

A.R.Yngve

DARC AGES

IN THE YEAR 940 AFTER MONRO A DISCOVERY WAS MADE, THAT WAS GOING TO SHAKE OUR WAR-TORN, BATTERED EARTH.

The trustworthy servants of Lord Bor Damon of Damon City, North Castilia, were searching the ancient Wasteland Ruins at night. Their lord, a curious man, hoped they would bring his people some valuable discoveries -- though many of his peers and subjects feared such excursions might bring the Plague, or the Ones Whose Very Name Brings Disease, inside the walls of Damon City.

To temper such fears, Lord Bor Damon kept these nightly expeditions secret. The time and date of the earth-shaking discovery were recorded by his servants' memory wheels. At exactly 3 hours 47 minutes in the morning of the 8th of March, the servant expedition unearthed the undead corpse of Darc. Little did these humble metal figures realize their discovery would alter the course of history...

Excerpt from Librian's "Chronicles" (translated from the original language)

BOOK ONE



Robot's head

Chapter 1

The four robot servants entered the lichen-covered ruins of what had once been the cathedral of a large city, many centuries ago. The remaining walls reached up at the sky like the half-buried hand of some submerged giant, trying to claw itself up from the rubble of time.

The moon was out of sight this night, but the sensors of the robots registered infra-red heat from living beings as well as ultra-violet light; they needed no daylight to search the ruins. The red glimmer of their visorplates moved about the place as they scanned the dark earth and rocks for any sign of metal -- anything unusual that might interest their owner, Lord Bor Damon.

A muffled whirring of servomotors, the occasional clicks and low hisses of their hydraulic systems, was all the noise they made. They did not communicate; their objectives were clear. Find something of interest and return to Damon City before dawn. Should the Lepers find you, you and the aircraft must self-destruct immediately. It is not easy to say whether these machines could feel genuine fear; their richly ornamented, helmet-shaped metal heads were incapable of expression. Nevertheless, they treaded about as silently and carefully as a man-sized, two-legged robot could.

After a few minutes of searching across the huge church ruin, something happened. The robot bearing the name Vhustank -- engraved on its forehead below the crest of the Damons -- stepped on a wide, grass-covered slab of stone. Unexpectedly, the slab yielded to its steel-and-lead foot. With a sucking sigh of inrushing air from below, Vhustank fell. He did not say a word.

The sound of his fall alerted the three other robots: Surabot, Avton, and Lachtfot. They marched forth to help their fallen comrade -- perhaps not so much out of compassion, as because their directives ordered them to protect their owner's property; but who knows? As they looked down the square hole where the ground had caved in, they saw what no human eye would have discerned in the darkness: Vhustank was undamaged.

He and the slab upon which he rested had fallen a few meters, landing on a heap of old rotten coffins, which had crumbled like soft paper under their weight.

"Are you still functioning, Vhustank?" Surabot asked in a very low, metallic tone -- constructed to be understood by humans as well as machines.

"I have no severe damage," Vhustank answered immediately. He was already rotating his head to scan the new surroundings. "I appear to have reached a lower chamber. Please prepare to help me up with the ropes. Just a moment --"

His red visorplate halted, pointing to some inner recess of the crypt.

"I am registering a large metal object nearby. I will examine it closer. Just a moment -- weak radioactivity is emanating from the object."

Lachtfot stated in a calm tone: "Vhustank: if you find any sign of resemblance to the historical descriptions of Radioactive Weapons, please avoid the object until our master is informed."

It was a robot's way of saying "Be careful". Ignoring Lachtfot, Vhustank crawled to his feet and walked over to the sarcophagus at the corner of the abandoned chamber. Rats, snakes, bats, and insects scurried away as he lit the flashlight of his visorplate to get a clear view of the artefact. The sarcophagus was very old, and covered with a thick layer of dust and dirt. Vhustank picked a small brush-head from his round waist, unscrewed his left hand, and fitted the brush to his wrist-socket. With a low whine, the brush-head began to spin very quickly. Starting from the top, Vhustank neatly polished the dust off the surface of the sarcophagus.

When he was finished, Vhustank stepped back to scan the uncovered object. The outside of the cleaned coffin turned out not to be made of metal -- but some kind of composite material, covered with a very thin coating of diamond-hard material. In fact, it was diamond: ionized carbon atoms sprayed over a concrete and plastic shell. The metal object registered by Vhustank was hidden deep inside the shell.

The robot noticed an inscription on a metal plate on the side of the sarcophagus. The style of the lettering was archaic but recognizable: Old Juro. The plate had been scraped badly centuries ago -- when some long-forgotten thief had removed most of its thin coating of gold. To the robot, the sign read:

ARC

In an instant, Vhustank searched his memory for the word "D. ARC" or "DARC", and found nothing of importance. Vhustank made a quick decision.

"The object is named 'DARC' and appears to be harmless," he told his comrades. "Please help me lift myself and DARC up to ground level."

As he spoke, Vhustank picked up the ropes that the others were hauling down the hole. He tied them to some holes in the outer shell of the sarcophagus.

Surabot said: "I agree. Move quickly, dawn comes soon."

With no further objections, Avton and Lachfot threw down another rope and lifted up Vhustank, who was holding the ropes connected to the sarcophagus. Then, all four of them began hauling up the heavy coffin. The strain on their motors and battery-cells was considerable, but within their limits; the sarcophagus weighed much less than half a ton. When the sarcophagus had been lifted to the ground, the robots positioned themselves along its sides.

Surabot said: "Commence collective lifting procedure... now."

In a smooth, mechanical parody of a funeral train, the four metal figures kneeled down and lifted the sarcophagus onto their shoulders, then stood up. They walked slowly to the edge of the ruin, down the shallow grass slope that covered the entrance steps of the former cathedral. Silently, the procession marched along the grassy, desolate streets of the ancient city -- towards the waiting, unmanned aircraft that bore the insignia of Bor Damon.

