

Hell Hath No Fury
David Weber & Linda Evans

Prologue

The vertical cut in the cliff face only looked razor-thin. Even the broadest railway cut looked like narrow crack when it was cut into the face of a sheer precipice over three thousand feet tall.

Darcel Kinlafia knew that. He'd already passed through what the guidebooks had taken to calling the Traisum Cut once before, outbound, but it was the sort of sight not even the most jaded trans-universal traveler could ever tire of.

That was why he'd climbed out of his seat in the rattling, banging so-called "passenger car" and stepped out onto the front platform so that he could see it better as the train started up the four-mile approach ramp to the cut. Now he stood there, hands on the guard rail, staring out and up at one of the most spectacular pieces of scenery imaginable.

The portal between the universes of Traisum and Karys was one of the smaller ones Sharona had explored. Or, rather, it was *effectively* one of the smaller ones. The theorists believed it was actually much larger, but that most of it was buried underground in both universes. Only the uppermost arc of the circular portal was exposed, and the terrain in the two universes it connected was . . . dissimilar, to say the least. The Karys side of the portal was located near what would have been the Arpathian city of Zaithag in Darcel Kinlafia's birth universe; the Traisum side was located in the Ithal Mountains west of the city of Narshalla in Shurkhal.

That was what created the spectacular scenery. Zaithag was barely seven hundred feet above sea level; the mountains west of Narshalla reached heights of over forty-six hundred feet . . . and the portal's Traisum nexus was located smack in the middle of one of those mountains.

Most people who saw it from the Karys side for the first time felt a peculiar sense of disorientation. It was something the human eye and the human mind weren't trained to expect: an absolutely vertical, glassy-smooth cliff over a half-mile high at its shortest point and four and a half miles wide.

The good news was that Karys was outbound from Sharona. That had allowed the Trans-Temporal Express's construction crews to come at it from the slopes of Mount Karek rather than straight out of the mountain's heart. The portal was actually located east of the mountain's crest, which made the impossible cliff several hundred feet shorter from the Karys side and the approach slope perhaps three or four miles shorter from the Traisum side. Even so, and even though TTE's engineers were accustomed to stupendous construction projects fit to dwarf the Grand Ternathian Canal or New Farnal Canal, this one had been a stretch even for them. It had taken them years (and more tons of dynamite than Kinlafia cared to contemplate) to complete, and all meaningful exploration down-chai from Traisum had been bottlenecked until they'd finally finished it. The cut was five miles long, eighteen hundred feet deep where its Karys terminus met the top of the approach ramp, and wide enough for a four-track right-of-way *and* a double-wide road for wheeled traffic. The grade, needless to say, was steep.

Now the locomotive chuffed more noisily than ever, laboring as it started into that deep, shadowed gulf of stone with its tender and single pair of passenger cars. Its smoke plume fumed up, adding its own fresh coat of grime and soot to the stains already marking the cut's rocky sides, and he heard the haunting beauty of the whistle singing its warning.

He stayed on the platform a little longer, looking up past the edge of the passenger car's roof overhang at the narrow strip of scorching blue sky so far overhead. Then he drew a deep breath, went back inside, and settled himself into his seat once more.

Not much longer now, he told himself. Not much longer . . . for this stage, at least.

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Less than two hours later, Kinlafia gazed out the passenger car window as the train clattered and banged to a halt in a vibrating screech of brakes and a long, drawn-out hiss of steam.

It was hot, and despite the welcome interlude of relative coolness in the Traisum Cut, the car's open windows had done little more than help turn its interior into an even more efficient oven by letting the hot, dry wind evaporate any moisture it might have contained. Still, it had been a substantial improvement over the wearisome horseback journey through Failcham, across the desert between what should have been the cities of Yarahk and Judaih.

As a Portal Authority Voice—and a certified Portal Hound—Kinlafia had seen far more of the multiverse than the vast majority of Sharonians could begin to imagine. Yet even for someone like him, it took a journey like this one to truly drive home the immensity involved in expanding through so many duplicates of humanity's home world. Under normal circumstances, it tended to put the silliness of most human squabbling into stark perspective. With such incredible vastness, such an inexhaustible supply of space and resources available, surely anyone ought to be able to find the space and prosperity to live his life in the way he chose without infringing upon the interests or liberties—~~or~~ prejudices—of anyone else!

Except that it doesn't seem to work that way, he thought, as he collected his valise from the overhead rack. Part of that's simply ingrained human cussedness, I suppose. Most people figure somebody else ought to move away, rather than that they ought to go off looking for the life they choose. And then there's the godsdamned Arcanans.

His jaw tightened for a moment, and his brown eyes turned bleak and hard. Then he shook himself, forcing his shoulders to relax, and drew a deep breath. His weeks of grueling travel had given him enough separation from Shaylar's murder for him to at least concede that Crown Prince Janaki had had a point. There was no way Darcel Kinlafia was ever going to forgive the butchers of Arcana for the massacre of his civilian survey crew and—especially—Shaylar Nargra-Kolmayr. For that matter, he still saw no reason why he should. But there was a difference between refusing to forgive and building an entire life on a platform of hatred, for hatred was a corrosive drug. Nourished too deeply, cherished too closely, it would destroy a man as surely as any rifle or pistol bullet.

And it can do exactly the same thing to an entire civilization, he thought grimly. "Call-me-Janaki" was right about that, too. Besides I've known plenty of Sharonians I wouldn't exactly want marrying into the family. No, be honest, Darcel. You've known plenty of Sharonians who ought to've been put on someone's "needs killing" list. So, logically, there have to be at least some Arcanans who are going to be just as horrified as any Sharonian by the prospect of an inter-universal war. Of course, finding them may be just a little difficult.

He snorted in wry humor, which he was half-surprised to discover was only slightly tinged with bitterness. Well, maybe a little more than "slightly." Still, the tearing, savage spasms of fury which had wracked him whenever he thought about the massacre at Fallen Timbers truly had lost much of their virulence.

Petty-Captain Yar told me they would. I suppose I should have listened to him.

Kinlafia made a mental note to drop Delokahn Yar a Voice message. It was the least he could do for Company-Captain Chan Tesh's senior Healer, he thought just a bit ashamedly, given how hard Yar had worked to force him to admit to himself that life truly did go on. Wounds like Shaylar's death might never go away, but at least they could scar over, turn into something a grownup learned to cope with rather than retreating into an endless morass of depression and petulantly refusing to have anything more to do with the world about him. And in his own case—

"Welcome to Fort Salby."

Kinlafia turned as the sound of the train master's voice interrupted his thoughts. Despite his Arpathian surname, Irnay Tarka was a Uromathian, from the independent Kingdom of Eniath. He was

also an employee of the Trans-Temporal Express, one of the hundreds of workers pushing the railhead steadily down-chain towards Hell's Gate now that they could finally get their heavy equipment forward through the Traisum Cut. They'd driven the line to within less than four hundred miles of Fort Mosanik in Karys, which had been an enormous relief. No one was going to be sending any of the TTE's luxury passenger coaches out here to the edge of the frontier anytime soon, but even this spartanly furnished, bare-bones, pack-'em-in-cheek-by-jowl people-hauler was an enormous improvement over a saddle.

Tarka grinned, almost as if he could read Kinlafia's mind.

"Saddle sores feeling any better?" he asked, and Kinlafia snorted.

"It's going to take more than one miserable day for that," the Voice said. "Mind you, I'm not complaining. Just having the opportunity to sit down on something reasonably flat is a gift from the gods!"

"We aim to please," Tarka said. Then his grin faded slightly. "On a more serious note, Voice Kinlafia, it's been an honor."

Kinlafia half-waved one hand in a dismissing gesture that was more than a little uncomfortable. That was another thing Janaki had been right about. As the sole survivor of the massacred Chalgyn Consortium survey crew—and the Voice who had relayed Shaylar's final, courageous message—he'd acquired a degree of fame (or notoriety, perhaps) which he'd never wanted. It wasn't as if *he'd* done anything that wonderful. In fact, he would never forgive himself, however illogical he knew it was, for not having somehow managed to save his friends' lives.

Tarka seemed about to say something more, then stopped himself and simply gave a small headshake. Kinlafia smiled crookedly at him and held out his right hand, and Tarka clasped forearms with him.

"Good luck, Voice Kinlafia," the train master said. "And a safe journey home. A lot of people are going to want to hear from you directly."

"I know." Kinlafia managed not to sigh.

He nodded to the Eniathian, walked down the aisle, and then climbed down the carriage's steep steps onto the sunbaked, weathered-looking planks of the station under a sky of scorching, cloudless blue. It was only late morning, but the platform's heat struck up through the soles of his boots as if he were walking across a stovetop, and he was acutely grateful when he reached the cover of the shedlike roof built to throw a band of shade across the rearmost third of the boardwalk.

