

Renegade: Betrayal

From the Chronicles of Raydan Marz
Written by Loren L. Coleman

Chapter 1: Raydan Marz

An eastern warlord? Are you certain?

If you are going to second-guess my judgment as well as my histories, why do you still hold me here?

You are not held, Maleficus. I am your protector. There are those who have begun to question your influence. Were I to withdraw my favor, I doubt you would survive to leave the city.

Of that, I am very certain. Sire. But again, I have done as you asked. Your power in the west is known and feared. The south is complacent in its illusion of security, the north preoccupied with its own petty concerns and squabbles. The first challenge, when it comes, must of necessity rise in the east.

From a warlord.

I did not-and do not-specify. But it will be one of similar power to your own, and with loyalties you cannot secure. Likely with a history of independence or personal rivalry.

Then it must be Raydan Marz...

* * *

The morning fog fell away from the hillside encampment, unveiling blackened fire pits and empty bedrolls as the feathery mist retreated into the lower vale. A broken fence of knee-high stumps pockmarked the immediate area: the remains of smooth young alders and scale-barked pine sacrificed for firewood the day before. Tufts of pale grasses marked the beaten ground. The sharp latrine stench warned of very recent occupancy by soldiers, while abandoned packs promised their return. A single blue pennant hung from a pole planted in front of the commander's tent. Stirred by a weak breeze, the pennant unfolded to reveal a design that would be recognized anywhere in the Land: a golden-toothed wheel.

The ensign of an Atlantean warhost.

Having ordered his remaining warriors out at first light, the warlord Raydan Marz now led the core of his troop down into the fog-blanketed hollow, searching for the chaos mage Krang and his pack of Orc raiders. Mighty ponderosa pines rose majestically over brushy acacia and scotchbroom undergrowth, their boles gnarled like arthritic joints. The ground was softer here, a mulch of sweet-smelling earth and old pine needles. Frequent breaks in the forest allowed the warlord to track most of his troop by sight--though not all. Magus Olarud had disappeared off to Raydan's left, leading the warhost's Amotep forces. Altem Sorub and his guardsman squad faded in and out of the mists on the warlord's right. The fog wouldn't last against the rising sun, but for now it cut visibility down to thirty paces or less, creating a maze of shifting shadows from which an attack could spring at any moment. This was the kind of morning that set even a seasoned veteran on edge.

Raydan's manaclevt, naked in the chill air, quivered with internal magicks as the sword's cord-wrapped hilt carved fresh creases into the calluses on his right hand. In his left he held a short length of rope, its other end tied in a slipknot about the slender neck of his prisoner. Human, with dusky skin and bright hazel eyes, she looked no older than fourteen but as wild as any nomadic Elf off the Wylden Plateau. Twigs and broken leaves tangled her ash-

blonde hair. She wore only ragged breeches tied with a knotted cord and a leather vest stained with dirt and moss. Her feet were bare and toughened.

The warlord prodded her forward roughly, looking carefully into the forest shadows. He couldn't see the Roa Lents, a tributary of the mighty Kaiten, but he heard the distant rush of its foaming waters ahead. Along its bank would be Kuttar Depths, a mining town under the aegis of the empire and, like many other towns, important to the Atlantis Guild only for its monthly quota of magestone. The most valuable substance known in the Land, magestone allowed the Guild to craft such wonders as his manaclevt sword and the magical weapons carried by Raydan's Amotep gunners. It powered Atlantean war golems, two of which trailed his personal squad, their bronze carapaces glistening even in the morning's feeble light. And, if Desmanda's hints were to be believed, it also helped a Guild magus focus magical talents.

Such a prize would be a lodestone to the Orcs as well, which was why Raydan had left Kuttar Depths seemingly undefended--to draw them in. After two months of tracking and skirmishes, feints and diversions, battle finally loomed. He felt it lighting a fire in the marrow of his bones as he stalked forward. It would be today. The gamble had paid off.

Desmanda appeared by his side, her copperish robes hanging loosely on her thin frame, while the leather mantle gave her the illusion of shoulders a Troll would be proud to own. "You're taking a big chance," the scholar-magus said, as if reading his mind.

She did that far too often for Raydan to believe it merely coincidence. But warlord or not, Guild secrets were Guild secrets, and after two years campaigning together he hardly bothered about it anymore. It was one of those subjects to be avoided, like the small bumps on her skull--the pieces of crafted magestone set beneath her scalp. It was difficult not to notice them, though, as Desmanda shaved the front of her head and pulled the rest of her long, raven-black hair back into the formal crest of a Guild demi-magus.

"Not so big a chance," he replied, lowering his voice to a deep whisper. He wasn't worried about his prisoner overhearing them, but he didn't want any of his men to eavesdrop on their conversation.

"Krang didn't push this deep into the empire without a reason, and Kuttar Depths is the only decent target nearby. All I did was make it look more appealing." He glanced sidelong at her, his eyes questioning. "The Orcs are after magestone. Any idea why?"

"I know what the Guild could do with it. But Orcs?" Desmanda shrugged. "They might want it simply because we value it. And with a chaos mage involved, I'll stick to predicting that the sun will rise in the east, and that only if you give me strong odds."

He nodded, and the two of them paced along for several moments. Then he slowed enough that the three Utem Crossbowmen outdistanced the pair by several strides. The only other squad nearby was the Khamsin mercenaries he'd hired two months before, and they were whispering amongst themselves. "It would help if we had even a basic idea," he said. Raydan didn't like to press his magus, but Krang had escaped him too many times over the past several years for him to take any chances now.

"Lacking the wisdom of Tezla's avatar, it would only be guesswork," Desmanda replied. "You should have as good an idea as anyone. You're from Prieska." "And our dominion runs right up to the borderlands of the Fist, so of course we're experts on Orcs," Raydan scoffed. "We trade with them openly, too. And it's our fault that the Orcs ever established raiding parties inside the western reaches of the empire. We also eat with our fingers and bathe only once a month, if you want to believe all the tales."

"I never believed you traded with Orcs," she said, but then the demi-magus nodded at Raydan's young prisoner. "Although maybe I should start to wonder." The warlord frowned, shrugged, shook the rope leash. "The needs of the empire come first, Desmanda." His tone wasn't exactly congenial, and the conversation languished

for several hundred paces.

Finally, she decided to try again. " If you say it is so, Raydan Marz, I will believe it. We've been together long enough. But you know that Magus Olarud would-" Desmanda broke off, staring into a stand of tangled acacia as a shadow detached itself from the woods, appearing nearly at Raydan's shoulder.

The warlord did not hesitate. His sword flashed down at the prisoner, the keen edge of the manaclevt, halting only inches away from the young girl's slender throat. The child, oblivious, continued to stare straight ahead, but the new arrival immediately dropped down into a crouch, averting his gaze in submission to the warlord. A man of middling years, by all appearances. Although he was muscular and graceful, he was also filthy and unkempt, with nothing more than ragged pants to clothe him, and his amber, lupine eyes stared out of a face darkened by a few days' worth of beard. Raydan withdrew his sword only after the Utem bowmen had drawn steady aim at the magespawn.

"You haven't brought one to me", Raydan said, checking the man's hands and mouth for any trace of blood. " You will answer my bidding." He tugged on the rope leash, half-throttling the girl. " Hunt."

The man said nothing. His kind never did, to the warlord's knowledge. He continued to stare at Raydan, a feral anger smoldering in those glowing eyes and a sneer curling his upper lip.

Stronger measures were called for, Raydan decided. He turned his blade away from the girl and pinked the man's shoulder. Blood glistened on the tip of his manaclevt as he withdrew it, but no wound showed. Only rage, twisting the other's face into a cruel and savage snarl. Then his features ran like melting wax, dispelling any illusion of human form. Coarse, gray-black fur sprouted from his shoulders, arms and face, quickly growing into a matted coat. His face erupted into a muzzle of white, gnashing teeth. Only the eyes remained the same, glowing with a wild strength.

Raydan's manaclevt, once again held a killing position at the girl's neck. One short thrust, and she'd be dead. "Hunt!" he ordered again.

The werewolf fell back a step, growled threateningly and then turned for the nearby brush. A quick leap, a rustling of branches, and he was gone. Raydan saw the magespawnd creature a moment later when it passed between two trees, a lethal shadow caught in the morning light, and then the shapeshifter vanished again.

"I hope you know what you're doing." Desmanda shook her head, the longer tresses falling down from behind her ears brushing against her leather mantle.

"The magespawn? He'll obey."

" Not that," she said. Then she amended, "Well, not just that. I was referring to the fact that we're spread very thin. We have-what?- twenty warriors left from a warhost of fifty? If Krang hits us with anything too large..."

"Coming to grips with a host of Orc raiders is like trying to grab quicksilver- they slip through your fingers," Raydan said. " I had to match Krang's diversionary raids with patrols of my own. We contain them, push them to make a heavy strike, and then crush their center." His skin flushed warm at that pleasant thought. "It's really the only way."

Desmanda shrugged, obviously unconvinced. "As you say. But Magus Olarud won't thank you if the Orcs' heavy strike costs us Kuttar Depths. Nor will the prophet-magus in Atlantis."

Raydan bridled. She had clearly and intentionally left out the emperor, but weak as Sire Tahmaset was thought to be, he still sat the throne, and the empire was more than the Atlantis Guild. "Olarud wouldn't thank me if I personally destroyed the Necropolis Sect. To

him, I'll always be an outlander." Always, despite ten years of loyal service to the empire and the Atlantis Guild. That ate away at Raydan some nights. Other nights, he simply dreamed of strangling the belligerent magus with his own hands. That image kept Raydan company for another ten strides.

And then a terrified shriek shattered the still morning air.

A throaty snarl from Raydan's werewolf answered the wounded scream, the source of the noises lost in the fog but very close by. The younger magespawnt tensed, crouching down and staring off to one side in search of her kindred. It gave the warlord a direction.

"Wheel left," Raydan ordered, hauling the captive shapeshifter around by her leash as the trio of Utem bowmen rejoined them. Shadowy figures leapt and scrambled about in the distant fog. There would be no opportunity for finesse--not with the Orcs all but falling in the Atlanteans' laps. If the magespawnt's prey hadn't warned them...

"Altem Jannus," he called back over his shoulder, "bring up our golems. Gunnery team, hold for my order."

But it was too late. Raydan's Khamsin auxiliary had already pressed forward on the warlord's right side. Whether they had seen something through the dissipating mists or were merely attempting to spook the raiders, the dwarf fuser led a salvo backed by both freelancers with their pistols. The echoing report of their guns thundered out even as Raydan attempted to order them back. The acrid stench of black powder hung in the air, stinging the warlord's nose, and he caught the dark look two of his bowmen sent the dwarf.

"Mind the Orcs," Raydan said, kicking dirt at one of the gunmen. The first shadowy figures were now coalescing into a pair of Orc Slashers, and this was no time for the standing prejudices between his Atlantean warriors and the rebel-trained auxiliary to flare.

Desmanda sheltered behind two of the bowmen, one hand on each of their shoulders, head bent in concentration. An azure halo wreathed her brow, and the readied quarrels of both men began to glow subtly. The third Bowman fired and missed. Raydan moved forward to buy the demi-magus more time. One raider hacked wildly at the warlord's head with a pair of abused scimitars, one blade in each hand. Raydan ducked the first and took the second blow harmlessly against his shoulderguard.

The warlord lunged with the manacle, his magic blade working through a gap in the Orc's crude bronze armor to strike into a lung. The raider shrieked, blood flying out with his spittle as he stood impaled on Raydan's weapon. With the precise control learned as part of the "way of the blade"- Raydan shifted his grip on the cord-wound hilt, stepped into the raider and brought his sword up in a quick, disemboweling cut. The Orc folded to the ground even as the lagging pair of Utem bowmen fired together. Both bolts took the second Slasher high in the left chest, staggering him.

But the wounded raider was apparently made out of sterner stuff than his companion, ignoring the bolts protruding from his breast and cutting down the first Bowman with two savage slashes to his extended arm. The other two reloaded, and without the benefit of magical assistance this time fired point blank. One bolt caught the Orc in the throat, dropping him.

"Leech!" the warlord yelled, standing over his fallen Bowman. The warhost's only medic broke away from her Khamsin countrymen to attend the wounded man, tying a quick tourniquet around his arm and then fishing into her collection of leeches.

With no desire to see the beasts at work, Raydan pushed ahead with his remaining force. More Orcs emerged from the clearing fog. Two, three, five, eight! And those were just the ones he could see. His Khamsin squad stalled the rush for a moment, their gunfire echoing through the vale like the thunderclaps that herald a coming storm, while Altem Jannus hurried forward the host's two brass golems. On his left flank, Raydan heard the roar of an

incinerator and the wounded howls of scorched Orcs. Two lightning flashes cut the mist, snaking white tendrils at as-yet-unseen enemies. Olarud was busy too, then, leading Raydan's Amotep forces.

"If we're in trouble, it's on the far right," Desmanda said, mentally jumping ahead of him. "Altem Sorub is there with only two Utem blades." Her green eyes alight with magical energy, they flared brightly for an instant in the telltale flash Raydan knew signaled the release of her mental attack. Ahead, one Orc crumpled as if poleaxed. She nodded to the golems. "I could send one of them."

Desmanda was offering to "throw" a golem toward Altem Sorub by her ability to levitate. Raydan considered it briefly, and just as quickly rejected the idea. "Krang hasn't shown his face yet. I can't overcommit until we're certain." He tried to press forward, but the young shapeshifter child hung back defiantly, stalling the advance. Raydan yanked the magespaw to him, half-strangling her. With a quick tug he loosened the noose and yanked it off over her head, bending to dip his fingers in the blood of the Slasher he'd killed. "Orcs," he said, pointing to his right. He reached out and smeared some of the blood on her mouth. "Hunt!"

Licking the gore from her lips, the creature's hazel eyes brightened with bloodlust. She spun around to race off in the direction Raydan had indicated, leaping over a fallen tree with a fluid grace even the more powerful shifter hadn't shown. She disappeared between the heavy-hanging branches of two cedars, the vale swallowing her up.

"If the male finds her, you've lost them both."

Raydan nodded, unconcerned. Right now, giving the magespaw her freedom to hunt rated far above any need to keep them under his thumb. Besides, he'd trapped them before--he could find them again. And without the young werewolf to slow him down, Raydan was able to whip his squad into a tight diamond formation that placed himself at its head, the two remaining Utem Crossbowmen backing him, and Desmanda protected at the rear.

The Orc raiders were being squeezed between the Khamsin mercenaries and the huge-fisted golems, but enough of a gap remained that raiders could slip through in hopes of flanking either force. What they found instead was Raydan, the warlord's manaclevt, slicing at them in great dancing arcs, searching out the flaws in their crude armor. That was the first principle of the "Bakash"- to know an enemy's weaknesses. One Orc fell, costing Raydan only a small cut along his left arm. When a pair of Crushers tried to take him together, one to either side, they moved into the sights of the bowmen who once again had Desmanda enhancing their bolts with magical energies. Once wounded, neither raider stood before the warlord long.

Desmanda called to him, and Raydan glanced back quickly. Her eyes flared, reining in the deadly energies at her command. "Where's Krang?" shouted again.

He shook his head. The chaos mage had yet to show himself. "He's here" Raydan insisted. The Orc warlord couldn't release that many raiders as a separate force--they'd abandon him and form a new raider pack. But then Orcs typically fought amongst themselves for the right to lead a charge, and if this frontal assault was not the raiders' best troops, then where was Krang?

A question no sooner asked than answered, as the longshaft of a black-fletched arrow buried itself in the bole of a thick pine next to Raydan's head. Another appeared to magically sprout from the back of an Utem bowman, who screamed in pain and confusion. Then a great roar of challenge welled up behind the Atlantean forces, and Raydan spun about in time to see a half-dozen Orcs, both Crushers and Slashers, burst from concealment.

And behind them, beating a studded mace against the bronze chestplate of his own armor with great ringing blows, was the Orc chaos mage. Krang!

Chapter 2: Marching Orders

I have sent for him and set my agents in place. Raydan Marz will not live to see the city.

Perhaps that is for the best. Then again...

You are saying there is another way?

I am reminded of Good King Phorus, who assassinated his brother to prevent knowledge of his brother's treason from becoming known and thereby staining his kingdom's reputation. A difficult choice, but he made it with the best interest of his people in mind. Of course, the story was eventually told anyway. It ruined King Phorus' reputation, and his brother received more sympathy than vilification.

Your point?

Public displays may incite both sides of an issue, but private decrees tend only to work for the injured party. So now it is your turn to make Phorus' Choice.

Is any of that true, Maleficus?

Does it matter, Sire?

* * *

The howling battle calls of the Orcs were barely louder than the cries of dismay sent up by the Khamsin mercenaries as they realized the trap that had closed around the warhost. One of the pistol-wielding freelancers wavered, unsure in which direction to shoot. Altem Jannus stumbled back into the protection of the brass golems, his right side laid open by the chipped blade of an Orc Slasher. Another deadly arrow whispered out of the scotch broom underbrush, singing by Raydan's left ear and vanishing back into the fogged hollow. The archer kept himself well hidden, but despite his potential for mischief Raydan Marz had more immediate problems in the form of the grayish-skinned raiders and their chaos mage leader.

The Orc warlord could not have caught the Atlanteans in a more dangerous trap. Krang leapt and danced in the background, safeguarded by his larger warriors as he worked bizarre magicks. The horned skull he wore as a helm bounced awkwardly atop his head while fingerbones strung into a gruesome necklace rattled against his bronze chestplate. He continued to beat his studded mace against the mail, urging his warriors on to victory. Krang had his Orcs whipped into a bloodlust, the two Slashers among them nearly cutting at each other in their desire to reach Raydan. The entire pack rushed forward with reckless abandon, stringing themselves into a loose line in their eagerness. Krang had no doubt sent them after the Atlantean warlord in the hope that one killing thrust would give the battle to the raiders. The chaos mage was as impatient as ever.

And Raydan would make that cost him.

"Desmanda," he called to the demi-magus, his powerful voice making itself heard over the din of ringing steel and the screams of the wounded. "Throw a golem after me." He broke away from their squad to intercept the new rush, buying time for the Guild-trained woman to give his warhost an advantage. She did, though not quite according to his plans.

Desmanda had sought safety in between two Crossbowmen, protecting herself while gathering mana. Taking his command far too literally, however, she now darted from her sanctuary to lay hands on Raydan's back. The force of her levitation sorcery picked up not a

golem but the warlord himself, hurling Raydan up and over the blades of the advancing Orc raiders. Branches whipped at his head and chest, stinging his face with red welts. One Slasher leapt high and swiped at him, the tip of his scimitar nicking a sliver from the warlord's leather belt. Then Raydan dropped with a stomach-sickening lurch toward the ground, which looked far harder than it had moments ago. For all her error, though, Desmanda set Raydan down feather-light in between the last two raiders.

But what Raydan had mistaken for a large Orc Crusher shambling out of the fog turned out to be one of the bestial half-Troll, half-Orc warriors Krang often brought off the steppe. "Raydan!" it called out, challenging the warlord. Thick, corded muscles bunched and quivered beneath hairless gray skin, and the misshapen brute wielded a stone ax capable of crushing a man with one blow. But it stood between Raydan and Krang, and for that the warlord was not about to slow.

Raydan lunged forward with his manaclevt at full extension, the flat of the blade parallel with the ground to cut easily without getting lodged between his opponent's ribs. The tip of the magestone sword tore into the side of the monstrous warrior just as it swung an overhand blow with its ax. Using the half-Troll's momentum against it, Raydan dodged to the side and past, avoiding the ax and tearing a great wound into the creature's side. The ax's stone head smashed into the ground, burying itself almost to the haft in the dark loam, and the abomination roared in pain and fury. Froth-flecked blood gushed out of the wound, slopping visceral gore across Raydan's gauntleted hand. A few warm drops splattered onto the warlord's brow, tracing red paths down his face.

Although still alive and very dangerous, the half-Troll was actually a lesser worry. Twice as deadly was the Orc chaos mage Krang with his strong mace and unpredictable magicks. But the thunderous volley of the Khamsin mercenaries firing their black powder guns, followed by the angry and pain-filled shouts of the raiders, reminded the warlord that he had far more strength behind him.

His own lightning pistol swung from a heavy leather lanyard hooked over his belt. Raydan had left the mana-powered weapon alone while relying on his swordplay, now he took a firm hold of the device's leather-wrapped ruby pipe. His fingers brushed the trigger assembly, hooking around it as he extended the weapon. He only needed a few seconds.

Krang did not give them to him.

The mage's eyes flared a dangerous red, and Raydan felt the searing wave of power roll over him like the discharge of an Atlantean Incinerator. It stabbed hot needles into his eyes and ears and lodged fiery coals in his lungs. His limbs numbed from the magical assault, Raydan managed only two steps toward Krang before stumbling to his knees. He kept himself from falling prostrate only by letting go of his manaclevt and supporting himself with one arm.

But he still held tightly to his pistol. Raydan fired from the ground, pulling the trigger hard against the handgrip. A far cry from the Khamsin weapons, with this gun there was no hangfire or worry that a bullet would tumble. Energies flared from the jewel lens of the device, focused by the mana collimators into a hard flash of lightning that raced out in a serpentine track to slash at Krang. The tendril crackled and spat, while smaller arcs of energy played between the studs on Krang's mace and between the chaos mage's teeth. Its impact threw Krang back several paces, the chaos mage dropping into a ready crouch.

Which still might have spelled the end for Raydan's new magical attacks. But then a crossbow quarrel took the chaos mage in the left leg, spinning him around and knocking him back into a tangle of thorny brush.

With a glance over his shoulder, Raydan saw one of his Crossbowmen standing ready off to one side with Desmanda, the demi-magus lending her magic to his archery. She had also

thrown a golem after him, per his instructions, and with the Khamsin mercenaries holding back the Orcs' frontal assault; Krang's veterans were now caught between Raydan's two brass golems. The magestone-powered machines were quickly being rendered down into scrap, but for now they held the raiders in check. It also appeared that Altem Sorub had rejoined with the main force, leading his trio of Utem blades in from the flank to press the raiders. The half-Troll, though, had turned to stagger after the warlord, one hand clamped over the wound Raydan had given it while the other trailed its heavy stone-headed ax. A long string of bloody saliva dripped from its chin. It cursed him in the guttural Orc tongue, which lent itself so well to invective. The Atlantean warlord rolled under the abomination's weak, one-handed cut, grabbing up his sword before coming back up onto unsteady feet.