They marched up the loading-ramp, which folded up after them. The robots shackled the sarcophagus to the floor of the cargo room, while Surabot took the pilot seat. He started up the vessel's jet engines. The keel thrusters of the jet tubes screamed into life, pushing the streamlined aircraft slowly up, up -- rising above the maze of ruined city blocks. The vessel turned its nose toward the glittering lights of Damon City at the dark horizon, and roared off. The noise echoed and rolled along the ruins, waking up animals. The night beasts howled and screeched in fearful response.

The craft reached the city well before dawn.



Bor Damon

Book one Chapter 2

"My lord!" Librian called out, knocking on his master's bedroom door. Bor Damon groaned something unintelligible from his huge, gilt four-poster bed, falling asleep again. The anxious old man thumped on the door. "My lord, please wake up! This is most urgent!"

Bor Damon groaned again, sitting up among the thick sheets.

"What is it?" he growled, squinting.

In his younger days, Bor had once broken the neck of a nightly assassin who tried to murder him in his sleep -- broken it with his bare hands -- an event which had given Bor a reputation for terrible morning tempers. If someone dared to disturb his sleep now, he knew it had to be important; yet he still felt like killing when it happened.

"The expedition, my lord!"

Librian glanced about the castle corridor for unwanted listeners. He was not allowed to utter a word about the night excursions to anyone but Bor Damon.

"Wait," his lord commanded.

Bor rose up from bed. He was a squarely built, heavysset man with the large belly and short, gray hair of a middle-aged nobleman. Like most men of his caste, he wore no beard -- but the stubble was showing now. Bor groped for his black wool dressing-gown with golden brocades, put it on on top of his nightshirt, and slipped into a pair of shoes. His wife, lying in an adjacent chamber, remained asleep. When he opened the thick steel-and-oak door, Bor found Librian standing outside, accompanied by the servant robot Surabot. He immediately took command of the situation.

"Come with me," Bor said calmly.

He strode off into an elevator, pressing the DOWN button -- and descended from the castle's top-floor residence, ten levels down, to the underground chambers. The other two took another elevator. Only Bor's fingerprints would open the locks to these catacombs.

When Bor, Librian, and Surabot arrived in the cellar chambers, the other robots had already put the sarcophagus to rest on a stone table, in a corner of the large catacombs. The party walked closer to the table. Electric lamps lit up the quarters, and illuminated Bor's huge collection of bought and found curiosities...

Rusted and cracked helmets from forgotten wars...

The carcass of a four-wheeled vehicle found in an underground room full of the same artefacts...

Remains of all kinds of ancient robots and appliances...

Crumbling books in forgotten languages, such as "ZYNAPSTOUCH 2100 INSTRUCTION MANUAL"...

Plastic commodes with rows of buttons, melted together by some incredible heat... Heaps of shiny plastic discs with holes in the middle, with no machinery accurate enough to read their damaged surfaces...

A green bronze sculpture of a man who might have been a king six hundred years ago, his name now gone...

And scores of withered pictures, paintings, and small plastic and metal tools; some recognizable, such as forks, knives, and spoons; others more puzzling.

Some of the old pictures were early representations of familiar religious icons, such as the Goddess, the Singing King, and their various incarnations. There were also pictures of heathen deities, forbidden by the church -- Koban-Jem, Kristos, or the red demon Setan-Klaws. But the sarcophagus was unlike anything Bor had ever come across during his years as a collector. It seemed almost undamaged by the passage of time -- as if made to last forever. Bor approached it warily, then halted.

"You have sterilized it, of course?" he asked Surabot.

The robot's head swivelled toward its master with an oily click.

"The artefact named 'DARC', the aircraft, and everything on it have been treated with the standard decontamination procedure, my lord. Just a moment -- " Surabot's head turned to the sarcophagus. "The inside of the artefact named 'DARC' is shielded by some radiation-proof metal. If the artefact is opened, the risk of contamination increases, my lord."

Bor stood there scowling, thinking hard for a few moments, while Librian and the robots awaited his decision.

He said: "Librian, could that thing be an undetonated explosive charge, of the kind which the lord of Barcel dug up once? The one that went off and incinerated his entire city?"

Librian looked uncertain. He took off his round glasses and polished them with a cloth he took from his robe, then shook his white-haired, balding head.

"It does not appear so, my lord. The inscription says nothing about radiation, though a few units of gamma are leaking from inside. But the amount is so small, it cannot possibly be an infernal device... it is more likely to be a coffin. I have read about these in the old manuscripts..."

Librian put his glasses back on his nose, and extracted a small, leather-bound volume from one of his many pockets. He opened a page marked by a bookmark. Inside the volume were bound together some ancient, brown fragments of print in Old Juro, the dialect called Aenglich or Ingles. And he began quoting the text with an unsteady accent, gathered from years of research among those Northern city-dwellers who still recalled the pronunciation.

"Why pay more? The Kryotek Company offers the chance of immortality at a price YOU can afford!" The Kryotek Manuscript, which is at least eight hundred years old, promises a way of preserving the dead or dying until they would be reanimated and made immortal in the future." The old librarian assumed a more certain, lecturing tone: "Now, my lord, most scholars at our university hold this to be just another myth or heathen superstition. The Priestesses have demanded that such unholy books be burned -- may the Goddess have mercy -- but I always suspected that there might be some truth to it... that ancient peoples not only believed in preserving their bodies, but also had devised some practical method. The Doctors' Guild might be interested in this..."

Bor gave him a dark stare; Librian shrank in fear.

"The Doctors' Guild," Bor said in a hard, menacing voice, "would hardly applaud me for taking an old coffin into the city, with the risk of bringing the Plague here."

He walked up to the table and tapped on the sarcophagus' hard, shiny surface.

"And if it should contain some medical discovery, they would loathe me the worse -- they are a zealous lot, those plaster-mongers." He added, in a less hard voice: "You have spent too much time with your books, my friend -- forgotten about politics."

Bor looked down at the scratched plate, reading the worn letters to himself -- Librian had taught him some Old Juro: "D... Ars... Dars... Darc...! Still, the possibilities..."

