



The WIZARD'S

The
Ergoth Trilogy
volume two

Fate

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Soldiers and Diplomats



aising a tin cup to his lips, Tol of Juramona took a sip. The water was warm and brackish, but it cut the thick coating of dust from his throat. He spat, noting it was tinged with red.

“Are you well, my lord?” asked his comrade, Darpo.

“Well enough.”

Tol had taken a hard knock from an enemy horseman. The blow had left his jaw black and blue and loosened a couple of teeth. The plainsman who landed the blow was with the gods now. Tol had separated his head from his shoulders.

During this brief lull in the battle, Tol and his men had ridden into a shallow draw to down bread and water. Wine would have been more welcome, but after ten years on campaign, wine was in short supply.

Tol removed his helmet. Beneath the heavy iron pot his long brown hair was soaked with sweat. He untied the thong at the back of his neck, letting the breeze blow through his hair. The wind off the bay was cool—too cool. Winter was coming, and life in the open on the Tarsan coast would soon be even more difficult.

Through the swirling dust, Tol spied a rider galloping toward them. His company drew swords and interposed themselves between their commander and the approaching stranger. When they saw he wore Ergothian trappings, the warriors relaxed.

“Dispatch coming,” Frez announced. A spearman of great

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repute, Frez was one of Tol's companions from the early days in Juramona.

When Tol first came to that provincial town as a mere boy, twenty years before, Frez and his fellow foot soldiers had been in the pay of the Marshal of the Eastern Hundred. Since then, they'd all come far, in station and location. Tol, the farmer's son, was now Lord Tolandruth, Champion of the Empire; Frez and Darpo were his chief lieutenants.

The young dispatch rider hauled his mount to a skidding stop. "Message from Lord Regobart!" he cried, voice cracking.

Tol dismounted and made his way to the rider, parting his men's horses with easy shoves. Not a big man, he was compact and very strong. Taking the dispatch from the messenger, he saw the youth's hands were shaking.

"Nervous, boy?" he asked, not unkindly.

"The enemy has sortied, sir!" The messenger's fist spasmed, drawing the reins tighter and causing his sweat-streaked horse to prance in a half-circle. "They mean to break Lord Regobart's position!"

Tol studied the missive. His reading skills had improved over the years, but the abbreviated script used by Regobart's scribe was hard to decipher. Frowning, he held the square of parchment up to Frez and Darpo.

"Does that say twenty thousand, or thirty?"

Frez, less literate than his commander, merely shrugged. Darpo, a well-traveled former sailor, pushed blond hair from his face and peered at the writing. "Thirty thousand," he said firmly.

Tol's face split in a fierce grin. "They've come out at last!" he said, spirit rising in his voice. "Anovenax has committed the garrison—the Tarsans have come out!"

He strode back to his horse and leaped into the saddle. "To your positions, men! At last we can carry out the plan!"

By the dispatch rider Tol sent message to Lord Regobart to hold on. Tol and his men were coming hard and fast.

Before departing the young warrior bared his dagger in formal salute. "My lord! I have long prayed to Corij for this day!"

"So have we all, son."

Tol's retinue broke up, each man riding out to resume command of his horde of one thousand men. Only Frez remained close by his commander's side. The two of them rode down the ravine, toward the battlefield where eighty thousand warriors and sixty thousand horses had churned, screamed, fought, and died.

The Imperial Army of Ergoth had battled its way to the very gates of Tarsis. Behind its thick white walls, the city's thousand spires gleamed, despite the haze of dust drifting overhead. Beyond the spires lay the Bay of Tarsis, dotted with numerous ships of the Tarsan fleet. The normally placid blue water of the bay was dotted with whitecaps. A strong offshore wind churned the water and kept the great galleys, crowded with highly paid Tarsan marines, from reaching land.

Tol squinted against the sunlight. Three, perhaps four, hours of daylight remained. The battle must be concluded before sunset or their great gamble would fail.

He and Frez guided their mounts to the ridge above the ravine. On their right, battle raged between Lord Regobart's thirty hordes and the city's army. The Tarsan commander, Admiral Anovenax, was bold and brave but not much of a tactician—very like his opponent, Regobart. The admiral had marched forth from the city with his entire garrison thinking to smash the Ergothian army and enable the Tarsan fleet to dock. With the Tarsan forces thus united, the imperial hordes would be outnumbered and cut in two. All that would be left to them was ignominious retreat.