The locomotive lay panting quietly as the station's water tower topped off its tender and its fireman and his grease gun worked their way down its side. It wasn't one of the behemoths which pulled TTE's massive freight and passenger trains closer to the home universe, nor was it as beautifully painted and maintained. In fact, it was a shabby, scruffy work engine, with an old-fashioned half-diamond smokestack, grimy, banged-up, dust-covered paint, and no pretension to the grandeur of its more aristocratic brethren. No doubt it was out here in the first place because newer and more powerful engines had replaced it closer to home. The TTE could spare it from passenger and normal freight service, and the construction planners and operations people had probably figured they might as well get the last of their money's worth out of it before it finally went to the boneyard. Yet even though it couldn't come remotely close to matching the speed and effortless power of something like one of the new Paladins, Kinlafia had never been happier to see one of those more splendid lords of the rails.

His mind ran back over the wearisome journey since he'd separated from Janaki's platoon and its little column of Arcanan POWs. The ride to Fort Ghartoun had been hard enough, but the journey across Failcham had been worse. Much worse.

Normal Portal Authority policy called for the forts which housed the Authority's garrisons and

administrative centers to be located, like Fort Salby, on the Sharonian side of the portal they covered. The planners had made an exception in Fort Ghartoun's case, however, for a couple of reasons. One was that the Failcham side of the Failcham-Thermyn portal was located very close to the spot occupied by the city of Yarahk in Sharona. Unfortunately, "very close," especially in multiversal terms, wasn't the same thing as "in exactly the same spot." Yarahk had grown on the banks of the mighty, north-flowing Sarlayn River, just below the Sarlayn's first cataract and almost six hundred miles south of the Mbisi. The Sarlayn Valley was fertile enough, and Yarahk was fairly popular as a winter resort, but the portal was thirty miles outside the valley, in the barren desert to the west. It sat on a thoroughly unpleasant piece of dry, sun-blasted dirt and rock, with very little to recommend it aside from the portal itself. Just providing a garrison with water would have been hard enough.

Admittedly, Fort Ghartoun (only, of course, it had been Fort Raylthar when it was built) was also located in a remarkably arid spot, but at least water was closer to hand. And so were Snow Sapphire Lake and the Sky Blood Lode. It had made sense to put the local Authority administrative center on the Sky Blood Mountains' side of the portal, given the availability of water and the fact that keeping a watchful eye on the development of that massive silver lode was eventually going to become the local authorities' primary concern.

But locating Fort Ghartoun on the Thermyn side of the portal hadn't made the journey across Failcham any more pleasant. The Karys-Failcham portal was located in the North Ricathian Desert, close to what would have been the city of Judaih, better than fourteen hundred miles west of Yarahk. Fourteen hundred miles of desert, in point of fact, in which the water a traveler could carry was altogether too often the margin between survival and something else.

The letter of priority Crown Prince Janaki had gotten Regiment-Captain Velvelig to endorse for Kinlafia had helped enormously. Among other things, it had allowed him to requisition Portal Authority horses—and, for the desert-crossing aspects of his journey, experienced local guides. His homeward journey had been far more rapid (and strenuous) than his survey crew's outward journey, and his letter had provided him with dune-treaders, as well as horses, for the trip to Fort Mosanik, on the Karys side of the Karys-Failcham portal.

From Fort Mosanik, located in the general area of the Sharonian city of Queriz, the terrain had been at least a little friendlier than that between Mousanik and Ghartoun. Of course, only the North Ricathian Desert could have made the Queriz Depression seem particularly hospitable. At its deepest point, Kinlafia knew, the Depression was almost a hundred feet below sea level, dotted with salt lakes and covered with feather grass, tamarisk, and wormwood, where it wasn't outright desert in its own right. Still, oases were more frequent, and the much flatter terrain, once one got south of the highlands around Fort Mosanik itself, was much easier going. Not to mention the fact that he'd only had to cover around three hundred and fifty miles of it before he met up with the advancing railhead.

Which meant, he thought, hoisting his valise and starting along the platform towards the rudimentary station building, that he only had another three or four weeks to go to get home.

"Voice Kinlafia?"

Kinlafia stopped and turned around as someone called his name in accented Ternathian. The man who'd called to him wore PAAF uniform with the single gold rifle of a company-captain. He was also a sturdy-looking fellow, perhaps a couple of inches taller than Kinlafia himself, with the swarthy complexion and dark brown eyes of a Shurkhali. His nose was strongly hooked, and the eyes under his bushy eyebrows were very direct and intense.

"Yes, Company-Captain?"

"Orkam Vargan," the Shurkhali said, reaching out to clasp Kinlafia's forearm. "I'm Regiment-Captain Skrithik's XO here at Fort Salby. They sent word up the line that you'd be arriving today, and the regiment-captain asked me to keep an eye out for the train."

"Oh?"

"We understand your hurry to get back home again," Vargan said almost apologetically. "But you're the first person to come back *up* the line since it happened, and you're also . . . well—"

He shrugged slightly, and Kinlafia suppressed a sigh. It was hardly the first time someone had said that to him.

"I don't suppose there's another train headed up-chain this afternoon, anyway, is there?" he said instead.

"Not really." Vargan's slightly crooked grin suggested to Kinlafia that the company-captain had heard the sigh he hadn't uttered. "That's why the regiment-captain wanted me to ask you if you'd have supper with him tonight. Obviously, we'll all understand if you're too tired. Gods know *I'd* be! But we'd really appreciate the opportunity to offer you the closest Fort Salby has to hospitality. And, of course, to pick your brain ourselves."

"Actually, if I can extort a long, hot shower out of you, and maybe a couple of hours worth of nap, I think I'd enjoy a sitdown supper."

"No problem." Vargan smiled. "We've put you up in the BOQ. If you'll come with me, we'll get your bag dropped off, and then I'll personally escort you to the longest, hottest shower in at least two universes."

Kinlafia chuckled. "It's a deal."

* * *

Somewhat to Kinlafia's surprise, supper at Fort Salby turned out to be not only extremely tasty, but actually enjoyable.

Salby, unlike the other portal forts Kinlafia had passed through on his way back from Hell's Gate, had been established for quite some time. At one point, Salbyton, the settlement outside the fort, had been a construction boomtown as the Trans-Temporal Express labored on the Traisum Cut. Its peak population had been as high as seven or eight thousand, although it had declined from that quickly once the cut was completed. By the time the Chalgyn Consortium had set out on its productive but ill-fated survey expedition, Salbyton had been down to perhaps two thousand, and TTE, as was its wont, had collected and hauled off the temporary, portable housing in which most of its labor force had lived. Despite that, the remaining buildings of Salbyton had a look of permanency and solidity which was rare this far from Sharona, and the local railroad station had quite literally miles of heavy-duty sidings left from its days as the end of the TTE's line.

Neither the fort nor the town had changed a great deal—yet—despite all that had happened since, but that was about to change. All of that temporary housing TTE had pulled out was undoubtedly on its way back, although it might not be stopping at Salbyton this time. The new construction priorities closer to Hell's Gate were going to dwarf the importance of making the Traisum Cut.

There was a two-hour time difference between the two sides of the portal, which, fortunately was also one of the older portals which had so far been discovered. It must have been . . . lively around Fort Salby's present location for the first century or so after the portal formed, Kinlafia reflected. The altitude differential was less than that of some other portals, but it had still been sufficient to channel a standing, unending, twenty-four-hour-a-day, three-mile-wide hurricane through from Karys until the pressures finally equalized. There was ample evidence of the sort of sandblasting erosion portals at disparate heights tended to produce, although none of it was very recent. And there was still a permanent, moderately stiff breeze blowing through the portal, even now, which made it unfortunate that Zaithag was about as dry (and hot) as Narshalla. Fort Salby could have used a little rain, if Karys had had any to spare.

Now, as the Voice sat with his hosts on the covered veranda built across the back of the Skrithiks' house just outside Fort Salby's gate, the portal had already darkened to star-shot night. It was a

striking vista, even for an experienced inter-universal traveler, as the midnight-blue half-disk of night loomed up against the coals and ashes of the local sunset. The veranda had been carefully placed to take advantage of the permanent breeze, and the air moving across it was distinctly cooler than the local air temperature.

"That was delicious, Madame Skrithik," Kinlafia said, sitting back with a pleasant sense of repletion. "I've been eating off of campfires for months now."

"I suppose that makes your approval just a bit two-edged," Chalendra Skrithik said. "I've eaten campfire cooking myself a time or two, you know."

"I didn't mean—" Kinlafia began quickly, then stopped as he recognized his hostess' slight smile. She saw his expression, and the smile turned into a chuckle.

"My wife, you may have observed, Voice Kinlafia," chan Skrithik said wryly, "has what she fondly imagines is a sense of humor."

"Actually, I have a very *good* sense of humor," the wife in question said, elevating her nose with an audible sniff. "All women do. It's simply unfortunate that so many males of the species fail to appreciate its innate superiority."

"Personally, I've always recognized its superiority," Kinlafia told her gravely. "Or, at least, I've always been smart enough to pretend I did."

"A wise man, I see," Company-Captain Vargan observed, then shook his head with a sigh. "I fear my own cultural baggage betrayed me when Madame Skrithik and I first crossed swords. Er, *met*, I mean. Met."

"But I had to draw so little blood before you recognized the error of your ways, Orkam," Chalendra said sweetly, and this time Kinlafia laughed.

