he proposed, "that all those people- Kirtar, the mer emperor, Chainer, even me-that we're all evil, and the orb is just reflecting that and amplifying it? I can believe that about Kirtar and the emperor, though I did not know him. But I watched as that thing drove Chainer to his doom and then nearly lived through the same horror myself. Maybe the Mirari is just too powerful for mere mages to control. It controls us instead."

"Do you not control your sword, your horse, your magic?" asked Thriss. "Yes, the Mirari has power. But it is not powerful itself. Only the will of its owner gives the orb any true power- the power to destroy or the power to create. However, each and every one of you has good and evil inside, and evil is drawn to power, magnified by power. By rejecting that power, you have shown that the good in you is stronger than the evil. That is why you have been chosen. That is what gives you the heart of the champion."

"I have been a champion all my life," said Kamahl. "It has brought me glory but nothing else. In the

end, my pursuit of power and glory has brought me nothing but pain and sorrow. If you want a champion, take the orb and give it to Seton. He has a fine heart."

Kamahl drew his sword and dropped it at the feet of the guardian, who picked it up and swung it expertly back and forth. The huge weapon looked like a dirk in the giant creature's claws.

"A true champion does not seek power or glory," said Thriss as he held the sword out in front of him and gazed into the orb. "A true champion uses his power to benefit people not to impress them. A true champion gathers power to protect the land not to destroy it."

Thriss handed the sword back to Kamahl and stared deep into the barbarian's eyes again. Kamahl felt as if the guardian was probing his mind and his spirit.

"Come back tomorrow," said Thriss finally, "and I will begin to teach you how to use your power to bring peace to your mind, how to find glory in the world around you, and even how to control the orb, so it can never control you again."

Kamahl considered the guardian's words. He had come all this way to find answers, and he owed it to Jeska and Balthor to find those answers.

"I will stay a while," he said. "But tomorrow's lesson better be more than riddles."

"I think you will like tomorrow's lesson," said Thriss. "Tomorrow I will teach you how to listen to the trees."

When Kamahl came out of the heart tree, his nantuko guide was waiting for him. "Have you been here the whole time?" asked the barbarian.

"No, I was meditating and helping to restore balance to the forest," said the druid. "The tree told me you were descending, so I came."

"What do the . . . residents here do?" asked Kamahl as the druid led him down and around the steps toward the back side of the clearing. "I mean, this is a huge village, but no one outside the forest even knows it's here. How do you survive without interacting with the other races? Even the barbarian tribes trade with the Order for grain to make bread."

"The forest provides everything we need—food, shelter, clothing," said the druid. "We want for nothing, and we waste nothing. We give to the forest, and the forest gives in return. It is an idyllic life."

"I had always thought of the forest as a harsh place where you were either predator or prey," said Kamahl as they stopped in front of a simple, two-hut dwelling.

"That is not harsh," said the nantuko. "That is merely life. You must understand, barbarian, death does not end life, it sustains life. There can be no life without death. It is as I said. We give to the forest, and the forest gives in return."

The druid passed his claw in front of the wall of the hut and opened a doorway in the brambles. "You will sleep here while you visit with Thriss. Can you find your way back to the guardian's chamber?"

Kamahl glanced at the nantuko through the corners of his eyes. "Head up the steps to the big tree in the center, right?"

The sarcasm seemed lost on the druid. "Very good." He said, nodding his head. "I will be in the fields tomorrow. It is my turn to tend the crops so another druid may begin her meditations. Good luck with your training."

Kamahl stepped into the hut and closed the doorway with a wave of his hand. "Does everyone always have to know every' thing about my life?" he asked the wall.

In the morning, Kamahl made his way back through the bowl-room corridor to the forest guardian's chamber. Thriss was just as the barbarian had left him: sitting in the middle of the chamber, apparently praying—what Kamahl now suspected must be meditating and balancing the forest as his guide had been doing.

"I have returned for my lesson, Thriss."

"The tree has told me," replied the giant mantis. "Can you not hear it whispering even now?"

"Of course not!" grumbled Kamahl. "We haven't begun the lesson yet."

The guardian lowered his arms to his sides and looked on the barbarian with what Kamahl could tell was sadness. "The first lesson you must learn is patience, my rash student," said Thriss. "Trees, especially ancient trees like this one, do not rush through life, and you must learn to match their rhythm if you wish to listen."

"My apologies, Thriss," said Kamahl. "How do I begin?"

"Meditation," said Thriss. "The heart of a tree beats in rhythm with the world, for it is tied to the world, a part of the world. Through meditation, you can learn to center yourself and extend your roots back into the world. Only then can you hear their whispers."

For a barbarian raised in the chaotic world of the nomadic tribes, this sounded like mystical gibberish.

Men didn't have roots, and trees didn't have hearts. But Kamahl had seen wondrous things in his life and was only now beginning to realize that there was more to the world than could be explained with a sword. The dwarf clans knew that. Jeska knew that and had tried to tell him. He vowed to keep an open mind.

"I can see you have doubts, barbarian," said the mantis guardian. "You must purge those doubts along with your nomadic past. Only through a true connection to the world will you find your center."

Kamahl nodded. "What must I do?"

"I will teach you a druidic meditation ritual," said Thriss. "In your mind, you will become a tree. Once you have mastered that, the trees may speak to you and the world can show you her secrets. The technique is simple, but perfection takes time and a clear mind. Are you ready?"

"I am."

Kamahl focused, imagining his feet burrowing into the tree and his arms lengthening and growing leaves at the tips of his fingers. But after what seemed an eternity, nothing happened, so the barbarian dropped his arms to his side and opened his eyes.

"This is getting me nowhere, guardian," he said. "We should start with a different lesson."

"We are, Kamahl," said the mantis, raising his arms back up to his meditative pose. "This lesson is patience, and until you have mastered it, you cannot proceed. You cannot remember in minutes what has taken your body a lifetime to forget. Go now and practice this technique. Do not return until you have mastered the lesson."

"How will I know when I am done?" asked Kamahl.

"You will know. The trees will tell you."