A crossbow bolt nicked the half-Troll's arm, but the monster barely noticed. Raydan was not so easy to ignore. The warlord clipped the edge of his manaclevt into the knee of the monstrous half-Troll and then, ducking forward, slashed backhand to hamstring the fierce warrior. The keen edge of his magic blade left the limb attached only by a ruin of cartilage and bone.

Like the sturdiest iron oak before the labors of a woodsman, the half-Troll toppled over to slam full-bodied into the ground. The heavy ax was lost. Its large, gnarled hand clutched at the ground, digging into the soft, dark loam. Searching for a rock, perhaps, or just in unconscious effort, imagining that its fingers were around Raydan's throat. Mercilessly, the warlord stepped forward and brought his sword down across the half-Troll's thick neck. It took two cuts to free the head.

Raydan immediately turned toward the undergrowth Krang had fallen into, leaving the hard-pitched battle to what remained of his warhost, thinking about finishing off the Orc warlord once and for all. What he found was a tunnel forced through the brush, leaving a trail of blood-tipped thorns and crushed nettles. No sign of the chaos mage himself, and Raydan knew he had missed him. Again.

With Krang gone and their mightiest warrior dead, the raider squads finally shattered like Elven crystal dashed against the rocks. One second they were fighting in two large packs, looking ready to draw out the battle to the last raider. The next, a dozen Orcs were running their own course back into the trees, melting away like quicksilver. A few failed to break away quickly enough and fell to the Khamsin guns or the metal-encased fists of the surviving brass golem. The last Orc casualty apparently ran afoul of Raydan's werewolves, his screams and their snarling howls rolling back to the battlefield, filling the hollow. He took several long seconds to die.

And, finally, silence.

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Raydan Marz looked down on Altem Sorub, whose timely arrival during the battle had taken a great deal of pressure off the warhost's main body. Sorub's three Utem Guardsmen had bought the time Raydan needed to run off Krang and kill the half-Troll warrior. And he paid for it with his life.

Sorub was a native of Delphane, the island-state that had given birth to both Tezla and the Atlantean Empire. His swarthy complexion, normally the color of pale seaweed, was now ashen gray with blood loss. His eyes stared unseeing, seemingly accusing the warlord. Raydan met death's gaze with little sympathy. The empire often demanded such sacrifices, and it could just as easily be his turn in the next battle. The warlord watched as the leech medic brushed flies away from the sword cut crusting the side of Sorub's neck and then closed the Altem's eyes one final time.

"Saying goodbye?" Magus Olarud, returned from his patrol to Kuttar Depths, sidled up from where he had been conversing in low terms with Raydan's surviving Crossbowman. "I've

never seen you sentimental over a body before." Olarud's pinched face cracked into a condescending smile. "Of course. Comrades in arms. You must have known Altem Sorub back in your days as a sword-bearer."

"Sword-bearer." In the regional dialect of Prieska, Raydan Marz's homeland, that could be twisted to mean "lesser warrior," reminding Raydan that he sprang not from the magic-trained elite of the Atlantis Guild, but from the origins of a common soldier. It was one of Olarud's many charms, being able to slight his warlord with customs and language garnered from Raydan's birth land. And while the idea of running his manacle through Olarud's gizzard held some appeal, the least consequence of such an action would be having to answer personally to the Prophet-Magus of the Guild. Olarud knew this and wielded his advantage to the last coined insult.

Raydan brushed thick fingers through his warrior's mohawk, exploring the blood-matted tangles of red hair. How Olarud could come through a battle looking fresh-bathed and vigorous had to be another calculated annoyance. He rubbed hard at one patch, combing out reddish-brown flakes of dried blood.

"Altem Sorub signed on with me last year, fresh out of training. I think you know that, Olarud." He intentionally left off the magus' title while according Sorub respect, an insult that stung the smaller man deeply. "What is it you wanted with Keravan?" He nodded toward the Crossbowman. Olarud did not normally associate with warriors, having commandeered the warhost's Amotep forces six months before as his personal squad.

"I had noticed that your...pets...were absent. I simply asked if Keravan had seen them return." He smiled thinly. "They are dangerous creatures, after all. If they are loose again, I worry for our patrols."

"They are my patrols, Olarud, and the magespawn are of no concern to you or the Amotep warriors." Why this verbal slap prompted a smirk from the magus, Raydan couldn't see. As Desmanda joined the pair, it was clear by her own frown that Olarud's manner disturbed her as well. "Now did you find Kuttar Depths in order, or are you delaying bad news?" Not that the warlord thought that possibility likely. Olarud would never resist a chance to deliver ruin to him.

In point of fact, he was wrong.

"The mining town is untouched," Olarud said. "Fortunately." A touch more emphasis, and Raydan Marz might have read that "fortunately" as a threat. He still could, and then the Prophet-Magus leader of the Guild could have no real complaint. But the moment was lost as the warlord read behind Olarud's manner something more. Something...dangerous. "You've brought other news?" he asked, dark eyes narrowing.

"Actually, yes." His surprise spoiled, and trying desperately not to let the flicker of disappointment color his face, the magus reached into golden robes and withdrew a letter. "On the way back, I received mage-writ orders for you." He held it out. "I'd like to say it's been...an experience...serving with you."

Olarud's thumb hid the seal, but his attitude and the rare occasion of such a magically-produced missive promised that this was no casual conveyance. Had the magus finally arranged a transfer? A command of his own? A post back in Atlantis? Raydan accepted the dispatch, set in place a careful mask as he noted the emblem of the Emperor himself. Desmanda's green eyes widened as she, too, noticed, then stared cat-like in study of Magus Olarud.

The warlord broke the thin, stone-crusted seal. It took several moments to examine and decipher the flowing script, so fancy to be nearly illegible. Raydan had once watched

Desmanda take a summons in this way. Passing a rune-carved magestone over enchanted paper, the words magically appeared in the same hand as the sender had written. The paper was then folded and sealed, the magestone destroying itself as it melted into the correct sigil. The magus or demi-magus was challenged with not reading such important messages, though Raydan doubted many adhered to the discipline. Olarud obviously knew the contents, or had received a mage-writ letter of his own.

The latter, most likely, as Raydan continued to read. A cold shock burrowed into his guts, taking nest there. As it turned out, Olarud would delay bad news if it meant drawing out his own pleasure from delivering it.

“Desmanda,” Raydan finally said, voice neutral and giving no victory to the attentive magus, “I want you to recall the patrols. At once. Also send runners from Kuttar Depths to bring the full warhost together.”

The demi-magus glanced from her warlord to Olarud, to the letter and back again. She appeared torn over asking about the missive directly, or being more circumspect. Circumspection won out. “We don’t seriously intend to let Krang escape?”

Raydan shook his head, folded the message and tucked it from sight into the cuff of his gauntlet. “I certainly hope not, but that is no longer my decision to make.” He rendered a formal salute to the magus, fingers interlocked and a slight bow, as custom dictated. Here Olarud showed nothing but solemnity, returning the courtesy. “Command of this warhost, minus an honor squad at his discretion, has been turned over to Magus Olarud.

“I’ve been ordered back to Atlantis.”

Chapter 3: Rivals

He’s here. Now what shall I do with him?

What you must, Sire.

You can offer no better advice than that?

One of our first conversations, as I recall, concerned the dependence of a ruler on any one man. A ruler must be decisive and ruthless, traits you displayed so admirably on campaign, and regard all advice, however well-meant, with suspicion.

Yes. And wasn’t it you who also convinced me that with greater power would come a greater need to rely on the lessons of history? That places me at an impasse. So what say you now?

I would say that holding power is always more difficult than gaining it. Historically speaking.

Sometimes, Maleficus, I wonder why I’ve kept you alive for so long.

That question occasionally crosses my mind as well, Sire.

* * *

Atlantis.

The city floated, defying the pull of the Land, rising higher above the ground as Raydan Marz and his small retinue rode east out of the Jerriquan Heights and down toward the banks of the Roa Vizorr. Polished, brightly colored stone and burnished metal took to the air in silent majesty, finally hovering some five hundred feet overhead as if sculpted from clouds. No part of the empire’s capital had touched ground in almost a century.

Nothing compared to Atlantis. Not Warlord Djarett's floating leviathan or the Oracle's Needle at Kos. Many large cities boasted a few levitated towers, a palace, perhaps a Guild workshop—but nothing like this collection of skybound mansions, keeps, gardens, private theaters and grand halls, all joined together by cobblestone walks and paved boulevards. It was the gem of the empire, and a testament to the Age of Tezla.

To Raydan Marz, riding in on the emperor's summons, it was also a promise of what could be again.

Not that Raydan expected another Magus Supreme to rise. Four centuries earlier, Tezla had become the first and only mortal to walk that self-destructive path and fully master both the Elemental and Necromental schools of magic. His insights led to the discovery of magestone and the founding of the Technomental School—what would eventually become the Atlantis Guild. He also founded the Atlantean Empire, bringing order to much of the Land despite the resistance of petty tyrants. He alone kept a fragile peace among all three schools, ruling from the Serpine Mountains to the steppe of the Fist.

And then, when his energy finally began to dwindle, Tezla designed a way to prolong his life by having his mind transferred into an immortal golem: his Avatar, attended still by the Guild's Prophet-Magus. It acted as a moral center that held together a majority of the empire.

Unfortunately, it was not quite enough to prevent conflicts from developing between the Guild and the other schools, or to guard against the treachery of anarchists. The Necromentalists, failing in a bid for power only four years after Tezla's physical death, struck out on their own to form the dark Necropolis Sect. The heresy of the Elemental school had to be driven out of Atlantis, and the empire, by force; they then installed themselves on the Wylden Plateau and formed the core of the Elemental League.

And that first terrible gunshot, only thirteen years before, when nonmagical power in the form of gunpowder and steam mechanics had fallen into anarchist hands. The formal debut of the Black Powder Rebels had plunged the empire and the entire Land into chaos with the assassination of then-Prophet-Magus Karrudun.

No, Tezla's strength would never come again. Not in Raydan's lifetime. But another emperor, a strong emperor who could restore order and possibly reforge some of those sundered links, that wasn't beyond hope. Tahmaset might yet become that man. Or his son.

In the meantime, Atlantis waited.

A pair of mounted Elven outriders preceded the warlord's guard. The others led their horses across the Links, the system of stone platforms and short cabled bridges that soared across the Roa Vizorr. Beneath the northwest edge of the city, where a circular tower hung out over the Vizorr, the Drift streamed upward out of the river. Massive and slow-moving, a waterfall magically reversed, the Drift fed Atlantis' aqueducts and sewers. It also emitted a light mist that trailed over the Links, pattering an eternal rain over travelers' final approach to the city. Raydan turned his face up into the mist, enjoying the cool feel in the stale heat of midday.

It also distracted him momentarily from Down Town, the sprawl of homes and industry that had grown up under Atlantis' shadow. Like pale toadstools the whitewashed, clapboard dwellings sprouted in heavy clusters. Very few rose over a single story—inns, mostly, and stables with hay lofts—as there was little reason to. Atlantis claimed the heights. There was no competing with the Guild's ability, and any building worth lifting by magestone had been taken up to Atlantis long ago.

"The Guild should erect a liftgate outside," Desmanda said as the party of eight crossed into the shadow of the city.

Raydan traded a knowing glance with Altem Jannus; it was not the first time he had heard—and ignored—this complaint. No Guild member he had ever met enjoyed Down

Town, and as practical-minded as Desmanda was in the field, she still displayed many sensibilities of the privileged when in civilization. Philosophically as well as physically, the Atlantis Guild held themselves above the commonality. And deservedly so, in the warlord's mind. It was their reward for helping hold together Tezla's empire, without which people would live under the anarchy of the rebels or in servitude to the dark powers of the Necropolis Sect. The citizens of Down Town might know some minor discomforts, but that could hardly be considered too great a sacrifice. The needs of the empire came first. Always.

Fortunately, the scholar-magus would not have to endure Down Town long. Their outriders turned into a nearby corralled area. The stables nearest any liftgate were reserved for the elite of the empire, and as a warlord traveling under the emperor's seal, Raydan qualified.

Still, Desmanda wrinkled her nose over the earthy smell of hay and horse dung and glanced up with longing frustration at the underside of Atlantis. "Maybe one back across the river," she continued her complaint.

"Impractical," Raydan said with a shrug, finally allowing himself to be drawn into the conversation. He tossed his reins and a copper piece to the pale-faced boy who ran out from the stable to accept their horses and nodded a quick dismissal to the two cavalymen who always saw to their own mounts. "You'd have to levitate an entire bridge, and the Links work well enough."

The demi-magus tapped her chin thoughtfully as they crossed the road to a well-guarded plaza. Raydan's trio of crossbowmen, led by Keravan, jogged ahead to clear and hold the next lift. "I don't know," she finally said. "Why not do away with a bridge and simply have the gate take us up and across?"

"A horizontal lift? I've never heard of the Guild even trying that." And it wasn't something he felt particularly eager to experience, either. He remembered too well Desmanda's levitation spell hurling him through air.

She smiled with exaggerated humor as they entered the liftgate plaza. "Would you want to bet against us?"

No. Unless you belonged to the rebels, you didn't bet against the Guild in Atlantis. The odds favored the house too heavily. Raydan said nothing, though, taking his place in the paved plaza at the center of three concentric circles. The plaza guard held back the curious and the waiting while Raydan's people arrayed themselves tightly around him. The early stage of the lift would be the most dangerous, exposing them to assassins' spells or arrows. The warlord took some comfort in the relaxed attitudes of the plaza guards. Rebel activity, dangerously prevalent during his last visit to Atlantis, must be down, he decided. A good sign for Sire Tahmaset's rule.

"What do you think he wants with us?" Desmanda asked as the inner circle under Raydan's feet suddenly lit with a bright emerald glow. "With you?"

The middle ring flashed to life next, the magestone buried within the plaza charging for the lift. Then the outside ring. As if caught by the winds, Raydan's people were swept up into the air, rising toward Atlantis high above. The air around them shimmered only slightly with magical energies, but otherwise the liftgate's effect was hardly tangible. If one didn't look down, one could still imagine solid ground underfoot. Raydan Marz didn't look down.

"A new campaign?" Raydan finally guessed, trying to take his mind off the emptiness growing below him. Not that he was afraid of heights; Raydan simply did not like giving up control to someone—or something—else. He rubbed a hand back over his warrior's mohawk, thinking. "I hear Kossak Mageslayer has been hitting the empire hard in the north, bringing an army down off the Wylden Plateau. Maybe we're being set against the League."

It was possible, if unlikely. The third of the empire's three major rivals, the Elemental League was usually preoccupied with its ancient feud against the Necropolis Sect, pitting

their command of nature against the Sect's death magicks. Raydan wouldn't have minded fielding against the Sect himself, except that Warlord Jeet Nujarek had all but claimed the Sect as his personal vendetta.

Well, the Sect and Raydan Marz, anyway. Nujarek and Raydan had a history, and neither claimed fond memories of that time. Nujarek had once been military governor of Prieska, a hard overlord, and it was Raydan's efforts that eventually had him recalled to Atlantis.

"I wonder if he's in the city?" Raydan said aloud without realizing it, his attention suddenly caught by the view. From this height, one could see the lower city trapped almost entirely within Atlantis' shadow. The Links had become a thin ribbon stretched across the Roa Vizorr, and a stone's throw downriver the Vizorr gave birth to the Roa Platon, which split away and curled back around to the east, pinning Down Town onto a triangular corner of land. The Platon also served as the dump for Atlantis' effluent, and on the far side of the city the Gray Spill tumbled down without magical aid. That rain, which was often blown back onto the southeastern bank, would not be very refreshing and explained the lack of buildings near the sewage-laden falls.

"Who?" Altem Jannus finally asked, his voice uncertain.

The question, and Desmanda's frown, recalled Raydan's attention. "Nujarek," he said to Desmanda, the only person here who would remember the old feud. Her green eyes narrowed at the name. "I was wondering if he'd been summoned as well."

"You'll know in a moment." The scholar-magus glanced up at the rapidly approaching platform. The liftgate drifted to an easy stop, fitting them into a circular opening, where they hovered for a moment over the long drop. Then the floor rebuilt itself beneath Raydan's feet, beginning again with the inner circle and proceeding outward by rings. Each section glowed briefly with emerald light and then dulled back into paved stone.

The upper plaza was larger and far grander than the lower one. Ringed by a dozen archways of polished white stone, it possessed the look of a small amphitheater. Members of the Prator Home Guardsmen, decked out in ceremonial uniforms, stood facing outward at the four cardinal points. Their capes of rank stirred in the light breeze that always flirted with the edge of Atlantis. Through several arches Raydan Marz could stare into the empty sky, but his gaze swept the upper balustrade instead, where a half-dozen banners hung down at irregular intervals. On each banner was the personal shield of an Atlantean warlord, an old tradition that told other warlords who was in the city. Gold banners for regular army, red for mercenary generals—a color seen more and more often in the past decade as independent warhosts sold their services to various leaders.

Only one gold banner today, the shield decorated with a pair of crossed lances. Warlord Russo, another eastern warlord out of Prieska. Raydan Marz would hang his silver fist near Russo's. At the change of the watch, the Prator would take copies of that banner to each of Atlantis' four other liftgates.

Desmanda nudged him. "He's not here."

True. Nujarek's flanged cross was nowhere to be seen, which meant that the other warlord remained in the field--and that it was unlikely Raydan would be given any warhost against the Necropolis Sect. He had been removed from chasing Orc raiders. That left the Black Powder Rebels, which in his mind included any of the so-called "free" kingdoms declaring independence in the past decade. There was also the League and the far-distant possibility of war with the Rivvenheim Elves.

"Let it be the rebels," he said.

"I thought Nujarek was fighting the Sect."

Raydan frowned at Desmanda's recent inclination to take him too literally. Then he saw the hidden smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. "To the nether reaches with Nujarek, you know what I meant. I'm hoping the Guild has ferreted out a new rebel stronghold." He set

his mouth into a grim line. "We have thirteen years still to exact from them," he promised as his small group abandoned the liftgate for the city proper.

Only to be confronted around the first corner by the man he had just dismissed from his mind.

Jeet Nujarek stood at the head of a detachment of Prator lancers, the halberds of the Home Guard grounded into a metal-tipped palisade, barring any progress down the boulevard. A man of medium size, he carried himself as a larger man might, with a great deal of swagger and personal confidence. Now, arms folded across his chest, feet planted wide, the eastern warlord was well into his impression of the Colossus of Xandressa. Impressive. Immovable. An attitude Raydan remembered too well from serving under him in Prieska.

And that same expression of distaste for all things outland was firmly set on Nujarek's broad face as his dark eyes stared unblinking at Raydan Marz. He wore a ceremonial uniform of light armor and a scarlet cape of rank trimmed heavily in gold brocade. It was not one Raydan had seen before, likely of Nujarek's own design. One man to either side of the eastern warlord leaned forward their bannered polearms, displaying the golden-toothed wheel of the Atlantean Empire.

A crowd had gathered behind the Prator Guardsmen, standing silent and respectful. Raydan was conscious of the people now filling up at his back as well, the privileged of Atlantis pausing for the spectacle. He nodded curtly. "Nujarek."

"Outlander."

Even in greeting, Nujarek had to draw that distinction. But that had always been a large part of the other man's appeal. Nujarek looked Atlantean. His swarthy complexion labeled him of southern birth, possibly from Delphane, though Raydan knew he'd been born this side of the Dhokanios Strait. Not that Nujarek had ever claimed a Delphane legacy or needed one to act superior. His prejudice already ran the gamut.

"You seem surprised, Raydan Marz."

"I honestly did not expect to see you." Raydan glanced back over his shoulder at the archway leading into the liftgate plaza. "Your shield was missing."

The other man's dark eyes narrowed dangerously. "Yes. Well, I see that news still travels slowly to the west. I am not in Atlantis as a visiting warlord."

The Prator. The banners. The ceremonial dress. Had Sire Tahmaset taken Nujarek as an advisor? "As you say," Raydan said dismissively. He had no desire to play games with his old rival. If the emperor was using Nujarek to deliver a message of displeasure, that was already accomplished. Now all that remained was to make it formal. "What brings you here to meet me?"

Nujarek's smile widened, showing a hint of bone-white teeth. "Why, your treason, of course." A deathly quiet swept the boulevard, broken only by his sharp, cruel laugh. He flourished a hand toward Raydan Marz.

"Prator, seize the outlander!"

Chapter 4: Survival

Jeet Nujarek had learned early in life to take what pleasures he could. Watching Raydan Marz being led away in manacles, under the stunned stares of the warlord's soldiers, certainly qualified.

The Prator Guard handled him none too easily as they stripped him of weapons and armored mantle right there on the boulevard, managing to split his lip on one of the buckles. He endured the ordeal in determined silence, avoiding the eyes of his former honor guard—avoiding her, the scholar-magus, most of all. Nujarek, though, could see the cold fire that burned behind the other man's gray eyes--the determination to see justice done.

He would not find it on the streets of Atlantis. The crowd, released from its silence with Raydan's arrest, jeered the outlander warlord. Nujarek's accusation stood as formal judgment to them—there was scarcely a need for the trial he would engineer later. They shouted insults, and several voices could be heard calling for a summary execution. Lacking stones from the clean-swept streets, many simply spat on Marz as he was led by. That seemed to hit the outlander harder than his arrest, shock and anger and then finally anguish washing over his angular face.

Marz hadn't even fought the arrest, much to Nujarek's disappointment. Only the Altem had his sword half-freed from his scabbard before the demi-magus caught his arm. She quickly placed herself between him and the Prator, shaking her head. The warrior looked from her to the advancing Prator and then shoved his sword home. Head bowed, he stepped aside so that Marz could be taken.

Nujarek looked for them now and found the trio of Utem Crossbowmen trailing after the Prator and the demi-magus standing nearby, waiting to catch his eye. Of the Altem warrior there was no sign, and he gestured curtly to the woman, cursing his lack of attention.

Her glacial eyes surveyed his face as she approached. She nodded politely. "Demi-Magus Desmanda," she said in introduction. "I apologize, Jeet Nujarek, for my ignorance of your current position and title ..."

Guild or no, she could recognize authority when in its presence. "Lord Protector, Desmanda. Regent of Atlantis in Tahmaset's absence."

"Sire Tahmaset is missing?"