The promise of immortality burned in his mind. The possibility to escape from the shackles of time -- all too visible in this room filled with the marks of decay and oblivion. If the corpse in the coffin might still be

alive... Bor was too cynical, too educated to be a pious man; life had taught him attention to harsh, practical matters. As ruler and chief protector of 11,000 subjects and his family, he ought not let personal wishes put their lives at risk. He should return the coffin to the Wastelands, leave it be. But if there was a way to keep this discovery safe and secret, until...

His curiosity fought his fear for a long moment; curiosity won. He put on a pair of gloves and bent down at the side plate, surveying it closely with a magnifying glass. The large letters were too scraped to make out anything more than D... ARC...; probably the name of the corpse. But Bor had an inkling the plate lacked something: why was there no date of birth or other information, as there used to be on old graves and coffins? Struck with sudden inspiration, Bor started feeling around and behind the edges of the wide nameplate. His fingers found a notch, two notches under the plate -- two buttons! He tried pressing inwards, but they were stuck. He urged forward the waiting metal servant Surabot -- Vhustank, Avton, and Lachtfot had already jacked into some wall sockets to recharge their batteries.

"Surabot, push in the buttons down here," he ordered, and backed off as the robot calmly obeyed.

Librian warned him: "But my lord, be careful! Opening the chest could..."

Too late; the robot's steel fingers had already found the buttons and pressed hard enough to budge the dusty mechanism. There came a creaking, metallic twang; the plate shot out an inch from the sarcophagus' side, then slid aside on two railings. The two men stared. Librian gasped; Bor Damon mumbled: "Great Goddess..."

Now they could see that the gilt plate had been covering a second plate, made of white metal -- perhaps the first plate was a false lead, meant to be vandalized by grave-robbers. The second plate bore a much more detailed message, written in three old languages. Librian bent forward to read the fine Aenglish print:

CRYONIC FREEZE CAPSULE

CAUTION! CONTAINS LIQUID NITROGEN (N₂), OXYGEN (O₂), AND URANIUM (U235). FOLLOW OPENING INSTRUCTIONS CLOSELY. THIS CONTAINER HOLDS A LIVING HUMAN (NAME: DAVID ARCHIBALD; GENDER: MALE; AGE: 36 YEARS) FROZEN IN SUSPENSION. HE SUFFERS FROM A NON-INFECTIOUS DISEASE (SPINAL CANCER, MALIGNANT FORM) AND WILL NEED MEDICAL TREATMENT AS SOON AS HE IS REVIVED. SUCCESSFUL REANIMATION OF THIS PERSON WILL BE RICHLY REWARDED, AS HE IS VERY WEALTHY AND KNOWLEDGEABLE. PLEASE REPORT THE

FINDING OF THIS CAPSULE TO ALL REMAINING RELATIVES. THE MAP SHOWS THE BIRTHPLACE OF THE PERSON INSIDE.

SIGNED BY DR. PERCIVAL TAKENAKA OF THE ROCKE FOUNDATION, LONDON, GREAT BRITAIN, NORTHERN EUROPE, DECEMBER 3, 1999 AD.

OPENING AND REVIVAL PROCEDURE:

1. PLACE THE WHOLE CONTAINER IN A STERILE (GERM-FREE) ROOM AT A TEMPERATURE OF AT LEAST -30 DEGREES CELSIUS(=50 POINTS BELOW THE FREEZING-POINT OF MERCURY, 30 POINTS BELOW THE FREEZING-POINT OF WATER)

2. OPEN THE OUTER SHELL LOCK, LOCATED UNDER THIS PLATE (TURN THE HANDLE LEFT UNTIL IT STOPS, THEN TURN RIGHT AND PULL), AND THE VACUUM SEAL WILL OPEN ITSELF FROM THE INSIDE.

3. THE INNER CYLINDER CONTAINS THE BODY. DO NOT LIFT THE INNER CYLINDER FROM THE SHOCK-PROOF SUSPENSION. CHECK THE POWER SUPPLY BY PRESSING THE INSPECTION BUTTONS NEXT TO THE URANIUM BATTERY (MARKED WITH RED LETTERS). IF FEWER THAN 2 OF THE 5 CONTROL LIGHTS LIGHT UP, THEN IMMEDIATELY CONTINUE THE REVIVAL PROCEDURE. (WARNING! THE BATTERY CONTAINS RADIOACTIVE MATERIAL. DO NOT TRY TO OPEN THE BATTERY CASING!)

4. UNSCREW THE INSPECTION PLATE (MARKED WITH WHITE LETTERS) AND CHECK THE METER READINGS. IF THE READINGS ARE 2 OR MORE POINTS OFF THE FOLLOWING VALUES

N2: STABLE

O2: STABLE

THEN SLOWLY REFILL THE LIQUID NITROGEN AND OXYGEN SUPPLIES THROUGH THE VALVES MARKED WITH GREEN LETTERS (NITROGEN) AND BLUE LETTERS

(OXYGEN), UNTIL THE READINGS BECOME "STABLE". ONLY THEN YOU MAY CONTINUE THE REVIVAL PROCEDURE.

5. UNSCREW AND OPEN THE TOP LID OF THE INNER CYLINDER. THE BODY IS WRAPPED IN METAL FOIL, AND VERY BRITTLE. CAREFULLY ROLL OUT THE BODY ON THE WHEELED TRAY INSIDE. (DANGER! THE TEMPERATURE INSIDE THE INNER CYLINDER MAY BE BELOW -180 CELSIUS DEGREES! USE PROTECTIVE CLOTHING!) WHEN THE BODY IS OUT OF THE CYLINDER, SEAL THE INNER CYLINDER TO KEEP THE COLD GASES INSIDE.

6. DOUSE THE FROZEN BODY IN...

The small type did not end until five steps later. The instructions were lengthy, but clear enough. Librian read quietly for a long while, with increasing wonder. Tears came to his old, pale eyes.

