



PART I



THE SPECTRE OF A
KING'S SCEPTRE



PROLOGUE

BRANCHES cracked like whips as the man crashed through the underbrush, twigs snapping and dried leaves crunching underfoot, beneath the thin layer of snow. The sounds nearly masked the faint baying of hounds though it was the thumping of his own heart that filled the man's ears. The vapour of his frantic panting spilled like beads into the frigid early morning air and hung suspended for an instant before dissipating in the wake of his passing. It was gloomy in the forest: clouds brooded dark and low over the Peregrinswood.

He surged through a clutching brake of low holly bushes and dropped down the snowy bank of a swift-flowing brook, head swivelling, eyes wide, seeking a way across. He scrambled upstream, arms flailing for balance and hands reaching out to ice-encrusted boulders for support. Around a bend in the watercourse, torrents of water flooded through a boulder-filled narrows and the baying suddenly sounded louder, so the man risked a quicker pace.

A brief pause to gauge the distance was all he allowed himself before hurtling over the first torrent between boulders. On landing, his foot shot out from under him. He fell on top of the big rock and pitched into the downstream pool. His head broke the surface of the frigid water and he gasped from the pain in his ribs and the cold now enveloping him. The current pulled

him past the bend in the brook that he had rounded just moments before, only now two big brown dogs bayed at him from the top of the river bank. One leapt down the slope and splashed into the shallows. The flood pulled the man past flashing teeth, but a shard of luck fell in his favour for the dog was reluctant to leap into the cold, deep water. Once her prey swept past her, she hopped among the rocks, following him downstream, a half dozen of her pack mates sprinted in parallel atop the bank barking up a horrific ruckus, one getting knocked and spilling down the bank.

The man flailed to keep afloat. His hip collided with boulder, unleashing a cry of agony from him, but he was able to kick against it and thrust himself into calmer water nearer the far bank. He clutched at the branch of a dead tree, got his feet under him, and used the branch to pull himself from the icy water. Gasping and coughing, he staggered along the river's edge, shocked by the weight - and the stink - of his sodden clothing.

The barking of the pack on the opposite embankment grew more frantic as the fugitive hauled himself back up into the woods. As he crested the lip of the incline and pushed into the undergrowth, the thang of a bow sounded and an arrow took the man in the shoulder. He pitched into the jabbing holly with another cry of pain. He couldn't extricate himself from the bushes: each time he pushed against the stems, branches, and leaves with one arm, new thorns dug into his clothing. With great effort and much pain from the arrow in his shoulder, he rolled himself around so that he lay upon his back. He used the hand of his good arm to unclasp his cloak, freeing him from the worst of the clutching thorns. He got a knee under himself and crawled from the entanglement, now weeping from pain, terror, and the loss of all hope. Dogs flooded around him, having found a way across the brook, some darting in to nip at an exposed leg or arm. He flailed at them, scrambling to put his back to a broad bole of an oak for some protection. One dog got a hold of his right foot and worried at it, ripping his boot right off.

That was when the hunters came upon him.

A woman held a bow, arrow nocked and threatening, two hulking men-at-arms held swords at the ready, as a dark-haired noble stepped forward among the dogs, shoing the beasts away and shushing them with one curt order.

“*You?*” the wounded man yowled more than asked. “But you’re dead!”

“Ah, you heard about that fall through the ice, did you?” The noble’s voice was fair and confident, but also carried a tinge of sadness. The fugitive overcame his terror enough to nod, a frantic shivering and quivering. The noble smiled, and it was not an unkind face that looked down at the pathetic, bloody mess in front of him. “Does news from elsewhere not come to you smugglers up here along the river?”

The nobleman leaned forward. “As you can see, I live, and I do not give up on my quarry so quickly. I enjoy the grace of Galivith. Indeed, I’m Galivith’s sword of righteousness gleaming in the dark night. Although I like to wield an axe for Him.” The noble extended his ornate war-axe, held it to the terrified smuggler’s throat, and smiled again. “And it’s now morning.”

The man burst out in tears. “Don’t kill me, my *herg*. I’ll do anything. I ain’t the dead dancer you seek. I’m not the Necromancer!”

“Oh no, no, no,” the dark-haired man replied. “I know that, and have no fear, I won’t kill you. Luckily for you, Galivith sees fit to extend His grace to others. He has blessed you today. Galivith could have steered my man’s arrow into your heart, but He has spared you, and He does nothing without good reason. I have learned to read His messages, and I *always* honour them.”

“I’ll talk!”

“Oh yes, I know you will.” The noble pulled the blade of his axe away from the man’s neck and slid its handle through the loop hanging from his belt. “But I have no doubt that Galivith spared you for more than just talking.”

The noble turned to his men-at-arms, “Bring him, and try not to kill him.” They stepped forward and took hold of the man’s arms. He cried out in pain as they pulled him upright. Korgash took hold of the man’s chin and angled the dirty, bearded face towards his own. “Through me, Galivith has given you a chance to redeem your pathetic life. When you are recovered enough, you are going to rejoin the Marigold Smugglers, but fear not, I won’t ask you to betray your brethren. No. Not just yet. Your first mission will be to track down one of her patrons. You named him yourself, the Necromancer. You will guide me to him.”