"Tahmaset is dead." He allowed her a few heartbeats to digest that news, so carefully hidden from the masses these past several weeks. She would find out anyway. She was Guild. "A rebel attack at the coliseum. Somehow they smuggled a pair of steam golems and a kind of spring-driven catapult into the city. They landed a powder keg in the emperor's box and then escaped by jumping from the Grand Skywalk." He smashed one fist at empty air. "Clever little devices they had--your Prophet-Magus calls them thopter harnesses. We thought they were plunging to their deaths, but at the last minute these whirling vanes caught the air and lowered them safely."

"You weren't at the emperor's side?" the demi-magus asked narrowly.

Nujarek frowned at her question, but again, she was Guild and could take certain liberties. "I was approaching Down Town with my warhost, coming back from a regular rotation. I saw the jumpers from below, but I was too late to prevent their escape. As the senior warlord in-city, I accepted the Guild's temporary nomination as Lord Protector." And with Tahmaset's son too young to rule, that placed Jeet Nujarek one small step away from the emperor's throne. Certainly she would recognize that.

She did. "I see." A pause. "I see, Sire." Her voice took on a brisker tone. "I have ordered the Utems into the barracks. Altem Jannus was sent back to the liftgate to remove Raydan Marz's banner. This is satisfactory?"

"Your Altem was about to draw his sword against me," Nujarek said pointedly. "Should I overlook that?"

"Jannus is a warrior. He reacted. Simple warriors should be forgiven their first lapse when politics interferes with duty, shouldn't they? How else can they learn?"

“And your warlord, demi-magus? Should he also be forgiven any ... political lapses?”

Her eyes flashed in anger, but whether at Nujarek’s accusation against Marz or the implication that she might still be serving him, he couldn’t say. “Raydan Marz is not a simple man. This I believe you already know.” She glanced in the direction where he’d been led away, no doubt feeling some measure of guilt for her easy repudiation of him. “As to his politics, I doubt he’s going to discuss that with either of us now.”

Nujarek smiled. “Perhaps not with us,” he agreed.

But he had an idea with whom.

* * *

Prison, Sire?

Ah, Maleficus. I’ve wanted to arrest you, officially, for some time. And this is a wonderful opportunity.

You are enjoying yourself. Forgive me. I do not see the humor.

But I do. Raydan Marz is vulnerable, and the more I learn from him now, the better prepared I shall be later. He may even admit to treachery or otherwise slander the empire. I wish to know. You can gain his trust. And then you can betray him to me.

I would prefer to remain as far removed from him as possible. Raydan Marz seems a dangerous man to betray. It would be safer to kill him now.

Safer for you, perhaps, but not for me. Phorus’ Choice, remember?

If he discovers that I am working against him, he will kill me.

Then you should be well-motivated to produce results.

* * *

Splashing through ankle-deep water, Raydan Marz retreated before the slashes and probing thrusts of his opponent, a dark-haired Elf with the lean and dangerous look of a ravenous mountain wolf.

Raydan kept his center of gravity low and his left side turned away. Before throwing him down the stairs the Prator Guardsmen had manacled Raydan’s left hand to a thick leather belt tightened around his waist. He had assumed it was a handicap either meant to keep him subdued or get him killed in the dank hell of the palace dungeon. The latter, it now seemed, as he dodged the blade again.

The Elf was one of several Necropolis Sect warriors imprisoned in the common room: their leader, maintaining authority with a crudely fashioned shiv. Fortunately, the man was not an experienced knife fighter, and Raydan’s training as an Altem Guardsman had included many defensive maneuvers. He sidestepped an overeager lunge but nearly slipped on the slick stone beneath the shallow pool’s dark surface. The blade snagged his quilted vest but did not draw blood, and then the warlord struck out with his free arm, hitting the Elf in the shoulder and sending him staggering against the damp dungeon wall.

Raydan moved in, but he was too slow to exploit his momentary advantage. The dark-haired Elf rebounded from the wall with a graceful backhand slash meant to blind the warlord. Raydan recoiled but the tip sliced a thin red line over his left eye. It stung, but could hardly be considered lethal--a bigger threat was the blood now trickling into his eye.

He began to retreat again, trading distance for time. Scooping up some water from the floor, Raydan cleared the blood from his vision. Most of the other prisoners laughed and jeered and called for more bloodshed, reminding Raydan of his earlier arrest—of the fickle crowds that had been perfectly willing to believe Nujarek’s lies. Their Lord Protector, now--and all because he had been the only regular army warlord near the city when the Black Powder Rebels staged an incredible assault. Or so said the tall, spindly man Raydan had been talking to before the Elf had attacked. If he survived this fight, the warlord might actually learn something about the insanity currently gripping Atlantis.

That was a fairly important “if.”

Of course, with the obvious handicap of his manacled arm, this fight had only been a matter of time. Other prisoners wore similar belts, their cuffs swinging empty at the end of a short length of chain. No one had offered to release his restraints, so he’d downplayed the disadvantage, keeping to himself and avoiding the other prisoners as he splashed through the open chamber.

The amount of standing water in the common cell had surprised him. Not so his new acquaintance, whom the guards had tossed down the stairs an hour later. Both men ended up along a wall, squatting in a half-inch of stagnant water, wary of each other but warier of the hungry looks from the dungeon predators. The other man had long abrasions down both arms from his trip down the water-slick stairs. He washed them clean. “Not quite a boulevard bathhouse, is it?”

Raydan considered ignoring the man, who was most likely a thief or a murderer. But then Raydan was now a traitor, convicted by public opinion without need of a trial. He shook his head. “I think someone is trying to drown us.” Not that he believed Nujarek would let him go that easily. Executions in Atlantis were often public affairs held at the coliseum. And the water wasn’t exactly flooding in. It trickled in under the door or seeped through cracks in the walls. It didn’t really look intentional.

“Spillover from the aqueducts,” the man explained. “Leaking sewers. Broken feed pipes. There’s a large system of sub-boulevard cellars and passages beneath Atlantis, you understand. Eventually water finds its way to the lowest point. There isn’t anything lower than the dungeons.” As a jest it fell very flat, killing their conversation for several moments.

In any such place there was an established order, and Raydan had quickly learned this one by simply watching the other prisoners. Only one, an emaciated Elf who looked almost dead, was chained to the wall; the others were free to stake out their own territory according to strength. The only patch of dry ground was reserved for the quartet of Sect warriors, who were obviously at the top of the hierarchy. At the bottom were the weak and the wounded, forced into deeper corners where the water was pooled knee-deep. Most prisoners lounged on the damp stone, each knowing his or her own place. They clustered by race—humans, Elves, Dwarves, a lone Troll. Only a small band of six half-starved Orc raiders remained on the move, like predators, constantly searching for weaknesses they could exploit for their own gain, even here.

And of all the factions represented in the dungeons—rebels and raiders, knights and common criminals—Raydan Marz’s presence had to upset the Sect most. Likely, the Elf had targeted him for no better reason than his regulation mohawk and partial uniform--and his restrained arm. A quick kill to reinforce his own position. But Raydan had been stripped of his insignia, and though the Elf had no doubt expected a simple Altem—itsself no easy mark—he instead found himself matched against a warlord.

The shiv was the Elf’s biggest advantage, and now he switched the crude knife to his other hand, a habit Raydan had noticed twice in as many minutes. It kept his arm from tiring and threw off Raydan’s timing, as the handicapped warlord couldn’t shift postures to match him.

The Elf slashed, missed.

Water was up to mid-calf now as he backed toward the lower side of the dungeon. It was beginning to slow him down. Soon he'd be forced to stand his ground and take the knife at least once in order to get his free hand on the Elf.

As it happened, an Orc bought Raydan the distraction he needed. The gray-skinned raider stuck out a leg to trip the warlord--apparently just for fun. Raydan feigned a forward move, backing the Elf off, and then stepped back sharply on the Orc's foot as he smashed his free fist hammer-like into the blunt-featured face.

The Orc howled in surprise and pain as Raydan grabbed the raider's arm and propelled him into the Elf's next lunge. The blade dug deeply in between two of the Orc's ribs. The raider bellowed, and his comrades might have jumped Raydan then, except the warlord had used the distraction to splash free of the deeper water, back toward the stairs. The raiders shouted curses after him and two of them moved forward, only to be driven back by the Elf's angry glare.

"You're good, Atlantean," his opponent hissed now. "But you can't hold out forever."

"You ever say the same to Jeet Nujarek--maybe sparring across the lower Whitespray?" A long shot, assuming that this man had fought Nujarek in the field, but one that struck home. Sudden rage burned in the other man's violet eyes.

Another wild slash, and then the knife switched hands again. The Elf led with his left now, blade sinister. It was an awkward stance for Raydan to match, hampered as he was with his left arm manacled. The dark-haired Elf feinted a high slash and then stabbed in low. This time it was Marz who made the mistake, falling for the feint. He tensed for the warm rush of blood that would soak his front as the shiv slid in between his ribs. Instead, it felt more as if he'd been punched hard in the gut.

Of course: the manacle belt, made of thick leather and encircling his stomach tightly. The shiv's point had been unable to pierce it. Raydan backhanded the Elf across the jaw, driving him away again as the warlord's heel bumped against the lowest stair leading up to the heavy cell door. He backed his way up three of the water-slick steps, wondering if the Elf was angry enough now to follow him.

He was, teeth bared and blade stabbing out underhand at Raydan's legs, groin, lower abdomen. Raydan retreated another step and then another, knowing he had backed himself into a corner but trading it for the slight tactical advantage of higher ground--and something more. The guardsmen had left him only one free arm, but he still had two unfettered feet.

Watching for his chance, Raydan waited for the Elf to switch hands again. He didn't make the novice mistake of concentrating on his enemy's hands, but watched the whole body, waiting for a shift in weight, a glance, the dip of his right shoulder as he reached back in for the shiv.

Raydan lashed out with his left foot, coming in from a direction the Elf hadn't worried about for the entire fight. And he still wore the metal-reinforced boots of an Atlantean soldier. The side of his foot glanced off the Elf's shoulder and took him right in the temple. The partially deflected blow robbed Raydan of some strength, but the warlord had also caught his opponent right in the middle of changing stances, his footing poor on the wet stone. The Elf's head snapped to one side, eyes glazed but still aware. Still dangerous. Until his own feet shot out from under him and he came down hard on the edge of the steps. His hip cracked hard against the stone and then his head, and he collapsed in an ungainly pile of limbs at the foot of the stairs.

Raydan Marz retrieved the shiv from where the Elf had dropped it on the second step. It looked as if it had been fashioned from a piece of banded mail--perhaps the spurs of a cavalryman. He glanced up into the silent room, blade held easily in his hand. A score of glares answered him, the remaining trio of Sect warriors and the Orc raiders tied for the most hostile.

“Someone here knows how to pick the lock on this cuff,” Raydan said, rattling the chain on his manacled arm. “That someone had better come forward now.” He noticed a few gazes slide toward a small man Raydan never would have looked at twice on the field.

Knowing that the others had betrayed him, the picklock hitched up his courage and came forward at Raydan’s motion. He was short and lean, with quick eyes. Licking his lips, he fished a small length of stiff wire from his hair. The warlord did not worry about this rabbit man harming him, not with a metal toothpick, so he kept the blade away, his gaze roving the common chamber. His former companion hadn’t moved from the spot they’d claimed earlier, though the man’s blue eyes were alight with interest and calculation--no doubt trying to decide if Raydan’s victory somehow improved his own station. Raydan Marz also saw new life in the eyes of the restrained Elf, the one chained to the wall. Not hope exactly, but awareness. Perhaps the Elf wasn’t near death after all, just very, very patient. Waiting for his chance.

He would just have to keep waiting. Raydan was spending his newly won authority quickly, and the warlord wasn’t going to weaken his position by allying himself with the dungeon pariah.

His cuff sprang open, and Raydan immediately grabbed his unconscious opponent by the belt, dragged him to his associates and dumped him on the dry stone still held by the Sect. As much as it galled him to remain deferential, he could not afford to challenge their obvious supremacy. They would come at him together, then, like a pack of wolves. Better to leave them the opening to challenge him one at a time, at their convenience, to prove which was the alpha male.

But not with the blade. He threw that at the feet of the Troll who hunkered in a damp corner, as isolated as one could be in the dungeon commons. A large hand engulfed the shiv, and the Troll looked at Raydan with intelligent, deep-set eyes. “Maybe you should hold that,” Raydan suggested. The shiv disappeared into the back cuff of the Troll’s leather gauntlet.

No one was going to slug it out with a Troll for the blade, not when he outclassed the next biggest prisoner by six inches and two hundred pounds. It brought some parity back to the assembled prisoners, which meant that they were less likely to challenge Raydan to improve their own status. He walked back to his spot next to the other newcomer, checked the Orcs to make certain they were keeping their distance and then crouched back down, his back to the wall. Attention finally drifted away from him, the prisoners returning to their usual routine of muted conversations and suspicious glares. Many of these fell on Raydan Marz.

Raydan was playing a long shot, he knew, and his currency might be gambled away once the Elf woke up. But the risk here was no greater than those he had faced in the field, and this was his best chance for long-term survival. He had a feeling the empire was going to need him.

He glanced over at his tall, gangly acquaintance. “Tell me more about the rebel attack on Sire Tahmaset,” he said.

“What would you like to know?” asked Maleficus.

Chapter 5: Devil's Choice

You send me into the dungeons an hour behind Raydan Marz and summon me moments before you see him? He will know I betrayed him.

You worry too much, Maleficus. I have no intention of sending you back into the dungeons. At this time. Now, what do you have for me?

Very little. It takes time to cultivate trust, Sire. I know Raydan Marz believes strongly in the Empire. But he is also no admirer of yours. When you served as military governor of Prieska, he worked with others to undermine your authority. Self-protection, he calls it. But perhaps you could apply the term “conspiracy” without too much difficulty.

Names, Maleficus. I need names.

Raydan Marz is not a stupid man; he would never trust a fellow prisoner so blindly. I’ve already had to give him more information in trade than you might prefer, but such is the price of betrayal. It takes a great many truths to cloak one poisonous lie. Two hundred years ago, when Tezla dealt with Prince Forsentz—

No history lessons! I need a weakness in Raydan Marz I can exploit. Today. What do you have for me?

I can tell you that he is an ambitious man, no more immune to the lure of personal power than the next. While it would be cloaked in his duty to Guild and Empire, I believe there is not much he wouldn’t do to secure greater position.

He told you this?

I know the type. Sire.

* * *

After four days in Atlantis’ dungeons, his eyes now accustomed to the dim flickering of magelamps at their lowest setting, the bright, spacious rooms of the emperor’s palace seemed alien to Raydan Marz.

He found the atmosphere oppressive: the rich marble and rare polished woods, the alabaster vases glowing with fragile beauty and Elven crystal glittering in carefully lit display cases. The perfumed air caught in his throat, sickly sweet after the sweat and filth and dankness of the past four days. Perhaps he’d never felt comfortable here, even when he had enjoyed the hospitality of Emperor Tahmaset, but never had he felt so much the outsider—the outlander—as he did now.

A quartet of Prator Guardsmen escorted Raydan down one long corridor to the room where Jeet Nujarek waited for him, swords naked in their hands, metal-shod heels rapping on the tiled floor in perfect unison. When they reached the room, the guards split into two pairs and stationed themselves on either side of the chamber’s open door: one pair watching the hall to ensure privacy while the second kept an eye on Raydan. One of the guardsmen checked Raydan’s restraints, ensuring that the warlord’s left hand was again fastened tightly to the thick leather belt before nodding him to proceed into the room.

Nujarek was standing next to a wingback chair, a small table between him and Marz. The “lord protector” had given up his ceremonial uniform today for more practical robes of state. He looked comfortable, almost like a courtier in the formal dress. But as Raydan moved closer he noticed the reinforced belt and the telltale bulge along one side that warned of a concealed sword.

For his part, Nujarek studied Raydan as he might an obstacle in his path, be it palisade, picket, mountain or man. “You seem to thrive in any situation, outlander,” he said finally. “Rising to a position of influence in Prieska—despite my efforts—to become one of Tahmaset’s favorites. Holding together a warhost originally intended for a Guild magus. And now, you have not only survived the dungeons but are apparently looked to as the stabilizing force down below.” He shook his head lightly. “I wonder, if I handed you over to the Necropolis Sect, would they turn you they did that League priest, Kho”Ta?”

Allowing his anger to flare slightly, Raydan drew himself up stiffly. “That would be too dangerous for you, Nujarek,” he retorted. “Then you might have to meet me on the field.”

The other man's dark eyes narrowed. "If you think you can goad me into a challenge of honor, you are sorely mistaken."

"Because you haven't any?" Raydan asked, needling him.

Nujarek glowered, leaning forward to wrap slender yet strong hands over the back of the chair in front of him. His fingers whitened as they locked tightly onto the carved wood. "Because I have a far more important victory at stake here than settling any personal score with you." His smile was thin. "Your downfall is simply a pleasant bonus."

"If I'm so far beneath your notice, then why am I here?" Raydan asked, retreating slightly from his initial aggressive stance. Acknowledging Nujarek's stronger position was a necessity at this point. If he was going to win, he had to attack where his enemy was weak.

"I wanted to discuss your sentencing."

He nodded. "I see. Sentence first, trial afterward. Very nice." Raydan had sat on military courts that used just such a technique. For the good of the Empire, he'd convinced himself, and always where the accused's guilt was obvious. Now that he was on the receiving end, he was suddenly much less sure about the wisdom of the tactic.

"An excellent idea," Nujarek admitted, "but no. Nothing so obviously unjust. Your trial has been going on for the past three days. In the absence of the defendant, of course, but as an accused traitor you have no right to a personal defense. And we've kept it very fair. Your scholar-magus, Desmanda, spoke decently of you. As did Altem Jannus. Even Magus Olarud resisted what I'm sure was a strong urge to condemn you outright."

"Messing up your easy conviction?" News of the trial had not carried as far as the dungeons, but the charges had. Recklessness in command. Conspiracy. Treason.

Nujarek shook his head. "Not even remotely. Olarud's word carries great weight. His brutally honest reports, taken by the Prophet-Magus himself via mage-writ messaging, were far more damning than if he'd acknowledged his personal rivalry. And when Desmanda and others—lukewarm supporters, but your only defenders nonetheless—verified Olarud's reports ... well, it all fell into place."

Raydan's disappointment in his followers was a tangible hurt, even though he had expected nothing better from their behavior at his arrest. He saw the flicker of amusement in Nujarek's eyes as the other man rubbed salt in that wound. Time to go on the attack again, he decided.

"It all seems to have fallen into place, hasn't it, Nujarek?" he said, pointedly declining to use the man's assumed title of lord protector. "Sire Tahmaset is killed by rebels just as you arrive, and with a full warhost. You couldn't catch a few stumpy-legged Dwarves, but those troops gave you a nice edge in securing the city for yourself, didn't they? How many of them have been promised positions in the Prator Home Guard?"

Nujarek either believed Raydan's bluff or didn't care if Raydan possessed that particular piece of knowledge. "If you want to believe I had something to do with Tahmaset's death, feel free to speculate," he said. "Preach it to the other prisoners for all I care. But the truth is that Tahmaset was weak. You knew it and I knew it. He was destined to fall someday, and now it has finally happened. For the good of the Empire, we have concealed his death until a successor can be confirmed."

Raydan skinned his lips back in a savage smile. "And you don't want rivals flooding to Atlantis, do you?"

"Do you?" Nujarek asked, his question actually sounding serious. "Think about it. Remember what happened thirteen years ago, when the rebels assassinated the Prophet-

Magus. How many warlords have we lost over the years to personal ambition? Would you want to see that happen again?" He paused for a moment and then smiled at Raydan's obstinate silence. "You're not going to answer, are you, outlander? But I can read it in your eyes. You've hated every warlord who has turned against the Guild, just as I do. You know uncertainty is bad for the Empire. And, like it or not, no one has a stronger claim to the throne than I do."

"Except Tahmaset's son." Raydan had been waiting for his chance to mention the heir, Averett, and now he watched for a reaction. Was the boy alive? Would his enemy admit to keeping him imprisoned, or something worse?

Nujarek disappointed him, his face set into a careful mask. "Ah, young Averett," he said, his voice giving nothing away. "I'm afraid he has disappeared. It shows more intelligence than I ever gave the lad credit for, actually. He was even weaker than the father, and far too young to rule. If he'd pressed a claim an accident would have befallen him. Even now, I wouldn't wager much on his life."

Raydan half-turned from Nujarek, glancing at the guardsmen near the door. "This is an awfully public place to be forecasting the murder of the emperor's son, wouldn't you say?" he said loudly, hoping to sow some doubt among Nujarek's supporters.

But Nujarek only laughed, sharp and cutting. He reached into his robes and pulled out a small, black cube from an inner pocket. Sapphire energy swirled across its obsidian faces with unnatural life: a privacy cube. Powered by a small piece of magestone, the Guild invention could blanket a one-hundred-foot square, preventing eavesdropping and most forms of scrying. Raydan again glanced back at the Prator sentinels, and this time noted that their attention was focused entirely on any possible attack. They were oblivious to everything that had been said. "Very nice," he said reluctantly.

"I made the mistake of underestimating you back in Prieska, Raydan Marz." He spat out his rival's name with venom. "Do not make that same mistake with me."

"I would never underestimate you, Jeet Nujarek. Actually, I have a very good idea what you're up to." Thanks to the historian he'd met in the dungeons, the man Raydan suspected was in Nujarek's employ; a suspicion that had been confirmed when Maleficus was removed from the dungeon not long before the guards had shown up to escort Raydan to his meeting. "The Guild won't endorse you for the throne, not yet, and you're hoping to force their hand by playing up the western frontier as a bed of potential unrest, with my trial as evidence. You'll drag out the same charges you failed to prove before Tahmaset removed you as military governor, only this time I'm the sole target. As I have no personal ties to Atlantis, only to Prieska, you hope it will worry the Guild." He drew a steadying breath, committing himself to a dangerous gamble. "In fact, you're the one who's worried, and I'll make certain they know that. I'll fight you right up to the moment they run me through in the coliseum. I doubt I can ruin you as effectively as you have me, but I can sow enough doubt to keep you from the throne." Nujarek's anger had been building during the recital, controlled only by an impressive display of self-control. "You should be more careful who you put close to your enemies," Raydan added in a final jab at his enemy. "I learned more from your agent in the dungeons than he ever learned from me."