Kamahl left the heart tree and retired to his hut, where he found a bowl of fruits and vegetables fresh from the gardens. He ate the entire contents of the bowl then began working on his lesson. Over the next two days Kamahl practiced becoming a tree, wandered the clearing, helped in the fields when needed, and slept.

At the end of the second day, he was frustrated with the lesson but content with his life. The heart of the forest truly was an idyllic place. The inhabitants lived in peace, working together without conflict for the good of the forest. The druids in the field brought food to those in meditation then took their turn replenishing the forest's energy through thought while others tended the fields.

"If only I could master the meditation ritual," Kamahl told his nantuko guide when the druid brought him his evening meal, "then I would truly feel like I belong here. But I still have doubts that break my focus before I can enter the trance. I lose patience."

"It is difficult the first time," clicked the nantuko, "especially for someone who has lived his life constantly moving from one place to another. But I believe you are close. If you wish to belong here, then all you must do is accept that this is your home, and the rest will come."

"I definitely cannot go back to the mountains again," said Kamahl. "That life belongs to another now. And there is nowhere else I would rather be than here in the heart."

"Try again tonight," said the druid. "I believe you are almost home."

After he supped, Kamahl wandered down into the fields where he had toiled earlier in the day. He loved the smell of the fruits and vegetables, and he had felt more connected to the world while working the soil than while meditating in his hut. Taking off his new boots so he could feel the dirt between his toes, Kamahl began the meditation ritual. He imagined his feet turning into roots and his arms into limbs. He tried to draw nutrients out of the soil to feed the emptiness within his body.

Then Kamahl was no longer standing on the field, a brass-skinned man with a family and troubles and doubts about the future. He was a tree in a world filled with trees, connected to the world and yet able to travel through the network of trees anywhere in the world. His heart slowed, and time seemed to slow right along with it, but his mind raced from tree to tree, and he could see the world sweeping along beneath him.

The barbarians were rebuilding in the mountains, like ants scurrying around and over an anthill. Cabal members were scuttling from the pits to the shops, betting and buying their lives away. Order patrols raced back and forth across the savanna, looking for some purpose in their lives. Kamahl sped across the world and then settled back into the forest, checking in on Seton and Jeska. The centaur stood over Kamahl's sister, mopping her brow with a damp cloth as she slept.

Kamahl then found Laquatas, marching through the forest with the Order troops, the Cabal raiders nowhere near the mer. And, for that matter, Kamahl noticed, there weren't any nantuko warriors anywhere near Laquatas. Kamahl tried to listen to what Laquatas was saying, but it sounded like bees buzzing. He did hear a voice, though.

"Welcome to our world, Kamahl," said the voice.

"Who said that," asked the barbarian, looking around at the forest surrounding the mer's camp.

"I did."

Kamah! saw the tree next to him move as the voice responded. "Are you talking to me?" he asked the tree.

"Of course," came the answer. "Isn't that what you have been trying to do the last two days?"

"Well, yes," said Kamah!. "I guess I got distracted by those warriors down there and forgot why I was here."

"You will learn to ignore unimportant matters like the lives of the flesh," said the tree. "Everything that lives eventually dies, but in death you complete the circle and provide for the living, go on living at a different level."

"As food?" asked the barbarian.

"Perhaps," came the answer. "Or soil, water, air. Some believe the spirit is reborn to live another life and learn more of the mysteries of the world."

"Well, I am concerned about a mystery in this world," said Kamah!. "Where are the nantuko warriors that should be fighting off these invaders?"

"Thriss recalled them," said the tree. "But do not concern yourself with these mortals. You have just taken your first step toward something far greater."

Kamah! barely heard the last words of the tree spirit. He was racing back toward his body, back toward the heart. He must warn Thriss of the danger. Left alone, Laquatas could and would destroy the forest to get to the Mirari. He must be stopped at all costs. Kamah! must make Thriss understand.

As the barbarian's spirit left the Order camp, he sensed one last presence waiting in the trees but had no time to dwell on the implications of the discovery. It was a dark, shadowy figure that seemed out of place in the world and yet familiar at the same time—a beast that was dead, but not dead, an undead creature Kamah! had once called friend.

CHAPTER 28

After the scare of the previous evening, Laquatas was almost happy to be moving again through the deadly forest. The nantuko always attacked at the edge of the phalanx, where they only killed soldiers. And though the wall of troops between him and the attacks was getting thinner every day, at least the mer knew what was attacking and where. But, the beast could walk right into camp, bypassing all his guards, and be on the threshold of his tent without so much as raising an alarm.

Last night proved it was personal. The beast wanted Laquatas dead, and the mer was almost afraid to go to sleep at night. Almost. He did have his new jack, the nantuko warrior he now had complete control over. These creatures were the best warriors he'd ever seen. Nothing could get past his new jack. Nothing. At least that's what Laquatas kept telling himself throughout the day.

Laquatas spent so much energy worrying about his safety that it was afternoon before he'd noticed there hadn't been a single nantuko raid since they started the march that morning. In fact, he couldn't sense a single predator within miles of their position. Laquatas called a halt while he scanned in a narrow arc out as far as he could. He found nothing threatening within ten miles in any direction.

"Corporal," he called, "it appears we have finally beaten back the nantuko. We are clear of enemies. Prepare for double-time march. Let's take advantage of our good fortune."

"Yes, sir," came the reply.

The beast had seen the nantuko withdraw the night before. It had always known exactly where they were, for they were never far from its position, just outside the mer's sensory range. But the sudden halt and Laquatas's circular deep scan took the beast by surprise. There was nowhere to run, so it took a chance. If the mer was merely searching for predators, large animals moving through the forest, it could fool the scan the same way it fooled the nantuko—with complete motionlessness.

Dropping behind a fallen tree, the beast stayed still, hoping the decaying log would mask its own dead flesh. Not even breathing, for it truly didn't need to, the beast was nothing more than a lump of dead matter when the mer's scan passed over. Afterward, the beast raised its head up over the log and watched as the phalanx jogged off. It would take the creature all day and much of the night to catch up to them, but it never tired and never ate, so it had time to kill. And tonight it would kill, it promised itself and its surrogate son. Tonight it would kill the mer bastard.