"Thank Goddess," he mumbled to himself. "I was right... what wonder this is!"

Bor Damon tried to read over the older man's shoulder; he could understand the words "CAUTION!", "RICHLY REWARDED", and "NON-INFECTIOUS DISEASE" without asking. The small world-map engraved next to the text was marked with an "X" at the artefact's country of origin.

"England," Bor read to himself. "I know it only from the oldest maps. The Eternal Ice covered it long ago. According to family legend, my red-haired ancestors came to Castilia from the northern part of England, called Scot-Land... and fought many great battles, until it settled in Castilia."

Librian looked up at Bor Damon with a pleading expression.

"My lord," he stuttered, "it is safe to do it! The frozen man inside dates back from before the two Great Wars, before the Plague -- he has been forgotten for nine centuries! We can cure this man now, bring him back to life! Imagine what we could learn from him!"

He held up his hands, trembling with excitement. Bor gave him a grave look -- and took off his gloves. He ran his bare hand across the smooth surface of the message plate, and shut his eyes.

Yes, Bor Damon thought, I can imagine what he could teach us. The same things that the ancients used to destroy entire cities in the wink of an eye; the forbidden knowledge that created the Plague; that turned the great plains of Juro into a wasteland, where we huddle together in our fortified cities at night, fearing the Lepers that haunt the land and our nightmares. Or -- maybe a way to free ourselves from disease, from Lepers, from all our troubles. Is it worth the risk? Goddess; Singing King; give me strength! This responsibility is too heavy for just one man.

Minutes went by; Librian sat down and rested his legs. Surabot excused himself -- he was powered by a radioactive battery, and ran without recharge day and night.

"My lord, it is six in the morning. I must attend to my duties, and report to my overseer."

Bor dismissed him and the other servants with the waving of a hand.

He scratched his stubbly chin and yawned, and told Librian: "So be it, then. We revive him. But keep quiet about it, and let me arrange the procedure with my most trusted men."

Bor locked the catacomb doors. The two men and the robots walked up the stairs, returned to the elevators, and went up. Around them, castle and city had already awakened. Thousands of people and a handful of robots busied themselves, washing, cleaning, dressing, ploughing, watering, harvesting, cooking, building, repairing, checking, going to school, going to morning mass, saying their prayers, living their daily life of toil and dreams.

Little did they expect their way of life would soon change profoundly, nor that their lord, Bor Damon, would be the instigator of change.



Born again

Book one Chapter 3

It could not remember its name, or even if it really existed.

All that it was -- all that was -- was a white, numb blankness suffused with an existence; an existence that perceived itself as a soundless yelp, a needle-point of being balancing on a pinhead of reality. It did not move, breathe, or eat; it merely was (though it did not know what it was, having no memories or impressions to compare itself to). It did not think, it just existed.

And suddenly, there was a difference: it did not understand it at first, having no reference-points. Then the difference became stronger, split up into separate impressions:

Sensation... Tiny stings of feeling, multiplying, defining a shape; it became aware of the fact that it had a body.

Memory... It became aware of its name: David. David Archibald. It was a he, a man.

Emotion... David felt pain, increasing heat, rising fear. Then he realized that the heat was decreasing cold; he was freezing to death, and he could not move or see -- he screamed. There was no sound,

because he did not yet breathe. He was suffocating! Yet something supplied his brain with oxygen.

The recall rushed through David's mind now, bits and pieces of memories: His ex-wife and two children, hunching over his bed; the little girl crying as she tugged his hand.

"Please don't go away, Daddy."

He said: "I promise."

His ex-wife's eyes, looking away. What was she hiding?

Another memory: Dr. Takenaka speaking to him.

"The organic anti-freeze liquid was extracted from Antarctic fishes. It will prevent your cells from bursting during the delicate thawing processes. But the cancer... well, that's up to the future to solve. Do you believe in life after death, Mr. Archibald?"

A flashback: David seeing himself in a mirror as a small child, dressing himself up as king, with a paper crown and a red tablecloth for a mantle. The feeling of power! brought by the robes of office. The shame and littleness when his mother, so much bigger, discovered him and smiled.

The cold. The cold that crushed his bones, clawed at his heart. The pain was growing unbearable. David was dying, and he understood it now. A tunnel of light opened in the darkness, and he approached it faster and faster. At the end of the tunnel he discerned a shadowy figure, stretching out its arms to welcome him...

And the figure vanished before him. His body was jolted by a burning shock -- air was pressed into his lungs and forced them to move. His heart took a first, numb beat -- then another, and another. His vision went red as blood streamed through his eyes. His aching ears were suddenly attacked by a torrent of sounds, a world of noise crashing onto his heavy head. David opened his eyes.

First, it was all a blur of light and shadow. The light stung, so he shut his eyes for a while. The noise settled to a murmuring of wind in his ears. Time passed. David breathed and blinked and ached. Gradually, the blur grew more focused: he was looking up at a dark ceiling, while surrounded by monstrous figures that hunched down over him. David could taste blood in his mouth, and feel the tubes stuck into his mouth and up his nose. The figures above him were wearing some kind of coveralls, and face masks with visors over their eyes.

David tried to move his head, but the effort almost caused him to faint. With another effort, he sucked in extra air to talk. A wheezing sound escaped his throat. Someone removed the tubes from his mouth, and he tried speaking again.

"Bhhh..." he whispered, until the pain in his throat stopped him. The words he was striving for were "Bloody hell!", but they didn't come out quite right. He lay still, and let them tend to him.

One of the figures bent down close to his ear, and asked in a muffled voice: "Can... you... hear... me? Do... you... understand?"

A foreign accent, David thought sleepily. Italian? German? Asian? He wheezed a pained "yes".

"Remain... still," the voice said calmly. "You... need... rest. Blink one for yes... or blink two for no. Do... you... understand?"