The man managed a nod.

“Oh, and one other thing. I am no mere *herg*. You must henceforth address me as *Oberherg* Korgash.”

CHAPTER ONE

“I hear war is nigh.”

“I do not presume to foresee such great events,” the wrinkled, grey-eyed man replied. He was pleasant-looking, with a nice smile and fluid movements. He had seen the back of his fiftieth spring, and though his pate shone in the blazing sun, he still had a thick arc of curly hair - red, streaked with strands of grey - circling from one temple to the other. He lifted his bulky frame off his stool and shifted it into the shade of the elm tree that dominated the western side of the Targo Miatara, Sar Ilksaw’s central square. His clothing, while well made, was too heavy for the heat.

“Portents can be perceived,” the woman said. She was shorter and bulkier than the man.

The man gave a broad, genuine smile, showing good teeth, and he shook his head. “Alas, dear lady, I never enjoyed the good fortune of having a tutor well-versed in perceiving portents. As much as I can manage is anticipating the rising of the sun upon a day and its subsequent setting presaging a coming night, and I only manage it with great effort and much distress. I shall leave the scrying of portents to those of greater wisdom or well-honed talents.”

Now the woman smiled, though her mouth remained closed on her broad face as the ends of her thin lips arched up. Her

black eyebrows, too, arched upwards. She nodded and replied, "Ah, but that itself is a most reliable portent."

The man looked up at that. "A '*reliable portent?*' What is *that* supposed to signify?"

"Just that, Marrakus. Your visit to our city is, in its very essence, one such dependable sign." She brushed a strand of her long, lank black hair from in front of her face, hooking it over her ear before then wiping at a bead of sweat on her temple.

"You will be so kind as to explain, I trust," Marrakus said, though he said it politely, the manner in which he did so left no doubt that it was a command.

"Yours is a purchasing mission. Your wagons will return to Danskaya with a greater load than when they arrived. You seek ingots, not lumber; coke, not roof tiles; smoked sausage, not grain. You don't expect the building or repair of houses in the capital or the mere baking of bread. You foresee the forging of weapons."

"I would procure grain," Marrakus corrected.

"Would you indeed?" the woman asked before offering another closed-mouth smile. "Well then, it is just possible that the portents are not as clear as I would have thought."

Marrakus mirrored the smile in response and whispered, "You are not so wrong, dear Magga. Grains are also necessary in war."

"Granted," Magga conceded. "If the campaigning should occur here at home. Grains can be transported to a foreign front from here as easily as from Sar Danskaya. Why transport it twice? - unless in so doing one increased its value? I shall need to ponder your words. Will, then, the Drovers range down upon us? Will we have the pleasure of seeing the longboats of the Wicked Westmen sailing up the great river? Or will the Catagenians traverse the Northwater?"

"News comes late here, so far north, when the events have occurred far to the south," Marrakus observed, lifting a glass of the cellar-cooled lemon water to his lips. He said no more, but he still wondered at an odd piece of news he himself had received unexpectedly from a Royal Courier who had tracked him down the night before, coming all the way from the capital with a mysterious invitation to a palace ball.

“Straeland?” the woman asked, eventually, and with a hint of surprise in her voice.

“Hmmm? Ah, yes, Straeland. There is an *oberherg* there agitating for a strike against us.”

“Ah, that? Even here we have heard such news, though the reports had it as simply a group of northern *hergs*, not their *oberherg*.”

“And therein lies the news that has taken some time to reach your ears. *Oberherg* Holgarth has *Crossed the Threshold* into what comes next. Rumour, and some informed speculation, would suggest that his successor is a ... *vigorous* ... man. An ambitious man.” Marrakus withdrew a cloth square from a pocket of his waistcoat and mopped the sweat forming on his brow. Then he folded the cloth with care and returned it to its place. “The *wlars* along the river are worried by the news. It is possible, just possible, that they may pay a great deal for ingots, coke, sausages ... and grains.”

Magga nodded, taking a sip of her own lemon water. “What of the *Overlar*? Is he worried?”

Marrakus chuckled. “Alas our sovereign does not share his thinking with me. I could avoid a great deal of risk in my investments were that so!” Then he grew more serious. “I do not believe the news worries our *Overlar* greatly. The Straelish Queen sent emissaries who, I understand, assuaged his concerns.” He furrowed his brow. “That said, a man approached me recently, asking about my trading across the Peregrinwater and whether smugglers or fugitives had been active.” He didn’t add that this man had asked about a few other things besides.

Magga narrowed her eyes. “The Dark Prince?”

Marrakus shook his head. “No, though the Old Condor may well have been behind the questions: there are many who do his bidding.”

Magga nodded. “What has become of your clerk?”