The rest of the day passed without incident for Laquatas and the phalanx. The nantuko raids had come

to a sudden, but welcome end. Laquatas no longer worried about the safety of his jack and let the beast lead the way through the forest. By nightfall, his fears had almost vanished.

"I will keep the bug in my tent again tonight, Corporal," he told his second in command. "The nantuko never attack at night, and it would seem they have retreated anyway. I'm sure your men are up to the challenge of guard duty without help."

"Yes, sir," said the corporal. "But what of the beast. He attacks every night. Surely you want the bug on patrol."

"I do not," said Laquatas. The mer wanted to keep his jack as close to him as possible and, knowing that he would spend much of the night in the underground caverns, needed the bug in the tent to keep the Order soldiers out as much as to fend off the beast.

"We shall set a trap for the beast. It obviously wants me, so I will keep the bug in my tent to trap it. Under no circumstances are you or any of your men to enter tonight."

Sensing the impending objection, Laquatas added, "It's for your own protection, Corporal."

Laquatas retired to his tent, much more relaxed. Life was so much easier when he had a jack to keep the world at bay. Now he could concentrate on more important matters. After giving the bug specific orders to block the flap and not allow anyone to enter until he returned, Laquatas concentrated on the mossy ground in the center of his tent.

After a moment, a small, silvery-blue circle of liquid mana appeared at the mer's feet and began to expand outward. Laquatas grabbed his pack and dived head-first into the portal, which closed behind him.

Appearing in the still, black waters in the caverns beneath the forest, Laquatas concentrated for a moment on his legs, and watched while crackling, azure energy cascaded down his body from his torso to his feet. When the energy dissipated, his legs had grown and merged into a long, silver-scaled tail.

"That feels good," said the mer. "It has been far too long." Reveling in his freedom underwater, Laquatas swam for a while, looking for Havelock and the mer troops.

Not finding his loyal soldiers in the immediate area, Laquatas pulled the mirror from his pack, passed his webbed fingers over its surface, and called out to Havelock.

"Here I am, my lord," said the commander, his face appearing in the mirror.

"Where is that, Havelock?" asked the mer.

"If the maps are accurate," said Havelock, glancing down at something out of sight, "we are approximately twenty-five miles from the center of the forest, just past the last eastward fork."

Laquatas pulled his copy of the map out and located the spot. "Okay, I see your location," he said. "I will be there within the hour."

The beast slipped into the camp and easily eluded the Order night patrols. Fewer and fewer soldiers were on guard duty each night as the nantuko raids took their toll. The creature's real concern was Laquatas's new jack, which it suspected was in the tent guarding the wretched mer. It wouldn't be easy to get past the bug and kill the mer, but the beast was running out of time.

The creature loped up to a shadowy section of the tent, away from the fires, and listened. The bug was inside, near the flap, but it couldn't hear the mer. Perhaps he was a sound sleeper. The beast glanced to each side to make sure it hadn't been spotted, stuck one of its claws through a seam in the tent, and silently slit the fabric down to the ground, slipping noiselessly inside.

Even with its stealth, the nantuko jack was already moving toward it when the beast straightened up inside the tent.

"Damn bugs!" muttered the beast and then dived to the ground and rolled past the advancing mantis, kicking its legs out to the side as it passed to shove the jack off balance.

The beast's double-leg kick was strong enough to shatter the bug's ankle, hobbling the creature and slowing it down. As the beast rolled toward the other side of the tent, the nantuko whirled on three legs and swung its arms down in a wide circle toward the retreating attacker. One of its claws dug deep into the beast's back and side, leaving a large gash.

But no blood spilled out of the wound, and all the bug had to show for its attack was some tough, gray skin and a claw full of green sludge.

"Don't hurt a bit," said the beast as it rolled to its feet again. Glancing around, it saw that Laquatas wasn't in his bed. "Damn mer," muttered the beast. "Gave me the slip again."

Then the jack was on it again, swinging down backhanded, trying to slice the beast in half with the razor-sharp ridges on its forearms. The beast slipped inside the larger monster's reach and dug its own claws into the bug's groin, trying to sever the tendons leading into its legs. But the beast's claws couldn't cut through the nantuko's chitin armor, and the two combatants moved apart and squared off again.

Speed was the mantis warrior's main advantage, and the beast knew it. To have any chance, it needed to slow the bug down even more. What the beast needed was its weapon. That's what it had come for.

Glancing around the tent while evading the bug's attacks, the beast saw what it was looking for: a large, locked chest it had seen carried by Order grunts and stowed in the mer's tent every night since the lieutenant's death. But then the bug was on it again.

Diving past the outstretched arms of the nantuko, the beast came up beside the chest and turned. When the mantis jack came at it again, the beast dived right through the approaching warrior's legs, slipping past the serrated armor plates on the front legs and coming up underneath the bug's thorax. Grabbing the jack's back legs above the serrations, the beast lifted with its arms and head and heaved the bug over onto the chest.

The bug crashed head first through the top of the chest and toppled over, slamming its shoulders through the far side of the chest. The slats on the top and side shattered from the double impact, sending shards of wood right through the wall of the tent. The beast turned to retrieve its weapon before the bug could recover, but it was too late. The weapon had already finished the job. Sticking straight up out of the box was the haft of a two-headed battle-axe, one of the blades buried deep in the nantuko's skull.

"I'll be taking that," muttered the undead dwarf as he yanked the battle-axe out of the bug. "I'm sorry ye had to die over this. I know it wasn't your choice. I promise I'll avenge ye on that blasted mer."

"It's the beast," yelled an Order guard as the dwarf cut his way out of the tent and ran off into the forest. Other soldiers came running at the call and the guard glanced inside the tent, the blood immediately draining from his face.

Stepping back, he turned to the first guard and said, "Get the corporal. He'd better see this."

A few minutes later, the corporal stood inside the mer's tent with several guards, including the private who'd made the discovery, staring down at the broken chest and the dead nantuko.

"What does this mean?" asked the private.

The corporal kneeled down, shoved debris out of the way, and pulled the crystal sword from the remains of the chest.

"It means Laquatas lied to us," he said, holding the sword reverently in the palms of his hands. "The mer must have killed the lieutenant and then hid the sword of leadership in Dinell's own chest."