David summoned all his strength and blinked once, with one eye. There were cheers from somewhere in the room. He was too tired to feel happy or angry, but he was awake. And he remembered something else: The cancer! They woke me up in the future, but I'm still sick. I must tell them! He tensed with panic as he tried to gasp a few words, then sank back exhausted. The men in coveralls surrounded him again, injecting him with something. The calming voice with the heavy accent explained that they knew about his disease, and that he was already being cured.

David fell asleep, his final thought being: Kids, I'll see you again as I promised.

Bor Damon's team of trusted physicians and technicians were keeping David in a specially equipped, sealed chamber of the castle hospital. Librian left the isolated chamber by way of the double-door and entered the observation room, where Bor had been watching the revival of the man from a window. Librian pulled off his rubber face mask, his face red and sweating.

Bor turned from the observation window and addressed him impatiently: "Well? Is he recovering as he should?"

The old man sighed heavily, sitting down: "Yes, my lord. His spinal cancer was no great challenge, the doctors have had cures for such ailments for centuries. What I worry about is his will to live. He is still very weak and thin, and must work up his strength. It will take all his willpower."

Bor made a sly face: "That does not seem to be a problem. The fellow has spirit -- he fought to speak almost as soon as he woke up." He frowned, and added: "But why is his hair so white? He is supposed to be in his prime."

Librian began wiping the moist off his glasses, and did not listen. A physician who was entering the observation room, pulled off his face mask.

He had overheard Bor's question and eagerly fell in: "Perhaps a side effect of the long freezing period, my lord. We have not come across such a case ever before. If you, my lord, would permit me to take the patient to my laboratory for further study..."

The doctor looked hopefully to the feudal lord, who restlessly moved about the small chamber in his rough hunting-clothes of leather and felt.

"Your wish is denied," Bor said curtly. "You will keep silent about this for now, under penalty of death."

A stern gaze from his blue eyes silenced any objection the doctor might have made; the physician went pale and bowed obediently. The next moment, he left the room. Librian put his cleaned glasses back on his head and continued talking, absent-mindedly.

"Yes, he has great inner strength, my lord. But bear in mind, that he surely was not meant to sleep for nine hundred years! To him, it must be as if he fell into sleep only yesterday. When he understands that the ancient world, his wondrous Golden Age is gone... then he might lose his will to live."

"So what will you tell him?"

"Nothing, my lord. I will just keep him from the world, until he is strong enough to face it."

Bor Damon seemed content with this solution: "Good, good. Besides, it would look bad to show him in this haggard state -- I would risk becoming the laughing-stock of the nobility. Keep him from my sight -- and especially my family. I will be away hunting in the castle gardens for the rest of the day."

Bor strode out, leaving the old scholar and his new guest from the past.



Tharlos Pasko

Book one Chapter 4

Lord Migam Pasko was not pleased.

His spies had just returned to his castle with the latest news from Damon City. The spies had prowled the city disguised as flying trade officials on a visit; gossiping with the locals, bribing the servants of the castle, handing the Damons' maids a pearl or a ring. They stayed for two days but flew back in their airship to Pasko City a month later, having been forced to fly a longer three-city route to avoid suspicion. That Bor Damon's quarterly harvest of food crops were turning out fine, while Pasko's growing ranks complained over sparse rations, was bad enough news. But the spies had picked up a persistent rumor, too: of a mysterious, white-haired stranger who had come from nowhere to visit lord Pasko's neighbor and rival. A stranger who was said to be immortal.

Lord Migam Pasko listened to his agents' report with ever increasing gloominess. He was a fat nobleman like Bor, but Migam's fat spread all over his body, making his soft face look too small for his round head. He tugged nervously at his stripy, black whiskers as he asked the spies: "What is his name, the name of this mystery man with the white hair?"

"They call him 'Darc', my lord."

The city lord's wife Lady Tresa, who sat next to him at the dinner table, sneered at the spy: "Is that a name? It sounds more like a mistake to me!"

Migam's adult son, Sir Tharlos Pasko, did not laugh. He sat up from his chair and paced the royal hall restlessly. Tharlos was a gaunt young man, almost twenty years old. His naturally black hair was long and dyed pale yellow, in the fashion of the worshippers of Koban-Jem. He stopped at his mother's chair.

"The Damons are conspiring against us," he complained loudly, "and what do you do, my esteemed parents? You sit and wring your hands! We should strike now, while our forces are still strong!"

His father looked up at him with a little contemptuous smile, and said in his calm, studious manner: "You still cannot forget that Bor's son beat you last year -- can you?"

Tharlos gave his father a furious glare. His long-fingered hand reflexively moved toward his behind, where he still had the scar from the last summer joust. Bor Damon's son, Dohan, had fired a laser pulse through a weak spot in Tharlos' armor and burned his right buttock. Tharlos had screamed out loud, and the audience had laughed at him -- even his mistress, Lady Okono had laughed. That day, Tharlos had secretly sworn to kill Dohan. Lord Pasko made a slight nod, silently confirming that he remembered the occasion too. The young Tharlos put his hands on his mother's velveteen-covered shoulders. She was still attractive for her age, but her cruel character gave her eyes an ugly slant.

"My dear mother, mistress of our house," Tharlos said with exaggerated sadness, "it pains me to see your beauty wither away in this dreary place, with no hope of it ever becoming otherwise." She stiffened in her seat, looking down on the broidery in her lap. "Pity my poor father, dear mother. Comfort him, and support him, because what would you be without him?"

The lord's spouse stared at her master with cold, spiteful eyes. Lord Pasko knew what that look meant, and the personal misery it implied for him -- especially if he would try to sneak into her bedroom that night. He took comfort in another pint of strong wine, the product of his own vineyards. At least I have the wine, Migam Pasko thought. It brings the city good trade, and it brings me oblivion. Thank you, bountiful Goddess, for the gift of wine!

But Tharlos could neither forget nor forgive, ever. An obsessive pride drove him to avenge every slight, real or imagined.

He left the hall with the spies, humming a ritual chant to himself: "I-eee-e-e-ee-ee, I-eee-e-eee..."