He really hadn't looked forward to dinner when the invitation was extended, but now he was more than glad he'd accepted it. Chan Skrithik reminded him in many ways of an older Janaki chan Calirat. He wasn't as tall—few people were, after all—and he was considerably older than the crown prince, with much fairer hair, but he had the same steady, gray eyes, and there was something of Janaki's sense of . . . solidity about him. He and his wife had worked hard, with the smoothness of a well-established team, to make their guest feel welcome, and they'd succeeded in ample measure. They'd treated him as if they'd known him for years, and he found himself wondering if perhaps Chalendra had one of those traces of rogue Talent that turned up so often. She'd seemed to know exactly what to say and do to make him feel at ease, and he was guiltily aware that his personality had been . . . thorny, to say the very least, since Shaylar's murder.

Like her husband, Chalendra Skrithik was at least ten years older than Kinlafia himself, and she had that tough, capable air he'd seen among so many of the women who'd followed their husbands—made their own independent ways—out to the frontier. Her dark hair was just beginning to show threads of silver, and there were crow's-feet at the corners of her brown eyes, but she remained a remarkably handsome woman.

"At any rate, Madame Skrithik," the Voice said now, "I intended my comment as the most sincere possible approval. This was delicious, and the opportunity to sit in a proper chair and use honest-to-gods silverware only made me appreciate it even more."

"I'm glad," she said, this time with simple sincerity of her own. "I've spent enough time following Rof around to realize just how hard you must have been pushing yourself to reach Fort Salby this soon. And I know why you're doing it, too. If we can make you feel welcome, then I think that's the very least we can do after all *you've* already done."

"Don't make me out to be some sort of hero," Kinlafia said quietly. "I happened to be the one to Hear Shaylar and relay the message. The real heroes were the ones at Fallen Timbers, or the people like Company-Captain chan Tesh."

"I have enough Talent to have Seen the SUNN rebroadcast of Voice Nargra-Kolmayr's last message," Vargan put in. "I won't embarrass you by running on about it, but I wouldn't be surprised if those of us who've Seen it don't have a better appreciation than you do for just how much you do qualify as a 'hero.' "

Kinlafia made an uncomfortable little gesture, and the company-captain left whatever more he'd been about to add unsaid.

"At any rate," chan Skrithik said, stepping into the brief hiatus in the conversation, "we appreciate what you've been able to tell us about what's happened since. I've been getting the intelligence synopses and copies of most of the official reports, but it's not the same thing as talking to someone who's actually seen it. You've really helped me put a lot of it into context."

"I'm glad I could help," Kinlafia said, and he was. *And I'm also just a little surprised by how little hurt, he thought. Either the scab's getting even thicker, or else I really am learning to deal with it. Or both, maybe.*

"I could wish you hadn't left before the negotiations began," Vargan said.

"Oh?" Kinlafia looked at him, and the company-captain shrugged.

"You were there at the beginning," the Shurkhali pointed out. "You might say—" Vargan's smile was grim —"that you Saw the way *our* first effort to negotiate worked out. I'd like to have gotten you firsthand impression of whether or not they're serious . . . and whether or not anything's likely to come of it."

"I wouldn't be the right person to ask." It came out a bit more flatly than Kinlafia had intended, and he gave himself a small mental shake. "I'm afraid I'm a bit too emotionally involved in what happened to Shaylar and the rest of our crew to stand back and think about anything those people might come up with."

"I can understand why that might be," Chalendra said quietly. She reached out and touched the back of Kinlafia's hand. "I don't think anyone who Saw the SUNN broadcast of Shaylar's final message could expect you to feel any other way, Darcel."

"Maybe." He managed not to sigh and gave her a small, grateful smile. "Having said that, though, I really do hope that something comes of the talks. But for that to happen, they're going to have to agree to punish whoever was responsible for that massacre. I don't see how Sharona could settle for anything less than full accountability for that."

"From what I've been seeing in the Voicenet transmissions, that's probably the absolute minimum any Sharonian government is going to be able to settle for," chan Skrithik agreed. "On the other hand —"

The regiment-captain paused as his batman stepped back onto the veranda with a bottle of slightly chilled wine, which he proceeded to pour.

"I'm afraid that finding *good* wine out here at the bleeding edge is all but impossible," chan Skrithik said, "but this vintage is at least decent."

"Wine snob!" his wife snorted.

"I take my pleasures where I can find them," the regiment-captain replied with an air of dignity as the orderly withdrew with an admirably impassive expression.

Chalendra's lively eyes gleamed, but she declined to take up that particular challenge, Kinlafia noted. For now, at least.

"I noticed what looked like a Uromathian cavalry regiment's standard," the Voice said, changing the subject before she changed her mind. "Does that mean Emperor Chava is sending forward reinforcements?"

"Not as many as he might like," Vargan muttered, and chan Skrithik gave his executive officer a slight frown, more imagined than seen.

"Actually, Uromathia was the first to get any of its national units moved up to support us," the fort's CO replied to Kinlafia's question. "And I'll admit I had my own doubts when I heard they were coming. For that matter, and just between the four of us, I still don't trust Chava's motives one little bit. But Sunlord Markan, their senior officer, has done nothing but dig in and do everything he possibly can to integrate his troopers into our force structure here. In fact, he's out on maneuvers this evening, or I'd have invited him to supper, too. I don't think anyone could fault his efforts or how energetically he goes about them. And to be brutally honest, he's come very close to doubling our available troop strength."

"But you're not sending any of them farther forward?"

"No, I'm not. Or, rather, the PAAF isn't. For several reasons, I feel certain. Logistics would be a problem, for one thing. The Uromathians don't use standard PAAF equipment, so just keeping them supplied with ammunition would be a pain. And until the railhead reaches Fort Ghartoun, Salby is the natural 'stopper' for the Karys Chain. In fact, we've turned into a collecting point for a really odd collection of odds and ends that've been emptied out of various arsenals and armories up-chain from us. Some genius in Reyshar actually sent us an even dozen Yerthak pedestal guns." Chan Skrithik snorted. "They were intended for the Authority revenue cutters in Reyshar—they've been having some smuggling problems—and apparently the panic immediately after word of Fallen Timbers hit got them rushed ahead to us here. And until they get the rail lines laid at least to Ghartoun, I'm *keeping* them here, too. The damned things weight a good half-ton each, and at the rate they eat up ammo, just keeping them supplied with shells would be a genuine pain in the posterior. Exactly what chan Tesh needs in his field fortifications, aren't they?"

The regiment-captain's expression was so disgusted Kinlafia had to chuckle. For a moment, he was afraid his laughter had given offense, but then chan Skrithik grinned wryly and shook his head.

"Better to have people sending us stuff we'll never use than not get sent the stuff we *will* need, I suppose. But that's just one more example of the logistics headaches we'd be looking at if we deployed the Uromathians forward."

Kinlafia nodded gravely, but he also heard all of the things chan Skrithik wasn't saying. The Voice didn't doubt for a moment that Balkar chan Tesh would have done almost anything to get another couple of thousand men forward to help hold Hell's Gate. But the "almost anything" undoubtedly didn't include effectively putting Uromathia in command of future contact with Arcana. No matter how conscientiously this Sunlord Markan was working to cooperate with chan Skrithik, letting him supersede chan Tesh—which, given his combined military rank and aristocratic precedence, he would most certainly have done—wasn't going to be something any non-Uromathian in Sharona wanted to see happen.

Politics, he thought almost despairingly. *Always politics. And Janaki thinks I can do something about it?*

A vision of his parents' faces floated before him. His father was a professor of languages at Resiar University in New Farnalia, while his mother was a Talented Healer, and both of them had . . . pronounced views on politics. Which, though he hadn't explained it to Janaki, was one reason he'd hesitated before jumping at the Prince's offer. Both of them were staunch opponents of the "outmoded, class-based" system of "paternalistically justified aristocratic denial of the basic right of decision-making." Given that the two of them lived in one of the more militant of Sharona's republics they had little personal experience with that "aristocratic denial" of the right to make political decisions, but he very much doubted that they were going to be performing any Arpathian drum dances of joy when they found out about their baby boy's career-move decision.

"Has there been any word on the Act of Unification?" he asked after a moment. "There seemed to be a few . . . difficulties that still needed ironing out according to the last Voice message I Heard."

"My, you *are* tactful, aren't you?" chan Skrithik murmured with a crooked smile.

"Well, I'm neither Ternathian nor Uromathian," Kinlafia pointed out. "I hope you won't take this wrongly, but most of us New Farnalians have always been at least a little amused watching the two of you. Don't get me wrong. Of the two, I've always been a lot more comfortable with Ternathia. After all, that's where most of the New Farnal colonists came from in the first place. Still, I have to admit that with the entire multiverse out there, all of this 'great power rivalry' has always struck me as just a little silly."

"If it weren't for the constant potential for it to turn into something very unfunny indeed, I'd probably agree with you," chan Skrithik said. "Orkam, on the other hand, lives a little closer to Uromathia than you do, and I don't think he finds it quite as amusing. In fact, I've noticed that the humor quotient seems to decline in direct proportion to one's proximity to Chava Busar's frontiers."