"But why?" asked the private.

"Control," came the reply from outside the tent.

The Order guards turned at the voice and then drew their swords as Traybor stepped into the tent.

"Put those away," said the Cabal summoner as an inky black-ness swept across his eyes. When the guards looked down, their swords were back in their scabbards and a black film covered their palms, except for the corporal, who still held the crystal sword out in front of him.

"Before you draw those again, I suggest you step outside," continued Traybor before backing out into the camp.

The private and the corporal followed Traybor outside, where they could see that the entire camp was surrounded by Cabal summoners and that the rest of the night patrol was tied up and gagged on the ground.

"How . . . ?" asked the corporal.

"Magic is a powerful weapon," replied Traybor, smiling.

"Then Laquatas was telling the truth. The Cabal is responsible for everything."

"No, Corporal," said Traybor. "You were correct before. Laquatas killed Dinell, stole the crystal sword, and blamed us. He needed control over you to exert control over us. His mistake was thinking he could ever control the Cabal."

"You are the ones in control now," said the corporal, grasping the crystal sword in both hands. "Did you send your beast in to get the sword and take Laquatas? You cannot have it, and we demand the mer come back to face justice at the Citadel."

"We do not have the mer, and you can keep your sword," said Traybor. "I am only here to insure the safety of those who are to come. We did not know the ambassador had disappeared."

Traybor raised his hand, which suddenly dripped with black ink, and drew a large oval in the air from the top of his head to the ground and back up again. As the ink dripped, it filled in the oval forming a large, black portal. The corporal nearly charged the portal when a tall, female mer stepped through followed by Braids. But he dropped to his knees instead, bowing low and raising the crystal sword over his head, when the third figure emerged.

"Commander Eesha," said the corporal. "You have returned. Praise Pianna."

"Rise, Corporal," said Eesha as she grasped the sword from his hands and held it high for all to see.

"Order will be restored to the forest and beyond," she told them, and with a snap of her fingers, the bindings holding her soldiers fell to the ground.

The corporal stood and faced his commander. "What do you mean, ma'am?" he asked. "And why do you travel with our enemies?"

"Enemies no longer," said the female mer, stepping up. Eesha sheathed the crystal sword and beckoned her troops to gather. "My warriors," she said, "this is the lady Veza, ambassador to Empress Llawan. She has helped me see Laquatas for what he is—a treacherous snake who would do anything, kill anyone, destroy everything to get what he wants—the Mirari and its ultimate power. He has used both us and the Cabal in his schemes and in the end would turn on us all."

"The empress is different," said Veza. "All she wants is to work for the good of her people."

"But we are not her people," said the corporal. "How do we know she won't turn on us as Laquatas has done?"

"I won't lie to you," said Veza, turning toward the corporal. "Llawan grew up in the royal court just like Laquatas, and she has learned how to survive there. But I assure you that the empress is an honorable being, and she understands that a world at war is not good for her subjects."

Turning to the gathered Order troops, Veza continued. "We all benefit by working together instead of warring amongst ourselves. Trade between the factions can bring prosperity and an easier life for all. The great war has been over for centuries, and yet we all live like barbarians. Today, we take the first step back toward civilization."

Eesha stepped in and addressed her troops once again. "I have signed a treaty with the empress, as has the Cabal First. The fighting stops today, and the Order can finally return to the ways of Pianna. We will educate Otaria. We will heal Otaria."

"But what of Laquatas?" asked the corporal. "He murdered Lieutenant Dinell. He stole the sword of leadership. We found it in his tent. He must pay for his crimes."

Braids, who had been standing with her head in her dementia cloud since arriving, finally spoke, but her voice echoed as if it came from a distant place.

"Leave him to the forest," she said. "Alone he is no match for the combined power of Kamahl *and* the denizens of Krosan."

"It is time to go home," said Eesha, wrapping her wing around the corporal's shoulders. "The war is over."

Traybor stretched his arms out to his sides, and as he did the portal grew. With a signal, all of his raiders filed through the portal, followed by Braids. Traybor then nodded to Eesha who commanded her troops to enter as well. There was much grumbling about trusting Cabal magic, but once the commander assured them of their safety, none balked at the order.

Traybor then turned to Veza. "My lady?" he said and gestured to the portal.

"A moment please," she said and disappeared into the tent for a moment. When Veza returned, she wore a huge smile and confidently strode through the portal.

Traybor took one last look around the camp and then strode through the ink, which cascaded to the ground, forming a black stain outside Laquatas's tent.

A shimmering blue portal opened in the ground inside Laquatas's tent, and the former mer ambassador appeared above the pool. Immediately, Laquatas dropped into a crouch. His tent was a shambles. The sides were ripped, his jack lay in a pool of blood, its head split wide, and his chest had been shattered.

Laquatas crept to the flap and peered outside at the empty camp.

"What in Norda's domain has happened now?" he asked himself. Laquatas made a thorough search of his tent. When he got to the broken chest, he noticed that the two prizes he'd collected on this trip—the crystal sword and Balthor's battle-axe—were both missing. In fact, the only thing left in the chest was a single, large clamshell with a brightly colored image of Llawan painted on one side.

Laquatas stared at the clamshell for several minutes and then smashed it on the remains of his chest. After a time, the mer pulled out his mirror and summoned Havelock.

"There has been a change of plans, Commander."

CHAPTER 29

Kamahl stormed into Thriss's sanctuary, not bothering to wait for the guardian to acknowledge his presence. "You retreated your nantuko warriors from the approaching army?" he roared at the giant mantis. "Do you know what will happen now?"

Without even moving his arms away from his face, Thriss replied. "No. Do you?" he said calmly.

"Yes," said Kamahl. "Laquatas will storm in here, kill your people, take the Mirari, and maybe even kill you."

"That is one possibility," said Thriss, finally lowering his arms to look at the enraged barbarian. "But if it is truly the will of the forest that my time on this world has come to an end, it is not for me to say otherwise."

"But we can fight this invasion," said Kamahl. "It does not have to happen that way. Send the nantuko back out. I will fight by their side. Together we can defeat Laquatas."