The spies were working for his gold too. And he had plenty of work for them, with the SummJoust approaching. Let us see just how immortal this "Darc" is, he thought.



David Archibald / Darc

Book one Chapter 5

David thought his new epithet "Darc" sounded a bit silly.

But he accepted it as a courtesy to his hosts. After all, had they not saved his life? He promised himself to donate a handsome amount of his stock portfolio to Bor Damon -- as soon as he got in touch with the Rocke Foundation, which had administered his company during his long absence. Was there a chance, he asked himself, that Dr. Takenaka had also had himself frozen with his own method? David could thank him, they might both get to meet his children...

Christ, the kids! Eileen and Powers had to be at least in their fifties by now -- older than himself! But he must not rush ahead of himself -- he was here in Bor's estate to relax, restore his former self. Was it really only a month since they thawed him out? David had been well treated by the servants. And the translator Librian had improved his broken English a lot since they met -- a funny old geezer, treating David almost with the respect of a king. He had brought David some very, very brittle books to read -- "Gulliver's Travels" and Adam Smith's "The Wealth Of Nations" -- but someone had torn out the year of printing. Odd. What year was it anyway?

David quit his brooding and sat up from the wooden wheelchair, supporting himself on a walking-stick. He walked through his spacious room -- it was furnished with heavy oak furniture and colorful painted tapestries -- out onto the stone balcony. David breathed in the clean air, savoring the scents of spring. So much cleaner the air was in the future, unlike the stink of London or Brussels!

From his viewpoint at the eastern wing of Bor's mighty castle, David could overlook the entire town below. It stretched out at least two kilometers away in all directions, surrounded by the sloping, twenty-meter-high circular wall that ran unbroken along its rim. The town itself consisted mostly of a maze of narrow streets, and old three-story houses with sloping tiled roofs and large, well-kept back gardens. Several houses also had gardens growing on the very rooftops. The brick walls of the houses were just being re-painted in celebration of spring; a bright mosaic of red, white, and blue patterns was replacing the pale colors of yesteryear.

David looked down the smooth, round, sloping concrete walls of Bor's fortress. A beautiful walled park surrounded the castle at the center of the village, where men and women strolled about -- hanging up loads of clothes and linen to dry, dancing and playing, singing, listening to the flutes and strings which even David could hear from his balcony high above. He tried waving at a woman below -- she saw him and waved back, urging her friends to do the same.

"Hi there!" David shouted cheerfully, waving for a while; his arm soon got too tired to continue.

He leaned out to the north, trying to get a glimpse of the huge church which lay on the west side. But the castle hid the sight of the oval cathedral and its exotic, ornamented spires. David gave up the attempt, and made a mental note: Ask Bor to go to church for Mass as soon as you are strong enough to walk outside the castle. I got to get a closer look at those strange church ornaments -- there's something familiar about them, if only I could remember what?

Then he raised his gaze to the streets outside the park. There was much movement of people; the distant clatter of electrically powered carriages rolled across the cobblestone paving. He also saw a few horses and some cattle. No smoke rose from the chimneys; there was obviously a central power plant located somewhere below the city. And behind his range of sight, he knew, there were the enclosed fields of soybeans and potatoes which, according to Librian, bore harvest four times a year.

And beyond the city walls -- the blue haze made it hard to discern the details of the landscape, but it was obviously a wide valley with very few trees, and heavily eroded hills. Something far to the south might be another city... Madriavalo of North Castilia, they called this land. Picturesque, thought David, how provincial-minded these future people seem -- they don't react much to the word "Spain" at all. And they look like a mix of all the world's races too -- Bor Damon and his family are the spitting image of Irishmen or Scots. But of course, he assured himself, I should have known -- in such a peaceful world as this, who cares about national borders?

A river glittered in the distance to the east. Lush forests grew along its edges -- but no signs of cultivation or plowed fields -- nor a single boat in sight. A single bird flew by, far away. The only bird David had seen today. There were no pigeons to be seen in the city, almost as if they had been... exterminated. No, that was impossible.

David tapped his fingers against the parapet. As his health improved, his limbs tingled with restlessness. He had so much to do, and he was tired of the damned walking-stick. He dropped the stick, took a few uncertain steps -- and laughed as he found he didn't need it anymore. Bor and Librian were going to be surprised at his quick recovery! He heard a knock at the door inside, and stumbled to the room's only mirror to check his appearance.

He looked into the tall mirror. The man in the reflection was lean and tall, but not thin. His thick, bushy hair and eyebrows were still prematurely white -- a maid had offered to dye them in their original hue, but David had refused such vanity. His sharp face and its Caesaresque nose had remained the same, though. The tanned skin was crisper and had acquired a few wrinkles around the eyes and mouth, but was vigorous enough. His green eyes had not lost their almost wickedly playful sparkle, and his front teeth were all in place -- and white. He felt great, he told himself, and ready to take on the world.

David adjusted the soft, stuffed high collar of his modest brown jacket -- he wore the tight-fitting, bright synthetic pants of the nobility, though he'd rather prefer a pair of comfy slacks -- and brushed off his leather shoes. There was a new knocking at the door, more anxious this time.

"When in Rome, do as the Romans," he said to his image in the mirror.

Humming the old Popeye tune, David went over to the door and opened it.



Librian & Awonso

"Librian! Bor! Please come in and have a drink!"

David greeted them in English -- he was far from mastering their language yet. Librian entered, as always wearing his threadbare robe with its many pockets. In David's eyes, Librian appeared to be in his early seventies -- a balding, sunken man with very pale skin and kind, sad eyes. David had learned that the name Librian was actually a title, meaning "keeper of records" or "historian". He had not yet asked for Librian's real name.

Behind the older man came Bor, leaving Surabot to guard the door from the outside. Bor Damon had very soon impressed David with his charismatic authority -- one could see that people trusted and listened to this man, though he was often harsh and remote. In David's time, Bor might have been a very tough business executive -- instead of the petty local strongman he appeared to be. Bor was now dressed in what was obviously his casual spring clothes, made of rough blue and white linen. The blue-red-black family emblem was sewn onto his chest with gold threads.