However, the admiral's plan had not brought him the swift victory he'd expected. Foiling his triumph were the inhabitants of a cluster of tents set up on the rolling dunes two leagues from the city. There, priests employed by the empire worked the powerful and prolonged wind spell that held the Tarsan fleet at bay. Twice the Tarsans had tried to destroy the clerics; first, in a night raid that failed, and then with magic of their own. Their hired magicians had called forth a flock of fire-ravens, living birds made of flame. Imperial spellcasters countered with torrential rain, and the fire-ravens were extinguished before they could do serious damage. Now Anovenax was concentrating his attack on the tents.

Sixteen hordes were under Tol's command, the six thousand

horsemen and ten thousand infantry which made up the Army of the North. All lay flat on their bellies, the riders' horses likewise down. Rolling dunes screened them from the sea and from sharp-eyed city sentinels.

The preponderance of foot soldiers in Tol's command was unique in an empire forged by the Riders of the Great Horde, but Tol had made a specialty of leading men on foot. He and his tough, well-trained, highly loyal force had won many signal victories. In the past decade they had marched all the way from Hylo in the north, fighting eleven battles large and small, to arrive at this place, where they hoped to end the war that had raged so long between Ergoth and Tarsis.

Tol drew his saber and lifted it high. "Rise up!" he cried. "Now is our time! For Ergoth!"

Sixteen thousand men rose as one. Shouting "Ergoth! Ergoth!" they came streaming over the ridge. The horsemen spread out to confuse the enemy about their true numbers; the footmen marched in close order to convey overwhelming strength.

As the first block of spearmen reached him, Tol got down from his rawboned gray mount and tossed the reins to a surprised Frez. "I'll fight this battle on my own two feet," he said.

He accepted a spear from a nearby warrior, telling Frez to remain in the saddle, the better to bring the news from other fronts. Frez dismounted anyway and sent both their horses cantering away.

"After the battle, you may flog me for disobedience, my lord," Frez said to his glowering leader. "But now, shall we fight?"

The going was hard—the soldiers had to slog through loose sand while burdened by the weight of scale shirt and leggings. In addition, each man had an eight-foot spear ported on his right shoulder and a brass and wood shield slung on his left arm. Tol was glad he'd taken the time for water, brackish or not.

The din of combat grew louder with each dune they crossed. A vast melee was boiling under the walls of Tarsis. Regobart's force, nearly all cavalry, had been bent backward like a huge bow.

In the center of the battlefield was a bizarre sight: four enormous turtles, each six paces high, and each carrying upon its back a tall wooden hoarding. The Tarsans had bought the creatures at great expense from the breeders of Silvanost, where they were used to tow ferries across the Thon-Thalas. From the makeshift platforms on the turtles' backs, Tarsan archers showered the Ergothians with arrows. No weapon in the imperial army could penetrate the shells of the giant turtles.

"Quarter turn, right!" Tol shouted.

The marching block of men slanted off, avoiding the slow-moving, implacable turtles. Arrows fell on them like a deadly squall. Men toppled, pierced in the head or shoulders. The phalanx closed the resulting gaps and kept going. They had no choice but to ignore wounded comrades; if they paused, more men would fall. The surest way to save Ergothian lives was to come to grips with the enemy as quickly as possible.

Riderless horses galloped past, eyes wide with pain and terror. Broken weapons cracked underfoot, and the sand was stained with large scarlet patches. At Tol's order, spears were leveled. A section of Regobart's cavalry scrambled to steer clear of the approaching block of warriors. Catching sight of the banner of Juramona, Tol's hometown, the cavalry let out a roar of approbation.

"Tolandruth! Tolandruth!" they chanted, raising high their bloodied sabers. Tol's footmen pushed through open lanes between the cheering horsemen.

The Tarsan soldiery grouped behind the spearhead of giant turtles was composed mainly of mercenaries, with a few city dwellers pressed into the ranks. The mercenaries were a mixed lot: leather-clad plains nomads, Thoradin dwarves wielding double-axes, and a few wild elves from the forest lands, their faces painted with red, blue, and green loops and lines. Tarsan officers led this contingent. Their bright golden headgear made them easy targets for the Ergothians.

Tol swung his phalanx smartly in a half-turn left. The leading ranks of the Tarsans, long-haired sailors now serving as spearmen, recoiled at the sight of five hundred Ergothians maneuvering with such unity and precision. Tol watched them brace themselves for the inevitable collision, setting

their feet firmly as inexperienced soldiers were wont to do. To his expert eyes, the Tarsans with their spears couched looked like a picket fence standing in the path of an avalanche.