"I know." Kinlafia felt just a little abashed. "If it sounded like I don't think there's any difference between Emperor Zindel and Emperor Chava, I apologize. For that matter, I spent quite a while with Crown Prince Janaki, and I discovered that he's a . . . very impressive fellow, in a lot of ways. I guess it's just that I grew up far enough away that I never really felt threatened by either side, and I've seen just how big the multiverse is. I've wondered, sometimes, if it wouldn't have made sense to just hand an entire universe over to Uromathia, and another one to Ternathia, and tell them to behave themselves."

"I doubt very much you could've gotten anyone else to go along with the notion of giving Chava Busar an entire world to play around with," Company-Captain Vargan said dryly. "The problem is what he'd do with all those resources. I'm afraid Chava is one of those people who can never be satisfied, never feel he has quite enough power. The only thing he could see that sort of resource base as would be a springboard from which to conquer the *rest* of the multiverse."

"I'm afraid Orkam's probably right, about Chava, at least," chan Skrithik said with a sigh.

"And he's not exactly alone in that, either, Sir," Vargan pointed out. His voice was diffidently stubborn. Obviously, this was a topic he and his superior had discussed before, Kinlafia thought. "Markan's been a lot more . . . proddy ever since he found out about the Act of Unification and who'd been proposed as *everyone's* emperor, and you know it."

"Yes, he has," chan Skrithik agreed. "But you'd be 'proddy' if Chava had been elected as *your* emperor, too, Orkam. And Markan's a sunlord. Whether he wants to be or not, he's got to be deeply involved in Uromathia's internal politics. Bearing all of that in mind, how could you expect him to feel any other way?"

"I don't imagine anyone could," Darcel said, stepping diplomatically into the fray. "But has Sunlord Markan's attitude become a problem?"

"No, not really," chan Skrithik said. "Markan is as dedicated and professional an officer as I've ever met, and he hasn't let his unhappiness—his *natural* unhappiness—get in the way of cooperating with us here. In a way, though, that only emphasizes the nature of our problem. Most Uromathians are going to be at least . . . strongly influenced, let's say, by the attitude of their ruler. And if *most* Uromathians are no more power-crazed or power-hungry than anyone else, Chava, unfortunately, *is*."

"And he's Emperor of Uromathia," Chalendra pointed out, shaking her head. "For that matter, those sons of his are no great prizes, either."

"So thank the gods the Conclave had the good sense to pick Emperor Zindel over Chava," Vargan said with the sort of fervor Kinlafia seldom heard outside temple.

"I can't disagree with that," Kinlafia acknowledged. "But should I understand from what you've just said that the Act has actually been approved?"

"Not yet," chan Skrithik said, then snorted. "Well, what I actually meant, I suppose, is that it hadn't been as of a week and a half ago."

Kinlafia nodded in understanding of the qualification. It was hard to remember sometimes just how far places like Fort Salby were from Sharona. The thought that it could take over a week for a Voice message to reach Traisum was sobering proof of just how great the distances involved truly were.

Of course, it wouldn't take that long if it weren't for the water barriers, he reminded himself. It was the need to transport Voices physically across the water gaps too wide for them to span—most of which were up-chain from Traisum—that accounted for the vast majority of the delay, after all.

"So we still don't know if Uromathia is going to sign on," he said, after a moment.

"Oh, I think Chava will sign on the dotted line eventually," chan Skrithik replied. "It's not like he has a lot of choice, after all. Even he has to recognize how the appearance of these 'Arcanans' has changed everything."

"You think so?" Vargan said sourly. Chan Skrithik looked at him, and the company-captain shrugged. "Logically, I can't argue with you," he said. "But I'm telling you, Rof—that man is never going to sign off on the creation of a world empire, especially under the Caliraths, unless he figures there's some way for him to park his fundament on the throne eventually."

"You may be right," chan Skrithik conceded with the air of a man who'd had this discussion more than once already. "In fact, from what I've seen of Chava, you probably are. But even if you are, what he *thinks* he's going to get away with, and what he *is* going to get away with are two different things. You don't care how tough, how sneaky, Chava Busar may think he is, he does *not* want to piss off Zindel chan Calirath. Believe me."

"If he's anything like his son, I'm inclined to agree with you," Kinlafia said.

"Which doesn't mean Chava isn't going to try something, anyway," Vargan pointed out. "And if he does, it could get spectacularly messy."

"Yes, it could." Chan Skrithik nodded. "But what Voice Kinlafia was asking was whether or not Chava's going to accept unification at all. And my feeling, from the regular Voicenet messages and the dispatches I've received, is that he's going to. I'm sure he is going to have some . . . mental reservations, let's say, if he does, but if Emperor Zindel is willing to accept the demand that Janaki marry a Uromathian, I don't think Chava will have any choice but to agree to the unification."

"Janaki marry a Uromathian?" Kinlafia couldn't quite keep his repugnance out of his voice and expression, and Chalendra Skrithik snorted. It wasn't, Kinlafia noted, a particularly happy snort.

"That's what Chava's been holding out for," she said. "And, like Rof says, he may already have gotten it. According to the last report *I* heard, the Conclave was supposed to vote on the marriage amendment to the Act of Unification three days ago. So, we ought to be hearing about the outcome in another week or so."

"I see."

Kinlafia sat back and took a sip of chan Skrithik's "decent vintage" while he pondered what Chalendra had just said. It was odd to sit here and realize the outcome of the vote was probably speeding its way down the chain of universes to Fort Salby at this very moment. And it was even odder to realize just how ambivalent Kinlafia himself was about that possible outcome. Despite the optimism everyone else had felt when the Arcanan diplomats turned up, Darcel Kinlafia's belief that Sharona had to reorganize itself into something capable of meeting the Arcanans toe-to-toe had never wavered. Sharona *had* to unify its competing, squabbling nations. And yet, the thought of the towering young Crown Prince of Ternathia being forced to marry one of Chava Busar's daughters or nieces revolted him. Perhaps it was the sort of dynastic, political calculation kings and emperors routinely had to face, but he *liked* Janaki. Liked him a lot.

And I don't much like what Vargan was saying, either, the Voice reflected. *Because if Chava really does think there's a way to put his arse on the throne, then there has to be at least a line or two in his plans for getting rid of Janaki, first.*

Darcel Kinlafia wouldn't like that. He wouldn't like it at all.

~~So it looks like there's another good reason to go into politics, where I might actually be able to do~~
something about it, he thought, drinking his wine and gazing up at the twinkling stars of Karys.

Chapter One

Commander of One Thousand Klayrman Toralk sat upright in the personnel carrier strapped to his circling command dragon's back, despite the buffeting wind of the beast's passage, so that he could see clearly over the edge of the windshield. The sight was impressive, he admitted, watching critically while the final few transport dragons, scales glittering with gemlike intensity in the last light of day, settled like huge, multihued insects onto the handful of islets clustered in the middle of so many endless miles of swamp. Unfortunately, "impressive" wasn't exactly the same thing as "well organized." In fact, the words which came most forcibly to mind were "awkward as hell."

And the reason the maneuver looked awkward was because it *was* awkward, he thought sourly. Despite his deep respect for his immediate superior, this entire operational concept could only have been put together by a ground-pounder. Any Air Force officer would have taken one look at the topographical maps and informed his superior roundly that he was out of his mind. Crowding this many transport and—especially—touchy, often ill-natured battle dragons into such a constricted space violated every precept of peacetime training regulations and exercise guidelines.

Too bad Ekros never heard about all those regs and guidelines, Toralk thought. Or maybe he did. After all, how could even a demon make sure that whatever could go wrong did go wrong if he didn't know exactly what he was screwing up?

The thousand chuckled with a certain bare minimum of genuine humor. Yet even as he did, he knew that if Commander of Two Thousand Harshu hadn't pushed him—hard—on this, he would have told the two thousand it was impossible. Fortunately for Arcana (if not, perhaps, for the tender sensibilities of one Thousand Toralk), Harshu wasn't particularly interested in the artificial safety constraints of peacetime. He wasn't overly hampered by excess tactfulness, either. But he *was* completely willing to absorb a few casualties, among his dragons as well as his troops, to get Toralk's attack force into position with its beasts sufficiently well rested to maximize their combat radius.

And it looks like that poisonous little prick Neshok was right—barely—about whether or not I could fit them all in, Toralk conceded.

The last of the transports landed a bit short of its intended island, and a towering, mud-streaked fountain erupted as the huge dragon hit the water. Fortunately, it was shallow enough that the beast wasn't in any danger of drowning or miring itself in the muck, and the levitation spell kept its towed cargo pod out of the water while it floundered ashore. Of course, Toralk had no doubt that if he'd been a little closer, he would have heard an interesting chorus of yells and curses coming from the infantry inside that pod. It might have stayed out of the water, but that hadn't kept it from bouncing around on the end of its tether like some sort of insane ball. And all of that water and mud the dragon's impact had thrown up had had to go somewhere.

Toralk grinned behind his helmet's visor, despite his tension, then shook his head and leaned forward to tap his pilot on the top of his flight helmet.

"Yes, Sir?" The pilot had to raise his voice to be heard, but not by very much at this ridiculously low speed.