"Good morning, Darc!" Librian said in English and smiled.

Bor grunted something which might have been the same words; he could only muster a few English phrases. Librian bowed and held out his palms, but did not shake hands -- it was the custom greeting among all people who were not close family members. Darc bowed in return at first Librian, then Bor Damon. Bor gave him a slight nod -- and caught sight of the open balcony. He immediately marched across the room and pulled the heavy double doors shut.

Turning to Librian, Bor asked: "Has Darc spoken to any man from that balcony?"

Librian translated the question to Darc, who smiled in surprise and replied: "How could I talk to people on the ground, from up here? I shouted hello a few times, but..."

He watched attentively as Librian mumbled the translation in Bor's ear.

Bor grunted and addressed Darc directly, while Librian translated: "Darc, it is good to see that you are recovering so soon."

"It is only thanks to you, and the good care of your staff," Darc answered politely.

"Darc, I shall not question that you are curious of why you must have stayed in your room for this whole month," Bor said -- only the vaguest hint of a personal excuse. "But the matter of your presence in my city is... delicate. I have even kept you from my own family members, so as not to upset you in advance."

David didn't quite understand what Bor meant, and his irritation began to grow. He had been close to death, and then revived in a future of talking robots, nuclear-powered cities, and cures for cancer. Nothing in this world appeared too outlandish for him to handle -- in fact, he had expected much more dramatic differences. Where were the spaceships? The TV sets? The stereo music players? Why were there robots, but not a single computer in sight? Or any photographs? His head was brimming with questions, and he wanted answers. At once.

"Bor -- spit it out, for Christ's sake." (He noted that his hosts seemed to wince at the mere mentioning of Christ. Were they Moslems or what?) "What is it I shouldn't be able to handle? Is my company bankrupt? Is my ex-wife dead? Are the kids --"

David swallowed, fighting back a sudden surge of emotion. He had managed to deny the thought until now -- but the gravity of the moment was overwhelming. He steeled himself for the worst.

Bor said: "Librian, explain to him. You are better suited for it than me."

Bor looked away, as if he was embarrassed by the intensity in David's questioning eyes. Librian sighed, and took David by the shoulder.

"Come with us to the library," he said in English. "You will find your answers there."

The castle library was not merely large; it was immense.

Located on the floor above the great hall of the fortress, the library stretched through two connected arched halls, measuring thirty meters in length and nearly twelve meters in height. Along the walls ran four separate levels of bookcases, accessible via narrow balconies and stairs. The ceiling lamps were deliberately subdued, as to avoid damaging the innumerable fragile volumes collected from nine centuries. There were electrical reading-lamps available at the tables on the stone floor; when the three men entered through the high portal, they could see a handful of people sitting reading at the tables.

One of the seated men was obviously at work copying a manuscript. He fitted tiny die-cast letter-types into a blackened box, for use in some primitive printing-press in another part of town. David stared up at the rows of books, and gaped. It was so old, everything. How could it be so old? His mind staggered, refused to grasp the inescapable answer. Bor had a quick glance around, but showed little interest -- he had seen it all his life.

Librian, on the other hand, seemed at home in this dusty, dry environment. With soft, swift steps he walked over to a round-faced young man, who sat dreaming over some restored pictures of lush, naked women. He wore a robe dress similar to Librian's, and reminded David of a monk. The old librarian snapped impatiently with his fingers -- the chubby young man looked up and blushed, covering the book-pages with the wide sleeves of his robe.

"Master Librian, I --" the embarrassed apprentice stuttered.

"Hush!" Librian whispered. "How many times have I told you to keep your voice down? The spirits of ancient writers will haunt you if their sleep is disturbed!"

The apprentice's eyes widened fearfully, and Librian commanded: "Now go get me the oldest world map, and the copy of Al-Masur's History. Quickly, Lord Damon is waiting!"

The apprentice librarian hurried away, his soft shoes shuffling against the floor mosaic. While they waited, Darc stepped forward and surveyed the mosaic under his feet: it was worn and faded, and must have been as old as the castle. Its tiles mostly formed patterns which might be inspired by Arabic carpets -- but some of the patterns were utterly strange. Small yellow circles split by black lines... white parallel lines over a green background, converging in black rectangles -- where had he seen them before? Circuit boards? He hadn't seen a single circuit board in the castle. The central symbol was about three meters wide, and consisted of a big golden circle cut through by a thick, black stripe. It reminded him of the head of a screw. An absurd idea entered David's mind, that a circuit board design had been used as an abstract pattern...

He looked up again as he heard the apprentice return, carrying a book under one arm, and a tube the size of a rolled-up carpet in both his hands. The pudgy apprentice went to the widest table and opened the tube, then carefully pulled out and unfolded a huge roll of parchment. Librian, Bor, and David moved closer. And for the first time, David saw the map of the world as it now was. The date at the top read, in hand-lettered calligraphy:

719 Aw Monro

Seven-hundred-and-nineteen years after Monro... Monroe! At the middle bottom of the map, among much text, was drawn a small picture of a voluptuous blond female figure -- surrounded by a round halo. The figure held out its arms in a gesture that was both an invitation and a blessing. The dreamy smile and the half-shut eyes, though heavily stylized, were instantly recognizable. David made an ugly grimace.

The accompanying picture at the top of the map was even more absurd -- an Elvis lookalike, stylized almost beyond recognition. The microphone he should have been holding, had been changed into a phallic sceptre. The absurdity of the moment -- finding classic pop stars as icons on a withered map

scroll -- would have been funny, if it wasn't so terrifying.

David's horror grew, even as he refused to accept what the map clearly displayed: The British Isles were gone. As were most of Scandinavia, Siberia, and Canada. A symbolic, cracked icecap was covering almost all land down to Belgium. There were no longer any nations, only continental regions such as Juro, Awrica, Amreca, Arba, Azja, Artica, Awstrala, and Atartica. The huge Antarctic and Arctic ice-continents seemed uninhabited.