The raw anger faded from Nujarek's eyes, his broad face settling back into an impassive mask, and Raydan cursed himself. He had taken his taunts a step too far. Very likely Maleficus—if that was indeed his name—had already warned his master what he had told Raydan. "An interesting idea," the other man said evenly. "Now, let me tell you what is actually going to happen." He pushed himself off the back of the chair and began to walk slowly around the table toward Raydan, trailing one hand along the table's edge.

"Tonight," he said, "news of the emperor's death will be released to the city. They'll be in outraged, and without any rebels to hang you, a convicted traitor, will be the obvious target. And yes, you will be convicted." He paused just far enough away that Raydan could not get to him before the guards could. "If you think I can't guarantee that, then ask yourself why

I've let you live this long. The people will be ready to assume that where there is one traitor, there are others. It will give me what I lacked in Prieska: public opinion on my side. And I'll use that to my advantage."

Raydan believed him. Never let it be said that Nujarek did not learn from his mistakes. "But you can't stop me from my final statement, charges of treason or no," he said. It was every defendant's right to curse his accusers to the black depths. In the case of the Sect or the Black Powder Rebels, it often made for great theater at the coliseum--right before their execution. The people of Atlantis loved their spectacles.

"No, I can't. You'll have your chance in front of the Guild court, in fact. If you decide to take it." He read the question in his enemy's eyes. "Why wouldn't you? I think I'll let that remain my little secret. But maybe I know you better than you think, Marz. I've left very little to chance. You've lost, outlander. Unless..."

"Unless what?" Raydan asked guardedly. He wasn't about to believe that Nujarek was offering him a way out.

"Unless you shift the blame to others." Nujarek's swarthy skin flushed darker with excitement. "I told you earlier, outlander, I have a more important victory to win here. Atlantis. Empire. The chance to bring back Tezla's dream."

To live Tezla's dream, Raydan translated. He had trouble believing that Nujarek could think of much beyond his own wants and needs. Tezla's Empire in the hands of this man? The idea sickened him. But did he have a choice?

Nujarek apparently thought he didn't. "I'm offering you a deal, outlander. I want names. Two or three would be fine, if they're important enough. The ones in Prieska who helped 'move me along' from the governorship and are now planning to divorce themselves from the Empire. If you don't know who they are, I can provide you with names that will serve just as well. You will denounce them, and I will supply the evidence necessary to prove that you were an unwitting accomplice. And, to demonstrate my newfound trust in you, I will appoint you the new military governor of Prieska." He smiled, but there was no friendship in it. "You will be going home, outlander."

The offer caught Raydan off guard, though perhaps he should have been prepared for such treachery from Nujarek. "A nice piece of work. No one in Prieska would ever trust me again, not with your stamp of approval on my appointment." And Raydan would forever be under Nujarek's thumb. The moment he stepped out of line, or merely at the new emperor's whim, Raydan's neck would be stretched over the block.

But there was also the reality of how Nujarek would treat Prieska in the absence of a sympathetic military governor. Raydan could alleviate some of the suffering sure to follow—didn't that deserve consideration? He rubbed his free hand up over his face, feeling the long stubble of beard, and then back across his pate. His mohawk was tangled and matted, the short hairs at the side of his head itching with filth and lice picked up in the dungeons. He scratched behind his right ear, working out the devil's choice being offered him. Damned if I do, death if I don't. That's what it came down to.

But in the end, there was only one choice he could make.

"I think I'd rather face death and take my best shot at bringing you down with me," he said simply.

Nujarek's face fell into comical astonishment that quickly changed to anger. "Don't make that mistake, outlander. You need me."

Resolute, Raydan Marz met Nujarek's dark stare with a hard gaze of his own; one warrior to another, neither offering any quarter. "All I'll need is my chance to speak before the Guild court." It would not be enough to reverse the decision that had already been made against

him, Raydan knew. But if he had to trade his life to keep the Empire out of this man's hands, he would.

Turning his back on Raydan, Nujarek stalked back to the far side of the table, taking those few seconds to compose himself. When he faced Raydan, he was a man once again confident in his own power, in his natural superiority. And something more. There was a hard gleam of cruelty in his eyes—the cat allowing the mouse just one more chance to run before that final pounce.

With a contemptuous gesture, he dismissed his old rival back to the care of the waiting guards. “You will help make me emperor, Raydan Marz,” he said. “Whether you want to or not.”

Chapter 6: The Knife Edge of Duty

You said he would take the offer! He threw it back in my face.

Given that you've wanted to kill Raydan Marz all along, I can't see why you would be this upset now that he's placed his head in the noose.

I don't like being made the fool, Maleficus. All I did was give Marz an opportunity to insult me.

Surely for the last time.

Many things around here are happening for the last time--which might include your access to me as an advisor. You'll find yourself back in the dungeons if you don't start proving more useful.

I live to serve, Sire.

And you serve to live, Maleficus. Never forget that. Do we understand each other?

Indeed. Sire.

Good; I am not abandoning my plans for Prieska. So let us talk about Warlord Russo ...

* * *

“Requests for any admission of guilt went unanswered. Forbidden by the charge of treason from speaking in his own defense, Raydan Marz's situation was reviewed by a full court, including our Prophet-Magus, the lord protector, and a man of equal military rank. No adequate defense for his actions was discovered--nor, in the tribunal's opinion, could one exist.”

The magelamps were dimmed just low enough that a red-tinted glass skylight bathed Raydan Marz in an island of bloody light. The warlord stood alone on the revolving dais, caged in by a waist-high handrail, waiting stoically for his one opportunity to speak as Scholar-Magus Annunub read aloud the tribunal's final deliberation of his guilt. He stared in turn over the crowded gallery that surrounded him and up toward the judges' balcony at the head of the hall. Back straight, head high, eyes forward—it was almost over.

This day had been the greatest test of patience Raydan had ever faced, on or off the battlefield. Prator Guardsmen had removed him from the dungeon commons that morning at the point of their long halberds, allowing him an hour to bathe—under supervision. He scrubbed himself hard with pumice and lye soap, burning his skin as he scraped off the filth of the prisons. He shaved himself smooth and tightened his military-cut mohawk down to a wide stripe of red stubble; he pared his fingernails and cleaned out all the grit from beneath them.

A functionary of the court officially took charge of him then, though the Prator were never far away. Raydan briefly considered escape but quickly abandoned the idea. Where would he run, alone and hunted in the city of Atlantis?

A clerk provided Raydan with his full military uniform, complete with the silver-lined cape of rank and the close-fitting helm of an Altem Guardsman, like the one the warlord had thrown away ten years before. Raydan kept it now but tucked it beneath one arm, staring down the clerk, almost daring him to say something. The bookish little man shrugged, his expression letting Raydan know that he conceded the point out of indifference rather than fear.

It was the first time that day that Raydan felt a touch of nervousness eating away at the core of his confidence. To be so easily dismissed by such a lesser man said that the warlord no longer mattered.

Still, the familiar scents of leather and oiled metal, replacing the rancid sweat and damp stone stench of the dungeons, helped ease Raydan through the next long hour of waiting. Eventually he was escorted into the higher levels of the courthouse, past the many offices where the pen-pushers labored, up through the levels of lower courts, and finally to the Grand Avium, where he now faced sentencing.

In keeping with tradition, Raydan was the first man to set foot into the domed hall. The gallery of the Grand Avium filled soon after with citizens and interested soldiery, dressed in their finest robes or best uniforms as they assembled to condemn the warlord. Connoisseurs of such spectacles, the general public wore masks of contempt. Out of the general buzz of a hundred conversations came hurled insults and threats, falling quiet only when the magelamps dimmed and Raydan's accusers and judges finally filed into their balcony seating. Conspicuously empty at the balcony's upper level was the emperor's seat, a reminder to all that Sire Tahmaset was dead, his powers temporarily vested in the man sitting at the right hand of the vacant position, the Lord Protector Jeet Nujarek. On the far left was the position reserved for Nefar Osiras, Prophet-Magus of the Atlantis Guild—also absent, though Raydan had paid scant attention to that fact.

"Exacerbating the charges," Magus Annunub said now, his voice neutral as he continued to read the condemnation from the podium at the center of the balcony's low wall, "was the revelation by a member of the tribunal that Raydan Marz had in the past conspired against the greater stability of the Empire. Given the opportunity to confirm the identities of his conspirators, even in return for mercy, Raydan Marz demonstrated only contempt for these proceedings."

Contempt. An adequate description of Raydan's feelings toward Nujarek. His enemy glared down from on high with an expression of disgust, though Raydan could see one corner of his mouth twitch with the hint of a satisfied smile.

Raydan's gray eyes then sought out Warlord Russo, his onetime friend and ally, now one of his primary accusers. Nujarek had found his puppet, all right, the other warlord giving up some of Prieska's strongest leaders in order to solidify the lord protector's grasp over the Empire. Russo refused to meet Raydan's gaze, turning his eyes down toward his feet until the slow revolutions of the dais forced Raydan to look away. Russo's personal condemnation earlier, on behalf of the "loyal" citizens of Prieska and the western empire, had riled up the attending citizens to the point that Nujarek had been forced to call for order and double the Prator Guardsmen holding the gallery back from the dais. There had been immediate calls to simply pitch Raydan from the Avium's high overlook and be done with him.

But the attending soldiery, the warlord noticed, had not joined in the theatrics—instead standing mute, gazes hard and alert. He had not spotted even one member from his personal guard among them; he had thought that Desmanda at least would do him the courtesy of attending. Most, in fact, were Russo's officers, with a few others belonging to the mercenary warlords currently in Atlantis. It was for the benefit of these observers that

Raydan kept his military bearing. In this, the Atlantean machine for justice had miscalculated. While Raydan's neat appearance and martial splendor might make him appear threatening to regular citizens, who had already turned against him regardless, the soldiers would see a kindred being. A man who had not lost his pride or honor.

And after his statement, they would know that he'd been betrayed but never beaten.

Another slow turn of the dais. "Such actions must prejudice the tribunal and its final deliberation, excepting, of course, that in this case there can be no further remedy. Raydan Marz must be made to divulge the needed information, after which his execution must follow swiftly and without further review for mercy. May Tezla forgive him the excesses and crimes against his Empire." Annunub finished reading the condemnation just as Raydan was turned to face the balcony. With that, the scholar-magus retired from the podium, retaking his seat in the lowest balcony row. Raydan Marz drew in a steadying breath as he again swung around to face the broad expanse of the gallery, ready to begin his final statement.

"Tezla does not forgive!"

The voice, strident and full of authority, pierced Raydan's thoughts like a needle in his mind. He sagged forward, unbalanced, his mind fogged, dropping the helm he'd been carrying and grabbing for the dais rail with both hands. Several spectators cheered his moment of apparent weakness, but Raydan knew it for what it was.

Magic.

He rocked back onto his heels, gradually regaining his equilibrium and strength. His left hand fished for the helm at his feet, recapturing it, while the right clenched about the rail's polished wood. After the condemnation, Raydan had expected to address the gallery before sentencing, as was his right by law. But Nujarek had made other arrangements, apparently, in an attempt to thwart Raydan's plans. And this new accuser was one that no loyal warlord could hope to stand against. He waited now at the upper level of the balcony, in the archway reserved for one of three men: Nefar Osiras, Prophet-Magus of the Atlantis Guild. And he wasn't alone. Drifting in behind him, brilliant in gold and glowing magestone, came the immortal golem. Tezla's Avatar.

"Tezla does not forgive," Osiras repeated. "Nor will he ever forget what warlords of similar ambition have done to his magnificent Empire. The Avatar has made his will known to me, and so I add the personal condemnation of Tezla against this outlander. Let him now face the Avatar of the Magus Supreme. Let him explain his treason to the founder of the Empire."

Raydan Marz swallowed dryly but kept his place at the rail as the dais turned him away from the balcony, showing him a sea of faces that displayed a combination of rapture at the rare appearance of the Avatar and loathing for the warlord. All faced him now, and Raydan finally spotted Desmanda and one crossbowman from the honor guard he'd brought to Atlantis. Standing in the western gallery, they'd kept their faces hidden but now stared up at the balcony in a mixture of fear and uncertainty.

Raydan understood the uncertainty. The Avatar was the closest thing that Atlanteans held to a god. The immortal casing had been devised by the Guild to keep Tezla's mind and will alive long after the emperor's body failed. Raydan did not know what to do. Never in his long career had he suffered so great a reversal, so complete a surprise. It made Krang's maneuver near Kuttar Depths look clumsy and juvenile by comparison. Nujarek was playing against Raydan's sense of duty, his loyalty to the Empire. If he spoke out, it would not be solely against the lord protector—and that would be damaging enough to the Empire that Raydan had not made the decision lightly—but also against the Prophet-Magus and the Avatar. Against Tezla himself.

The thought shook Raydan to his core. Could Nujarek suborn the Avatar? Or was it simply the Prophet-Magus? Raydan would much rather believe that, but then how could the Prophet-Magus claim it to be Tezla's will? Certainly Tezla would never allow such abuse ...

Unless Tezla's Avatar was constrained to speak only through Osiras.

Although the Avatar had always spoken through the Prophet-Magus of the Guild, everyone had accepted that this was by Tezla's choice, not by any artificial constraint. To think otherwise ... it meant that Tezla's will could be corrupted by men. By ambitious men, with their own goals and machinations. The Avatar was being used against Raydan Marz, and there was nothing he could do about it.

Raydan felt a light sweat building on his brow. His breathing came shallow and fast, and he forced on himself an artificial calm. The gallery was waiting. He had to say something. He had to decide. Raydan was caught between his desire to refute his condemnation and the pressure to stand mute. To speak out could send more ripples of discord through the Empire, and it would certainly serve his own interests, but the final question was: which better served the will of Tezla?

It was a decision he would not have the chance to make.

"Treachery!"

Raydan was facing toward the back end of the Avium, across the widest expanse of the gallery, and his first indication of trouble was Prophet-Magus Osiras' bellowed warning. The large magelamps set along the outside walls flashed from a crystal blue to a danger-filled red. Prator Guardsmen throughout the grand hall snapped halberds down in a bladed fence, instantly ready to attack but lacking a clear opponent. When mercenary officers in the crowd reflexively reached for the absent swords they had given up in an antechamber before their arrival, a few nervous guards stabbed out with their long-reaching polearms and cut three of them down.

Raydan spun about on the dais, seeking the balcony. Nujarek and the Avatar had already disappeared back through the upper archway, out of the reach of potential assassins. Nefar Osiras stood his ground, a haze of crimson swirling about his head as the mana of his protective spells manifested itself. He swept one hand up into the air in a broad arc, gathering strength and power, feeling for the attack. Finding the threads of power, Osiras thrust an open palm toward the western gallery. Crimson light coalesced into a lance, spearing down into the crowd to pick out his attacker. People scattered, leaving only two framed in the Prophet-Magus' power. One had her hands fastened onto the leather mantle of the other and was pulling him around to face her as she nodded toward Raydan Marz. She pressed a device into his hands and only then noticed the light pointing her out to the Prator Guardsmen.

Desmanda.

No! Raydan wanted to shout. Not this way! Part of his mind was imagining what Jeet Nujarek would do with this kind of demonstration. The rest of his thoughts quickly and accurately picked apart the unfolding chaos.

The smarter civilians were dropping to the floor, removing themselves from any line of fire, but the earlier deaths had already incited the beginnings of panic. Most of the crowd pressed for the main doors, now blocked by the arrival of another half-dozen of the Home Guard, who formed into a lethal cordon. Among the soldiery, officers pulled short knives or quickly formed small bands out of self-defense. A few wrested polearms away from the overeager Prator, intent on defending themselves but merely drawing the attention of the other nearby guards. Blades clashed, and more men fell to the floor of the Grand Avium, staining the gray marble with their blood. Someone screamed in pain, others in fear.

The chaos gave Desmanda the moment she needed to act, her hands taking on an emerald aura as she heaved against the crossbowman's mantle. A spell of levitation gave her the illusion of incredible strength as she seemed to throw the man through the air, over the reach of the Prator and into the no man's land that separated Raydan from the crowded

galleries. He landed awkwardly, sprawling over the marble floor a body's length from the prisoner's dais. In his hand he held a small spike of dull gray stone. Rising to his hands and knees, he looked at his former master.

Raydan had not moved, watching the events unfold around him with the detachment of a commander on the battlefield. He stared down at his former warrior, his gray eyes watchful, probing. They locked gazes, and he saw the other man's confusion and fear melt away, leaving behind only the cold fire of determination. Raising the spike, he slammed it down point-first into the floor.

Instead of shattering, as Raydan had expected, the spike punched deep into the marble. The crossbowman left it there, and the magestone-charged material melted into a puddle that filled the hole. Like water poured over spun sugar, the floor began to melt and fall away. The acrid scent of fired bricks reached Raydan, though no heat. In only a few seconds a gaping hole lay before him, leading into a darkened room on the floor below the Avium. An escape. If he would take it.

One of the Prator Guardsmen had broken away from the crowd and was rushing toward the dais, halberd poised for a quick thrust. The unarmed bowman turned to meet the attack, glancing back only once to shout "Go!" Then he leapt into the guard's deadly embrace, the halberd's blade slicing through his gut until the bloody point peeked through his back. The Prator's momentum swung him around, closer to Marz. He tried to pull his polearm free, but Raydan's warrior had locked his hands on the shaft. The crossbowman crumpled to his knees, head lolling to one side as he spent the last of his strength to keep his warlord safe. His stare settled on Raydan, eyes glassy and blood flecking his lips. "Go," he mouthed silently.

Even though any attempt to escape would lend credibility to Nujarek's charges, Raydan Marz was not about to let his warrior's sacrifice be for nothing. One hand already on the rail, he levered himself up and over, vaulting toward the opening in the floor.

He was almost too late; another mind-numbing shriek echoed in Raydan's mind as he flew over the dais rail. Landing on suddenly weak knees, Raydan crumpled into a rolling impact that brought him up to the edge of the gaping hole. One more turn would be enough, and after that he'd be in the hands of Desmanda's plan, whatever it was. Having come this far, though, there was no alternative. However the "lord protector" had managed to corrupt the Avatar's testimony, Nujarek had crossed a line, and Raydan had no choice but to follow.

And as he tumbled into the blackness, staring back up into the Avium and the chaos he left behind, Raydan could only curse Nujarek for forcing on him this decision.

Chapter 7: Descent

Falling through the cavernous hole his warrior had pierced through the Avium floor, Raydan gazed up into the red-hued light pouring in from the great hall and tensed for his impact with the cold marble flooring on the level below. His mind exhausted, nerves still stinging with magical energy from the second mental blast that had hit him, the warlord struggled to remain focused. Most of his scattered thoughts centered on Jeet Nujarek. How his enemy—now the "lord protector" of Atlantis, and likely future emperor—would tear the city apart to reclaim him as prisoner, and then tear Raydan's homeland down in his machinations to secure ultimate power.

It was not a pleasant thought to take with him.

And then he felt arms catch him, plucking him out of midair and wrapping him in a strong embrace. His dazed mind thought for a moment that he had somehow summoned Nujarek to him, and he struggled briefly, but a dozen fingers locked around Raydan with corded

strength, chafing at his neck and scalp, lowering him to the floor before relaxing their grip. A gloved hand brushed the side of his face. It smelled of oiled leather, and for some reason Raydan's mind dredged up a scene from weeks past: trapping the young werewolf, hounding her with his guardsmen and then using Desmanda's power of levitation to cast the net ...

Desmanda—he remembered Desmanda. This was an escape!

This was a disaster. His memory came flooding back as shadow-cloaked arms helped him to his feet and urged him along a dim corridor toward the light spilling through a doorway. He recalled the sentencing; Warlord Russo's charges of conspiracy and the condemnation by Tezla's Avatar as stated by Prophet-Magus Nefar Osiras. The situation looked bleak. But he also remembered his outrage, and his final decision to stand against the betrayal, and with that he found a rock on which to anchor his scattered thoughts.

His strength returned quickly, helping Raydan get his legs firmly underneath him as his rescuers led him into a lighted stairwell. The strong, slender hands on his arms belonged to a pair of Elves he had never met before. But Desmanda's face was familiar enough. The demi-magus was waiting for him on the narrow landing, her face ashen with pain; the hand clasped protectively to her hip told him that her landing had not been as gentle as his.

"Raydan," she said, and then found no words to continue for several deep breaths. "Damn. Raydan, I failed. I'm sorry." She limped forward. "It should have happened more quickly. But then Osiras appeared, and the Avatar! The power slipped away from me when I realized what the Prophet-Magus--the man to whom I swore allegiance--was doing. Conspiring with Nujarek!" She spit the name out like a mouthful of venom. "I knew better. I knew he would be protected."

Her green eyes were haunted, but a muted call from above focused her attention. She took his arm from the Elves and steered him quickly toward the lower stairs. The stairwell was narrow and steep, obviously little used. "We're lucky the magi in the balcony didn't think about much except protecting Osiras. They could have crushed our minds to pulp. As it was, Jurum Dall paid the price."

Jurum Dall: the crossbowman who had traded his life for Raydan's. One of Keravan's squad, promoted to the warlord's honor guard after the battle at Kuttar Depths, Raydan had been unable to place the man's name earlier and was grateful for Desmanda's reminder. "Then let's not have his sacrifice be wasted," he said, with an effort making his voice strong and clear.

The illusion failed as he stumbled on the first few stairs. Raydan caught himself on the banister and gave Desmanda a reassuring nod. "Someone up there was thinking clearly. Caught me on my way out." Raydan tasted salt and iron in his mouth and swallowed blood. He probed his teeth with his tongue, finding where he'd bitten it—either during the attack or after his fall through the floor. It throbbed painfully but didn't feel serious. "Don't worry. I'm fine." He glanced up as the sounds of clashing steel and shouted commands filled the stairwell from above. The thunderclap discharge of a Lightning Pistol echoed through the passage, and the sounds of battle faded for the moment. "How long do we have?" he asked, quickening his pace.

"Altem Jannus is holding the upper levels behind us. We have as much time as he can buy." She saw Raydan's concern at leaving a man behind. "He demanded that position, Raydan. Jannus has one magestone spike that he can use for a quick exit, and one man might slip from the city undetected--so long as it isn't you."

Raydan accepted that, remembering his furious dedication to the Empire when he was an Altem Guardsman. How Jannus chose to exercise his sense of duty was not Raydan's to question--not now. Now was the time to honor the sacrifices being made on his behalf, and he would return that obligation to those around him ... if and when he escaped. He grimly turned his attention to hurrying down the stairwell, helping the demi-magus limp along at his side.