"Let's set it down, Fifty Larshal," Toralk said, and pointed at the larger island at the center of the half-dozen congested, swampy hummocks which had been chosen for his forward staging points.

"Yes, Sir!" Larshal said, and the command dragon lifted onto its left wing tip, banking more steeply as it circled down towards the indicated perch.

Toralk gazed into the west, where the embers of sunset still glowed on the horizon. This particular bivouac wasn't going to be much fun for anyone, he reflected. Maybe that would be for the good, though. Men who were thoroughly pissed off after spending a wet, muddy, bug-infested night not

sleeping were likely to show a little more . . . enthusiasm when it came to shooting at the people responsible for them being out here in the first place.

* * *

Hulmok Arthag was an unhappy man.

Someone who didn't know the platoon-captain well might have been excused for not realizing that. Or, rather, someone who didn't know Arpathian septmen well might have been excused for not realizing Arthag was any unhappier than usual, given how little an Arpathian's expression normally gave away.

He stood under the forest canopy—thinner than it had been when the Chalgyn Consortium survey crew had been slaughtered, just over two months ago—and gazed into the predawn darkness, longing for the empty plains of home. Life had been harder there, but it had also been much less . . . complicated.

"Copper for your thoughts, Hulmok."

The platoon-captain turned at the sound of Platoon-Captain Dorzon chan Baskay's voice. The Ternathian cavalry officer looked improbably neat and clean—not to mention well-dressed and fresh shaved—for someone who spent his nights sleeping in a tent in the middle of the woods with winter coming on. Arthag had sometimes wondered if there were a special Talent for that, one that was linked by blood to the families which routinely produced the Ternathian Empire's diplomats. Not that chan Baskay had ever wanted to be a diplomat, whatever the rest of his family might have had in mind for him.

Which just goes to show the shamans were right. No man can outrun his fate, Arthag reflected with the faintest lip twitch of amusement.

"I don't know if they're worth that much," he told the Ternathian after a moment.

"I'm pretty sure they are," chan Baskay responded. Hulmok raised one eyebrow a fraction of an inch, and chan Baskay shrugged. "I've heard all about your 'instinct' when it comes to picking people for your command. And while I'll admit you've got a remarkably good gambler's face to go with it, it's pretty clear to me that something's jabbing that 'instinct' of yours as hard as it's jabbing every single one of mine."

"Really?"

"Hulmok, they've been talking to us for over a month now," chan Baskay said. "In all that time, they haven't said one damned thing except that they want to talk, instead of shoot. And they've been throwing grit into the machinery with both hands for the last week and a half. Which, you may have noticed, exactly corresponds to the point at which I finally got formal instructions from the Emperor. You think, maybe, it's pure coincidence that they got even more obstructionist as soon as *I* stopped sparring for time?"

"No." Arthag shook his head. "No, I don't think that—not any more than you do."

The two men looked at one another. Chan Baskay's expression showed all the frustration and anger he couldn't allow himself to display across the floating conference table from the Arcanan diplomats, and Arthag's very lack of expression showed the same emotions as both of them contemplated the Arcanans' last week or so of posturing. Rithmar Skirvon, the senior of the two Arcanans, had hardened his negotiating posture noticeably. His initial, conciliatory attitude had all but completely evaporated, and he seemed determined to fix responsibility for the initial violence of the clash between his people's troops and the civilian survey crew on the dead civilians.

That was a pretty significant shift from his original attitude, all by itself, but it was obvious to chan Baskay that Skirvon's instructions were exactly similar to his own in at least one regard. Neither side was prepared to give up possession of the Hell's Gate portal cluster to the other under any circumstances. Chan Baskay hadn't found it necessary to be quite as . . . confrontational as Skirvon,

since Sharona currently *had* possession of the cluster, but he could at least sympathize with the Arcanan on that point.

What he couldn't understand was why Skirvon seemed actively intent on forcing a breakdown in the talks. He wasn't simply stonewalling, simply withdrawing into an inflexible position which he could always have blamed on instructions from his superiors. Instead, there'd been a whole series of insults, "misunderstandings," and "lost tempers" coming from the Arcanan side. And by now, chan Baskay no longer needed Trekar chan Rothag's Sifting Talent to tell when Skirvon was lying. All he had to do was check to see whether or not the Arcanan's mouth was moving.

"Hulmok," he said after a moment, his eyes unwontedly somber, "I've got a really bad feeling about what's going on. But that's all I've got. I don't have a single concrete thing to hang my worry on. So, if you've got something specific, I damned well need to hear it before I sit back down across from those bastards in a couple of hours."

Arthag considered the Ternathian for several moments, then shrugged very slightly.

"I do have a Talent," he acknowledged. He wasn't entirely pleased about making that admission to anyone, for several reasons, but chan Baskay was right. "It's not one of the mainstream Talents," he continued, "but it's run in my bloodline for generations. We've produced a lot of shamans because of it."

"And?" chan Baskay prompted when he paused.

"I can't read minds, and I can't always tell when someone's telling the truth, the way Rothag can. But I can read what's . . . inside a man. Tell whether he's trustworthy, honest. Recognize the ones who'll cave in when the going gets tough, and which ones will die on their feet, trying. And—" he looked directly into chan Baskay's eyes "—the ones who think they're about to slip a knife into someone's back without getting caught."

"Which pretty much describes these people's school of diplomacy right down to the ground, assuming Skirvon and Dastiri are representative samples," chan Baskay snorted.

"I'm not talking about double-dealing or cheating at cards, Dorzon," Arthag said somberly. "I'm talking about *real* knives."

"What?" Chan Baskay stiffened. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that little bit of 'lost temper' yesterday afternoon was carefully orchestrated. I mean that when Skirvon demanded that *our* people apologize for provoking it, he'd rehearsed his lines well ahead of time. I mean that the lot of them are pushing towards some specific moment. They're not only working to a plan, Dorzon—they're working to a *schedule*. And the thing that's driving me mad, is that I don't have any idea *why* they're doing it!"

Chan Baskay frowned. Commander of Fifty Tharian Narshu, the senior officer of Skirvon and Dastiri's "honor guard," had exploded in a furious tirade over a trivial incident between one of his soldiers and one of Arthag's PAAF cavalry troopers the day before. The Arcanan officer had actually "allowed himself" to place one hand on the hilt of his short sword, which chan Baskay was positive had to be deliberate posturing on his part, rather than a serious threat. After all, Narshu had to know what would happen if his outnumbered men wound up matching short swords against H&W revolver.

But by the same token, an officer in Narshu's position had to be equally well aware of his responsibilities as part of the diplomatic mission . . . and if *he* wasn't, then certainly the diplomats he was there to "guard" were. Yet Skirvon had reprimanded Narshu in only the most perfunctory manner even though both Arcanan negotiators must have been conscious of the example their escort's CO was setting for the rest of his men.

"How confident are you of that, Hulmok?" he asked after a moment. "The schedule part, I mean?"

"I'm not as totally confident of it as I'd like to be," Arthag admitted. "If these were Sharonians, I'd be a hundred percent certain. But they aren't." He shrugged ever so slightly. "I keep reminding myself

that it's remotely possible I'm misinterpreting something. After all, it's only been two months since we even knew they existed. But still . . ."

Chan Baskay nodded again, wishing his stomach muscles weren't tightening the way they were.

"One thing *I'm* certain of," he said slowly, "is that they don't have any intention of actually negotiating any sort of real resolution. For one thing, they're still lying their asses off about a lot of things."

"For example?" Arthag raised his eyebrows again.

"Exactly how Shaylar died, among other things," chan Baskay said grimly. "And these repeated assurances about their eagerness to reach some sort of 'mutually acceptable' disposition of the portal junction, for another."

"And about who shot first?" Arthag asked.

"No." Chan Baskay grimaced. "On that point, they're actually telling the truth, according to Rothag. They don't have any better idea of who shot first than we do. And oddly enough, they also seem to be telling the truth when they insist that the officer in command at the time tried to avoid massacring our survey crew."

"I think maybe Rothag better have his Talent checked," Arthag said bitinglly.

"I know, I know!" Chan Baskay had the air of a man who wanted to rip out handfuls of hair in frustration. "I've Seen Shaylar's message myself. I *know* chan Hagrahyl stood up with his hands empty and got shot down like a dog for his pains. But they insist that wasn't what their officer wanted, and Rothag's Talent insists they're telling the truth when they say it."

"They may *believe* they are," Arthag snorted. "But if they do, it's because the bastard lied to them about what happened out here."

"Maybe." Chan Baskay shook his head, his expression half-exasperated and half-hopeful. "I keep wishing Shaylar had managed to contact Kinlafia sooner." He grimaced. "That sounds stupid, I know. The fact that she managed to reach him at all under those circumstances, much less sustain the link through what happened to her and all of her friends . . . Gods, it was nothing short of miraculous! I can't even imagine the kind of guts it took to hold that link. But we didn't actually See or Hear anything until after chan Hagrahyl went down."

"But we know what happened, anyway," Arthag pointed out. "Darcel—Voice Kinlafia—was linked deeply enough to know that from the side traces. Besides, she *told* him so."