"I will not send my nantuko out to face that abomination again," said Thriss. "He can control them and turn brother against brother. The denizens of the forest never kill each other except for food. I will not allow that mage to control my people."

"But if he makes it to the heart," said Kamahl, "he will control you all, and the forest will die. Is that what you want?"

"You have learned a great many things about life in the forest, Kamahl," said Thriss rising and walking over to tower over the barbarian. He laid his razor-sharp arm on his pupil so lightly that Kamahl barely felt the pressure on his shoulder. "But you still resist the great truth. Death leads back to life. When that circle is broken, the entire world suffers. I do not fear death but welcome it as a rebirth in the forest that is to come after. Life must be allowed to happen, no matter the consequences."

Sitting back down, the guardian opened his arms wide and tried to smile. "Now," he said, "let's get back to your lessons."

"Not today," said Kamahl. "It's easy for you to sit there and let the world flow by while you watch, as you've done for hundreds or thousands of years. But for those of us who only get a few precious decades on this world, we wish to cling to that life, for it is truly precious. I will face Laquatas, by myself if need be. I have friends in the forest I wish to protect, and I believe that this forest, the forest of today, is worth saving."

Kamahl turned and strode across the great room and turned at the entrance to the bowl corridor. "Allow this to happen," he yelled back. "Your champion goes to meet his destiny."

Thriss called after him as he left the chamber. "Wait, Kamahl!" he yelled, a note of desperation in his voice. "You are not ready to face him. Good and evil still wage a war inside of you over the possession of the orb."

The words echoed within the tree and within Kamahl's mind as he descended, but there was no turning back. This was his time. He knew it. Life must be allowed to happen, but sometimes a champion must make it happen.

Laquatas walked through the forest alone, periodically calling out to Kamahl to come face him. The mer had briefly thought about dropping back into the underground waterways and going after the barbarian's sister to use her as leverage. But he knew that it wouldn't be long before the empress sent her forces against him, and he didn't have time to spare. No. The only way he could still win was to get the Mirari now. Today.

And that meant facing the barbarian. But he wouldn't have to do it alone. There was no reason to relegate this to a fair fight. While he walked, Laquatas held his mirror in the pocket of his coat. Havelock and his marines could pop up around Kamahl at a moment's notice. All Laquatas had to do was call the arrogant warrior out to face him. He knew the barbarian wouldn't be able to refuse the challenge.

"Kamahl, you son of a goat!" he yelled. "Here I am. It's time to end this. We both know it."

As Laquatas walked, he scanned the forest for signs of nantuko or the beast but saw, heard, smelled, and felt nothing beside himself anywhere nearby. The bug attacks had stopped as soon as he learned how to control them, the mer realized, so he had no fear on that front. The beast was another matter, but it hadn't attacked yet, and Laquatas was an easy target out in the open by himself, so either the creature wasn't after him or had been driven off or killed the night before.

"Kamahl!" called Laquatas as he walked down the path toward the center of the forest. The wilds of the deep forest had given way to what could only be described as a well-tended garden, with trees in rows, weeds and brambles meticulously absent, and a wide path leading northward. "I know you are here! Show yourself, and we will settle this man to mer."

Kamahl stopped at the edge of the clearing to meditate. He quickly found his spirit moving from tree to tree through the forest. He could sense more than hear the thoughts of the trees as he passed through them and quickly found Laquatas, walking alone down the path he'd trod only a few days earlier. There was no

sign of the Order or Cabal forces, but Kamahl always suspected treachery when Laquatas was around.

Returning to his body, Kamahl took to the trees. Moving quickly and silently on into the forest, the barbarian came upon the mer and shadowed him from above.

Kamahl could find no signs of an ambush and quickly grew weary of the constant chatter from the insipid mer mage. He would have to take his chances and deal with whatever the mer had set into motion. Laquatas had set the rules for this confrontation, but Kamahl was fighting in his home, his new home. That alone gave him all the advantage he would need.

"Kamahl!" yelled Laquatas again. "Face me like a man, if you dare. It is time to settle this dispute as the barbarians always do, in honorable battle."

"What do you know of honor, you snake," said Kamahl as he dropped to the ground in front of Laquatas, landing in a crouch and looking up at the mer who stood not twenty feet away. "Your entire life has been a lie. Do you really want it to end in a lie as well?"

"I do not want it to end at all," said Laquatas. "Which is why I have brought friends to this honorable battle."

Laquatas pulled a mirror out of his coat and spoke into it. Pools of energy formed all around Kamahl as he stood and prepared for battle. Before the barbarian could even summon any creatures of his own, he was surrounded by mer warriors bearing tridents, spears, and nets.

The nearest marines launched their concerted attack, leading with the nets. Kamahl shot his hand up into the air and called a vine from the tree above, which wrapped around his wrist and pulled him from the ground just as the first nets landed where he had stood. Kamahl then swung to the side and released the vine, hitting the tree with bent knees and rolling down the trunk to land outside the ring of mer.

Laquatas had moved to the other side of the wide path, keeping his forces between himself and Kamahl. The marines advanced again, and Kamahl knew the nets would be thrown much higher this time to keep him from swinging back up into the trees. As the mer warriors closed, Kamahl called the vines again, but this time the green tendrils descended upon his foes, catching one around the neck, another encircled an upraised arm as the mer was about to throw a spear, and a third caught a marine by the foot, pulling the warrior upside down off the ground.

But there were too many, and the rest pressed forward. Kamahl dodged a spear and shredded a net with a spray of thorns from the tree behind him, and still they came on. As one marine stabbed at Kamahl with a spear, the barbarian ducked under and inside the attack, grabbed the mer by his scaly arm, whipped him around, and slammed him into the tree, which grew long spikes a moment before the impact.

Kamahl turned again to face his attackers, but the next marine had dropped low with his trident while the barbarian's back was turned. Sweeping in with the forked spear toward Kamahl's legs, the mer hooked the tines around the barbarian's ankle and swept him off his feet. A weighted net fell over Kamahl's body, pinning him to the ground.

"A well-timed attack, Havelock," called Laquatas to the mer who had dropped Kamahl with the trident. "You've greatly underestimated my marines, Kamahl. They may not be as fierce as your friends the nantuko, but constant training and simple telepathy allows them to coordinate their attacks with quick and decisive results.