“When times are difficult, one adjusts. I have a guard who can keep the books. Now, are you certain of your response? When I come back here next year, you will not decline to see me because you regret accepting my price?”

“No one else brings me lemons,” Magga replied. “Ironically, they seem to make me sweeter. You are one for theories, for proofs. How can a sour drink make a client sweeter?”

Marrakus smiled. "I will examine the question. Have you a hypothesis?"

They clasped arms, hugged each other and took their leave. As he walked back to his inn, his detail of guards closed around him. The tall guard, Sorig, went ahead of him, the broad guard, Soleigh, followed behind. Meanwhile, the strangest of his detail, a multi-hued dog who never went far from Soleigh, either scouted out ahead, investigated scents far behind, or loped from the latter to the former. The streets were nearly empty in the heat of the afternoon and Marrakus hardly needed the extensive protection, but Lucyja, the captain of his personal guard, insisted it was never good for men to let their readiness slip.

As he walked, Marrakus shook his head. Magga's astute observations meant trouble and the conversation about the Old Condor took his mind back to the odd visit he had received prior to leaving the capital. They rounded a last corner, passed behind the grand customs house - a towering, broad stone construction that was a message to foreigners in a land of messages - and entered the Victorious Inn. In truth, the inn was not so victorious, but it had good stables and a safe place to keep the wagons. He shook his head. "She knows. If she shares the news, prices will go up."

The guard in front looked around, appraising the danger. There was none, Marrakus knew, given that they were in a city with a curtain wall four times the height of a man and eight times the width, with regular soldiers enough to man its walls, and no hint of a northern enemy, but the young man had illusions of duty, adulthood. He also, evidently, had no illusions of propriety, replying, "Then why did you tell her?"

"Relationships are important, young man," he riposted, turning towards a party of three men in the sitting room off the main entrance. He paused before walking in and greeting them, turning instead to the young guard, "They are important for their own sakes. Besides, she already knew something was afoot. She said as much. When she thinks back, later, she will remember who informed her and she will think of me fondly."

"That will obtain you a better price?"

"It will mean that she will meet me again, keep the door open to possibilities. As much for friendship as for profit. These men are here for much the same reason. Do you think they would

agree to meet me if I were parsimonious with them whenever I visited here? An incrementally better price always helps, but devotion to it above all else is not healthy. Now, this will take time, lad, track down the captain and go train in the yard.”

Marrakus clasped arms with each of the three men in the sitting room and then took a seat himself. The oldest, a slight man just shy of forty cast a glance at the guard, who had not moved from the entrance to the room and stood with his arms crossed and his eyes flitted around the room. “*He* has filled out over these past few years,” the man observed.

Marrakus nodded. “Yes. He has shown some talent in languages as well. He is transforming himself, relatively quickly as these things go, into a young man of considerable talent and potential. He reads and writes, you know.” The man’s eyes widened at that and Marrakus nodded with a smile. “He remains, however, a poor rider.”

“He has adopted many of our ways. I almost did not recognize him. He shaves and keeps his hair short. Those are unusual concessions for a Wicked Westman to make.”

“I have a theory about his ... *concessions*,” Marrakus replied, “though he’s still a brazen young man. I have other thoughts about a few other strange phenomena as well, although they remain but hypotheses as supporting evidence is sorely lacking. He enjoys strange good fortune.”

“Magga is saying you believe war is upon us,” the man stated.

Marrakus’ head snapped backwards in shock. “I just walked directly from the square after sharing a drink with her and she has already spread news? Well, it seems my wisdom is quicker than my own two feet if it arrived in this good house before I did. I advise not believing all one hears, Wyrrus, especially as it concerns people saying what other people say.”

“So it is, then,” Wyrrus declared.

Marrakus rolled his eyes. “No, I very much doubt it. We may see some trouble creep across the border, but the Straelish queen will not support a war, I deem.”

“So you procure grain, horses, coke, ingots this year instead of lumber, pelts, wool?”

“Again, I advise not believing all one hears,” Marrakus replied.

Wyrrus narrowed his eyes and glanced at his two companions. “Well then, perhaps we have wasted our time, for we have coke and ingots from the hills.”

“Never fear, dear friends,” Marrakus assured them, “Coke and ingots always interest me.” They negotiated for the rest of the afternoon: quantities, quality, delivery times, whether trade goods might serve for payment, dates for possible further transactions, and of course, prices. Before clasping arms on the final agreement, they talked about the Drover market that would begin in a week’s time. “I understand it will be a large gathering,” Marrakus stated, though in such a way as it offered space for confirmation.

“So do I,” agreed Wyrrus. “Four, possibly five, tribes may bring their herds. That is why it will occur on the Coldwater. I understand that is as close to neutral ground as the Drovers can find for so many tribes. One would almost think they believe the demand for horses will be considerable.”

Marrakus smiled at that, “Ah, that subject again. They are too far north to have heard what you think they might have heard.”