"Granted. But she Told him, and she Showed him her *memory* of chan Hagrahyl going down with his hands empty and the crossbow bolt in his throat. That's not the same as Seeing it happen for ourselves. We have what she told Kinlafia, but we don't have anything before the actual event, don't know if there was something Shaylar didn't see herself, or saw but didn't recognize, or didn't realize it had happened at all, in those few seconds we didn't actually See."

"I'm sorry, Dorzon," Arthag said after a moment, "but I can't think of anything which could possibly change what happened or why. And even if I could think of anything now, it's too late for it to have any effect."

"I know. I know." Chan Baskay gazed off into the depths of the forest. "But they're still insistent that they didn't want any of this, that what happened was against their standing orders to establish *peaceful* contact with any new human civilization they encountered, and Rothag's Talent insists they're telling the truth about that. Which presumably means it accurately represents their government's long term policy, no matter how badly things have gone wrong on the ground. To be honest, that's the only hopeful thing I've heard out of their mouths yet! Unfortunately, it's outweighed by everything else . . . especially what *your* Talent is telling you."

"Well," the Arpathian said slowly, "what do you plan to do about it?"

"Gee, thanks," chan Baskay said. "Drop it on *my* plate, why don't you?"

"Well, you *are* senior to me," Arthag pointed out reasonably. "My promotion was only confirmed last week. And you're the official diplomat around here, too."

"I know." Chan Baskay drummed the fingers of his right hand on his thigh for several seconds, then shrugged.

"The first thing is to have Chief chan Treskin Flick a dispatch to Company-Captain chan Tesh. I'll tell him what we're worried about, and ask him for instructions. And the next thing is probably to have Rokam pass the same message back to Company-Captain Halifu for relay up the line to Regiment-Captain Velvelig."

Arthag nodded. Chief-Armsman Virak chan Treskin was the Flicker who'd been assigned to relay messages to chan Tesh's senior Flicker, Junior-Armsman Tairsal chan Synarch. Petty-Captain Rokam Traygan was chan Tesh's Voice, but despite everything, they were still desperately understaffed with the long-range telepathic communicating Talents out here. Traygan had originally been slated to hold the Voice's position at Halifu's portal fort in New Uromath. In light of the situation here at the Hell's Gate portal, he'd come forward to replace Darcel Kinlafia when the civilian Voice headed back to Sharona with Crown Prince Janaki. Fortunately, the Portal Authority had managed to scare up a third Voice—Petty-Captain Shansair Baulwan, a fellow Arpathian—to hold down Halifu's fort, and they were working hard to get still more Voices forward. But for right now, at least, there was absolutely no one else to spare in Hell's Gate or New Uromath, and it was critical that chan Baskay have the shortest possible message turnaround time . . . and the greatest accuracy and flexibility when it came to relaying diplomatic correspondence. So they'd ended up assigning Traygan to him and Baulwan to Halifu, at the critical inter-universal relay point, while chan Tesh (who was in the potentially stickiest position of all) made do with written messages relayed through the Flickers. It was clumsy, but until they could get more Voices deployed forward, it was the best they could do.

"And in the meantime?" the cavalry officer said after a moment.

"And in the meantime," chan Baskay replied with a grim smile, "we do the best we can. I'm inclined to trust your Talent, even if these aren't Sharonians. So, pass the word to your people. I don't want them going off half-cocked, but I don't want them taken by surprise if these people are working to a schedule and they decide to push further than they have."

"Swords and crossbows against pistols and rifles?"

"If that's all they have, that's one thing." Chan Baskay shook his head. "On the other hand, it's been a month now, and we need to be careful about letting familiarity breed contempt. So far, they haven't produced anything man-portable that looks like some sort of personal super weapon, but for all we know, they've just been waiting for us to get accustomed enough to them to let our guard down."

"Point taken," Arthag agreed. "I'll talk to my people."

"Good. And when they get here this morning, I want you handy. Close to Skirvon, as well as Narshu."

* * *

As he climbed down from the back of the completely unaugmented horse the Sharonians had "loaned" him for the trip from the swamp portal, Rithmar Skirvon found himself wishing he'd been in the habit of spending more time in the saddle. Whatever the rest of him thought of his current assignment, his backside didn't like it at all. And the miserable nag his "hosts" had provided didn't make it any better. He suspected they'd deliberately chosen one with a particularly unpleasant gait just for him.

He pushed that thought aside as he handed his reins to one of Fifty Narshu's troopers and started across the now-familiar clearing towards the Sharonian negotiating party. Deeply drifted leaves rustled about his boots like bone-dry dragon scales, and the air was cool and bracing, particularly compared to the hot humidity from which Skirvon had come.

Despite that, his "hosts" didn't look particularly happy to see him as they waited under the towering forest giants' multicolored canopy, and, as he contemplated what was about to happen, Skirvon had never been more grateful for all his years of experience across the bargaining table. For that matter, his taste for high-stakes card games had served him in particularly good stead over the last two or three weeks, as well. His face was in the habit of telling other people exactly what he wanted it to tell them, and while he'd developed a certain wary respect for Viscount Simrath, he was confident the Sharonian diplomat didn't have a clue what was coming.

Of course, he reminded himself as he reached the floating conference table and his waiting chair, there's always the possibility that I'm wrong about that.

But, no, that was only opening-day nerves talking. If the Sharonians had suspected the truth, they would certainly have reinforced their "honor guard" here at the conference site. For that matter, they wouldn't have passed Skirvon and his diplomatic party through the swamp portal at the crack of dawn this morning, either.

Face it, Rithmar, he told himself as he settled down in the chair across the table from Simrath yet again, your real problem is that you're scared shitless.

His lips quirked ever so slightly at the thought as he waited for Uthik Dastiri, his assistant, to sit beside him. That, however, didn't make it untrue, and he reminded himself once again that this entire ploy had been as much his idea as acting Five Hundred Neshok's. In fact, Skirvon had probably done even more than Neshok to sell the concept to Two Thousand Harshu. Somehow, though, he hadn't quite envisioned his own direct participation in sufficient detail when it had sounded like a *good* idea.

Mul Gurthak is so going to owe me for this one, he thought. He may be in the Army, but I'm damned well not drawing combat pay!

He watched Viscount Simrath and Lord Trekar Rothag sitting down opposite him and suppressed a sudden urge to pull out his chronometer and check the time.

"Good morning, Master Skirvon," Viscount Simrath said, as courteously as if he didn't realize Skirvon had been deliberately stalling for at least the last two weeks.

"Good morning, Viscount," Skirvon replied, as courteously as if he really thought Simrath didn't realize it.

"I trust we may be able to move forward, at least a little bit, today," the Sharonian diplomat continued. Under the formal rules and schedule they'd agreed to, it was his turn to control the agenda for the day.

"Progress is always welcome, My Lord," Skirvon conceded graciously.

"I'm pleased to hear that. However, the fact remains that I'm still awaiting your response to the points I made to you following the receipt of my last message from Emperor Zindel," Simrath said pleasantly. "In particular, I note that you continue to insist that the Union of Arcana must receive title to at least half the portals contained in this cluster. A cluster, I remind you, which is in Sharona's possession and which was first surveyed by the civilian survey crew which your troops massacred."

"I'm afraid I must disagree with you, Viscount," Skirvon said in his most respectful tones. "You appear to be implying that Arcana has taken no cognizance of Sharona's insistence on retaining total possession of this cluster—despite the fact that it's still to be established who actually fired the first shot, and the fact that our total casualties have been much higher than your own. In fact, we have taken cognizance of that insistence. Our position may not have changed," he smiled the empty, pleasant smile of a professional diplomat, "but rejection of your emperor's . . . proposals is scarcely the same thing as not responding to them."

The Ternathian noble leaned back in his chair—the floating chair, provided by Skirvon—and folded his arms across his chest. The leaves whispering wind-songs overhead were growing thinner by the day, Skirvon noticed as a shaft of sunlight fell through them and illuminated the tabletop's rich,

polished grain and glittered brilliantly on the translating personal crystal lying between him and Simrath. Those leaves remained unfortunately thick, however, and a part of him wished Two Thousand Harshu had decided he could wait just a little longer.

Which is pretty stupid of you, Rithmar, when you've been pushing him just as hard as you dared from the beginning.

"Master Skirvon," Simrath said, "I'm at something of a loss to understand Arcana's motives in sending you to this conference table."

"I beg your pardon, My Lord?"

"Officially, you're here because 'talking is better than shooting,' I believe you said," Simrath observed. "While I can't disagree with that particular statement, ultimately, the shooting is going to resume unless we manage to resolve the issues between us here, at this table. So it strikes me as rather foolish for the two of us to sit here, day after day, exchanging empty pleasantries, when it's quite obvious you're under instructions not to agree to anything."

Despite himself, Skirvon blinked. He was ill-accustomed to that degree of . . . frankness from an opponent in any negotiation. After all, two-thirds of the art of diplomacy consisted of wearing down the other side by saying as little as possible in the maximum possible number of words. The last thing any professional diplomat truly wanted was some sort of "major breakthrough" whose potential outcome lay outside the objectives covered by his instructions.