"It's a pity it has to end like this, really," gloated Laquatas. "It was all too easy. To think that all the time and energy I spent chasing you and that blasted orb across the continent, and it should end like this. You on the ground unable to even reach me. But I assume the irony is lost on you. Oh, well. Kill him, Commander. You may have the honor."

Havelock raised his arms to drive the trident down into the barbarian's chest, but as he was about to strike, a battle-axe sailed into the gathered marines and struck the commander in the face, embedding itself up to the haft and driving the marine leader backward into the throng of mer behind him.

While the stunned marines stared at their dead commander, Kamahl summoned several vines from the tree to wrap around the net and pull it up into the air. Grabbing the net as it rose, Kamahl pulled himself up and kicked his feet out at the nearest marine, catching the mer in the jaw and whipping his head around so fast the blow broke the marine's neck.

Another marine came at Kamahl from the side, but the barbarian saw a blur of motion and heard a low, guttural growl as the shadowy figure he'd seen outside the Order camp barreled into the advancing mer. The figure dropped the marine with two quick swipes to its midsection, raking huge gashes in the mer with its claws and leaving the dead warrior on the ground in a growing pool of its own blood.

Kamahl glanced at the figure as he dodged an incoming net. "Balthor," he cried. "What did they do to you?"

"No time to explain," said the dwarf as he pried his axe out of Havelock's skull. "Get that snake. I'll

keep these vermin off ye." With that, Balthor hooked his axe under his gray, clawed feet, rolled forward in front of Kamahl, and came up swinging. He sliced down through the chest of the mer in front of Kamahl and then tossed the axe at the next marine in line, catching the warrior in the shoulder and sending him spinning to the ground.

"Go!" said Balthor as he jumped on top of the downed marine and plunged his claws into the mer's exposed neck.

Kamahl raced through the small opening that Balthor had created with his axe, not looking back. The mer mage was backing away, his face twisted in horror as his last remaining forces fell at the hands of an opponent he'd left for dead.

"Now about that honorable battle you promised me," said Kamahl.

"This isn't over yet, barbarian," spat Laquatas as he waved his hand in a circle over the ground.

Seeing the shimmering portal begin to form, Kamahl called down the vines from the tree behind Laquatas.

"No you don't," he said, and four vines twisted around the mer's wrists and ankles and pulled him off the ground.

Kamahl walked over to look up at his nemesis, suspended harmlessly, his back flat against a tree, his arms held high over his head, and his legs splayed wide like a tortured marionette.

"Not this time," he said shaking his finger at Laquatas. "You can't escape your final judgment. We fight, or you die where you hang."

From behind, Kamahl heard Balthor's voice. "Kill him," said the dwarf as he came up behind the barbarian. "Do it now. He don't deserve an honor battle."

Kamahl glanced back at the carnage Balthor had left. All the mer were dead, even the three Kamahl had left hanging in the trees. Balthor's gray face and arms were covered in mer blood.

"You . . . you're dead," said Laquatas in horror.

"But I'm still a better man than ye are," spat Balthor. "After ye left me to die with that beast's arm stuck in me throat, I blacked out. I died. The next thing I know, this braided woman is standing over me in a tent, giving me a new life and a new purpose. To kill ye ... dead and final. Do it. Kamahl. Do it, and then I can finally rest."

Kamahl turned to face his old friend, forgetting about Laquatas for the moment, more worried about his old friend than an old enemy.

"What did that Cabal witch do to you?" he asked. "The dwarf I knew loved battle but would never slaughter. What have you become, Balthor?"

"Vengeance."

"I sense something more inside you, dwarf," said Laquatas, still hanging from the tree, his voice calm again. "Our previous encounters were too brief, but now I can sense the flesh of Burke inside you. It has spread through your body since your death, infecting you with dementia flesh. Dementia flesh that was created for one purpose and one purpose only-to serve me. Do you know what that means, dwarf?"

"What?" spat the undead Balthor.

"You are mine!" said Laquatas. "Now, kill Kamahl."

After glancing back at Laquatas, concerned over the mer's sudden calm, Kamahl turned back to his mentor just in time to pivot out of the way of the dwarf's axe, which Balthor had swung with all his strength right at the barbarian's chest. Kamahl spun to the side and backpedaled, trying to put some space between him and his possessed friend.

"Balthor, no!" yelled Kamahl as he moved. "I don't want to fight you. Take control, old friend. Fight back."

"He can't control himself now Kamahl," said Laquatas. "That's Mirari-created matter inside him, created by your other dead friend, Chainer. It's too powerful for him to fight. It's too powerful for you to fight."

Kamahl back flipped away from another swing, just barely getting his legs out of the way of Balthor's wicked axe as it pounded into the ground. Reaching up to the trees, Kamahl called the vines down to tie up his mentor, but Balthor swung his battle-axe in an arc over his head and sliced through the incoming foliage. The dwarf then hooked the axe under his feet and threw himself into a forward roll toward Kamahl, the twin blades of his axe flashing as he barreled toward the barbarian.

Kamahl dived to the side in a roll of his own, but he stopped short with his hands and kicked his feet back at the spinning blur, sending the dwarf careening away into a tree. Balthor smashed his back into the tree, but his feet continued up and around, driving the axe blade into the trunk and leaving the dwarf hanging upside down. In that moment, Kamahl got to his feet and glanced back at Laquatas, who was twisting his

arms trying to work them free from the vines.

Balthor stalked up behind Kamahl again. The barbarian turned, ready to dive out of the way of Balthor's mighty axe. The dwarf swung down and across. Kamahl jumped to the side, but the attack was just a feint. Balthor reversed the direction of his attack, swiftly turning his hands over on the haft of the axe and thrusting the butt hard into Kamahl's gut.

Kamahl doubled over as the blow drove the wind out of him. Balthor slapped the haft up into Kamahl's face, sending him flying over backward, his nose broken. Unable to breathe and with blood streaming down his cheeks, Kamahl tried to roll to the side to avoid what he knew was coming.