For the last few paces the quick-moving Ergothians leaned forward, now almost running. Arrows flickered in from the platforms atop the creeping turtles. One creased Tol's cheek. He ignored the sharp sting, blinking away involuntary tears. The clash of arms was at hand.

Iron spearheads, backed by the weight of a full phalanx, hit the Tarsan line. They went down like grass before a scythe, hurled backward into their comrades and knocking them likewise flat. Tol's men penetrated five ranks deep before they were stopped. Ergothians in the rear ranks laid their spears on the shoulders of their comrades and pushed. All the maneuvering and strategy came down to this: bodies of armed warriors shoving at each other.

On either side, other blocks of Ergothian spearmen struck the enemy line. Horns blared, and the Tarsan ranks opened to reveal a corps of archers. At spitting distance they lashed the Ergothians with arrows. The soldier on Tol's right dropped, pierced through the eye. Tol put up his shield in time to block an arrow coming at his face. The bronze-tipped shaft penetrated halfway through his shield.

"Get those sons of snakes!" he cried.

Men four ranks in the rear broke formation and charged. The archers were northerners, from the wild coast east of Thoradin. They stood their ground admirably, bombarding the Ergothians with deadly missiles. At the last moment the archers melted back into the Tarsan army, several lofting arrows backward at their foes as they ran. It was a masterly performance, and Tol grudgingly admired their skill.

Freed by the pressure of Tol's counterattack, Lord Regobart re-formed his horsemen and charged again, aiming to cut off the Tarsans from their city. A small band of mercenary cavalry tried to defend the gates but proved no match for the fury of Regobart's Great Horde. With their guard routed, the Tarsans had to close the city gate to keep Regobart out. The massive brass portals swung shut just as the lead riders reached them. From atop the walls, stones, molten lead, and arrows scourged the Ergothians. Lord Regobart recalled his men.

Cut off now, the Tarsans did a remarkable thing. Instead of surrendering or trying to fight their way back into the city, they continued to drive toward the distant row of tents where the imperial priests labored. For a moment the Ergothians did not react, so surprising was this bold move. The four giant turtles ponderously changed formation from a wedge to a line. One of Tol's phalanxes tried to stop a green behemoth, jabbing it continuously with their spears. The beast's shell and leathery hide turned aside all their efforts.

Frez appeared at his commander's side. "They're not themselves today!" he shouted in Tol's ear. "They fight like wild men."

Tol nodded. "They'll expend every life they have to reach our mages—then their fleet will have a chance to save the city!"

"Can we stop those monsters?"

Tol craned his neck to see over the sprawling battle. The hoarding on each turtle's back held fifteen to twenty archers. The wooden structures, pointed at the fore, reminded him of the forecastle of a ship. That thought brought a grin to his face.

"Let's board 'em!" he said, clapping Frez on the back.

Tol withdrew his phalanx, ordering the rest to keep up the pressure on the Tarsans. Marching swiftly behind the line of battle, his men grounded their spears and drew swords. With about four hundred men fit to fight, Tol sent a hundred against each of the four turtles.

"Scale them any way you can," he ordered. "Rope and grapnels, a human ladder—whatever you can devise!"

One group dashed off to the closest turtle. Bracing themselves against the nearly vertical slope of the beast's shell, they laced their arms together. More of their comrades clambered up their backs to their shoulders and repeated the pose. Tol's band used shields to create footholds for the next wave to scale the great creature's side. All this occurred under a constant hail of arrows. Fortunately for the Ergothians, the safest place to be was up close to the crawling giants. There the turtle's bulk shielded them from the Tarsan archers.

Tol, Frez, and a dozen soldiers climbed the staircase of shields to the top and threw themselves onto the turtle's back.

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The shell was steeply curved here, but the Ergothians were able to crawl up the smooth shell. Tarsans on neighboring animals shouted and pointed at the encroaching enemy. More arrows whistled in and several of the climbing Ergothians tumbled to the ground, their bodies studded with white-fletched Tarsan missiles.

Tol reached a more level area and drew himself into a crouch. Survivors of his band gathered behind him. All drew sabers.

With a shout, Tol vaulted over the low wooden hoarding and planted a booted foot on the chest of a wide-eyed Tarsan archer. His men swarmed in behind him, howling for blood. Some of the archers had star-headed maces for close combat, but these were no match for Tol's swordsmen. The Ergothians cleaved through the enemy in short order, shoving dead and wounded foes over the side to clear the small structure. Soon only the turtle-driver remained.