More to the point, however, Simrath had observed the rules of the game up to this stage and taken no official notice of Skirvon's delaying tactics. So why had he chosen today, of all days, to stop playing along?

"In addition," the viscount continued calmly, "I must tell you that the distressing number of . . . unpleasant scenes between members of your party and my own do not strike me as being completely, um, *spontaneous*, let's say. So I have to ask myself why, if you're so eager to negotiate with us, you're simultaneously offering absolutely nothing new, while either encouraging—or, at the very least, tolerating—extraordinarily disruptive behavior on the part of your uniformed subordinate. Would you, perhaps, care to enlighten my ignorance on these matters?"

Skirvon felt a most unpleasant sinking sensation in the vicinity of his midsection.

Stop that! he told himself sternly. *Even if they've finally started waking up, it's too late to do them much good.*

At least, he damned well *hoped* it was.

"Viscount Simrath," he said in his firmest voice, "I must protest your apparent charge that the 'unpleasant scenes' to which you refer were somehow deliberately contrived by myself or any other member of my negotiating party. What motive could we possibly have for such behavior?"

"That *is* an interesting question, isn't it?" Simrath smiled thinly. It was a smile which never touched his gray eyes—eyes, Skirvon realized, that were remarkably cold and clear. He'd never realized just how icy they could be, and it suddenly struck the Arcanan that Simrath was not only extraordinarily tall, like most of the Ternathians he'd already seen, but oddly fit for a diplomat. In fact, he looked in that moment like a very tough customer, indeed, and remarkably little like someone who spent his days carrying around nothing heavier—or more deadly—than a briefcase.

"What, precisely, do you wish to imply, My Lord?" Skirvon asked with the air of a man grasping a dilemma firmly by the horns.

"I wish to imply, Sir," Simrath said coolly, "that it's never actually been your intention to negotiate any sort of permanent settlement or mutually acceptable terms. For reasons of your own, you've seen fit to initiate these negotiations and to keep Sharona talking. To this point, I've been willing to play your game, to see precisely what it was you truly had in mind. However, neither my patience, nor Emperor Zindel's tolerance, is inexhaustible. So, either the two of us will make significant progress

over the next twenty-four hours, or else Sharona will withdraw from the talks. We'll see," if his smile had been thin before, it was a razor this time, "how you prefer shooting once again, rather than talking."

Skirvon felt Dastiri stiffen at his side. Despite the Manisthuan's espousal of *garsulthan*, or "real politics," Dastiri's skin had always been thinner than Skirvon's. Fortunately, the younger man appeared to have himself under control, at least for the moment. Which was actually about as much as Skirvon could say about himself, if he wanted to be honest. He managed to keep himself from looking over his shoulder at Commander of Fifty Narshu, but it wasn't the easiest thing he'd ever done.

"That sounds remarkably like an ultimatum, My Lord," he said.

"Does it?" Simrath cocked his head to one side, as if carefully considering what Skirvon had said, then shrugged. "Good," he said in an even cooler tone. "After all, that's what it is."

"The Union of Arcana is not accustomed to bending to ultimatums, My Lord!" Skirvon's response came out harder and more clipped than he'd intended.

"Then perhaps you should seek to profit from the novel experience, Master Skirvon," Simrath suggested. "Or, of course, if my plain speaking has sufficiently affronted you, you can always withdraw yet again to . . . how was it you put it the other day? Ah, yes! Withdraw to 'allow tempers to cool,' I believe you said."

Skirvon was astounded by the sharpness of the anger Simrath's words—and scornful attitude—sent jabbing through him. He felt his expression congeal, his nostrils pinched in ever so slightly, and the slight flicker in Simrath's eyes as the Sharonian obviously observed the physical signs of his anger only made that anger even sharper.

At that moment, Skirvon would have like nothing better than to stand up and storm away from the table. Or to snatch an infantry-dragon out of some outsized pocket and blast the smiling aristocratic bastard across from him into a smoldering corpse. Unfortunately, he could do neither of those things . . . yet.

"My Lord," he said through gritted teeth, instead, "I must protest the entire tone of your comment and your apparent attitude. As I say, the Union of Arcana is unaccustomed to bending to ultimatums. However," he made himself inhale deeply and sat back in his own chair, "whatever your own attitude or that of your government, may be, *my* instructions remain unchanged." *Which*, he reflected, *is actually the truth*. "As such, I have no option but to continue my efforts to achieve at least some progress in resolving the matters which bring us here before anyone else is killed. I will continue to pursue my duty, but not without telling you that I most strongly protest the insulting nature of this exchange."

"If the insult is too great," Simrath said, almost indifferently, "please feel free to withdraw. Otherwise, I trust, you'll at least stop insulting my intelligence by simply repeating the same, worn out, and completely pointless positions again and again and again."

* * *

Dorzon chan Baskay watched the Arcanan diplomats' faces darken with anger. The younger of them, Dastiri, had never been particularly hard to read, and his anger at chan Baskay's confrontational language sparkled in his dark eyes. Skirvon was obviously older and more experienced than his assistant, but despite that, he was nowhere near as good at concealing his emotions as he clearly thought he was. And the fact that even though Skirvon was as furious as he obviously was, he'd swallowed not just the content of chan Baskay's words, but the deliberately insulting tone in which they'd been delivered, as well, told the cavalry officer quite a lot.

Unfortunately, chan Baskay wasn't certain exactly what that "lot" was. The fact that Skirvon hadn't stormed away from the table in yet another of his patented temper tantrums was interesting, though. Whatever these bastards were up to, Skirvon clearly *needed* to be here this morning.

Which, coupled with Hulmok's observations, doesn't precisely fill me with joy.

He didn't so much as glance in the Arpathian officer's direction, but he did withdraw his gold fountain pen from his breast pocket and toy with it. He turned it end for end, watching it gleam richly in the morning sunlight. He had no doubt that the Arcanans would interpret it as another insolently dismissive gesture on his part. That didn't bother him particularly, but it wasn't the real reason for it, and the corner of his eye saw Arthag's tiny nod as the Arpathian acknowledged his warning signal.

"I deeply regret that you've apparently so completely misconstrued and misunderstood my efforts My Lord," Skirvon told chan Baskay through stiff lips. "Since, however, you seem to have done so, b all means explain to me precisely what sort of response to your emperor's terms you would deem a sign of 'progress.' "

* * *

"For a start," chan Baskay told Skirvon in an only slightly less indifferent tone, "you might begin by at least acknowledging the fact that our current possession of this junction—paid for, I might add, with the blood of our slaughtered *civilians*—means we are not, in fact, negotiating from positions of equal strength. We need not even discuss sharing sovereignty over this junction with you. We already have it. As Sharona sees it, Master Skirvon, it's your job to convince us first, that there's any logical or equitable reason for us even to consider giving up any aspect of the sovereignty we've secured by force of arms, and, second, that there's any reason we should trust your government to abide by any agreement you manage to negotiate."

Skirvon ordered himself not to glower at the arrogant Sharonian. That sort of blunt, hard-edged attitude was far more confrontational than anything he'd seen out of Simrath to this point, and he wondered what had prompted the change.

But it's too little, too late, you prick, he told Simrath from behind the mask of his eyes. *All I have do is keep you talking for another hour or so, and then . . .*

"Very well, My Lord," he said after a moment. "If you insist upon rejecting my government's efforts to reach some arrangement based on something other than brute force, I suppose I have no choice but to meet your proposal on your own terms.

"As you say, Sharona is currently in possession of this junction. I would submit to you, however, that it would be a grave error to assume that that happy state of affairs—from your perspective, at least—will continue indefinitely without some indication of reasonableness from your side. My government has stated repeatedly, through me, that talking is better than shooting. That doesn't mean shooting couldn't resume if our legitimate claims are rejected on the basis of your current military advantage."

Skirvon sat forward in his chair once more, hands folded on the rock-steady table floating between him and Simrath, and looked the Sharonian straight in the eye.

"In all honesty, My Lord," he said with total candor, "given the fashion in which you've just spoke to me, and spoken about my government, a resort to military force isn't totally unattractive to me. I suspect, however, that your masters would be no more pleased than my own if that should happen. So ___"

Rithmar Skirvon went on talking, making himself pay no attention to the steadily ticking seconds and minutes flowing away into eternity.

Chapter Two

Company-Captain Balkar chan Tesh pushed back his canvas chair and stood. The morning officers' conference had run later than usual, thanks to the message chan Baskay and Arthag had Flicked to him, and that, in turn, had both delayed his breakfast and reduced his appetite. Now he left his mess kit on the folding field table for his orderly to deal with and stepped back out of his tent into the morning light.

It was an hour earlier in the day on this side of the portal, and he squinted his eyes as he gazed through it at the mist hanging above the hot, humid swamp on the other side. The autumn weather was growing steadily cooler on this side, especially under the towering trees, but the far side of the portal was much nearer to the equator. At the moment, chan Tesh was grateful to be spared the swamp's miserable climate, but if his people were still living under canvas once winter got here, that was going to change, he thought wryly.