The slight man shrugged, getting to his feet, an act that triggered his companions to do the same. Marrakus, too, rose to his feet. “Drover lands circle around south in the foothills to the Worldrim Mountains. Who knows how news passes among them? I cannot pretend to know. A Royal Courier blew past here two days ago and headed north. Perhaps they know more than you? Regardless, there will be a good supply of horses for you to examine, I believe. Are you sure you want to take those Wickeders with you? You *do* know the Drovers also hate them: Sorrowsowers, they name them.” Finally they clasped arms and the three men departed the Victorious Inn.

Later, Marrakus joined his two wagoners to watch his guards spar. He had half a dozen guardsmen and one woman, Lucyja, who had been with him so long and who was so good it felt unjust not to name her captain. Lucyja took arms training seriously and in her youth she had been amongst the better duelists in the detachment of royal soldiers posted to the capital. Despite her skill, advancement in the ranks had been difficult for her in Sar Danskaya: Marrakus knew from personal experience the estrangement felt by people whose romantic affections

differed from what society felt was normal. He had felt he could make a difference for her ... and benefit in the doing. So he had hired her.

Despite their years together, Marrakus had never seen his captain train men in arms-craft as well as she had evidently trained the youngest two guards, judging by the results. In three years she had turned them into credible swordsmen. The process of learning the blade would have gone quicker had the two not arrived with deeply encrusted faulty technique, meaning Lucyja had to beat that out of them first. It would have gone quicker yet if they hadn't also insisted on training sessions with brutish battle axes - their skill with which Lucyja privately admitted was solid, not that she could claim expertise with the weapon. The biggest one, Soleigh, even practiced with a giant, unwieldy club, of all things. Indeed, according to Elkor, the maul was the strapping young man's favourite weapon. And after a few bouts with the club, then would come a complete contrast of styles as they practiced with a beautiful longsword they shared. Lucyja was defeating them less and less in their sparring. They were turning into formidable warriors.

Looking at them took his mind back again to that strange visit: Marrakus visited the palace regularly enough - indeed, a courier had arrived with a fresh invitation to attend a mysterious ball - so why send a river man in the dark of night to his warehouse? Why ask questions about necromancers and thorns? He had no answers.

He sighed, thinking of it all.

Then a final question came to him. Why could the tallest of the two young guards, Sorig, not figure out how to ride a horse?



MARRAKUS concluded his trading in five days, leaving one free day prior to their departure for the Drover market. As was his wont, he indulged himself in his pleasures. Whenever he came north, he always enjoyed a visit to the Valsav Baths. Long

before, in the beginnings of Polgatia, Ilksaw had been founded around a collection of thermal hot springs. Over the long march of years, after trade had expanded with the northern peoples, merchants had preferred conducting commerce in the comfort of a town with such luxuries, and the settlement had expanded to merit the prefix - *Sar* - that gave it the full status of a city. Wealth of trade and the harnessing of the north's own resources had made the city wealthy, wealthy enough for an elegant building to emerge around the hot springs, encasing the natural pools in rooms of marble pillars, surrounded by tiled floors with elegant patterns, oil lanterns hung from polished granite walls rising up to high ceilings where the marble pillars burst apart into elegant arches supporting domed roofs. Tall, narrow, stained-glass windows let in sunlight, or moonlight, into the vast space.

And that space was suitably vast to impress even the odd visitor from the Chayan Empire, never mind the herder nomads who were the most common foreign visitors. There were three large chambers that housed the hot pools, one for men, one for women, and another for the more adventurous who wanted to mingle with those of the opposite sex. Each chamber had a cold water pool and marble benches for massages or simple relaxation. Grand stained glass archways with narrow culverts allowed patrons to swim to large hot and cool water pools outside. Those were popular in summer, allowing people to bathe under the vast Polgati sky, but they often enjoyed even more visitors on star-filled winter nights or when giant flakes of snow fell silently onto the steaming waters.

That last day before heading off to trade with the Drovers, Marrakus set aside his business, his worries and his speculation over the odd invitation he had received from Sar Danskaya, and instead he treated his entire retinue - Lucyja, the two wagoners, and the six guards - to an excursion to the Valsav Baths. The grand building fronted onto the Targo Miatara, paved with cobblestones and featuring a ring of tall elm trees that encircled a proud central fountain from which rose a grand marble pedestal crowned by a statue of Dorotea the Teacher. The Royal Customs House stood directly across from the baths, on the south side of the square. Also grand, it rose three paces above the rest of the Targo Miatara, with pairs of flights of steps raising up from left and right to meet on four minor landings before a final flight of

steps led from each landing to a broad terrace in front of the building proper. That landing gave onto a bank of alcoves set into the wall facing the *targo*, where the interest of the state was calculated and coinage exchanged hands. In the middle of the façade rose an archway, ten paces high, an absurd height, but one deemed suitable for impressing the foreign traders who perforce passed Sar Ilksaw on their way to the even more impressive cities of the south or west.