Each new landing was held by a warrior loyal to Desmanda. To Raydan Marz. It was Keravan waiting on the next level. He quickly pressed a manaclevt into Raydan's hand. Though the wire-wrapped hilt was tarnished, the mana-powered sword practically danced with energy. An Utem Crossbowman wearing the crossed-lances insignia of Warlord Russo held the next landing. He gave Raydan a salute straight out of the Atlantean army manual—clenched fist over the heart. A pair of Dwarven mercenaries joined them next, falling in at the rear of the small band. Desmanda had prepared well.

“Nujarek made it easy for me,” she said, as if reading his thoughts. “His draconian measures have stirred up quite a few warlords, and Russo's capitulation lost him a few good men as well.”

Raydan frowned. “How few?” he asked. His head was beginning to clear, and it was time to start thinking ahead—at least as far as their escape from the city. “Where exactly are we heading?”

Desmanda took the second question first. “We're five levels above a skywalk that can take us across to the Avalon Galleria. That should get us down to the main boulevard. Then it's your turn.”

His turn? Raydan wanted to ask her what she meant, but his question was cut off as the sounds of fighting again burst into the stairwell, a confused tangle of ringing steel, curses and distant shouts for aid. The echoes made it difficult to tell whether the noise came from up or down the well. It was certainly close at hand. Ahead by three steps, Keravan stopped, bringing up his crossbow to cover the next turn of the stairs.

Wyst, a cavalry outrider and one of the two Elves Raydan had brought into the city, raced up from the next landing. He waved his slashing sword, a gracefully curved scimitar, beckoning the group forward. “Trouble,” he panted. “Two levels down, the Prator have seized the stairwell.” His warning delivered, he spun with fluid grace and dashed back down around the turn.

Raydan left Desmanda to make her own way, moving down two steps at a time right on Keravan's heels. He caught the banister at the turn, using it to swing himself around the curve of the staircase. The Elf was already lost from sight around the next landing. Raydan ran down the next flight and caught the rail to vault the last half-dozen steps. The sounds of fighting were now obviously coming from below, and at the landing he caught sight of another of Keravan's crossbowmen, Carson Blane, fighting alongside Wyst as they retreated up the stairs. The two Prator Guardsmen had abandoned their halberds in the confining space, but their mana-powered swords flashed dangerously in the dim light, trailing a soft golden blur of magical power as they slashed through the air.

Keravan pulled up short of the battle. With no room to join, he held his crossbow ready for a clean shot into the melee. Carson had abandoned the crossbow for his short sword but was no match for the Prator. He took a minor cut high in the left arm and another along his ribs, but he refused to back out of the fight. Raydan was not about to stand idle while one of his men was cut down. Desmanda's levitation ability would not help much in the tight stairwell, and with her injury there was no guarantee she could even summon enough mana. He would have to find another way.

The left-hand side of the stairwell was a full wall all the way down, broken only by high window slits at the turns and a door at each new landing. The right side offered a partial wall halfway down to the turn, where it opened into a balustrade overlooking the stairs beyond. Raydan judged the distance, gauging the drop on the far side of the lowered wall by memory. Then, still holding the manaclevt in his left hand, he rushed down the steps with his right trailing along the banister. As the wall fell away, he leaned in and jumped sideways for the rail. Raydan controlled the jump with his right hand, sliding several feet down the balustrade toward the fight. One of the Guardsmen swiped at Raydan's legs, his sword

biting off a large splinter from the balustrade's wooden cap as the warlord rolled off to the far side, hopefully to land behind the Prator.

As it turned out, the short fall dropped Raydan Marz in between two melee battles. He landed awkwardly, sprawled across four steps and quickly reorienting himself with a sharp glance in either direction. Besides the two imperials fighting their way around the turn, a third had followed to defend their backs from another of Desmanda's assembled rescuers—an Altem Guardsman who'd raced up from a lower floor. The Altem was bleeding badly from his right hand, and it looked to the warlord as if the man had lost two fingers along with his Lightning Pistol.

His battlefield instincts singing danger, Raydan assessed his position with lightning speed. There was no time for consideration or subtle tactics. He had not placed himself in an enviable position; whichever way he faced he would have an enemy at his back. Except that the trailing Prator had foolishly kept his halberd; while its long reach made it easy for him to keep the Altem at bay, he could not fight at his best in the close quarters. It gave Raydan a few seconds.

Seconds were all he needed.

With his back to the lower fight, trusting the Altem Guardsman to keep his opponent preoccupied, Raydan levered himself up and forward to thrust at the legs of Blane's opponent. The Prator had not overlooked Raydan, however, and his sword flashed down in a sidearm swipe to parry the attack. Raydan felt the blow travel up into his arm as the swords rang together, throwing fiery sparks as their competing magicks clashed. The Prator's blade slid along the length of Raydan's until the flanged guards met. Raydan twisted his wrist, hooking his guard over the other's, turning his sword point-first into the floor to trap both blades between them. A standoff, under most circumstances. But there was still Carson Blane.

The crossbowman might not be a dab hand with a sword, but Raydan's interference had given him the opening he needed. He stabbed forward, driving the tip of his short sword through the Prator's leather tunic and tearing a terrible wound in the other man's side. The Prator groaned through clenched teeth, his furious gaze still locked on the warlord. Raydan silenced him with a backhand across the face, his mailed gauntlet no doubt breaking the man's jaw. The guard slumped into unconsciousness, falling back against his comrade.

Carson and Wyst rushed their surviving opponent together, bearing him down in a confusion of arms and naked blades.

The Prator behind him was still threatening the wounded Altem. Raydan slid down a few steps and reversed his sword. Stabbing back under his left arm—faster than a turning slash, and more practical given the difference in height on the stairwell—the mana-charged blade sheared easily through the Prator's mantle and into his shoulder. A clean wound.

Charged as he was with battle lust, it took an effort for Raydan not to twist the sword and inflict a potentially lethal injury on his opponent. This was not Nujarek. The Guardsmen were still serving under the legacy of Sire Tahmaset, and even after all that had happened, the warlord still believed in duty to the Empire. Raydan swallowed dryly, the taste of blood more pronounced than ever.

“Spare their lives if you can,” he shouted. The wounded Prator had dropped his halberd and was being held at the point of the Altem's manacle. The warlord spun around and reached down, liberating the Prator's sword from its sheath. With a quick pull, he then yanked his own sword clean of the man's shoulder. The guardsman grunted in pain but held his bearing. These were impressive men. Raydan did not look forward to fighting his way through them to get free of Atlantis.

Wyst was standing guard over his prisoner. Keravan was binding Blane's wounds. The others were piled up in a tight knot at the landing, with Desmanda now on the arm of a second Altem Guardsman bearing the silver fist insignia of Raydan Marz. It could only be Jannus. Raydan nodded to the warrior. “It is good to see you.”

Hidden by his masked helm, the man's face was not easy to read. But his slumped shoulders and the way his blade trailed on the ground beside him spoke of exhaustion. Jannus was also bleeding from a wound to his chest and another to his left thigh, though neither looked serious. "There was no way to hold," he said, voice slightly muffled by his helm, "so I fell back and spiked the landing three floors above. They'll have to backtrack to another stairwell or one of the private lifts."

"And they will," Raydan said, beckoning the Altem and Desmanda forward. To the three Elves now under his command, he ordered, "Strip the Prator of weapons. Bind their hands and feet." The Elves would be fastest on foot, able to catch up most quickly. He nodded at the grievously wounded man he and Carson had brought down. "Tie a compress over his side, but do it quickly. Meet us at the skywalk."

The last four landings sketched out the problems Raydan faced in greater detail. At the next, his small host had to step over two bodies. One was Kortan, the second Elven outrider Raydan had brought to Atlantis. The other was a Lightning Gunner belonging to Warlord Russo. Raydan didn't know him. The following two landings were empty, except for the stubs of two fingers and a Lightning Pistol lying in a small pool of blood. So the Prator had breached Desmanda's defenses, killing two men and forcing their way up the stairs. Only the wounded Altem had been able to pursue.

Raydan's men collected the fallen weapons as they went. The mercenary holding the landing just off the skywalk was another Lightning Gunner with a mana-charged device. Thirteen warriors--already down by two, and they weren't even free of the courthouse. Raydan took Desmanda with him out of the stairwell, checking for an ambush, but there were no Prator to be seen. Just a few late clerks returning from midday meals at the shops of the Avalon Galleria. Desmanda had been right that she could get them across the skywalk. But her earlier comment that it would then be up to him still hung over their escape like a funeral pall.

"How many more warriors across the skywalk?" he asked calmly, braced for her answer.

"None."

He nodded. "What about our path to Down Town? Were you able to secure a liftgate?"

She shook her head. "We're on our own. I knew I could get us to this first skywalk and across to the Galleria shops. There was no time, or manpower, for anything else."

Raydan ignored the stares of the passing clerks and other low-level functionaries. A few took off running, no doubt recognizing him or his colors. "Desmanda, we can't fight our way out of Atlantis. We'd need forty, maybe fifty men. Mage support. Golems." Raydan knew the stories of how the Elementalist heretics had been routed out of the city. And he didn't have anywhere near their numbers.

"You aren't asking much of four days planning, are you? We have fifteen warriors, Marz. Make it work."

Despite Desmanda's confidence in him, Raydan knew it couldn't be done. He knew it instinctively, like his ability to sense a battlefield for advantages and weaknesses. So far they had mostly remained ahead of the pursuit, but word would spread faster than his people could run. Each fight would be fiercer and more desperate than the last. The liftgates were Atlantis' only exits. Raydan had to assume that they would already be heavily guarded, and the Prator would move quickly to close off Down Town as well. A smart commander would dig a large hole right about now and pull his people in after him, waiting for a better chance at victory.

A large hole ...

“Forget the skywalk,” he announced. “We’re going straight down through the courthouse.”

She frowned. “For the boulevard?”

“Deeper,” Raydan Marz told her, turning back to the stairwell entrance. He did a quick headcount through the open door. The Elves had caught up, piling into the back of the group, which stretched back along the stairs to the last turn. “Into the sublevels of Atlantis,” he said, loud enough that everyone could hear.

Desmanda paused, looking first to her warlord and then glancing over their small contingent. “And what do you hope to find down there?”

Raydan Marz looked around at his makeshift guard, smiled thinly, and turned for the next flight downward. “An army.”

Chapter 8: Fallen Warlord

Maleficus!

Raydan Marz. You remember me.

I know you. You’re Nujarek’s creature. What are you doing down here?

Placing my life in your hands. I have ... overstayed my welcome in Atlantis.

How did you know I’d come here, to the dungeons?

I was inside. I saw how some of the other prisoners looked to you after you beat the Sect Elf, and it reminded me of the tale of the Malodorous Twelve--the dozen prisoners who formed a successful raiding party during the Age of Princes. You need a warhost, Raydan Marz. And one thing more.

What is that?

An escape from Atlantis. Or are you planning to leap from the Gray Spill?

I’ve considered it.

I can offer you a better chance. All I ask in trade is that you take me with you.

You expect me to trust you, Maleficus?

No. Not yet. But since I obviously knew you’d come here, ask yourself why the dungeons are unguarded, rather than crawling with Prators.

All right. You just bought yourself one chance. I can always kill you later.

It’s nice to see that my working conditions will be unchanged.

* * *

It was an act of desperation, freeing prisoners from the dungeons.

The people would not thank Raydan Marz for putting thieves and murderers back onto their streets. Other warlords would wonder about his loyalty in releasing sworn enemies of the Guild and Empire. Raydan knew these would be the consequences, and he accepted them as a necessary evil. He tried to be careful, weeding out the professional from the incompetent, taking only as many as he thought he could control. By seeding his loyal

troops among the recruits, he managed to keep the small warhost working together as they escaped pursuit.

They eventually took refuge on the third floor of a cold-storage warehouse. The building was high enough above the main bridges and boulevards that casual patrols were not a danger and too small to be connected to any grand skywalks higher up. The real risk lay in the coordinated search parties and the lack of a good path of retreat. Still, it would take days to search a city the size of Atlantis. As night wore into the early morning hours, most of the search teams seemed to be concentrating their efforts on the sub-boulevard levels, thinking to flush their quarry from the sewers and maintenance tunnels like rats.

Carcasses hung along one wall of the warehouse, and the place smelled of blood and old ice, like a winter battleground. Raydan's breath hovered before him in a frosty cloud. He rubbed his hands briskly together, generating a small amount of warmth, and then tried to flex some life back into his fingers. The joints cracked painfully, complaining--but not quite so vociferously as Tahr, the Sect Elf.

"Sitting around here, waiting to be slaughtered. We'll end up like the rest of the hanging meat. I don't like it, Marz. And I certainly don't trust him." The raven-haired Elf jerked his pointy chin at Maleficus, who perched nearby on a cask of butter.

The gaunt-faced historian was huddled back into his robes, like a brooding crow. He looked ill-rested and haggard--they all did--but had forgone sleep to remain on hand for questions and to wait for the return of Raydan's patrols. Desmanda had given up an hour before and was now sleeping fitfully against a large crate of eggs. Raydan himself was seated nearby. Most of the ad hoc warhost were sitting or lying about the warehouse in similar states of uncomfortable repose. Very few seemed to be taking the cold in stride. There was Lager, the Troll, who was protected by his thick skin. And the silent Elf with the violet eyes, the one who had remained chained to the dungeon wall right up until Raydan ordered him released. The picklock, Arik, and Maleficus helped the Elf along until they reached the warehouse, where the Elf stretched out on the floor and slept as easily as if he were lying next to a campfire. Further evidence of his stoic strength, or complete exhaustion? Raydan wasn't sure.

And there was Tahr, of course, with his tight band of Sect cutthroats. None of them seemed adversely affected by the cold, though whether that was because of conditioning or sheer thick-headedness there was no telling. They took turns sleeping, three of them awake at all times. Watching. They were the main reason Raydan didn't dare sleep himself.

"For that matter," Tahr said, warming to his complaints, "this whole idea of a 'back door' liftgate bothers me. How could one be built without the Guild noticing?"

Raydan glanced at Desmanda, accustomed to her speaking up in defense of the Guild. She remained quiet. He swallowed against the biting cold, feeling the dryness at the back of his throat. "From what Maleficus explained to me, this isn't a recent construction. It's old." He nodded at the historian, who took over the explanation.

"Atlantis was first formed from several levitated towers and buildings, all independent of one another and each with their own liftgate to Down Town. As the first bridges and skywalks were built, and then the gates for public access, many of the private portals fell into disuse. Some of these were later deactivated, but others were simply covered over and forgotten. "

"And if his lord protector has troops waiting for us?" Tahr asked Raydan, ignoring the historian.

"Then we fight our way through," Raydan said, disregarding the reminder of Maleficus' prior connection to Nujarek. The historian was smart enough at least not to walk into a deathtrap of his own design, and Raydan would keep the man very close at hand. "It has to be better than the cordon set around each main liftgate."

“Maybe not. You already have a dozen turncoats behind you. Maybe the Prator aren’t as solidly behind Nujarek as you think. Let’s test their resolve.”

And get a lot of people killed unnecessarily. Tahr was making it easy for Raydan to keep in mind that his goals and those of the Sect Elf were not the same. Tahr wanted to inflict damage on Atlantis and the Guild. He didn’t care who made it away from the city--excepting himself, of course.

“If you want to challenge the Prator, you know where the door is, Tahr,” he said aloud. “You can use it once I’m safely away from here.”

Tahr’s smile was devoid of any humor. “I don’t run out on my responsibilities, Raydan Marz. But it is my duty to point out options, and possible errors.”

When Tahr had claimed the title of Raydan’s second-in-command, the warlord wasn’t sure. The dark Elf had immediately helped organize the prison escape, backing up Raydan’s commands with no overt malice for his earlier defeat at the warlord’s hands. The only sticking point had been the chained Elf, who’d been unable at first to stand without aid. When Raydan allowed Maleficus and Arik to help the failing Elf he had caught the dark look that flashed across Tahr’s face, though nothing was said. It had even been helpful, in its way, having another solid lieutenant beneath him--no matter Tahr’s delusions of shared power.

Now was not the time to raise that issue. Not with thirty-four lives riding on a coordinated effort to win their way free of the city.

Raydan was saved the necessity of a tactful response by the arrival of Jaghar and his pack of followers. The Orcs had been low on Raydan’s list for rescue from the dungeons, until Jaghar identified himself as a shaman and proved it by first healing Altem Taberska’s hand and then Raydan’s more general injuries. Since then the broad-shouldered creatures had made themselves useful as security—making sure that no one got “lost” and wandered away and occasionally taking a turn down through the sewers to check for the presence of search parties.

Their stench told Raydan they had just returned from such a trip. Jaghar growled at his pack and then stamped up alone, the mailed shirt he’d “found” earlier splotted with dark muck. He stamped his feet on the floor, trying to keep warm. The metal links of his shirt clinked and jingled.

“Tunnels clear. No one find bodies yet.” The Orc was referring to the unfortunate squad of Altem Guardsmen who had wandered too close to the warehouse earlier--the source of the mail and their swords. Raydan consoled his sense of honor by vowing that their deaths would serve the greater good of the Empire. “We go soon?”

“Before first light,” Raydan promised, standing. He didn’t care to have the Orc staring down at him. They respected strength and little else. “Maleficus?”

“The museum will be magically warded, but with one of Desmanda’s magestone spikes, we can create an entrance sub-boulevard.”

Tahr snorted derisively. “Maybe the bookworm’s imperial friends can open the door for us.” He drew the short sword Raydan had given him, holding it with familiar ease. “If we’re going to fight our way free, I’d rather do it in the open.”

The Orc had watched the brief exchange with a guarded expression, his jaundiced eyes squinted almost closed in concentration, missing nothing. “Museum,” he said, repeating the human word. “We go now, check path clear.”

“No one goes anywhere,” Raydan told him. “Not for another hour, after everyone has had a chance to rest a bit more.”

Jaghgar looked ready to argue, or fight, his shoulder muscles bunching up like sacks of rocks. He looked back to his pack and then nodded abruptly. "We lead."

The first into battle, at least among Orc Raiders, was always awarded the greatest spoils. Knowing something of their ways, mostly through fighting their kind for so many years, Raydan agreed. "You go first," he said. He looked at Tahr, trying to ignore the naked blade held ready in the other's hand. "Your squad will bring up the rear."

The Elf nodded only once, curt and final. "Last ones into a trap, first ones out," he said calmly and sheathed his sword. Finding an empty crate, he upended it and used it as a chair.

Shaking his head, Raydan moved to wake Desmanda and Jannus, wanting to go over their plans for when they reached Down Town. As to Tahr and his prophecies of doom, he decided to ignore the Elf's pessimism.

There was already too much that could go wrong without begging for trouble.

* * *

As it turned out, Raydan should perhaps have paid more attention to Tahr's warnings. Though up to the moment of the betraying shouts--"Here! They are here!"--and the sudden attack, there had been no signs of treachery.

Dust lay thick on the floor of the tunnel, Raydan had been happy to note, undisturbed for months or even years. The sublevel smelled warm, dry and stale, scents characteristic of the museum above as well. It was a welcome change from the cold-storage warehouse--and especially from Atlantis' fetid sewers.

A closet-sized door opened to a narrow, steeply pitched stairwell. The Orcs led the ad hoc warhost down one final level to a larger area than on the floor above, still dry but much cooler. Archways opened onto tight corridors leading north and south. An open breezeway ran out to the west--an old bridge, stretching over to the sublevels of another large tower, abandoned many years ago as Atlantis city life moved upward and forgot the lower passages.

Desmanda quickly located the edges of the liftgate, which was much smaller than Raydan had thought. He broke the small army into two bands, sending ahead the Orcs, Altem Taberska with two Utem blades, Lager, WYST and most of the Dwarves. The lead party was strong enough to hold against any trouble below but left Raydan the bulk of his command while he remained in the city. The outline of a diamond appeared through the dust, glowing with a cobalt light. All magelamps were doused, and in concentric steps the diamond shrank toward the center. Finally the entire floor melted away, and the first band began to sink smoothly toward Down Town.

Anyone below looking up might have caught the subtle flash of magic, though it was unlikely. And in the midnight shadow of Atlantis the descending warriors would be in little danger of discovery until they were nearly at the ground. Looking over the edge, Raydan quickly lost sight of the first team. A handful of seconds later, the floor re-formed out of soft light and then darkened again into solid flooring. Only this time, there was no dust. As the magelamps were unveiled, they shone over a perfect diamond of brightly brushed stone that defined the border of the liftgate.

For a moment, Raydan breathed easier.

Then came the shuffle of hurried footsteps and the scrape of armor against a stone wall. That was the only warning as the first attackers burst into the room. One of the Sect Elves shouted in pain as a sword bit deeply into his side. Altem Jannus was better prepared--better armored, at least. A second blade rang off his mantle and dealt only a glancing blow to the side of his head. He reacted with well-honed reflexes, his manaclevt a golden blur of steel and energy. The strengthened blade battered aside the attacker's weak parry, sawed

through his leather tunic and slid between two ribs. The man screamed, shrill and pain-filled. Then his mouth was filled with Jannus' mailed fist.

It was too late for worrying about silence. Shouts of alarm were being raised all around them, echoing in from the corridors and from across the breezeway. Shadows danced as the searchers' lights appeared and swarmed closer. Altem Jannus kicked the dead Utem free of his sword as the Sect warriors swarmed the man's hapless cohort. Then another pair of Utem blades appeared from the northern passage, followed by a trio of Prator Home Guard, and that side of the room fell into chaos. Raydan drew his own sword and turned in search of Maleficus, murder etched into his face. He would strike the man down for this.

Except that Maleficus held no dagger at the warlord's back. Nor was he slinking off to the protection of the Prator. He stood at Desmanda's side near the middle of the liftgate, quietly urging her on as she prepared the liftgate for a second opening. His eyes widened at the warlord's fury but then darted to the left as he yelled, "Raydan!"

It was not the first time Raydan's life hung in the balance of his instincts. Likely it would not be the last. Look, behind you! was not the most original dodge. But then Maleficus was hardly acting the part of a guilty man, and the fear in his shout of alarm had been honest enough for the warlord to spin around in anticipation of being attacked. From the southern archway an Utem warrior had leapt past the unarmed Arik, coming at Raydan with longsword extended. The warlord just managed to turn the other man's attack but nearly lost his own weapon from the force of the blow. Fumbling his grip, Raydan attempted to recover and come overhead with a smashing blow.