The driver, a Silvanesti hired when the turtles were purchased, sat on the forward slope of the shell. Bare-chested, wearing loose white trousers that ended above his knees, the elf was screened on each side by a low wooden wall. His bare feet rested in niches carved into the forward face of the shell.

Tol put the edge of his saber to the elf's throat and demanded he halt the beast.

Calmly the driver replied, "Kill me, and nothing will stop the great Zeboim."

The turtle named for the tempestuous sea-goddess was by now only half a league from the tents housing the imperial clerics. Frustrated, Tol sheathed his sword and ordered the insolent Silvanesti dragged from his perch.

There were no reins or other obvious means of control, but with its driver gone, the turtle did slow a bit. Tol slid into the leather seat and tried yelling for the creature to halt. Zeboim continued to plod directly toward the vulnerable tents.

Frez leaned over his commander's shoulder. "The elf's nearly naked," he said. "Mayhap the beast needs to feel skin?"

Tol unwound his leggings and removed his boots and stockings. Planting his bare feet in the carved niches, he

tried to influence the giant with pressure from one foot, then the other.

Zeboim swung his huge head from side to side. A deep grunt gusted from his nostrils. Tol's men cheered him on, while he gave all his attention to the task. Sweat rolled down his face. Zeboim was foremost of the turtles; Tol was close enough now to see the pennants on the tent tops. A solid wall of Ergothian infantry had formed between the tents and the oncoming giants, a gallant, if futile, gesture.

Tol's men had seized a second turtle but failed to wrest the other two from their owners. Ergothians on the captured turtles took up Tarsan bows and loosed arrows at the two beasts still controlled by the enemy.

Tol exerted more and more pressure with his right foot. With agonizing slowness, the beast bore into a turn until it was crawling straight at another turtle, one still under Tarsan control. Between the slowly converging creatures the air was thick with arrows. A quartet of missiles shattered around Tol's naked feet and more thudded into the low-walled box that sheltered his upper body.

He glanced back to see the other beast captured by his men had halted for some reason, but even that slight movement stirred Zeboim off his path. Wiping sweat from his eyes, Tol concentrated on keeping the giant on his collision course.

"Stand ready, men!" he shouted.

The driver of the other turtle was so distracted by the general melee that he didn't notice Zeboim's approach until it was too late. Zeboim's nose touched his comrade's shell. Then he kept moving doggedly forward until gradually his head was forced back into his shell.

When the two domes collided, the impact shook Tol hard, though he was out of the driver's seat in a flash, sword drawn. His diminished band followed him as he leaped, still bare-foot, onto the other turtle. He snagged the rail of the enemy hoarding and swung a leg over it. Only a handful of Tarsans remained on the platform, and when the blood-spattered gang of Ergothians stormed aboard, the archers threw down their bows and begged for their lives.

Three of the four turtles had been captured. The last, the southernmost, experienced a mutiny when the Silvanesti

driver proved unwilling to continue the charge alone against the Ergothian tents. Instead, he wheeled his beast away from the fighting and toward the seashore. The archers he carried, unable to control the beast themselves, had no choice but to abandon their perch. The last anyone saw of the fourth turtle and his driver, they were paddling far out to sea.

Their final thrust defeated, the Tarsan mercenaries grounded their arms and surrendered. Admiral Anovenax had managed to escape capture with a small retinue of loyal retainers, and they re-entered the city. But the surviving members of his army of thirty thousand were captured.

Back on the ground, boots and leggings restored, Tol re-organized his scattered forces. Casualties had been heavy. He himself had received a few minor wounds. Loyal Frez had not even a scratch, but word came that Darpo had been gravely injured. Tol found him lying on his back on the ground, shielded from the glare of the setting sun by a wall of fellow soldiers.

Felryn Felryn's son, cleric, healer and a friend of Tol since his arrival in Juramona, was working on the wounded man. Sleeves rolled back to free his lean brown arms, Felryn probed Darpo's side gently for the head of the arrow. Darpo's brown eyes were open, his face moist with sweat. The scar that ran from his left eyebrow to his left ear stood out sharply white against his waxy pallor. His gaze flickered briefly to Tol, but he had no strength to acknowledge his commander.

There was no better healer in the empire than Felryn, not even in the imperial household. Time had thinned his curly hair and streaked its black with white, but the skill had not left his long, powerful fingers. He located the arrowhead and deftly removed it. Darpo gasped. Felryn spoke to him soothingly, applying a clotting powder to the wound. An assistant raised the injured man's head so he could sip a soporific from a silver cup. Darpo's eyes closed.