On the east side of the Targo Miatara was the Temple of the Guiding Stars that brooded in its power. It seemed overbearing when viewed from the *targo*: from street level, the view was dominated by the line of six pillars which stood atop the temple's tall socle, and by the mighty entablature that the pillars supported and that thrust out into the square. One could see little more of the building. Marrakus, however, preferred to look upon the temple from the *Sar*'s tall curtain wall, where he could behold the majestic dome rising from the building. Finally, to the west, were a series of residences, shops, and dining houses that provided a welcome break from the imposing presence of the religious and state institutions. Many of the dining houses - like the one where Marrakus had met Magga - had tables set up under the trees where patrons broke their fast with the brightening of the morning.

As they crossed the square, passing by the fountain, the tawny-haired young guard, Sorig, asked, "Who's the woman?"

"That's Dorotea the Teacher."

Sorig pointed his chin towards the statue's tall pedestal rising from the fountain's waters. "So it says. Who is she?"

"Ah yes, I sometimes forget you can read. There are plaques on the sides of the pedestal that will tell you more than I could from memory." The guard nodded and moved off to inspect the plaques. On impulse, Marrakus signalled to Lucyja to carry on with the other guards and he accompanied Sorig, looking up at the statue. Dorotea stood smiling, long locks spilling over her shoulders and down her back, right hand offering a book to some unseen student while the left hand held a key to symbolize her successful efforts to liberate goodwives from laws preventing them from engaging in commerce and holding property. After they had read the plaques describing Dorotea's origins and accomplishments, Marrakus asked, "What make you of it?"

“I do not know much about things like this. I suppose it took much work and much coin. Why do people build such things?”

“You are an intelligent young man. You tell me the reason.”

Sorig compressed his lips, an unconscious expression of thought. “I think a lot of time and effort has gone into telling the Polgati how great they are and how rich their country is. Like I said, I imagine a fountain like this requires a lot of work. A lot of silver. Why spend it unless it serves to tell your people that if they strive to become like Dorotea here, then they can live on in the memory of your folk. It tells them to do great things.”

Marrakus nodded. “That makes sense, although I have heard other reasons as well. This also serves to remind those who were comfortable denying ownership and a role in society to women that they were being fools. From a very young age, the Polgati are taught that a woman can be as shrewd a merchant as any man.”

“Though they can’t hold land or become *Overlar*.”

“My people believe that land, and a nation, require a man’s strength to hold.”

Sorig laughed at that. “Even the Straelings have a queen.”

“Just so. A nation of unsophisticated brutes who only have a modicum of base cunning. They have nothing like this fountain. Their realm has no future.”

“I have heard of a great cathedral in Shipton.”

“Cathedrals! Ha! They hardly know the meaning of the word.”

“You do not trade across the rivers much do you?”

“What is *that* supposed to signify?” snapped Marrakus. “You do not have the right to speak to me like that. I am your employer.”

Again Sorig laughed. “Then send me from your service. But doing so will not change the truth. Perhaps you should go see this cathedral before you judge it. I will.”

Marrakus huffed and pointed at Dorotea. “*Another* reason for such a display of splendour is to remind our foreign *guests* how great a people we are. They see the Teacher and remember they share this part of the world with giants. They learn that they anger us at their peril.”

At this Sorig became serious. “Ah, there you’re wrong. My people would look at this statue and think not of fearing the

giant, but of picking her pockets.” Then he walked off to join the others in the Valsav Baths. Marrakus followed along, feeling annoyed at the young guard and not liking having to follow along behind.

He caught up to his men as Lucyja finished organizing the handing-over of weapons at a kiosk to the side of the grand doors. Marrakus interposed himself at the front of his group and passed inside first. From over his shoulder he heard the big guard, Soleigh, gasp at seeing the Grand Chamber of Pools. “*Fir fargath!*” Soleigh said.

“Ah, ah! Not here. Not ever, but by the Light, particularly not here,” chided Marrakus, still feeling as though he needed to maintain his grumpiness following Sorig’s insolence. “God forbid that *that* tongue sully these chambers.”

Evidently not daunted at all, the tawny-haired one cut in, observing, “Those were words of awe. I do not think they would stain your walls.”

Marrakus turned to Sorig and arched an eyebrow. “Is that so? Well, how is this, then, for an argument to shut you up? ... Speaking that tongue will get you killed.”

“That’s a good argument,” said Soleigh, still marvelling at the Grand Chamber.

Lucyja pushed past the stunned Soleigh, “How’s this for another argument? ... shut your gobs or I’ll beat you bloody. I want into those pools and you young ones arguing with him who’s to pay to get us in is gettin’ *me* nowhere.”

They passed through into men’s and women’s changing rooms. Men in white robes undressed Marrakus and his retinue before taking away their clothes to be laundered. They were herded into a cool cleaning bath and scrubbed with hard brushes before being allowed out to enjoy a haircut and shave, which all but Soleigh accepted. Then they received togs and white robes of their own to don before entering the Grand Chamber. The stunned silence of Sorig as he studied the tall marble pillars supporting the domes high above and the play of the light passing through the stained glass windows to reflect on the surface of the water of the pools contented Marrakus greatly. He watched as the two youngest guards set aside their robes and lowered themselves, tentatively at first, then with abandon into the hot water.