The violet-eyed Elf got there first in an explosion of grace and power as he spun around the cowering picklock in pursuit of the Utem. Grabbing a handful of the guardsman's mohawk, he yanked back the head and smashed the outside edge of his slender hand into the other man's throat. The Utem gagged violently as the Elf brought up one foot in a sweeping kick that connected with the other man's wrist. His sword dropped from numb fingers, and the Elf pushed the warrior right into Raydan's downward slash.

A few warm drops of blood splattered Raydan's cheek and chin, and he spat to clear the salty taste off his lips. His manacle had cut deep through the Utem's mantle and collarbone, and the warlord had to use his foot for leverage to work the blade free. The Elf had already retrieved the longsword, holding it up for inspection, his eyes practically glowing in the light of the magelamps. His expression was clearly readable: this would do. He nodded once to Raydan, almost regally, and then struck a guarded pose just inside the southern arch as a squad of Prator pulled up short of the room. Blocking the doorway, the Elf forced them to come at him one at a time.

There might have been room for Raydan to join him, but the warlord could not afford the luxury of a personal contest of arms. He had to remain focused on the larger battle, and victory here lay not in conquest but escape. With a bloody fight raging on the northern side and the southern arch bottlenecked, Raydan moved quickly toward the undefended breezeway, pulling one of his uniformed Utems along with him. The breezeway was the largest opening onto this room, and he could see a large squad hurrying toward him across the dark skywalk. "Desmanda," he called out, partly in encouragement, partly in warning.

"Soon, Raydan. Soon." The demi-magus had her head bent in concentration. The liftgate could only cycle so fast, needing to fully complete the first descent before a second could begin.

It was not fast enough. The squad was almost over the breezeway. At its head Raydan spotted a shuffling form: one of the large-fisted Brass Golems, well suited for the close-up fighting found in cities. It advanced with its familiar loping swagger, pacing the squad at a slow but very determined gait.

The warlord set himself in the archway, knowing he would get only one chance to stop the Golem cold. But then a brilliant flash strobed through the room as tendrils of hard, white

energy streamed out into the breezeway to wrap around the Golem. The machine stopped in its tracks, caught up by the magical energies playing about it. Then the lightning winked out with a tiny thunderclap, leaving behind ghostly afterimages in Raydan's vision and the acrid scent of ozone. His companion was not an Utem! Raydan had dragged along his one experienced Lightning Gunner--the perfect choice for holding the breezeway.

"Again," the warlord commanded. He reached for his own Lightning Pistol before remembering that he—and his ad hoc warhost—were currently ill-equipped. "Hit it again!" And again the lightning flared out, its flash illuminating the gunner's sweating face. His expression was drawn and haggard as the mana-charged device hit him with a backlash for its overuse. The Golem staggered into a limping shuffle as the lightning finally played out. In the noise of the crackling thunderclap, he almost missed Desmanda's shouted "Now!"

"Gather up and go!" Raydan yelled, pushing the gunner back toward the liftgate. His order caused a few seconds' delay as the wounded were pulled hastily into the diamond-shaped pattern, but Raydan wouldn't leave prisoners on whom Nujarek could take out his frustrations. He set foot on the glowing outline as the liftgate began to open and watched the Prator flood from the breezeway into the room--followed by a magus!

Golden robes were folded about him, their metallic sheen reflecting the glow of several magelamps. His high-crested hair was barely ruffled by the winds outside, and he carried a staff with a magestone head. There was no end to the damage this man could do to Raydan's forces. Would already have done, in fact, if he could have identified Raydan from the breezeway. Now his eyes flashed with power as the magus' gaze fastened onto the rogue warlord, summoning mana. Ready to launch an attack of his own.

Raydan leapt forward off the liftgate just before it opened. In his mind, there was no other choice. The magus had identified Raydan, and now his power could simply reach beneath Atlantis after the warlord. Raydan would be dead before dropping twenty lengths--maybe less. His only option was to foul the man's magic. To do that, he committed himself to forcing a small opening between the Prator and stabbing forward with his manacle. No time to check his flanks to see how the battle had fared at either end of the long room. No chance to warn Desmanda to hold the opening. It was another decision made on instinct, and his life again hung in the balance.

It was just enough, the tip of Raydan's sword slipping past the Prator to punch through the magus' shoulder. A strong twist of his wrist opened a terrible wound. The Guild master shouted in anger and pain as the gathered mana fled his control. Then a sword slashed Raydan deeply across the left arm, while another Prator used the butt of his polearm to smash the warlord repeatedly in the face, driving him back toward the lip of the open liftgate. Empty space hung behind Raydan's heels. A halberd reached in from the left, the blade set under his throat, holding him up. From the right, a second Prator placed the tip of his bladed polearm against the warlord's side, pinning him in place with nowhere to go. Almost nowhere.

Facing a return to Nujarek's grasp, Raydan's choices were few. And the decision, once reached, required so little effort. Falling backward, allowing gravity to take hold, Raydan Marz toppled back through the still open liftgate.

Chapter 9: Escape

No! Damn his heroics, no!

Desmanda. Can you reverse the liftgate?

What? No. Not possible. Once the cycle has begun, it must complete. Raydan's lost to us.

Ahh, perhaps not. Look.

Oh, he didn't!

It would appear that Raydan Marz has taken matters into his own hands. Again.

* * *

Tumbling back through the open liftgate, Raydan Marz realized he'd once again put his trust in fate without appreciating how perverse it could be. Fate had brought him back to Atlantis and landed him in the dungeons. Fate had played a hand in his condemnation, and now fate had led the warlord into a trap just as escape beckoned. Not the most trustworthy of allies.

But then what did he truly have to lose? The specter of death paled next to what Jeet Nujarek might do to him if Raydan were recaptured. Better to go out now, by his own choosing. That was the thought that had helped him surrender to the fall, and he would hold on to it for as long as possible.

At least for five hundred feet.

The liftgate portal closed just after he fell through, so close to him that the magical energies played over Raydan's skin in a prickly static charge. A muted glow briefly filled the cavity, fading quickly back to dark stone. It removed the danger of crossbowmen stabbing their bolts down after him, at least. And then, caught in the night's chill embrace, the rush of wind filling his ears, Raydan simply tucked into an armored ball to present as small a target as possible and hurtled toward the ground. There was little else he could do except learn to fly.

His caution likely saved his life. Had he gone tumbling down, wildly flailing, the warlord might have slipped from the liftgate's magical boundary with nothing to catch him but the streets of Down Town. Crouched into his tense pose, he fell straight after his warriors. His free descent quickly outpaced the magical platform's controlled drop, and it rushed up at him with terrible speed.

The cushioning grip of mana touched him with only seconds to spare, slowing his fall. Sapphire sparks of energy shot up around him, and Raydan flushed warm as the magic bled off his speed into simple heat. It gave him an extra second, perhaps, for a few of his warriors to shift out of his way and a buffer that turned his impact into the invisible platform from bone-crushing to merely bone-rattling. Breath whooshed out between his clenched teeth as he slammed down, taking the brunt of the force on his back and right shoulder. Raydan collapsed in a clattering pile of bent armor and bruised flesh.

Shadowed faces swam in his vision as he blinked his way back toward sight. He smiled unsteadily at Desmanda's look of concern; if she wasn't attempting some life-saving aid, he must not look too bad. "I thought I was dead," he wheezed, trying to regain his breath.

"Trust the magic, Raydan." Her answering smile was forced, though, as she continued to keep an eye on the ground.

Raydan staggered to his feet. His chest felt as if it had caved in on one side. His right arm still worked but felt numb from the impact. He transferred his sword to his left hand. The liftgate was slowing their descent now, dropping them gently down over the last fifty feet onto the tiled roof of a small residence. Alarms were being sounded throughout the neighborhood, and the clash of weapons rang out from several locations nearby. In the shadows next to the home, Raydan saw a number of waiting soldiers. His own, he hoped.

"Everyone jump for it," Desmanda called out as the liftgate deposited them on the clay tiles. The Demi-Magus crouched on all fours, holding a purchase on the sloped roof, head bent in concentration.

Given the weight of his armor, Raydan wasn't about to gain a foothold on the smooth tiles. He kept to his feet and slid to the edge of the roof, dropping heavily onto the small walkway that separated this home from the next.

He landed right in the middle of a fresh battle. Raydan came up with his sword ready, cutting down and to his right to parry the thrust of an Utem Guardsman and then sweeping back across to gash open the thigh of an unprepared demi-magus. Tahr dropped down next

to Raydan, looking for trouble. He found it as a Brass Golem swung its heavy fist toward his head. The Elf ducked away and then lunged back to wedge the tip of his sword deep into a seam in the Golem's midsection.

Fortunately not every nearby soldier was against them. Wyst stood back to back with the guardsman who'd defected from Russo, the two laying about them with wild and reckless slashes to keep off the imperials for a few seconds more. And as Raydan's people continued to drop from the roof, the battle swung quickly toward the warlord's favor. Altem Jannus came down right on top of the Demi-Magus, bearing him to the ground under a pressing weight of armor. Tahr's wounded man, no longer able to hold a sword, threw himself into the Golem's path. It cost him some cracked ribs as the Brass Golem caught him up in a bone-breaking hug, but Tahr continued to work at the Golem's innards, and from deep inside the machine came the death knell of grinding gearwork. The Golem went down a moment later, just as Raydan dispatched his remaining opponent with a backslash that carved away half the man's face.

"Report!" Raydan barked out, throwing stealth to the winds. He had enough troops around him for a good scuffle now, and Down Town was quickly coming alive with lighted windows and running patrols. There were conflicting shouts of an escape, an invasion, a new assassination. They had to move fast to take advantage of the confusion.

"The family inside sent up the first alarms when we came down on their roof," Wyst said, coming up beside Raydan. "Altem Taberska kept the Orcs off them. He has the main street now." The Elf nodded ahead of them. "Jaghar's pack is roving farther down, picking off the faster patrols. Lager and the Dwarves are holding a third patrol off our backs." Fast and concise, the way a good battlefield report should be. The Elven cavalryman was clearly used to pulling double duty as a scout.

The bulk of his ad hoc warhost now crowded the narrow passage between the houses. Raydan searched for the one Dwarf who had remained behind with the second team. One of his people unveiled a magelamp, the glowing globe dispelling Atlantis' midnight shadow, and he found the holt-dweller crumpled in an untidy pile against the wall of the house, bled out from a wound taken in the fight above. The warlord seized Arik instead. The picklock trembled in Raydan's grip, ready to bolt for the nearest dark hole.

"Run back for Lager and the Dwarves. Tell them to make their way from the city, any direction but for the west side of town. Do not go west." He paused, considering. Then, more quietly so as not to be overheard, "Rendezvous is five leagues north of Atlantis, along the Roa Vizorr where it crooks around Seraph Point. You deliver that message. Afterward, you do what you want. Go." Raydan pushed the smaller man toward the street behind them. When Arik hesitated, the warlord brandished his sword. "Go!" he yelled in his most commanding voice. Arik fled. Raydan then clamped a hand on one of the unarmed Freelancers who had been close enough to overhear. "Same target. Same message. Good luck." The Freelancer set off without hesitation.

Not an easy call to make, but necessary. The Dwarves and the Troll would slow him down, and they were so easily distinguished from humans that he had to cut them loose. A thief and an unarmed Freelancer would be little help to them, but they were of the least use to Raydan in his flight from Down Town. The warlord hoped they would make it. It was the best he could offer them.

And a lot more than he would do for the Sect Elves who waited nearby, their dark eyes darting toward him with the patient hunger of a mountain predator.

Even while the warlord watched, Tahr conducted his own battlefield triage. His wounded man lay on the ground, bleeding heavily from the wound in his side and coughing up blood as well. He would never make it free of the city without help. Tahr nodded permission to one of his warriors, who drove a short sword right through their companion's heart, pinning him to the earth. The man kicked once, blood gurgling in the back of his throat, and then was still.

“Better here than in the coliseum,” Tahr said simply, noticing Raydan’s gaze. “What’s our plan?”

Raydan nodded. “While Lager and the Dwarves distract the guard, we head west. Tahr, you lead the way with your Elves. Try to stay out of any fighting, and shout that the prisoners are escaping to the south. Get clear of Down Town. Meet at the far side of the Links. Once free of the city, we’ll follow the original plan and try to find my old warhost. They might come over to me. Move.”

Tahr paused as if trying to decide. Finally he nodded once, curtly, and gathered his followers in by eye. They sprinted toward the main street, the opposite way from where Arik had gone, and cut to the left, staying to the shadows.

“So who did you just sell out?” Maleficus asked--a question that had no doubt been on Tahr’s mind as well.

Raydan let the question hang unanswered as Desmanda dropped off the rooftop, landing in a rustle of heavy robes. “I triggered the liftgate to cycle back up,” the demi-magus said. “That will delay our friends above.”

Leading the rest of his warhost into the street, Raydan found Altem Taberksa’s squad standing guard over three wounded and disarmed prisoners. “West,” he called to them loudly. “Gather up and go!” Leaving the prisoners, Raydan pulled his band of sixteen after him, trailing along the same way Tahr had gone.

Only as far as the next corner, though, where Jaghar and his Orcs were busy looting the corpses of three Altem Guardsmen. They looked dissatisfied, fishing a few coppers and the occasional silver piece from the pouches of the dead men. Raydan might have loosed his followers on the avaricious Raiders on general principle, if he didn’t believe it would cost too much of his newly won loyalty among the others.

Instead, he grabbed a small pouch away from Jaghar and threw it down the street. A few coins fell out and clattered away into the darkness. “You want to waste your time with this, or get free of the city?” There was no time for the usual subtleties of command. Jaghar would follow his orders, or Raydan would abandon his pack in the city.

The Orc Shaman bridled, shaking his forward-thrust head and growling dangerously, but most of that was for show. If the green-skinned Raiders wanted a chance at freedom, it would be by Raydan’s charity, and they knew it. “You lead,” Jaghar said, mangling the common tongue of man. “We follow.”

“No,” Raydan said. “You’ll lead. North. Range ahead by at least a hundred paces. We’ll be shouting alarms that the prisoners are escaping to the west, so if you have to turn aside, head east. You stop for any more scavenging and we’ll leave you to the city guard.” There was no jest in the threat. Raydan meant it, and the Orcs knew that as well. Jaghar shoved one of his Slashers ahead of him, the pack quickly moving forward into a picket position.

That placed the heaviest burden on Tahr and the Sect Elves, turning them into a diversionary force. And with the city guard converging on them, it gave Lager and the Dwarves a slight chance as well. That was simply one law of using troops. Sometimes you had to sacrifice a few for the many. “For the good of the Empire,” he whispered, remembering how many times in the past he had used that mantra to justify his actions. Now he was justifying rebellion, turned by Nujarek’s threat into the very thing he loathed most.

And it bothered him not knowing if he was now thwarting his enemy’s plans--or fulfilling them.

Chapter 10: Blood Will Tell

Your warhost is tired, Raydan Marz. Tired men make mistakes—Scythian wisdom.

Adversity binds the mob into an army--fifth tenet of the Atlantean War Manual.

In the long retreat from Khamsin, Crown Prince Fahvnir lost half his “army” to desertion. They became a mob.

Fahvnir had just put his own capital to the torch. What did he expect? I didn’t burn Atlantis behind me.

Metaphorically speaking, didn’t you? You might yet lose them. I won’t stop any of them from leaving.

Does that include me?

No, Maleficus. It does not.

* * *

After five leagues of a forced march, Raydan’s bone-weary warhost collapsed in exhaustion on reaching Seraph Point. Night was falling again. The dark waters of the Roa Vizorr swirled around the wooded promontory, offering protection on three sides but also trapping his people with only one escape. If attacked, the fatigued warhost would be forced to fight their way through an opposing battle line—not the best plan in their current state. Raydan Marz had gambled that risk against one night’s rest, pulling in his patrols and setting an abbreviated picket line at the base of the headland while he established camp.

Supplies, fortunately, were not a great problem. The warhost had seized a half-dozen horses and minimal foodstuffs from two unlucky patrols that day. The silent, violet-eyed Elf Raydan had rescued from the dungeon had left briefly with one horse and a borrowed bow and arrow, coming back with a freshly killed stag. Then the Dwarves had come in not an hour earlier, riding a wagon filled with confiscated supplies. Arik drove the team while Lager, the Troll Brawler, paced the wagon with great strides. Raydan figured that the Troll must have kept up a nonstop pace to make fifteen leagues alongside the wagon and arrive only hours behind the bulk of the warhost. Two of the Dwarves wore pistols at their sides. Raydan’s remaining Freelancer talked them out of two more, strapping them across his chest in gunslinger fashion. Arik avoided the warlord’s questioning gaze as he passed out food and heavy blankets to the rest of the warhost.

Still, very few slept. They sat around one of the two large, crackling fires, gazes darting out into the gathering darkness and then flicking back to Raydan, a neighbor, the closest weapon. There was too much uncertainty, especially among those who had so recently been prisoners. Raydan could count the number of clean consciences on one hand. The two Scorpion Gunners who had defected to his banner at the outskirts of Down Town were already bundled into bedrolls and breathing deeply in sleep, as were Carson Blane and two of the Dwarven rebels. The rest waited. Fidgeted.

“We were set up.” Altem Jannus used a stripped branch to poke at the fire, sending up a flurry of sparks. His armor was laid out beside him, and without it he looked much smaller. Or that might have been due to the fact that he was sitting next to Lager; anyone would be dwarfed by the Troll’s bulk. “You know we walked right into a trap, Raydan,” he continued. “It was no accident.”

Leaning back against the thick bole of a fallen tree, Raydan felt the scaly bark pricking through his tunic like a dozen dull knives at his back. He had been waiting for someone to bring up their brush with the Prator Home Guard. It had bothered him all day as well. He and Desmanda had discussed it briefly earlier, but had come to no satisfactory conclusion. Raydan was slightly astonished that it was stoic Jannus broaching the subject now, but

perhaps he shouldn't have been surprised. Soldiers were always leery around a new warlord, so it took someone who felt comfortable with Raydan to speak up.

"No, I don't suppose it was an accident," he finally replied. "But it wasn't perfect, either. They should have had the liftgate deactivated, or a larger force waiting down below."

Desmanda nodded. "They only knew our destination in general terms. Someone with imperfect information?"

"Or someone leaving room for his own escape." Jannus' gaze bored into Maleficus.

The gaunt historian shifted uncomfortably as he in turn sought out the violet-eyed Elf. His choice of ally was unsurprising--he had helped save the other's life, after all. The suspicious glances directed at him throughout the day had certainly not been lost on him, and the tension building around the fires was obvious enough that even the thick-headed Orcs noticed. Jaghar rocked forward suddenly into a crouch, balancing on the balls of his feet, accompanied by the metallic jingle of his light mail shirt and the clinking of the coins in his belt pouch.

The problem was, Raydan couldn't be certain. Maleficus' actions at the liftgate seemed to argue in his defense. But the number of people with knowledge of their escape route was small, and those who might have had a chance to alert the imperial guard even smaller. "You were Nujarek's agent, Maleficus," he said. "You can't expect much in the way of trust here."

Maleficus nodded. "I haven't asked for any, Marz. Though I expected at least the same fighting chance you gave Tahr."

"If Tahr were here now, he'd strike you down without another word. He warned me you were leading us into a trap."

"And now you would take the council of the Necropolis Sect? Be certain, Raydan," Maleficus advised him, looking fairly calm for a man under threat of death. "Be absolutely certain."

"Enough," Jaghar spat, coming to his feet and pacing around the fire to stand over the historian. "We know who traitor is here. He spy in dungeon. He spy now." With each declaration, the Orc Shaman stamped one booted foot in emphasis, his belt pouch jingling against his thigh. He waved his crudely fashioned mace, which was nothing more than a dozen shoeing nails driven into the head of a heavy club. Still, he could easily beat the historian to death with it. "Kill traitor, Raydan Marz. Strength rules!" Among the Orcs, it often came down to such simple questions. The strong led. The weak perished.

Everyone waited for Raydan's decision. The warlord glanced from face to face, noting Desmanda's uncertainty and the taciturn Elf's appraising gaze. Lager shrugged, though his dark eyes betrayed some concern. Arik had disappeared. The Dwarven rebels glanced around warily, as if concerned they would be the next accused. Keravan nodded reluctantly, as did Altem Jannus, neither apparently feeling good about agreeing with the Orcs but doing so nonetheless.

Raydan picked up a small hunk of wood and set it carefully on top of some glowing coals. He rubbed his hands together, savoring the crisp warmth, and brought them to his face, smelling the woodsmoke scent on his fingers. The problem was that Maleficus had again struck to the heart of the matter. Raydan had to be right the first time. Finding out later that he had executed the wrong man would destroy morale among his men.

And there were so many he didn't trust here. Black Powder Rebels ... criminals ... Orcs! At least when he had hauled around magespawn were creatures as part of his warhost, he had not had to worry about their politics. Now he was making deals with warriors he would have simply executed at any other time, and he needed to hold on to their loyalty. And that rankled fiercely. So be certain! Who would have profited from selling out the escape attempt?

It was that question that brought everything else into focus.

Raydan's manaclevt rested against the fallen log next to him, the mana-charged sword safely tucked away in its scabbard. Now he snatched it up, throwing aside the sheath as he stood. A dozen nearby warriors tensed in anticipation of violence. The violet-eyed Elf also rose, standing over Maleficus. Was he prepared to fight the entire camp for the historian's life? Blade naked and ready, Raydan stalked over to him, staring into the Elf's quietly determined face. The warlord expected many things from the soldiers he commanded, and one was respect for his authority. He gave the Elf a moment to read that in his face. The other's brow furrowed, uncertain, but then he stepped away, and Raydan passed in front of Maleficus to stand in front of the Orc Shaman.

A head shorter than the warlord, the Shaman stared up at Raydan with feral yellow eyes. His green skin appeared sickly gray in the flickering firelight. Subtlety would be wasted on the Orcs. "Back off," he ordered, raising the sword slightly. Jaghar grinned down at Maleficus with a predator's smile and took one large step back. Raydan took his place, turning his back on the Shaman.

Maleficus found himself isolated, and apparently he had run out of little historical tidbits. He stared up at the warlord. "No, Raydan." He shook his head. "You're wrong."