"Will he live?" asked Tol softly.

"I think so, but that is in Mishas's hands," Felryn said. "I dress their wounds. It is the goddess who heals them."

Horns blared, the sound followed by the rumble of hooves. The foot soldiers parted ranks as a contingent of horsemen thundered in. Leading them was a white-bearded warrior

with a black leather patch over his right eye. Lord Regobart had lost one eye in a duel when he was a young man.

"My lord!" he hailed Tol. "The day is ours!"

Tol approached the general's horse, replying more temperately, "The battle is won, anyway."

Behind Regobart were arrayed some of the highest warlords in the empire. Although their names were a roll call of imperial glory, Tol's many victories made him their equal. Even so, most of them looked upon him as an upstart, a clever peasant whose martial success smacked of unnatural influences or illicit magic.

Regobart would not allow Tol's caution to tarnish what he saw as the glory of this day. "The war is won," he insisted. "I have summoned the city to surrender, and the princes and syndics have signaled their willingness to parley."

Tol frowned. It was true they had vanquished the last sizable fighting force in Tarsis, but the city's defenses were still intact, and the Ergothian armies were not equipped to conduct a long siege. In spite of the efforts of the imperial priests, the Tarsan fleet remained in place, a potent threat. If they escaped the bay, they could wreak immense havoc along the empire's lengthy coastline.

None of these thoughts troubled the warlords arrayed before Tol. Triumph was evident on every face.

"When is this parley to take place?" Tol asked.

"Tonight, four hours past sundown. A pavilion will be erected by the Tradewind Gate." This was the same gate through which the Tarsans had sortied that day.

The wounded and dead were removed to camp, and thousands of dejected Tarsan prisoners were marched away under guard. Tol paraded them within bowshot of the walls, to make sure the city-dwellers could see their defeated army. The sun, sinking into the bay, bloodied the white stone walls and gilded the hulls of the Tarsan fleet, still held by magical winds and hovering like birds of ill omen.



Tol hated diplomacy.

It was not that he opposed talk. In fact, he rather enjoyed

it, and he thoroughly approved of any measure that lessened bloodshed. Unlike the typical imperial warlord, who regarded his warriors as expendable, Tol valued the life of every soldier under his command. Of humble birth himself, he did not ascribe to the notion, common among noble Ergothians of the Great Horde, that dying for the empire was the greatest honor a warrior could achieve. Tol preferred life to honor, as a rule.

Diplomacy, however, was something else again. It required him to wear his formal armor, a flimsy set of plate enameled in imperial crimson, to tame his unkempt hair and beard, and to try to look fierce and amenable at the same time. There would be interminable discussions of boring points of trade, land rights, tariffs, and indemnities; veiled threats and counter-threats would be made, the same ground would be covered and re-covered until a sane man felt like screaming.

In Tol's tent, Kiya and Miya helped lace him into his fancy general's armor. The sisters had been with him fifteen years. Ostensibly wives and hostages given by their father, Chief Makaralonga of the Dom-shu tribe, whom Tol had captured in battle, in reality the women were more like big sisters (each was a head taller than he) than hostages. Wives they were not, either. Tol's heart lay elsewhere.

Tol studied his reflection in a dull brass mirror. Just past thirty, broad-shouldered and stocky, with a square face and long brown hair, he had grown to look very like his father. Even the short beard he sported, in place of the sweeping mustache favored by the empire's elite, was very like Bakal's. He suddenly realized he was now about the age Bakal had been when Tol had left the family farm to begin his training as a warrior in Juramona. Where was his father now?

The crimson armor, jeweled dagger, and velvet mantle Tol wore as a warlord and the General of the Army of the North couldn't keep him from looking like who he was. In spite of twenty years' service and the favor he enjoyed from the imperial regent, Crown Prince Amaltar, he still felt like an impostor hobnobbing with the high and mighty. The decade he'd spent campaigning in the wilds had only strengthened that feeling.

Kiya flipped her long horsetail of blonde hair over her

shoulder and announced, "You look like a bushberry," naming the bitter, inedible, and bright red fruit of a forest vine.

"A bushberry with whiskers," Miya added. She had short golden-brown hair and a lighter build than her warrior sister. In charge of Tol's household and domestic affairs, she had a skill as a haggler which made her the bane of merchants across the empire.

Tol divided a sour look equally between them. "Exactly what I needed to hear before facing the nobility of Tarsis."