Marrakus took himself off for a massage before enjoying the luxury of the hot water. They were amongst the very first in the pools that morning and he could hear his employees - now joined by Lucyja - frolicking and hooting as they splashed back and forth in the water. Then he heard hoots and giggling - likely as they launched themselves into one of the adjacent cold pools - and finally he heard the threats, protestations, and cries of anguish recede as they, no doubt, passed through the apertures to the outdoor pools. When he rose from his massage, he saw only Sorig inside the Grand Chamber, sitting in a hot pool studying the domed roofs.

The young man was handsome. Worse yet, Marrakus thought, the man had realized it and was coming to terms with what it meant. In private moments together, when they could both be themselves, Elkor had recounted the events of nigh on four years earlier when he had first met the youngsters. Elkor had admitted that though others had engaged his mind better, his eye had been caught by a tall, blonde one among the party. The youth was rugged and strong, a god carved from stone and then transmuted into flesh ... alas without much of a brain, Elkor had declared before admitting that his judgement might have been harsh, as usual. When the young man had died, Elkor's eyes had adjusted their focus. It was like having the moon set on a cloudless night, allowing the full majesty of all the stars in the firmament to awe the viewer. His eyes had shifted to Sorig, though he would add that eyes might wander where a heart would not. Marrakus understood Elkor's words at the time and he had come to understand them better over the preceding three years. He understood them even better again seeing the young man in the pool. This was a lad pulling together the tools he would need to reshape his world, including relationships that might guide his thinking. It fell to Marrakus and others to nurture such a man, just as Elkor was nurturing the young woman.

Marrakus decided the look of wonder on the lad's face was contrition enough for him to claim victory from the earlier argument. He lowered himself into the pool and breast-stroked over to the handsome young man. As Marrakus swam near, Sorig turned his grey-eyed gaze on him and asked, "How is a construction like this possible?"

“Commerce,” Marrakus replied, settling against the edge of the pool beside Sorig. “Polgatia had a choice, long ago, although I suppose we have faced the same choice every day down through the long flow of time until this very day. When we reached the limits of the land we held, or could hold, we had the choice to look outwards on the lands beyond with fear ... or lust ... or avarice, weapons in hand, or, to look outwards with curiosity, modesty, and openness of spirit - all through eyes for a profit.”

“You must have chosen the former if modesty was part of the latter.”

“Quite amusing,” he retorted, on impulse splashing the young lad’s face with a slap to the water. Sorig smiled and Marrakus could not help but do likewise. “No, we chose commerce over warfare. Mutual prosperity over mutual destruction.

“Smart men, Sorig,” he continued, “smart men know how to put silver to work so that over time it generates more silver. Even smarter men know when they have enough and when they can contribute to something greater than themselves. Not only do they build monuments to the Teacher, they build places like this. And yes, I know, all this needs protecting by people who know how to use a weapon. But who pays for the weapons? How can you feed the soldiers? All this rests on commerce and the wealth it generates.”

Sorig’s eyes stared fixedly into Marrakus’ and for an instant the merchant thought the lad understood, but then the young man smiled. “Actually, I really just wanted to know *how* to build a chamber like this!” Then Sorig slapped down with the palm of his hand, sending a spray of hot water over Marrakus’ face.

Marrakus couldn’t help but laugh. The young man beamed one of those smiles of pure mirth that made him so handsome. Not wanting to be overly intimate and give a false impression, Marrakus gazed up at the domed ceiling. A thought came to him. “You and I have known each other for a not inconsiderable length of time. Elkor vouched for you and I have never regretted taking you on. I never thought to ask you to vouch for Elkor.”

Marrakus turned his gaze back to Sorig and saw the expression of mirth disappear. “Tell me something: before you

came here, did Elkor give grievous insult to *Oberberg Hasselmann*?"

Sorig peered into Marrakus' eyes. A smile returned to the young man's face, though this time there was no joy in it. "That is a question to put to Elkor."

Marrakus nodded. "What then of you?"

Those grey eyes remained resolute. "Korgash did grievous insult to me and mine. Would that he had fallen through ice in deep water rather than in shallows, I'd count myself revenged."

"What happened, son?"

"With respect, you are not my father."



THE next day dawned as bright and golden as all the days had the previous phase of the moon, holding the same promise of heat for later in the day. Marrakus had suspected as much and so when the dawn came, he and his entourage were already well outside of Sar Ilksaw's walls, heading north on the trade road towards the *jazmat* on the banks of the Coldwater. Lucyja rode a fine stallion next to him, almost as fine as Marrakus' own dun gelding, as was fitting, though he had to ignore the fact that the guard, Soleigh, rode an even finer beast up ahead. Marrakus eyed Soleigh's black warhorse again. It looked the sort of beast that could run for ten leagues, charge through a line of hardened warriors, and then pivot on a coin ... characteristics that would attract that coin and many another as well. The other guards, save one, were serving in the van with Soleigh or in the rearguard. The remaining guard, the precocious Sorig, he had consigned to driving the lead wagon in punishment for the displays of insolence the day before, though the youth hummed a song to himself and smiled as though happy not to be riding ... likely a solid hypothesis, come to think of it. His two wagoneers followed, driving their teams of horses after the lead wagon. Soleigh's dog bounded through the fields on both sides of the road trying to find horrific things in which to roll.