Raydan reversed his grip on the manaclevt, holding it point down like a large dagger. In the deathly quiet of the campsite, only the crackle of the fires could be heard. Everyone seemed to be holding their breath. "It takes courage to say that to a man standing over you with a naked sword," he said, raising his blade. He thrust down hard, turning the sword in mid-motion to run back under his right arm, punching it into Jaghar's lower chest. The Orc screamed, the sound guttural and laced with pain. Raydan spun, twisting the sword to round out the wound as he again shifted grips. "And it takes stupidity to risk your own freedom for coin."

Jaghar's pack was slow to respond, as if they couldn't believe what Raydan had done. It gave Jannus and the quiet Elf a chance to move forward with their own blades ready, forming a quick guard around them. Raydan didn't bother to check further, trusting them to handle any difficulty. Jaghar had dropped his mace, and the Orc remained on his feet only by strength of will and Raydan's help. The warlord reached down and pulled free the Shaman's belt pouch, hefting it in his free hand. He shook it and then dumped it out onto the ground. Bright gold pieces poured out in a short but wealthy cascade. They were all stamped with the insignia of the Atlantis Guild.

"Imperial gold. Blood price for our informant." Raydan watched the life ebb from Jaghar, finally allowing the Orc to slide to the ground.

He then nodded to Jannus and the Elf swordsman, who backed away from the Orcs. They would need to sort it out among themselves. One Slasher made a preemptory move toward the spilled gold, only to be cuffed hard by the largest Orc and scolded in the rough language of the steppes. Raydan understood only one word in four, most of those being colorful invective. Then the larger Orc knelt to the ground, bending one knee to Raydan as he scooped up a large handful of the coin. He then retreated to his bedroll. One by one the other Orcs knelt and gathered up coins, each taking slightly less than the one before. The last two also picked up the body of their Shaman and carried it away for disposal--after stripping it of armor and any other valuables. But Raydan had their allegiance, as far as that ever went with Orc Raiders.

"Maleficus," Raydan said, "you are free to go."

"I can leave?" Maleficus seemed not the least unnerved by how close death had come to him. He looked at the warlord with renewed interest, as if trying to catalog this experience within his tales of history and fable. "That easily?"

“That easily,” Raydan promised. “I don’t want anyone who isn’t solidly behind me.” He looked around. “Any of you are free to go. But make your decision tonight.” He returned to his rest against the fallen tree and used a handful of dirt to scour the blood from his manacle. Silence reigned over the camp for the time it took another log to burn.

“Why tonight?”

Raydan glanced over at Maleficus, the historian lying back on his bedroll as he gazed up into the night sky. “You said that as if the deadline was important. Why make our decisions tonight?” he said.

Raydan Marz glanced in the direction the Orcs had carried their slain leader. “Jaghar’s pack ranged out farther than any other patrol,” he said simply settling back against a tree. “There’s no telling how many times he’s sold out our plans.

“Tomorrow, I expect we’ll be facing another warhost.”

Chapter 11: Arrested Flight

He’s gone, Maleficus. Our violet-eyed friend slipped away last night. He took one of the horses and some basic supplies.

You sound surprised, Raydan Marz.

That we lost one man? No. I was counting on five to eight deserters.

But you expected better from our Elven friend? Well, perhaps he’ll return.

He took at least three days’ worth of food. That tells me he has left us for good. Not that I hold it against him--I would have given him the horse and food.

So you were expecting a farewell? As far as I know, he never even said “hello.”

Sometimes I wonder why I talk to you, Maleficus.

* * *

Despite the desertion, Raydan Marz gazed upon the fresh day with optimistic eyes.

His ad hoc warhost was shaking itself into a semblance of military discipline, breaking camp and preparing for another day’s march. Raydan chewed slowly at a piece of poorly smoked venison, taking note of the squads that were shaping up instinctively. The Orcs moved off together, of course, scouting ahead on foot. The two soaring gunners mounted their mechanical dragonflies, holstered their Lightning Pistols into the tops of their leather boots, and with a high-pitched drone of gossamer wings leapt into the skies for a wider-ranging reconnaissance.

Altem Taberska, with a confirming glance at the warlord, promoted an Utem he knew to Lightning Gunner, handing over the mana-charged device Raydan had rescued from a comrade’s corpse during his escape. That gave him two gunners, one at either flank. Altem Jannus organized three of the freed prisoners into his own squad. Keravan, Carson Blane and Desmanda all stayed close to Raydan. Lager finished tearing through his morning meal of stick-roasted venison and joined the pair of Elven Rangers. The Dwarven rebels appropriated the wagon, joined by the gunslinger and Arik the picklock, who no doubt thought riding in the back of the wagon preferable to walking. Raydan’s squad would take all the remaining horses but one, their only war-trained animal, which went to Wyst. With a shrug Maleficus joined Arik, sitting on the wagon’s back gate, his long legs nearly dragging in the dirt.

No one had completely recovered from the long march the day before; Raydan could see more than a few rubbing at cramped muscles or shifting from one sore foot to another. Despite the need to put distance between them and the capital, Raydan promised a cautious march today--three leagues, no more. He washed the salty taste of venison from his mouth with a handful of river water, filled a leather flask in the current, and mounted.

The day remained overcast--comfortable for traveling, though several false alarms contributed to the sense of tension, the nervous anticipation of a looming battle. Just after noon, the dragonfly gunners circled back to warn of a squad of men hiding in the brush ahead. It turned out to be another trio of Khamsin mercenaries, looking to join Raydan and blunt about their reasons for doing so.

"You're rebel. Maybe best damn warlord rebel in ten days ride." The grizzled veteran had to be in his fifties, but there was a cast-iron strength to him that suggested he could put down men half his age.

Raydan held up a hand to ward off Desmanda's hot reply. He saw Jannus edge in behind the man but trusted the Altem not to strike without orders. "I still claim loyalty to the empire," Raydan informed the other man, voice stiff and unyielding. He pointed toward the standard Arik had fashioned. The golden toothed-wheel of the Guild shone on the blue pennant fluttering from the head of the pole Wyst carried. The smaller badge tied lower on the shaft displayed Raydan's personal crest, a silver fist. "I'll strike my personal colors before I ever give up that ensign."

The older man rubbed at his gray stubble and worked a crick out of his jaw, thinking. He glanced at his two companions. A younger version of himself, who had to be his son, sat a dappled mare, a Dwarven-made Fuser balanced across his lap. From the buckboard wagon, the woman raised one slender eyebrow and shrugged, frowning at their stock of supplies and the two remounts now tied to the wagon. She was clearly concerned for their possessions, which they had just delivered into the hands of a small warhost whose loyalties were in some question.

"You're set against the Guild now, aren't ya?" he finally asked.

"I'm the enemy of Jeet Nujarek." Raydan still refused to give the "Lord Protector" his self-proclaimed title. "And maybe of Prophet-Magus Nefar Osiras as well. But not of Tezla or the empire."

The veteran nodded and spat to one side. "Good 'nuf. What you do in Atlantis can't be worse than them two. We'll fight for ya."

Raydan felt torn between consigning the man to the infernal regions and adding his two Fusers to the warhost.

The veteran had also brought in supplies and extra horses, and unless Raydan was mistaken, the woman had the look of a healer to her. Leech Medic, maybe. With the Orc Shaman dispatched, his people had no good healer for the coming battle. That argument won when nothing else might have, and he accepted their pledge of service.

The battle did not come by nightfall, as Raydan had been sure it would, and he had never been more relieved to be wrong. They camped on a low bluff that gave his pickets a good line of sight over the forest canopy south and east. Sometime after the moon had set, Carson Blane woke Raydan with a light touch on the warlord's shoulder. "You'll want to see this, sir," he said.

The Utem Crossbowman led Raydan to a vantage point that overlooked the still-dark eastern horizon. He saw nothing.

“Watch for it,” one of the Dwarven rebels advised, the butt end of his battleax planted on the ground, his hands folded over the head of the weapon. Then he stabbed a blunt finger forward. “There.”

A small tongue of flame sped skyward from the forest several leagues to the east. A flaming arrow, or a spelled sling-bullet, perhaps--except that the upward flight suddenly stalled and the bright flame swung around to drift slowly toward the ground. Far too slowly for any arrow or burning stone.

“Magic,” Raydan breathed.
Blane nodded. “Any idea what it means, sir?”

“It means we post a second pair of guards farther out to the east. A good two hundred paces, with signaling horns.” Raydan paused and glanced at the two men. “I have a feeling we’ll find out tomorrow.”

Except that they didn’t. The next morning brought nothing more dangerous than a pair of Utem deserters, waking the camp with shouts from a safe distance. They walked in under guard and pledged themselves to Raydan Marz.

News of the “floating fire,” as Carson Blane described it, swept rapidly through the warhost during the morning ride. Maleficus, now on horseback, rode in unnatural silence, telling no tales of fallen kingdoms or heroic battles today. He chewed on his lower lip and stared expectantly to the east, as if waiting for some kind of sign. When asked, though, he shook his head and vowed the floating fire was as new to him as everyone else. After an evening stop for dry bread and soft cheese, washed down with leathery water from his flask, Raydan had just made up his mind to press the historian for more information when Desmanda intercepted him, handing over a mage-writ scroll with visible reluctance.

“It’s from Olarud,” she warned, referring to the magus who had taken over Raydan’s old warhost when Marz had been summoned so peremptorily to Atlantis.

With a quick pull, Raydan broke the thin stone crust sealing the scroll. He unraveled the letter and after a few moments of silence read it aloud for Desmanda.

“Marz. Learning of your arrest, I turned for Atlantis. At Desmanda’s warning I swung north. I expect I am close by, just across the Roa Vizorr, if you are still heading for the ancient Citadel of Luxor. If you wait, I will find you presently. If not, I will still catch you this side of Luxor. Signed, Olarud—Magus, Warlord.”

Desmanda blanched. “Raydan, I did send a message, hoping to reach any among the warhost who might still be loyal. But I made certain to mention that we were heading east, in keeping with your deception, in case the message was intercepted. And”--she paused, frowning--“you haven’t even mentioned Luxor. Not to me, at least.”

Raydan rerolled the scroll and tapped it against his leg. As secretive as Desmanda remained concerning the Atlantis Guild, still walking her fine line of loyalties, what she had just said told him something new—assuming she had sent the message as mage-writ. Raydan had never considered the possibility that a mage-writ scroll could be intercepted.

Maleficus saved him from having to answer her immediately. “As there seems to be little trust lost between you, no doubt this magus assumed you would lie to him,” he pointed out. “You would not go south, where the Empire is stronger. Nujarek is well-established in the east, which would therefore be hostile to you. North was the only option left.”

“And Luxor?” Raydan asked.

“On the northern road, Luxor is the first grand landmark. It is also highly defensible. When the Necropolis Sect abandoned Atlantis, they too paused at Luxor on their way to the Three Fingers.”

Raydan frowned. "You might have mentioned this before. If it is so obvious, Nujarek will fall on us all the faster."

"I did not say it was obvious. My chain of reasoning relies on the fact that Olarud expected you to lie to him. Nujarek will not proceed from that assumption, as you never communicated with him directly on the eastward diversion. The only question remaining is whether this magus communicated his suspicions to Atlantis."

Had Olarud sold Raydan out before the Orc Shaman had had the opportunity to do the same? It was not a contest to place a high wager on, but Raydan would be risking lives on the result.

A shouted warning from ahead sent all hands to the hilts of weapons. A league from their next campsite, soldiers' nerves were beginning to fray. Wyst and Lager relayed the news back to Raydan Marz. A lone trapper had startled the Elf, but the man was unarmed and had moved willingly to one side of the road to make way for Raydan's forces. It wasn't the first traveler to spook the fleeing warhost, and it most likely would not be the last.

"His message is extremely neutral," Raydan said, returning to their former topic. "I am inclined to interpret it as showing hostile intent, though it might also serve as a tentative offer of support."

The historian nodded. "He reserves deniability either way."

The trapper could be seen now, crouched off to the side of the hard-packed road, waiting. He wore simple furs only slightly better kept than his bushy black beard. The man likely attended a nearby trapping line and had been caught walking back toward his campsite. He waited patiently, though he directed a hard glare at the Troll who loped forward to catch up with the Elves.

"Or," the warlord said, "Olarud is craftier than even I give him credit for and simply hasn't decided. Ultimately, he will do what is best for him."

Desmanda nodded in agreement. "And," she added, "we have to assume that Nujarek, one way or another, is moving north after us. I find it difficult to believe—"

What she found difficult to believe, Raydan never learned. A warning shout swung him around in the saddle, as he kned his horse toward the front of the short column. Fired shots warned him of the urgency as either the Khamsin or Dwarven mercenaries launched their first volley. But Raydan was brought up short as Carson Blane and Keravan wheeled back against him, using short, claw-like devices to draw against their crossbows. Raydan's horse neighed and shied to one side. Before he could calm his mount, the two crossbowmen had set bolts and fired. The bowstrings sang, and Raydan twisted his head to the right, following the quarrels as they struck the previously docile trapper.

The large man had picked himself up out of his crouch and sprang as Raydan's team rode past. He staggered as the first bolt took him in the side, but even as the second quarrel stabbed into his arm the man began to change. To shift. Dark, coarse hair sprouted from the muscled body that burst through the crudely sewn pelts. Fingers split and bled as claws emerged from their ends. With that melting-wax change Raydan knew so well, the bearlike shapeshifter threw off its human form and charged forward with lightning speed.

His horse bucked away from the werereature, ignoring Raydan's savage pull on the reins. The warlord could do little but tighten his knees around the animal's barrel and reach for his sword, knowing he would not be fast enough. At the last second Raydan leaned away from the attack. The powerful claw caught the horse's neck instead, ripping through the flesh with a spray of warm blood before taking Raydan in the shoulder and hurling him from the saddle.

Raydan struck the ground with bone-numbing force, his breath forced between clenched teeth and his shoulder on fire. He had lost his manaclevt in the fall. A metal-shod foot slammed into the ground near his head as the horse bucked one last time and then collapsed in a heap of twitching legs and blood-soaked hair. Its agonized screams tore at the air while Raydan fought to recover his breath. To sit up. To squint into the face of the furious creature as it lumbered forward. The Werebear raised its clawed hand for another swipe, roared its challenge through powerful jaws ...

And fell upon him.

Chapter 12: Stopgap

Shouts and shots from farther up the road echoed in Raydan's ears, warning him that his new warhost was under serious attack. But his eyes were only for the lumbering, bearlike monster that had reared up on its hind legs and now fell down toward him with one mighty paw raised, ready to cave in the warlord's skull. In a moment of frozen clarity Raydan knew he would remember the Mage Spawn's sweat-tinged musk, yellowed teeth and foul, carrion-laden breath for the rest of his life.

Which he accepted would only last another few seconds.

A challenging bellow, full and sonorous like the trumpet of a hunting horn, answered the werebear's gravelly roar, and a large, dark mass slammed into the creature's side an instant before it could smash the life from Raydan Marz.

Lager, the Troll warrior, had doubled back just in time to intercept the creature. The two were of a size and strength, and they went tumbling off to the side in a fury of hammering fists and slashing claws.

Raydan climbed to unsteady feet, walked painfully toward his dying mount, and retrieved his manaclevt from where it had fallen. Keravan and Carson Blane had dismounted, trying to get another shot at the creature without hitting the Troll.

He waved them toward the larger chaos. "Go," he said. "Get up there." Altem Jannus was hurrying his squad up from rearguard. His crew would help Lager deal with the Mage Spawn. The warlord staggered along behind his men, gaining new strength with each step despite the pain in his shoulder.

Desmanda rode next to him, a halo of power already burning in the air around her. Her green eyes flashed a dangerous blue as she glanced back toward Lager and the werebear, launching a mental attack to aid the Troll in his battle. Then they were past the large supply wagon where Arik cowered, a dagger held ready to throw should he ever get the chance and the nerve. A skirmish line had formed near the buckboard and fanned out to either side while the recently acquired Khamsin Fusers crouched behind the wheels, reloading. It was the first time Raydan had noticed the thin metal skirting set between the spokes, forming something like a shield. The older veteran finished first, rolled out to the side, fired from his prone position, and rolled back to cover. His son did the same not two seconds later.

Raydan absorbed the battle with finely tuned instincts. He saw Wyst on the ground, alive but bleeding from a head wound. A trio of fully armored Altems protected a demi-magus, the team advancing on Raydan's battle line of Dwarven mercenaries and the Khamsin Freelancers. Altem Taberska was trying to edge in closer to offer support, but at the moment he was hard-pressed to hold out against the advance of an Amotep squad throwing fire and lightning into his path. The Elven Rangers had abandoned their bows for crystal swords, the beautiful weapons striking with blurred speed as the two held off twice their number in Utem blades.

It was there Raydan first lent his strength, leading his two crossbowmen forward to relieve the archers. More enemy troops moved forward from around a bend in the road, and he needed the arrows to hold them back. Desmanda kicked free of her saddle and joined him in

the melee, a lethal piece of her magic glowing at the head of each crossbow quarrel. Given his reinforcements, the Rangers managed to break away from their opponents, and two bowstrings sang. Two Utem Guardsmen screamed, each pinned through the gut by eight inches of steel and wood.

Raydan dispatched them quickly, his mana-charged sword a golden blur in the air. He stabbed at another man, blade flat to the ground so it would not become lodged between the ribs. The tip punched through leather armor and flesh, emerging with a bloody froth that told of a punctured lung. The Rangers finished the two Utems quickly, and he turned toward some uprushing Brass Golems.

He had seconds only to catch his breath. He would need them. Raydan's picture of the battle was growing ever clearer, and his warhost was in trouble. His Orcs had swarmed a Steam Golem. One held on for dear life to the machine's bladelike right arm. Another had plunged his mace into the barrel of the golem's cannon, fouling the mechanism. But one instant of inattention and the heavy mechanism would crush the life from them. Above, Raydan's soaring gunners held back a pair of Ki Devils in a dark, dangerous aerial dance. Their Lightning Pistols cast out thunderclaps and spat argent fire. A strike smashed into one of the Ki Devils, battering it back as tiny arcs of energy danced between the black beast's wingtips. The creature shook it off and came back for more.

And now, at the road's bend, Raydan saw his opposite number moving forward under heavy guard. Not Olarud—he would have recognized the attackers long before now if it had been his old warhost—but a Guild magus nonetheless. Long, iron-gray hair fell over a wide leather mantle tooled with runes. The golden sheen of his robes made him an instant target—and an instant terror.

“Raydan!” Desmanda shouted over the din of combat, her voice almost lost among the volleys of Fusers and Freelancers. She pointed at the magus. “That’s Magus Danuub! The other--”

He had no time to listen to her now. One of the Brass Golems had gained a slight lead over its companion machine, and Raydan beckoned Carson Blane and Desmanda to assist him in capturing it. Her magical attack shook the golem, stressing its internal gears and draining its magestone power source. Then he leaped in at Blane's side, both of them hammering at the upper shoulders of the squat, powerful machine. It was risky, he knew, but with enough damage delivered rapidly, Brass Golems had an annoying tendency to “go dumb”—their simple machine-minds forgetting all past orders and putting themselves under the control of the next person to give a command.

This time it worked—the machine stumbled to a halt, one metal-clad fist only inches away from Raydan's side. Blane took control of it, and the warlord considered trying a similar tactic with its companion machine. But his Dwarven Berserkers had already fallen on it with their axes to devastating, dismembering effect.

“You were saying?” the warlord asked Desmanda, shaking his head to clear a momentary dizziness. His shoulder still bled freely, and it was weakening him. A heavy whiff of acrid gunpowder smoke drifted up to him and helped clear his head.

“I know the other man too.” Desmanda pointed a slender finger toward a robed demi-magus, secure within a squad of Altems. “That’s Jessard--Magus Danuub’s son!”

Leverage. Given a proper fulcrum, you could move boulders from a mountainside, fallen trees from a road—and, just maybe, the fanatical belief of a magus.

“Vardon!” Raydan's shout spun the grizzled veteran about, his Fuser held ready. Now was time for the man to prove his loyalties. “Bring me that man”—Raydan indicated the demi-magus with the point of his manaclevt--“alive!” Taberska ... no, too far away. “Arik, get up here!” Timid though he might be, when the thief moved, he moved quickly. Vardon was just beginning to start forward, bringing the warhost's three other Khamsin natives with him,

when Arik arrived at Raydan's side. "Orders to Taberska. At any cost, assist Vardon in bringing me that demi-magus. Go!"

The picklock sprinted away as Altem Jannus appeared with his three Utems in tow. Raydan formed around him a formidable wall of leather and steel and advanced toward Magus Danuub. Twice his number waited to receive him, while another fresh squad ran to support Danuub's Amotep forces, still being pressed by Taberska. Vardon had closed half the distance to the magus before he was pinned down under the withering fire of Altem Lightning Pistols.

Still, the battle was not all going against Raydan. The Orcs continued to hammer at the Steam Golem, trying to find critical weakness in the machine's thick armor.

The golem's bladed arm ran through the Orc that had earlier restrained it, lifting him off the ground like an insect impaled by a pin. But another of the Slashers had scaled the back of the metal monster and now sat astride the steam stack with his thick-muscled legs clamped around the hot metal, raining blows down on the golem's head and shoulders.

A moment later, the mighty machine stumbled to its knees, and the Orcs piled on to wrestle its bulk to the ground.

Raydan swung out from his line just far enough to reclaim his standard from the fallen Wyst. The Elf was dazed but alive, and Raydan left him to recover his wits where he lay. "If we get close enough, Desmanda, you will levitate Jannus and then me over Danuub's guard," he said. She nodded her understanding.

But it was a charge stillborn, as the warhost of Magus Danuub faltered and then fell back. Raydan couldn't see the cause at first, looking for a point where his people had made some significant breakthrough. The Steam Golem was a hard loss but not ruining. Vardon's squad was at close quarters with Jessard's protecting Altems, but Taberska had never made it past the Amotep forces.

Although it soon became clear that someone had. Jessard emerged stiffly from behind his protective line, his flowing robes nearly hiding the thin figure standing guard behind him. The Altems looked ready to leap to his rescue, but the demi-magus waved them back—it was too easy to get killed in a melee like that. A thin dagger protruded from his right shoulder, crimson robes stained dark with blood. He did not draw it out but kept his other hand pressed around the blade to stanch the flow.

Jessard reluctantly approached Raydan Marz. "You wanted to speak with me?" the man asked, voice tight with pain and anger.