Kiya made a dismissive sound. "You're twice the warrior of any of those snobs."

"And you're the Crown Prince's champion," put in Miya. "When he becomes emperor, your star will know no bounds. Why should you be unhappy?"

A face flashed into Tol's mind—green eyes and a smile framed by a rich fall of dark brown hair. Valaran. Ten years had passed since he'd last heard from his beloved, ten years of silence that puzzled him. Despite the passage of time, the distance between them, and the fact she was married to Crown Prince Amaltar, Tol still could not forget her. Val was lodged in his heart, a thorn that could never be removed.

The sisters knew of that old pain, but with the practicality of their forest upbringing, they saw no point in dwelling on it.

"You're right, I've no reason to be unhappy," Tol replied firmly, replacing his frown with a smile. "Life is good."

Kiya grasped him by the shoulders, staring hard into his eyes. "Let the Tarsans see the great Lord Tolandruth in all his glory. By the gods, I wager if you glare at them the right way, they'll melt into their fancy boots!"

The jest had its intended effect, lightening his mood. Seating his ceremonial helmet on his head, Tol stepped outside.

Torches blazed at the entrance to his tent, and his honor guard snapped to attention when he emerged. All his old comrades were present, save the wounded Darpo: there was balding Frez, dark-skinned Tarthan, Fellen the engineer, and Sanksa, the Karad-shu tribesman.

Looking them over with a grin, he suddenly missed Egrin, Raemel's son, the man who more than any other had made a warrior out of a clumsy peasant lad. Egrin had become

Marshal of the Eastern Hundred when his predecessor, Lord Enkian Tumult, dared to criticize Prince Amaltar's leadership during the worst part of the war against Tarsis. Removed as marshal, Enkian was made Warden of the Seascapes, the wild, desolate northwest coastal province. Not only a demotion, it was a dangerous assignment. Tarsan ships raided the Seascapes regularly. The previous two wardens had died leading their men against Tarsan raiding parties.

Wind lashed at the burning torches and drove sand against the soldiers' armor. Tol pulled on a pair of studded gauntlets, the last detail of his formal outfit, and strode away flanked by his retinue. He didn't like twenty armed men following his every move, but generals were expected to have entourages.

They marched through camp. At every junction soldiers turned out to cheer them. Even the camp followers joined in. By the time Tol reached the pavilion where the meeting was to take place, the whole Ergothian camp resounded with his name.

Lord Regobart was waiting outside the tent with his own large honor guard. He inclined his head politely to his young colleague.

"Welcome, my lord. I was able to track you by your stealthy approach," Regobart said.

Tol removed his helmet, smiling at the old warlord's jest, and they conferred in confidential tones. Regobart wanted to establish his primacy in the upcoming negotiations. He was twice Tol's age, a warrior of long service to the empire, and the scion of one of the oldest and noblest families in Ergoth. His ancestor, also named Regobart, had fought at the side of Ackal Ergot, founder of the empire, yet he knew the younger man had the acclaim of the troops and the powerful backing of the prince regent.

"You speak for the emperor here, my lord," Tol assured the elder general. "You understand these matters far better than I."

Regobart looked relieved. "Shall we put our brand on these sheep?"

Tol did not believe the Tarsans would be so compliant. Nonetheless, he nodded agreement, and thus they entered the great tent.

Regobart had spared no effort to make the pavilion extravagant. The center room was easily twenty paces across. Thick carpets covered the sand, and light was provided by six brass candle-trees, each holding twenty fat tallow candles. A trestle table in the center of the room was laden with ewers of wine and beer. Along the rear wall a cold repast had been laid out on another table. The Tarsan delegation hovered there, murmuring among themselves and eyeing the guards posted around the room.

The entrance of the two enemy generals silenced the desultory talk. The Tarsans—eight men and four women—sorted themselves into a line. The central place was held by a tall noble, finely made and clad in a pale linen robe edged with gold. A gilded chaplet sat on his head.

"I am Valgold, Prince of Vergerone," he said, pressing a beringed hand to his chest and bowing slightly. "I speak for Tarsis."

"Regobart, Lord of Caergoth." The elder general gestured to Tol. "And this is Lord Tolandruth of Juramona."

Glancing down the row of enemy leaders, Tol spotted a face he recognized. It belonged to a woman of striking appearance, with black hair and prominent amber eyes. She was elegantly attired in a close-fitting gown of green velvet and stood with one hand on her hip, the other holding a heavy goblet. Her gaze moved from Regobart to Tol and back, with no sign of recognition.