Before Kamahl could move, Balthor jumped up on his chest, raised his axe up over his head and swung down at the barbarian's head with all his might. Kamahl slapped his hands together in front of his face, catching the axe blade between his palms, inches away from his bloody, broken nose.

Kamahl looked into Balthor's eyes, but all he could see was a raging fire that burned inside the body that used to belong to his friend. If any part of Balthor was still there, it was buried too deeply for Kamahl to see.

"Fight it, Balthor," Kamahl pleaded, as the two warriors struggled to control the axe. "Fight him. You can win this battle. Balthor never loses."

Balthor screamed, but it was the guttural roar of an animal, not the painful wail of a tortured soul. The zombie dwarf released the axe with one hand, plunging his claws into Kamahl's shoulder and just missing his neck as Kamahl twisted his head out of the way at the last moment.

Balthor raised his bloody claws up into the air, but Kamahl kicked his legs up, smacking the dwarf in the back with enough force to send him flying head over heels through the air and into the trees. The barbarian then rolled over slowly and pushed himself back to his feet, blood running down his arm to drip on the ground as he stood.

"Look out, Kamahl," said the mer, who had gotten one arm free and had pulled out a knife to hack at the vines still holding his other wrist. "Here he comes again. And when I get free, I'll be off to find your sister. Maybe with her life in my hands, you'll be more willing to give up that which is so rightfully mine."

Balthor came at Kamahl, swinging his axe back and forth as the barbarian dodged and wove to stay out of the dwarf's deadly reach. But the dwarf's pace was slow and uneven, and his attacks seemed to falter and halt in mid-swing.

"Kill me, Kamahl," said Balthor, straining to get the words out as his arms continued to swing the axe back and forth.

Kamahl backed up, staying out of the dwarf's reach as he looked for something of his old friend inside the killing machine that now begged for death.

"Use the sword," whispered Balthor, the fire in his eyes fading, replaced by the tired, soulful gaze of a warrior who'd seen too many battles. "Only the Mirari has the power to finish this. Don't let that bastard get Jeska."

Kamahl still hesitated. He couldn't bear the thought of using the Mirari against Balthor. The memory of his battle with Jeska still haunted him. But then he heard the words of Thriss in his mind.

"Death leads back to life. When that circle is broken, the entire world suffers," said the guardian. "Release him back to the world, Kamahl."

Balthor came at him again, and Kamahl reached over his head to draw out his sword, the blade catching a stray beam of sun and reflecting the white light into his mentor's green eyes.

"Farewell, old friend," he said.

"Goodbye, me son," said Balthor. "Send me to Fiers. I am ready."

Even as he spoke, Balthor continued to swing his axe, but the attacks were weak and obvious. Kamahl easily stepped inside the weapon's reach and swung his huge sword hard through the dwarf's neck, slicing right through underneath his ash-gray face. A shadowy wisp of smoke slipped out from Balthor's sunken lips and drifted up into the Mirari, which flashed just as Balthor's head fell backward and his body fell to the ground, free at last.

Kamahl turned to face Laquatas, a tear streaming down his blood-soaked cheek, his face and neck flush from anger and sorrow.

"Now we fight, you snake," said the barbarian as he advanced upon the mer. Laquatas had freed both hands and was holding one vine while he reached out with his knife to cut at the vines holding his feet.

Kamahl strode forward, his sword held defensively in front of his body. He stopped just below the suspended mer. "Or should I just strike you down where you hang, as Balthor wanted?"

Laquatas gave up trying to free his legs, and instead grabbed the vine above him with both hands as he smiled down at his long-time adversary.

"That wouldn't be terribly honorable, barbarian," he said.

"I ask again," spat Kamahl, "what do you know of honor? You send honorable men to fight and die over your petty jealousies and your lust for power while you watch from the shadows. You sell your loyalty to the highest bidder then turn on your allies when they look away. You have never once fought for your own beliefs. Is it because you have no beliefs worth dying for? Are you afraid to face the lie that is your life? Or are you simply a sniveling little coward?"

Laquatas's eyes narrowed at the insult, and his horns flashed, blinding Kamahl for a moment. When his vision cleared, Kamahl saw the mer's long tail swinging up toward his face, catching him under the chin and knocking him backward. As he fell, Kamahl could see the vines beside Laquatas swinging. The transformation had freed the mer's legs.

Kamahl landed hard on his neck and back, his arms flying up over his head from the force of the concussion. As his hands hit the ground behind him, the large sword clattered out of his grip, tumbling backward and coming to rest near Balthor's head.

Kamahl's shoulder ached from the claw wounds, and his head throbbed from both the broken nose and the blow he'd just taken to his neck. But he had to get to the Mirari before Laquatas, so he rolled over and began scrambling toward his sword on hands and knees. Just as he grabbed the hilt, he felt the sword pull away from him.

Looking up, expecting to see the lanky mer standing over him, Kamahl found nothing but trees and leaves above. The sword inexplicably continued to rise, and it pulled him up behind it. As he came to his feet, Kamahl tried to pull the sword back toward him, but the force pulling the sword was strong enough to lift the barbarian into the air along with the weapon.

In a moment, Kamahl was suspended several feet above the ground, hanging onto his sword to keep it from the mer, who chuckled behind him.

"How does it feel, Kamahl?" asked Laquatas. "Helpless? Vulnerable? You hate that most of all. And look, your back is turned to me. How convenient. Go ahead, let go. Let go and face me."

Kamahl tried to twist in the air, moving his hands around the pommel to turn his body to face Laquatas, but the sword pivoted each time he tried. The barbarian calmed his mind and reached out to the trees to get a better view.

From his astral vantage point, Kamahl could see Laquatas standing on the path, his arms raised over his head, his muscles taut and trembling as he struggled with the levitation spell. Then, lowering one hand to his belt, the mer pulled out his dagger, cocked his arm back and launched the blade, end over end, at the suspended barbarian.

Racing back just ahead of the dagger, Kamahl reentered his body and immediately swung his legs to the side, twisting to move his body out of the path of the tumbling blade. But he was too late. The dagger sunk into his shoulder blade, sending a searing pain down the length of his arm and making Kamahl lose his grip on the sword.