The wide, fertile farmland north of the city featured large fields bordered by hedgerows, and woods separating the larger estates. They passed entrances to these estates, usually arched with stonework and giving way to tracks leading to large two- or three-storied farmhouses flanked by tall, stone barns, grain silos, and outbuildings for the many workers required to make the land productive. The road itself, no stranger to hot days of blazing sun, had tall shade trees running along its sides and regular troughs of water for the horses. It had two broad tracks paved in flat stones. Growing in between and to either side was grass.

The road climbed up a broad spur of hilly land before crossing a deep ravine and dropping down into a broad river valley on the other side. An arched stone bridge reached across the ravine in a single span, but even that was evidently enough of a spectacle for Sorig to insist on sizing it up for longer than Lucyja took to wander off behind a nearby bush, squat, and wander back. Beyond the ravine, they passed out of Polgatia into land settled by no one because any homesteaders who turned sod would find a troupe of Drover musicians at their door demanding food and drink for themselves and two hundred of their closest friends. The road, though, remained paved and well maintained, and they made good time. They took their lunch half way down the far side of the hills and they could see both banks of the Coldwater adorned with swaths of coloured tents and brightly painted wagons - the *jazmat* had already gathered. They napped fitfully in the heat of the early afternoon to the sound of Soleigh's dog panting, with Sorig assigned to the unpleasant task of staying awake and watching, before continuing on their way.

By late afternoon, they had dropped down from the hills. The dog caught a scent on the wind and ran ahead of them. Sure enough, they soon encountered the outlying, pungent corrals of the reindeer herds minded by Drover lads in loose-fitting grey shirts and baggy, bright coloured trousers fending off the dog from rounding up the animals. The big guard, Soleigh, whistled and the dog bounded back to him, clearly pleased with the results of her efforts, though the boys would have happily put an arrow through her. Marrakus enjoyed gazing on the reindeer ... they were such exotic animals, all muscle, racks of antler, and knobby legs. And the herds were *large*, each one numbering into the dozens. They were also *smelly*, at once musky as well as mossy.

As they passed the corrals, Lucyja turned to him and said, "That's a daft sound they make." Marrakus became aware that the animals did indeed make an odd sound. "How would you describe it, my captain?"

Lucyja snorted. "They sound like pigs oinking through a trumpet."

Marrakus chuckled. "They are Drover beasts, after all. Perhaps we should call it a melodic burp?"

Marrakus waved at the lads minding the herds, though he was glad as they passed the last of the corrals and made their way amongst the tents and wagons. The tents were of all possible hues, with most of them big enough for two people lying side by side, often circling two larger tents, one usually a family's gathering place while the other was a kitchen tent. The wagons were the homes of the better-off Drovers. They were made of wood, had arched roofs, shuttered windows on the sides, steps at the back. They, too, were brightly painted in as many hues as the tents. They had awnings attached to them, as well as wrought iron brackets from which lanterns hung (though presently not lit).

That was when they heard the first strands of music, also floating on the easterly breeze. Marrakus smiled as he caught, first, the frantic *bularia* clacking of *conakas*, the percussion women created by the rhythmic squeezing of wooden castanets between their fingers as they danced. He heard the thumping of hands upon wooden boxes and the faint strains of *garras*. Over it all, he caught the plaintive wail of air squeezed from a collapsable box, the *puhator*, that blasted notes of the sweetest, or sourest, variety depending on the skill or sarcastic intent of the person who squeezed. Finally there was the sound of rebabs that joined the rest to make a complete, unique, whole. He could picture the whirling skirts and bright colours that would accompany the music and, without knowing, accelerated the pace of his horse.

Marrakus saw the usual parade of dark-haired men and women, all with tanned faces. The men wore white shirts, coloured jackets, and wide-brimmed felt hats. The women also wore white shirts and coloured jackets, but usually with layered skirts of alternating colours, and they used red or yellow ribbons to tie back their long hair. Sandals were the usual footwear for all ages, and the loose fitting blouses worn by men and women alike

left no illusions as to the value of exposing skin to the outside air during the hot summer. Marrakus eyed specific, spectacular specimens with great interest, enjoying the play of light on an exposed, muscled chest or a flick of the long dark hair that the men were accustomed to allowing to flow loose around their faces.

At length they came to a wide space speckled with patches of shade cast by a half dozen tall trees, but free of tents or wagons, that lay at the centre of the gathering of the Drovers. The space gave onto the Coldwater - or, if one thought in such ways - extended across the river to the other side. It was the *jaxniat* to the *jazmat*, the gathering place within the gathering place. Most business deals were conducted here, especially those straightforward exchanges that did not require lengthy negotiations or discretion.