Prince Valgold began to introduce his colleagues: first, Syndic Trylani, a portly, balding fellow; then Syndic Formigan, ebony-skinned; and Princess Shelei Gozandstan, a silver-haired matron dressed entirely in white. Four strands of lustrous gold chain encircled her neck and hung to her waist.

Regobart bowed. "Princess Shelei and I have met. Greetings, Your Highness." Unsmiling, she acknowledged the general with a barely perceptible nod.

Syndic Pektro was the one with wine-stained fingers and crumbs in his brown beard. Prince Helx of Mokai was a clean-shaven young man with a cruel expression and a dagger poorly concealed beneath his purple robe. Syndic Tomo, a stout fellow clad in a leather-girded tunic, was the only Tarsan still eating.

Masters Vyka and Rorino, and Mistress Xalia Tol, were immediately recognizable as priests. Plainly dressed, all three wore incised amulets on chains around their necks and stood with hands clasped at their waists. Vyka was the elder of the men; Rorino, no more than twenty. Xalia, about Tol's own age, wore the medallion of a priestess of Shinare.

The striking, raven-haired woman in green velvet was Syndic Hanira. Tol had glimpsed her first some fifteen years earlier, in Prince Amaltar's tent before the campaign against the forest tribes of the Great Green. Later, she'd served as the Tarsan ambassador to the imperial court in Daltigoth. She'd made an audacious appearance before the regent in manly attire, an act calculated to unsettle the conservative warlords. It had worked. Tol certainly remembered Hanira.

The last Tarsan was a red-faced man whose hands and face bore many small cuts. This was Admiral Anovenax. Tol was surprised to meet his adversary face to face.

"My lord admiral," he said. "I compliment you on the good fight today."

"Not good enough," said Anovenax bitterly. He had a deep, powerful voice. Bawling commands from the quarterdeck of his flagship, he must be quite impressive.

At Lord Regobart's invitation, everyone took their places at the table. They presented an interesting tableau. On one side, the twelve richest and most powerful people of the city of Tarsis; on the other, only Tol and Regobart.

"Let me begin by saying we are here to bring about an end to the war between our states," Regobart began. "I have a list of our requirements given to me by the prince regent." He held out a sheet of parchment to Prince Valgold.

The prince quickly scanned the document, eyes darting down the short list. "This is unacceptable," he said bluntly. "Agreement would mean the end of Tarsis."

"If the war continues, there will be no Tarsis," Regobart replied coldly.

"That remains to be seen!" Anovenax growled.

"Would you care to try conclusions with us—again?" asked Tol, bristling.

Regobart placed a hand on his comrade's arm, and Prince Valgold called for calm. Valgold handed the list of demands to

the man on his left, the portly, balding Trylani. He read it and passed it down. In moments, all the Tarsans had seen it.

Hanira spoke firmly. "Tarsis cannot live without the ships of its navy," she said, gesturing with one hand. Her fingernails were long and painted a pale rose color. Tol had never seen such a fashion, not even in the imperial court.

Admiral Anovenax offered his vigorous agreement with this statement, but Lord Regobart interjected, "Your raids on our coast must end. Either you stop them, or we shall." At that Anovenax took instant umbrage.

The arguments escalated, about fleets and trade and war indemnities to be paid to the empire in gold. At one point Prince Helx's harsh expression drew into an even fiercer frown, and he asked sarcastically, "Why stop with gold? Why not enslave us all and be done with it?"

"I will gladly entertain alternatives," Regobart answered, refusing to be baited. "Silver, copper, grain—"

"Hostages?"

The single word from Hanira silenced the room.

Tol and Regobart exchanged a glance. Tol asked, "What do you propose?"

"That a certain part of the indemnity be rescinded in favor of a number of volunteer hostages to be sent to Daltigoth in token of our peaceful intentions."

"Noble hostages?" Tol asked. "You, lady?"

Valgold flushed, and Prince Helx looked furious, but Admiral Anovenax snorted with amusement. "As well try to put a panther on a leash!" he scoffed.

Most of the Tarsan men in the delegation laughed nervously and shifted in their chairs. Princess Shelei frowned in reproof. The three clerics lowered their eyes. Only Hanira herself seemed unperturbed.

"My countrymen jest with you," she said evenly. "As head of the Golden House, I've had many sharp dealings with them."

"Golden House?" asked Tol.

"The guild of goldsmiths and jewelers," Prince Valgold explained, then quickly shifted the subject back to the more serious questions of trade.