Of course, by then we should have someone senior to me in here to take over, he told himself. And we may have enough manpower to let me divert enough working parties to actually finish those winter quarters Frai's working on.

He snorted at the thought, although his amusement was less than total. Master-Armsman Frai chan Kormai had been making pretty good progress on throwing together split-log barracks which would at least be weathertight, if not precisely luxurious. Until, of course, the Arcanan "diplomats" had arrived on the scene. Up to that point, it had appeared the mysterious enemy was intent on avoiding any further contact, which had suited chan Tesh just fine. The longer Sharona had to get its own reinforcements forward before they were needed, the better.

But the Arcanans' reappearance, and the transportation capabilities their magic-powered boats had revealed, had forcibly reminded chan Tesh of just how vulnerable his position out here really was. He had been dividing his efforts between improving his troops' fighting positions and trying to provide them with at least rudimentary housing . . . until the arrival of Rithmar Skirvon and Uthik Dastiri refocused his priorities. Following their appearance, he'd pulled his work parties off the barracks-building details to concentrate on strengthening his troop emplacements . . . and reduced his work parties' size to make certain those emplacements were adequately manned at all times.

Of course, "adequately" was an often slippery word, and chan Tesh wished he could be more confident that it applied in this instance. Unfortunately, while it was decidedly on the small side as the inter-universal gates went, the swamp portal was still four miles wide, and there'd never been much point in pretending the forces under his command could hold its entire frontage against a determined attack—especially not given that the actual frontage to be covered amounted to *eight* miles, not just four. Although the rest of chan Tesh's command had finally caught up with the three platoons he'd taken ahead in response to the Arcanans' original attack on the Chalgyn Consortium survey party, that still left him with fewer than eight hundred men. Instead of spreading them out and dissipating his combat power, he'd chosen to divide the command in two. Platoon-Captain chan Dersal, the senior of his two Marine platoon COs, was in command of the positions covering the southern face of the portal, while chan Tesh commanded the ones to the north.

In the face of such a broad frontage, he'd had to settle for attempting to dominate it by fire. Luckily, the rest of his mortars and half a dozen three-point-four-inch field guns had come up with the remainder of the relief column. He'd dug the mortars in in central positions on both Hell's Gate sides of the portal, with the field guns positioned on their flanks, prepared to sweep the approaches to the mortar pits with shrapnel. Also luckily, the ground sloped generally upward on this side of the portal in both directions. That gave him pretty fair lines of fire into, across, and along the portal's Hell's Ga

aspects. He'd taken advantage of that and located the rest of his firepower to protect and support the mortars, because only they had the reach to cover the full width of the portal's faces from their gun pits. He'd positioned his machine guns with the best supporting fields of fire he could arrange, and his men had spent a great deal of time clearing fire zones of scrub saplings, which had further improved upon his basic elevation advantage.

The fact that the water table was farther from the surface on this side of the portal—although the ground immediately *surrounding* the portal was heavily saturated with swamp water—was another factor in his decision to defend it from Hell's Gate. He'd been able to go down more than two feet on this side without striking water, and he'd taken advantage of that to dig his men and weapons in as deeply as he could. And after he'd gotten them dug in, he'd gone right on digging. The mortar pits had to be open if he was going to fire the weapons at all, and the field guns were equally open in order to give the quick-firing guns the best command possible. Despite their lack of overhead cover, the artillery should be relatively safe, given the Arcanans' apparent lack of any sort of indirect-fire artillery.

His other positions, however, were as heavily bunkered as he could contrive. They were the protective barrier between the portal and his gunners, and he'd ordered them dug in below ground level. The aboveground bunker walls were over four feet thick, with log retaining walls filled with tamped-down earth, while the roofs consisted of at least four layers of crisscrossed logs covered by multiple layers of sandbags, as well. He was confident that they would have stood up well even against Sharonian-style field or medium artillery, and judging from the Arcanan fireball spells' apparent lack of penetration, they ought to resist even direct hits almost indefinitely.

He'd also arranged a few other things he hoped would come as nasty surprises to any potential attackers, but he'd always been aware that he'd be hard-pressed to stop any attack in force.

Many of his men (and at least some of his junior officers), on the other hand, thought he was being alarmist. He knew that. Despite his best efforts, they remained supremely confident—even *overconfident*—of their ability to deal with anything the other side might produce. Yet as Chan Tesh had pointed out at this morning's conference, people always learned more from failure than from success, and what Sharonia actually knew about Arcana's military capabilities remained pitifully inadequate. At least some of the Arcanan troops his command had defeated two months ago had managed to escape, however—that had been obvious from the moment Skirvon mentioned the confirmed death of that Arcanan civilian, Halathyn, in the attack—which meant the other side had probably learned more than he would have liked about Sharonian capabilities. But even if that weren't true, the natural response would be for Arcana to be bringing up the equivalent of *its* big guns (whatever the hells *that* might be) just as quickly as it could, and that could turn very ugly very quickly. Especially if those damned boats of theirs were any indication of their general mobility.

Chan Tesh himself was painfully well aware that much of his earlier victory owed its success to the Arcanans' complete lack of familiarity with modern firearms and mortars. The peerless stupidity of their commanding officer hadn't hurt, either, and that advantage, in particular, was something he couldn't count on the second time around. Just as—as he'd reminded his subordinates this morning—they couldn't afford to assume for a single instant that what they'd seen so far out of Arcana was, in fact, the best Arcana had.

There's a hell of a lot of difference between a four-and-a-half-inch mortar and an eleven-inch howitzer, he thought, *and the other side hasn't seen that yet, either, has it?*

At least Chan Baskay's dispatch had helped him ginger up his platoon commanders. Which was remarkably little comfort compared to the way it had underscored Chan Tesh's existing concerns.

He snorted again, this time without any humor at all. Chan Baskay's message had at least seen to it that Chan Tesh's entire command was at a higher state of readiness. He hoped to all the gods that those

among his subordinates who thought he was jumping at shadows turned out to be right. He was confident ~~he and his men were as ready as they could be~~, but he was also more aware than ever of just how exposed, vulnerable, and—above all—unsupported they actually were.

* * *

Commander of Fifty Tharian Narshu had been carefully chosen for his present duty.

Despite his junior rank, Narshu had seen more than his fair share of combat against everything from brigands to cattle rustlers to claim-jumpers to landowners using "guest workers" as virtual slave labor. More to the point, perhaps, he wasn't the Regular Army officer he appeared to be. He'd been trained in the far harder, tougher school of the Union of Arcana's Special Operations Force, as had half of the men under his command. Two Thousand mul Gurthak had grabbed Narshu and the single squad of his platoon he'd had with him, snatched them (and the transport dragon which had been moving them to join the rest of his platoon in Jylaros) out of the regular transport queue, and hurried them forward to Two Thousand Harshu. Harshu had been delighted to see them . . . and he'd used them to provide the core of Master Skirvon's "honor guard."

The honor guard's other twelve men were primarily window dressing, along solely to make up the numbers, who had no idea their commanding officer and fellow troopers weren't, in fact, Regular Army at all. Narshu wished fervently that all of them could have been Special Operations, but there were never enough SpecOps available. Two Thousand mul Gurthak had been unreasonably fortunate enough to have found even one of Narshu's squads this far out into the boondocks when it had all hit the fan. Besides, a dozen SpecOps troopers ought to be more than sufficient, especially with Sword Seltym Laresk to run the squad. Narshu and Laresk had served together for almost two years now, and the fifty had total confidence in the noncom.

He was glad he did, too, because Tharian Narshu, unlike the late, unlamented Hadrign Thalmayr, wasn't about to underestimate his opposition. This Platoon-Captain Arthag, for example, was as tough and competent as anyone Narshu had ever seen. But competence didn't matter, he reminded himself, when it was offset by complete ignorance and total surprise, and these people knew *nothing* about even the simplest magic.

If there'd been any doubt about that, it had been dispelled several days ago when Narshu and his men first started bringing their daggerstones with them.

Narshu had been in two minds about the wisdom of issuing the daggerstones that soon. He'd been afraid that, despite Five Hundred Neshok's and Master Skirvon's assurances to the contrary, the other side might have some way of detecting them. It wasn't as if they were particularly hard to spot, after all—that was why they were so seldom used by the Spec Ops teams, despite their firepower—and the maximum effective range was barely ten yards. The possibility of getting the ridiculously short-ranged weapons close enough to do any good was minimal in the face of even the most rudimentary security spells.

Two Thousand Harshu had insisted, however, and Narshu couldn't really fault the two thousand for it. Unlike these Sharonians and their "Voices," there was no way for Narshu to report the success or failure of his current mission in time for the two thousand to modify his own plans. That was the entire reason Narshu was out here—to level the communications playing field, as it were—and if his mission had been likely to fail simply because the Sharonians could, indeed, recognize a daggerstone for what it was, finding out at the very last moment would be disastrous.

No one on the other side had noticed a thing, though. Nor did any of them seem aware of the real reason for all of the last few weeks' "incidents."

And, he thought, glancing idly at his chronometer, *it's about time the game began.*

* * *

Rithmar Skirvon kept his attention focused on Viscount Simrath, and *not* on Fifty Narshu, just as

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