There was an iron rule of the Drovers that few foreigners seemed to know, but that Marrakus knew, just as he knew how to gain advantage from such knowledge. There was always a specific trough of water at the centre of the *jaxniat* to which all honourable visitors were expected to guide their animals to prove their respect for their beasts of burden. Often hidden, success in finding it proved one's worth to the Drovers. Marrakus cast his eyes about and saw many troughs, as he saw many pairs of eyes looking on as they entered the open space. Marrakus had never attended a *jazmat* of such large proportions before, but he had an idea of how the Drover mind worked, so he nudged his horse forward, leaving Lucyja behind and passing Soleigh and the other guards in the van. To their evident surprise, he avoided the troughs of water so evident in the open space - but also so evidently neglected by the Drovers - and he guided his horse simply down the banks of the river to the waters of the Coldwater. Then he dismounted and let his horse drink.

Off to the left, a man laughed. He was an older man, with a smattering of grey hair sitting atop a pate of wrinkles formed by many years of singing, crying, laughing, and cursing. The man called out, "I should have known! Marrakus, it would have had to be you to defy the naysayers, avoid the obvious, and win our admiration. I will have you know, however, that finding the correct trough will not gain you a better price."

Marrakus looked up from his drinking horse and replied, “I may not look it, but I *am* capable of thought. *Of course* you’ll rob me blind! How are the Sukovi?”

“We will have time to discuss such matters,” the man called back. “Come to my tent.”

And so, Marrakus went to his tent.

The Drovers had many types of tents. There were small, brown jute tarps handily attached to springs and rollers that one could roll out from underneath their wagons. They could be pulled out and retracted quickly and easily, although the view from the space underneath was wheels, spokes, and horses hooves as often as not. They also had similarly crafted awnings, larger than the tarps and done up in all the bright colours the Drovers could contrive, that rolled out from atop their wooden wagons. Then there were personal tents, small things meant for the less-energetic or less-wealthy, though usually they were cunningly crafted from coloured fabric and expressed something of the personality of the owners. Then there were the pavilions for the families who had grown too large to fit into a single wagon. These would really be two or three smaller varicoloured tents extending off a bigger, central tent. These tents would offer braziers against the cold, broad cushions to sit upon, and squat tables around which to dine, all set on rich, thick rugs to keep the cold from seeping up from the ground. All Drover gatherings worth the name were held outside, so there was nothing bigger, but there were other tents: those for the business of the clan leaders. These were ample and comfortable, always with a small pedestal for signing agreements, but never offering more space than needed to conclude a negotiation in intimacy. Two, or four, comfortable chairs sufficed, inside, while a perimeter of open space and a half dozen mute guards around the tent provided what was necessary in terms of discretion.

The grizzled man led Marrakus and his clerk/guard into one of these latter tents, that had its flaps rolled up to expose it to the eight winds and the eighty spirits, as the Drovers said. On its far side, was a red and yellow wagon, through the door of which came the sound of a woman humming to herself. The man offered Marrakus a seat and then sat down himself. Marrakus said, “I feel such joy in seeing you. Thank you for inviting us here.” Then he gestured to the young man behind him, “This is a

very useful man to me, part guard, as you can see, and all clerk - when I tell him to be. He is called Sorig.

“Sorig, this is likely as close as you will ever come to royalty. He is a *bulibara* of the Drovers. He drives herds of uncountable reindeer, breeds the finest horses in the world and leads the Sukovi people. He names himself Gustof Cigani.”

The old man smiled, creases radiating out from eyes and cheeks. “We say, *the Cigani*.”

“Ah, my pardons. Gustof, *the Cigani*,” Marrakus corrected, to a graceful nod of Gustof.

Sorig stepped forward and made an elegant bow.

Gustof smiled again. “Rise, please,” he said. “My people, too, are not well accustomed to subservience. Marrakus does me more honour than perhaps I deserve when he names me ‘royalty.’ I am not sure many of my folk would agree. So ... ‘Sorig’ my friend Marrakus said. So what is the name your father, Rig, gave you?”

Marrakus furrowed his brow and looked at a smiling Sorig, who replied, “I have been in Polgatia now for three and a half years and you’re the first person to ask.”

Again Gustof’s smile radiated out from his eyes. “Some of us have crossed the *Erçis*, what my Polgati friends like Marrakus here call the Worldrim Mountains. Not many, I grant you, and rarely, but enough, and frequently enough for us to know some things.”

“My name is Thay.”

“Thay,” repeated Gustof as though tasting wine. He frowned. Then he nodded and said, “Thay Sorig. That is a good name.” His beaming smile banished the frown from all memory. Then he turned to the opening of the wagon behind him and beckoned with his hand. “Let me present you, Siançionny, my granddaughter.”

From the wagon emerged a young, dark-haired, bronze-skinned woman with fiery eyes.