The discussion lasted far into the night. Another meal

was served by Ergothian orderlies. Wine flowed, but all kept their heads clear. At times tempers flared. Prince Helx, with arrogant rudeness, dismissed a compromise proposed by Lord Regobart.

Regobart smote the table with his fist, declaring he would turn Tarsis into a tidal pool if need be.

Helx jumped up, hand hovering over his dagger. "Do your worst, you savage! How will you breach our walls, eh? With sabers?"

The prince had a point, Tol reflected. Victorious as they were in the open field, the Ergothians still did not have the means to ravage and reduce the great city.

Tol had kept silent through most of the stalemate, watching and listening, and he felt he was beginning to understand what mattered to the Tarsan delegation. For all their talk of freedom and culture, what truly set their blood coursing was money.

Breaking the charged silence, he said calmly, "We don't have to destroy your walls, Your Highness. We can occupy your country. If all supplies to the city were cut off, how long would your food hold out? How long would your gold supply last?"

"Gold is not bread," said the admiral quickly.

"No, but gold is the lifeblood of Tarsis, is it not? Will you sacrifice your fortunes to save your lives? How about the fortunes of your comrades, not to mention the common folk of Tarsis?" Tol let his questions hang in the air, then added, "When you're paupers, what good will your pride be?"

Silence reigned. At last, Prince Valgold stood. He rolled up the list of Ergothian demands and slid the parchment into his voluminous sleeve.

Scanning the assembly with tired, bloodshot eyes, he announced, "It is late. I will take your demands to the City Assembly. You will have our response soon."

When the Tarsans were gone, Regobart filled a goblet with strong red wine and drained it.

"Bloody merchants," he said. "Call themselves princes? There's no nobility in counting money!"

Privately, Tol agreed, but then, he didn't see that riding a horse and killing people made one noble either.

He and Regobart took their leave of each other. Tol was so exhausted he thought he would be asleep as soon as he fell into bed. Instead, he slept very poorly. The yowl of a panther out in the dunes disturbed his rest. He even stumbled outside, sword in hand, dressed only in his breechnap, seeking to kill the beast. The only sound to be heard was the wind, hissing over the sand.

At dawn, the Tradewind Gate was thrown open abruptly. Alarms sounded in the Ergothian camp, and warriors rushed to fend off what they imagined was a last-ditch Tarsan attack. Instead of soldiers, however, a band of officials emerged, flanked by heralds.

One of the horn-bearing heralds, his eyes bright with tears, announced, "By order of the princes, syndics, and City Assembly, the city of Tarsis hereby yields to the forces of the Ergoth Empire!" He choked, cleared his throat, and continued. "Here are our counterproposals to the emperor's demands!"

A youth dashed out and presented a large scroll to Lord Regobart, who had arrived with hair uncombed and still in his sleeping gown. At his side, Tol, haggard from his unsettled night, watched as Regobart broke the seal and opened the scroll. The elder general's expression grew hard.

"They refuse to give their fleet," he reported, "and they offer only one hundred thousand gold pieces instead of five hundred thousand!"

Tol shrugged. "Does it matter? It's a goodly sum. Leave them their ships—or better, demand a token reduction of, say, one hundred galleys. They've surrendered. Leave them some pride and they won't be so resentful in the future."

Regobart struggled with conflicting emotions. As the warlord of a mighty empire, his inclination was to squeeze a defeated foe for every last drop of blood. As a diplomat, he knew even better than Tol that it was often wiser to let a loser retain some dignity.

The Tarsan officials were waiting, glaring at their conquerors with impotent hatred. Regobart drew himself straight and spoke loudly to them.

"In the name of His Imperial Majesty Pakin III and Prince Regent Amaltar, I accept these terms," he said. "Let every

gate of the city be opened! We shall enter and receive your surrender at noon today!”

Cheers erupted from the warriors who’d rushed to the gate believing themselves to be under attack. The jubilant men engulfed their generals. Cries of “Ergoth! Ergoth!” alternated with “Regobart!” and “Tolandruth!”

In the confusion, a man in Tarsan livery sidled up to Tol and thrust a note in his hand. Tol turned to confront him, but the fellow melted quickly into the crowd. Tol unfolded the small square of foolscap. It bore the seal of the Guild of Goldsmiths.

Hanira of the Golden House, the note read, requests the pleasure of your company for dinner at her residence. On Emerald Square, in the Crucible District. At Sunset.

Faintly, over the tumult of celebration, Tol heard the call of a panther.