Calling vines from the trees, Kamahl wrapped four of them around the hilt of the sword to anchor it above the ground and out of the mer's reach. He then back flipped off the vines, landing on the path opposite Laquatas. Both mages looked up at the glittering orb hanging in mid air at the base of the huge silvery sword, and both reached out for it with their hands and their magic.

Kamahl willed the vines to move the sword toward him but met resistance as Laquatas obviously used his own power to pull the sword away.

"You have made your last mistake, barbarian," yelled Laquatas through clenched teeth. "I am the stronger mage. We both know that. Your physical strength can't help you now, and you cannot beat me with magic alone."

But even as Laquatas finished taunting him, Kamahl could see that he was winning the mental tug-of-war. The sword was inching its way slowly but surely toward the barbarian.

"No! It cannot be!" screamed Laquatas as two more vines shot out from the trees behind Kamahl, twining around the blade and pulling it even faster away from the mer.

Out of the corner of his eye, Kamahl saw movement beneath the sword, and Balthor's battle-axe flashed up into the air slicing through the vines that dragged the sword to Kamahl.

The barbarian nearly fell over backward from the release of tension on his vines but recovered in time to see the sword hurtling toward Laquatas, still trailing two vines. Kamahl tried to pull the sword up into the air by those vines, but the axe slashed in again and cut the sword completely loose.

Kamahl rushed at Laquatas but couldn't outrun the sword. Reaching over his shoulder as he ran, he pulled the mer's dagger out of his back and snapped it forward. The dagger and the sword reached the mer at the same time, and the dagger imbedded into the back of the mer's arm, plunging right through his wrist.

Laquatas screamed, and blood streamed down his arm. Kamahl could see him grasp at the sword, but it seemed his fingers wouldn't close over the pommel with the dagger sticking through his wrist. Instead, the mer plucked the sword out of the air with his left hand and pointed it at the barbarian just as Kamahl reached him.

Unable to slow his charge, Kamahl barreled into the mer wizard, driving the sword through the soft flesh below his own ribs as he and Laquatas tumbled to the ground. Kamahl lay there, hardly able to breathe, pinning the mer mage to the ground with the weight of his body, but pinned himself upon the blade of his own sword.

"I have the sword," groaned Laquatas, twisting the blade inside Kamahl to prove his point. "I win."

"I no longer need the sword," said Kamahl, as he pushed himself up off the mer, the sword slicing back through his abdomen as he moved.

Laquatas twisted the blade again, but Kamahl grabbed the mer's wrist to hold it steady. Then, with but a thought, the barbarian encased his forearm in nantuko armor and slashed his serrated limb down through the wizard's scaly arm, severing it at the elbow and freeing the sword from the mer's grasp.

Kamahl rose to his feet, staggered back as he pulled the blade out of his body, and called vines down to bind his wounds and stop the flow of blood that poured onto the ground from his gut.

Laquatas lay at his feet in a pool of mer and barbarian blood, his arms folded across his chest to staunch the bleeding.

"No more tricks left up your sleeve, Laquatas?" Kamahl asked. "No other lives left for you to destroy in your mad pursuit of power?"

Laquatas looked up at the barbarian, and a smile spread across his pale, grimacing face. "Only one that I can think of," he replied.

"I think you've squandered your last chance to destroy me," said Kamahl.

"Not you barbarian," said the mer, "your sister. Kill me, and Jeska dies. Do you really think I committed all of my forces to this one battle? I have a platoon of marines waiting in the caverns beneath Seton's hut. If I do not contact them, they will enter the hut and kill everyone inside."

Kamahl snorted, smiled, and then laughed out loud at the mer.

"Do you think I am bluffing?" asked Laquatas. "I assure you I am telling the truth."

"That would be a first," said Kamahl. "But it doesn't matter."

"What do you mean?"

Kamahl shook his head. "You still haven't learned a thing have you Laquatas?" he asked. "Not about me. Not about the Mirari. Not even about yourself. But I have learned a few things while chasing after this foul orb. Do you want to know the most important lesson I have learned?"

"Not especially."

Kamahl ignored the mer's sarcasm. "It's as simple as this," he said. "Everything dies, and we cannot do anything to stop that. The trees, the animals, Balthor, Chainer, Jeska, Seton, me. Everything. And, whether you are bluffing or not, I know one thing for certain. Today it is your turn to die."

With that, Kamahl flipped his sword over, grabbed the pommel in both hands just below the Mirari, and slammed the blade down through Laquatas's chest, shattering the mer's ribs, shredding his heart, and driving the silvery-blue wizard's spine down into the dirt, embedding the blade and his body in the ground. As Kamahl released the sword, the Mirari flashed, turning the forest around the barbarian bright white and tossing him into the trees across the path.

When Kamahl opened his eyes a few moments later, he was amazed to see he was now surrounded by new bushes and flowers. Sitting up, the barbarian watched as a wave of growth expanded out from the Mirari. Existing trees sprouted new limbs and grew higher into the sky. Flowers sprang up all around and bloomed in seconds. The path around him became overgrown as bushes and trees erupted from the earth. Looking around, Kamahl watched as the wave expanded out as far as he could see.

It didn't seem to be a destructive force like those unleashed by Kirtar, Aboshan, and Chainer, but Kamahl knew this was the work of the Mirari-the Mirari guided by his hand, he corrected himself.

Crossing over to where he'd left Laquatas, Kamahl found nothing but a small hill covered in flowers, with a shining orb half-embedded in the ground just visible amongst the colored petals. Turning around, Kamahl couldn't find any trace of Balthor or the marines. The new growth had enveloped them all, turning their deaths into new life. He wondered what the wave had done to Jeska and Seton, wondered whether they were all right, wondered if Laquatas had actually been telling the truth for once. But it didn't matter now. Later perhaps, but not now.

Kamahl looked down again at the Mirari, knowing full well that his sword lay underneath the hillock. "I've finally buried you," he said. "And I've left my old life behind me. I don't need or want either of you

anymore. It's time to write a new chapter. It's time I got back to my training."

Walking back toward the heart of Krosan, Kamahl didn't know what he would find when he got there, but he was finally ready to accept whatever destiny the forest held in store for him.