Arik grinned from behind the demi-magus, where he had another dagger pressed at the base of Jessard's skull. "You did say any cost," he said dryly, his hazel eyes alight with fear and adrenalin. "What's a slightly damaged demi-magus worth these days?"

Raydan glanced from the scrawny thief to Magus Danuub, who waited in impotent frustration to see how Raydan would treat his captured son. "Right now, Arik, I'd say he's worth his weight in magestone." The thief grinned again and handed the prisoner over to Altem Jannus. "Come on," Raydan said to Desmanda, waving Maleficus forward.

"Let's see what kind of bargain we can strike."

Chapter 13: Congregation

Maleficus. Decided to climb out from under the wagon?
Each to his own skills; I offer help where I can. Is there a plan I should know about?
Trade Magus Danuub his son for safe passage to Luxor.

Can he guarantee that? There is an old merchant-prince saying: “You cannot buy what is not for sale.”

Interesting. Did the merchant-princes have guns backing their offer?

You are a most difficult man to advise, Raydan Marz.

* * *

Weakening screams from the gut-slashed Orc trailed after Raydan Marz as he led a small delegation forward to parley with Magus Danuub. He checked that his Khamsin medic was moving to help the fallen warrior, not that he expected miracles. The Orc was mortally wounded, judging by the blood frothing up on his lips. Nothing short of magic was likely to save him.

Still, the Slasher looked to be the warhost’s only loss. Lager staggered up, bloodied and torn from his brawl with the werebear, but alive. Wyst would recover, and Raydan’s two wounded Utems were already sitting up. Danuub’s people had fared much worse. They were taking advantage of the lull to recover their own wounded, and at a glance Raydan could spot three dead.

Jessard was left under guard twenty paces back from the place where Raydan, Desmanda and Maleficus met with Danuub’s small party. The elder magus glanced past the renegade warlord to his son, taking stock of Jessard’s wounds, and then focused solely on the bargaining. His brown eyes bored through Raydan—this was a man firmly in touch with his own power. He looked to have the same conceit as Magus Olarud, but not the same arrogance.

“Raydan Marz,” he greeted the renegade, his tone neutral. “You have something that belongs to me. Return Demi-Magus Jessard at once, and I will show leniency.”

“Arik,” Raydan called back to the picklock, “if you so much as see a weapon pointed in our direction, you are to slit Jessard’s throat at once.” The older man paled slightly at this threat. “Does this solve the issue of who holds the stronger hand, Magus Danuub?” he asked his enemy. “If you want to play games with your son’s life, that is your decision.”

Admitting that he knew the family connection was the shortest way to end Danuub’s posturing. The magus nodded, conceding the point. “What do you want?”

“Safe passage to Luxor.” The dying Orc managed another weak cry, though his strength was fading fast. Maleficus pointed at Danuub’s Wylden priestess, and Raydan nodded. “And your healer, to save the life of my warrior.”

Danuub hesitated, considering the offer, and then replied, “Luxor is beyond your reach, Raydan. Even if I stepped aside, there is no guarantee of safe passage. My Ki Devils report at least one other warhost between you and Luxor, not an hour behind us.”

With that news, Raydan knew his run for the safety of the ancient citadel had been stopped cold. However, it also revealed Danuub’s personal honor. He could have traded Raydan “safe passage” and then stood aside while the renegade warlord trapped himself between two warhosts. He didn’t. It wasn’t much to grab on to, but a drowning man could put his faith in spider-spun silk if it meant the difference between life and a watery grave.

“What about your healer?” Desmanda asked again.

“You cost me the lives of three good men of the Empire,” Danuub said, his voice suddenly hard. “I should let the Orc die.” Another low wail. “If you return my Steam Golem,” he said, “I will send my healer over to save your man. Decide quickly--I think he has only a few moments left to him.”

“The life of one Orc against a Steam Golem? Not likely.” Raydan was bluffing, but he had to press Danuub as hard as he could. If the news of a second warhost was true, Raydan would

need every advantage he could conjure up. “You will order your healer to take care of my wounded now, and I will return the Brass Golem we captured. That is the best offer you will get from me, Magus Danuub.”

“You are a cold man, Raydan Marz.”

“Jeet Nujarek has given me little choice in the matter.”

Danuub considered for less than a handful of heartbeats and then sent his priestess to the dying Orc. “She will also heal my son, before attending to your less critically wounded,” he insisted.

Raydan nodded. “Of course.” He thought a moment and then decided to gamble. “If I were to guarantee the life of your son, Danuub, promising to release him at the gates of Luxor ...”

“Would I serve as your vanguard?” the magus finished for him. “Distract or somehow divert the warhost trailing after you?” He shook his head, his long, iron-gray hair brushing his shoulders. “No. I cannot endorse a traitor, no matter the cost to me personally. The other warhost would not listen to me regardless. You cannot make Luxor, Raydan Marz. Trust me on that.”

Strangely, Raydan did. There was a solid bearing in the other warlord, the kind of steel spine that like-minded men recognized. “I will pull back and attend to my host,” he finally said. “If you do not come against us, we will give you time to bury your dead and see to your own wounded. After that, we can meet again.”

Danuub checked the sun, which was still several hours short of the horizon. He nodded assent. “But if we do not strike an arrangement by sundown, I may have to come for you despite any personal losses I may suffer,” he warned.

“So be it,” Raydan agreed. “I hope that by then you will have reconsidered my offer. It is the only bargain I am willing to make, and there is an old merchant-prince saying: You cannot sell what I am not willing to buy.” Raydan turned on his heel, collecting Maleficus and Desmanda in his wake, and led them back toward his warhost.

“The merchant-princes never said that,” Maleficus said under his breath.

“I’m beginning to think there are many things the merchant-princes never said,” Raydan shot back. Hurt, Maleficus moved off to help Arik herd Jessard back to the waiting troops. Desmanda waited until all were out of earshot. “There is something else going on that we’re missing,” she said. “I believe Danuub when he says he will come for us despite our holding his son.”

He nodded. “I believe him as well.”

“Then what are we to do?”

“We’re not fighting, are we?” Raydan asked. “That’s already a positive concession. The more time we can buy, the more options we have.” He looked at the sun himself and gauged that dusk would fall in four hours. “We shall see what the next few hours brings.”

* * *

Three hours brought Magus Olarud, an Elven friend, and the answer to a mystery.

Four hours would bring despair.

Olarud and a single honor guard rode through Danuub’s lines while Raydan oversaw the reactivation of the Steam Golem. Several pistons rattled and clanged alarmingly, but the Golem stood easily enough. Raydan’s Orcs jumped around wildly, each pointing out a dent or gap in the armor that was his part in bringing it down the first time. The Slasher who had

been stabbed through the belly, though, remained a safe distance from the Golem's deadly blade.

Vardon wiped oil and grime from his hands onto his leggings. "Been awhile since I hadda tear into one of those." The Khamsin veteran shrugged off Raydan's thanks. "Took my 'thanks' from the belt pouches of them two Utems ya chopped. So I owed ya."

Raydan forced down his disgust at the Khamsin native's mercenary habits. Most of his interest was centered instead on the new leader of his old warhost, the magus waving his Elven escort to a halt and riding up alone. "That will be all, Vardon," Raydan said dismissively.

Olarud didn't wait for the grizzled veteran to remove himself from earshot. He reined in hard, the horse scattering clods of earth with its hooves. "You were always one to trust unconventional troops, Raydan, but this is surprising," he said with no pretense of courtesy. "I count—what?—twelve Empire-trained men in your entire command?"

"Good evening to you as well, Magus Olarud," Raydan said as he folded his arms across his chest. "And it is thirteen, at last count."

"Is your total going up or down?" Olarud asked. He remained in the saddle, no doubt enjoying his advantage in height. The magus's mantled robes gave him some illusion of size, but he was a good head shorter than Marz on foot. His dark hair and swarthy complexion showed that he was of good southern stock, though, which was always an asset in the Empire.

Desmanda and Carson Blane walked over to back up their warlord, Maleficus trailing after. "So you are heading the second warhost we were told of?" Desmanda asked. "The one riding down on us from the north?"

"What's left of it," Olarud admitted, shifting uneasily for the first time under Raydan's gaze. "Your arrest did not sit well with several of your older warriors. I managed to hold them together for a time, but it was like sitting on a Rebel powder keg. Desmanda's mage-writ letter touched off the fuse."

"And you came out on top," Raydan said, hardly bothering to wait for the magus's nod of confirmation. "So you decided to drag what was left of the warhost over here to have it out with me once and for all time."

"In a manner of speaking," Olarud said, "though if I didn't know better, I'd say this was a poor reception. Not worried about your position again, are you, Raydan?" He sat casually in his saddle, obviously enjoying the look of confusion that crossed three of the four nearby faces at his last statement. "You look like the intelligent sort," Olarud said, nodding to Maleficus. "For one not trained by the Guild, anyway. Perhaps you should assist Warlord Marz with the blindingly obvious."

Smiling thinly at the back-handed compliments, Maleficus said simply, "He fought for you, Raydan Marz. Not against you. The demi-magus is here to help."

"Magus!" Olarud corrected, snapping his title out like the crack of a bullwhip.

"So sorry." Maleficus bowed with exaggerated respect. "No doubt a part of the Guild training I am lacking."

No dullard, Raydan leapt for the throat of the conversation. "You are here to support me?" His doubt colored his voice.

Olarud shook his head in exasperation. "I've come a long way to find you, Raydan. To help."

"Why? Why choose me?"

“Because for all your faults and low birth, for all your lack of any discernible magical talent and Guild sympathies, you are one thing that Jeet Nujarek will never be.” He lifted his chin, staring haughtily down his thin nose. “Loyal to the empire first and yourself second.”

“And Nujarek tried to have you arrested,” Maleficus stated with certainty.

“That too.”

And that explained it: he was here because, like Raydan, he’d been given little choice in the matter. Raydan gazed back at the nearby lines of Magus Danuub’s warhost, the barrier that stood between him and the north. “Did you tell Magus Danuub why you are here?”

The other man snorted. “Do you think he would have let me through if I had?”

“Maybe,” Raydan said, rubbing at his jaw.

That elicited a raised eyebrow from the magus. “You find a way to make the most interesting ... friends.” He spat the word out as if it left a bad taste in his mouth. “Look, whatever your plan is, I’ll support it. I don’t make that promise lightly, Raydan.”

Suddenly a thought seemed to strike him and he looked askance at the warlord. “If you were not certain of my ultimate loyalties, why did you send your scout to bring me in?” he asked.

The question diverted Raydan’s racing thoughts. “My scout?”

“The Elf. The one with the fire arrow.” Olarud looked at their puzzled faces. “He’s not yours?” He pointed back at his escort. “I saw a flaming arrow drifting in the sky this morning, and followed it to him. He’s the one who brought me to you, or I might have continued north toward Luxor.”

Raydan had barely given the Elf a passing glance earlier. Now he looked the man over carefully. Cleaned up, his hair washed and pulled back by a silver chain, the Elf was almost unrecognizable. But there was no mistaking the violet eyes and the calm gaze: their friend from the Atlantis prisons had obviously found what he had been looking for. His armor and horse were of the finest quality, in keeping with his regal bearing. This was no Wylden native; he had to be one of the mysterious Rivvenheim Elves. Even as Raydan watched, the Elf fitted a strange fire arrow into his horn-reinforced bow. A whispered word, and the tip of the arrow burst magically into flame, white and blinding but giving off no heat. Raydan saw a small packet of cloth tied to the back of the shaft. The Elf sighted into the air, drew and fired.

The bright arrow streaked up into the fading sky, a white blur against the dusky blue. The cloth unraveled to trail behind it on gossamer strings and then spread into a small, cupped canopy that caught the air, stopping the arrow in midflight. The glowing head swung beneath the canopy as it slowly drifted back toward the ground. Several of Raydan’s warriors exclaimed at the sight of their nighttime mystery revealed. A moment later, over their excited talk, a whistling scream in the distance answered the signal flare. The Elf nodded once, decisively.

Olarud was as taken aback as the others. “All ... right ...” he said slowly. He looked back at Raydan. “So he’s not yours, and this isn’t the meeting place you picked out for us. Can someone tell me what this is about, then?”

Raydan gave the mysterious Elf a nod of respect, so deep it was almost a bow. “Right now it’s about bringing enough pressure to bear against Danuub so we can pass through to Luxor,” he answered Olarud. “With whomever you can bring in, you and our Elven friend, we might force our way past.”

“That’s your plan?” Olarud asked incredulously. “What in the infernal regions have I gotten myself into with you, Raydan Marz? We can’t make Luxor. It’s too late for that.”

“Danuub said much the same thing,” Maleficus said slowly. “Did he tell you why?”

The magus nodded, finally swinging down out of his saddle, and walked a few paces past Raydan, scanning not the setting sun but the far southern horizon. “Jeet Nujarek,” he said. “He’s brought a floating fortress out of Atlantis, and he’ll be here by dusk. Danuub’s orders were to delay you in any way possible so that Nujarek could find us. We could ride hard the entire night, Marz, and it wouldn’t matter.” Olarud turned back to Raydan, his face revealing nothing of his feelings.

“Nujarek would catch us all before morning.”

Chapter 14: Lines in the Sand

Magus Olarud. Are you my new escort?

I have been asked to convey a message to you, Maleficus. An offer of pardon from Jeet Nujarek.

The wondrous benefit of mage-writ scrolls. Nujarek is barely above the horizon, and already he seeks to divide us. Since you show no caution in the telling, I assume you have already passed the word to Raydan Marz?

I have. And to Desmanda. I saw no harm in honoring the various peace offerings.

Of course not. You serve your master well, Magus Olarud.

I am not Raydan’s lapdog!

Who said anything about Raydan?

* * *

With gray stone walls protecting warriors and machines within, Nujarek’s fortress hung over the field in defiance of natural laws. The Land’s pull sloughed off from the floating castle while the push of the wind whistled around crenellated ramparts in futile argument. Magestone and the will of man kept it aloft, stretching a forbidding shadow over Raydan’s lines as the sun sank behind it.

“No scalding sand?” Vardon asked, the Khamsin veteran eyeing Nujarek’s stronghold with nervous unease. “No Macedon fire?” He did not sound disappointed.

Raydan shook his head, though hardly with the same feeling of relief. “Nujarek doesn’t want to force us into an early fight with Danuub for the same reason he would never honor any terms of pardon. He wants us bottled up right here, where he can personally destroy me.”

The only relieving fact weighing in on his side so far was that Nujarek had been forced to bring one of the smaller, fast-flying strongholds to catch up with him, and not one of the Empire’s leviathans. Soaring gunners swept about the flying castle on gossamer wings, their bronze bodies gleaming cruelly under the lowering sun. A techun, one of the rare stormwind golems, flew out to gather in all flying machines into formation, holding just over the fortress. Then—slowly, majestically—the stronghold settled to earth on the western edge of the fields. A good position, the renegade warlord noted with dismay. Rising foothills behind, where Guild troops could move in secret to flank his force. Good level ground out in front, to make a direct assault costly. Raydan quickly discarded his plans to strike early, before Nujarek’s host assembled. The blood price would run too high.

Olarud came to that same conclusion. “I will tell my people to stand fast,” he said. “Wait for them to come to us.” He moved off to where his own host had been joined to Raydan’s southern flank.

Everyone watched him go. The violet-eyed elf of the Knights Immortal nodded agreement though his face showed less enthusiasm for waiting out Nujarek’s army. With a quick glance

to Raydan, and a determined nod of support, he turned for the northern stretch where his own forces remained partially cloaked by the shadows of nearby forest.

It was not lost on Raydan that the High Elf could fade his people back into the forest from which they'd come. "What will he do?" the warlord asked Maleficus, looking after the elf. His other lieutenants craned in to listen.

Maleficus shrugged. "Whatever it is, I expect that it will not please Nujarek in the least. Trust your people, Raydan Marz. They have come a long way with you."

Raydan knew good advice when he heard it. He nodded to each of his nearby officers, counting among them almost every major faction of the Land. Desmanda and Altem Jannus for Atlantis itself. Lager, off the Wylden Plateau, and Vardon who had effectively taken over the warhost's growing contingent of black powder rebels. Only the orcs remained apart from this small command council, fighting amongst themselves for the right to lead their squad when the fighting started.

"Get our soaring gunners into the air," he ordered Jannus. "Find out what Nujarek is deploying on the backside of that stronghold. Tell them to avoid the techun until fighting starts, but they are to attack it immediately after."

Jannus did not question the order. Desmanda, though, stepped forward with a hand on Raydan's arm as he turned for the backfield. He could almost feel her warmth through his armor—the power she constantly reigned in as part of her discipline. "You will not get a different answer from him," she said softly, looking back toward Magus Danuub's lines. The small warhost still held the road north, drawn up in defensive lines and ready to be the anvil to Nujarek's hammer. Danuub currently argued with a demi-magus of Nujarek's, finally sending him off to mount behind a soaring crossbowman and be flown back to the settled keep.

"I don't expect to," Raydan admitted. "But I have to try."

Desmanda let her hand drop away and Raydan walked the short distance back to Magus Danuub's lines. Two altem guardsmen fell in at either shoulder, ready to protect their commander. Raydan was glad for their presence as he approached Danuub's hostile lines. The slope of the land was all in Danuub's favor, forcing anyone who came at the magus to fight on a light uphill grade. And if Danuub decided to slam his host into Raydan's back, he would own every advantage but one. Raydan glanced to the side, where Arik and two dwarven berserkers continued to safeguard Danuub's son; Arik with a dagger at Jessard's throat. Only this living shield protected Raydan from such treachery, and that would last only so long, he knew.

"Close enough, Raydan Marz." Danuub stopped Raydan a dozen paces short of his own guards. "You have no friends here."

Raydan shrugged, the weight of his armor heavy on his shoulders. As usual he eschewed an altem's normal helm, preferring to fight—and parley—face to face. "I'm not looking for a friend," he said, "only justice. Withdraw your people from the field, Magus Danuub. Let this remain between Nujarek and myself."

A glance at the nearby stronghold. The main doors cracked open and the first armored warriors were spilling out into the fortress's long shadow; utem guardsmen and crossbowmen, taking up covering positions for those who came after. Danuub shook his head. "That I cannot do."

"You do not believe in Nujarek's claim to the throne." Raydan knew this, even without the other man admitting it. If he were one of the Lord Protector's creatures, Danuub would not be so troubled by the fine line Raydan forced him to walk. "Why do you insist on standing against me?"

“For the empire!” Danuub’s response was hot and pained. “That is reason enough.”

One which Raydan himself would have voiced not so long ago. “I would have said much the same thing, once. Before Nujarek pressed a claim for the empire. He sits at the heart of Atlantis, Danuub, like a flesh-eating infection that turns black everything healthy he touches. He has corrupted the most-high in the person of Prophet-Magus Osiris. He offers me amnesty if I would betray Prieska, then turns Warlord Russo instead when I say no.” Raydan spat to one side, the taste of his words raw and bitter. “Nujarek will stop at no boundary to consolidate power into his own hands.”

Arguments he had given Danuub before. And the other warlord’s answer was still the same. “You have proof of this?”

“Only my word of what I witnessed with my own eyes and ears. And the testament of events. Look at how Nujarek had risen to power, Danuub. What does your heart tell you?”

“It tells me that I do not know enough.” The magus glanced once to Jessard. “I do not wish to fight you, Raydan, but I will if you try to force your way past me.”

“I do not want to destroy your son, Danuub. But I will, in the end, if it buys even one of my people a chance at escape.”

With the position of each warlord bluntly spoken, there was obviously no room for compromise. Not now. Danuub took up his own standard, the inter-linked circles of red and gold, and marched forward to drive the sharpened end of the pole into the earth right in front of Raydan. “Here is the line, Raydan Marz. Pass this, and I will have to attack. Until then you will have no fear of my warhost.” He looked out at the forming warhost of Jeet Nujarek. “You have chosen a good battlefield. I’m sorry that it cannot be enough.”

“It will have to do,” Raydan said, then turned for his own lines. Once again the escorting altem guardsmen hurried to ward his back.

Stalking down the light slope, Raydan looked out over the forming battlefield and saw that Danuub had the right of it; that despite the additions of Olarud and the Knight Immortal allies, his host would be overmatched. A great number of the troops facing him were of low quality; utem warriors bearing crossbows or simple swords, brass golems, pikemen—as if the Lord Protector had emptied out a few standing garrisons in forming this host. Still, Nujarek had brought along impressive reserves, filling the floating stronghold with quantity if not quality. And his specialists were yet to show themselves. Raydan could only guess how many magii the Lord Protector had convinced to support this chase, how many storm golems or other war machines he had powered up with magestone.

A question which was answered in short order.

The first metallic roar that bellowed from within the stronghold’s protected courtyard stopped Raydan in his tracks, hand reaching for sword, gaze darting about as if expecting a hundred Atlantean blade golems to come charging for his battle line. Then the second thunderous call echoed over the cleared land, tailing off in a screech of rubbing, unoiled metal, and Raydan knew what it was he would face this day.

Magic threw open wide the massive gates of Nujarek’s fortress as if they were saloon doors, swinging out noiselessly so that half a dozen chariots could storm forth in a brutal line. Each carried a driver and a Guild magus, except for Nujarek’s own chariot which carried only Atlantis’ Lord Protector into battle. Two storm golems followed, pacing forward on huge mechanical strides, flanking a trio of Necropolis Sect cavalry led by an Ulric charger warded in his bloodmetal armor. Dark creatures took to wing as a fist of feral bloodsuckers paced along one side of the cavalry. This addition of Sect forces would have been enough of a stunning blow to Raydan Marz and his people, shocking them even during a time when they had already thought Jeet Nujarek a dangerous and morally bankrupt leader. Would that the unearthly roar had come from some Sect creature, though.

Raydan stared past the chariot line and Sect forces where, behind them all and rearing nearly three stories high, with a carapace of gold-polished bronze, waited a monster of his worst nightmare. With a wide body hovering a man's height over the stronghold courtyard, ringed around the front with sharp, claw-like strikers that pawed the air as if in search for its first victims, the mechanical beast swiveled its dragon-kin head on an articulated neck and let forth another fire-bellied shriek. Then it began to glide forward, leading the second wave of attackers out of the stronghold, filling the gates even as it filled Raydan Marz with cold, stifling dread.

Jeet Nujarek had brought with him an Atlantean war tank!