And the cities? Most of them vanished, too. Paris, Madrid, Rome, Moscow, New York, Tokyo, Beijing and Buenos Aires were missing from the map -- in many cases replaced by a tiny symbol for nuclear radiation. North America was not hit so hard by the radiation symbols -- but a sizeable chunk of the Californian coastline seemed to have vanished into the sea. There were very few cities on the map, and most of them seemingly small, like Damon City... there it was, just north of where Madrid should have been:

Daamon Zateli

Australia was mostly uninhabited -- or uncharted, it was impossible to tell how accurate the map was outside of Europe. One city's name and location remained nearly unchanged:

Zidnii Zateli

Sydney. Of course. The place where David's cryonic freeze-capsule was supposed to have rested from the start. So it had been moved by unknown hands across the world, to gather dust... where?

"Where exactly did you find me?" David asked Librian, his eyes fixed on the map before him.

"In the Madrivalo ruins, I gather it was in an old crypt under a temple ruin."

"And... what year is it," David asked in an odd, soft voice.

The old scholar consulted a small almanac: "It is day fourteen in the month Arial, the year nine-hundred and forty After Monro Our Goddess. In the old calendar, that would be approximately the year two-thousand nine-hundred After Chri -- Forgive me, Goddess..."

Librian made a quick gesture: his palm went from his heart to his lips to his eyes, as if crossing himself.

David turned away from the map, feeling the impact coming hard.

"Nine hundred years," he mumbled. The young apprentice stared curiously at the white-haired stranger who stumbled past the rows of aged books. The stranger's language was alien to him. "I didn't want to understand that I'd been away for too long..."

David gave the other people a strange, excusing smile.

"Y'see, I was supposed to be awakened in the year 2010 or something. When they had learned to cure my cancer. When I was almost dead, they froze me and put the capsule in a storage-bunker in Sydney."

David pulled out a random volume from the bookcases, and flipped through the pages. The letters were right, but the words seemed warped. He stopped at a faded color picture: a reproduction of an old photograph, picturing a futuristic city of skyscrapers. Towers glittering with lights, against a sky illuminated by artificial images. The future. His future was already in the past.

His voice cracked as he shouted: "And now they're all dead!!!"

David hurled the precious book through the air. The apprentice librarian gasped, and dived for the book as it hit the floor. David started rambling across the library, his eyes frantically searching the bookcases for something... a message from his own time.

"Somewhere here there must be a piece of them... a letter... anything!!!" His fingers groped at the books, as if trying to pull out his lost loved ones. He began raving like a lunatic as he searched: "Please help me find them, the names, their names. Eileen and Powers. She is six years old, green eyes like me, blond hair. She loves books, she wants to become a writer.

"Powers is eight years old, brown hair, gray eyes. He plays videogames all day, but he can draw and play basketball. There must be something left... but... if... nothing..."

David would have welcomed madness, but the escape into insanity never came. He sank down on the floor, his back against the wall of books, and cried without shame. The others stared silently at him for several minutes. Librian walked over to the sitting figure, knelt down beside him, and put his hand on David's shoulder.

Through his tears, David noticed the compassion in the old scholar's voice: "Forgive me for keeping the whole truth from you," he said softly. "We had to be sure you were strong enough. After all our efforts to bring you back to the world of the living, we did not wish to lose you again. Can you forgive me?"

"Yes," David sobbed without hesitation. "But... I'm alone now, so alone. My kids, my ex-wife, my friends, my world... all gone..."

Librian answered: "I understand your grief, but you are not alone. I may not be like the people of your Golden Age, but I truly want to help. I wish to call you my friend, and I want you to live and tell us more about your time. Please do not give up now."

"But..." David sat catching his breath for a moment, looking before him. "What can I do? Start a new life here? I'm thirty-six years old..."

Librian grew more enthusiastic: "Yes, you can! You have spirit, as my lord said. You survived the Eternal Ice, the two Great Wars, the Plague. There is a purpose to your being here. I know there must be."

David sighed, wiping his face on his sleeve. He immediately accepted the facts, as he had always done in his previous life. He told himself: Always accept the facts. Then use them to your advantage. It helped me build a life, and it will build me another life. I still feel miserable, but I won't give up. Ever. I'm sorry, Eileen. I really tried to keep my promise. I really tried. But now it's too late. I still have this stupid drive that keeps me going. I yam what I yam and that's all I yam.

David Archibald stood up, bracing himself. He faced Librian, touched his shoulder, nodded.

"A new life," he confirmed in a steady voice. "Okay. The first thing I'll do, is to get rid of my old name. You call me Darc, and from now on I will use it as my name." He took a deep breath, walked closer to Bor Damon and greeted him in the customary way; bowing with his palms held out. "Nomme es Darc, Seo Damon. Tom kesse oré," he said in the local tongue. Meaning: "My name is Darc, Lord Damon. Your honored guest".

That much he had learned. Bor nodded in reply, almost smiling. By now, the young apprentice librarian had realized who the stranger was -- he had heard about Lord Damon's mysterious guest, but had refused to believe the rumors until now.

He approached the stranger cautiously, and mumbled: "Nomme es Awonso, masim Darc. Tom servat obé." Meaning: "My name is Awonso, master Darc. Your humble servant."

Awonso bowed respectfully. The white-haired guest bowed his head in reply. Librian handed Darc the volume which Awonso had fetched.

"What's this?" Darc asked in English.

"It is a copy of Al-Masur's History. It contains the oldest written records of history before the coming of the 'Toutim Ais', the Eternal Ice. The historian from the south of Arba, Al-Masur, lived four hundred years ago. He spent all his life collecting and translating fragments of old texts; many of them survived well in the dry desert climate of Arba. Al-Masur gave us the first whole picture of the Golden Age, and what happened in the following years -- the Eternal Ice, the Two Great Wars, the Plague... you must read our history, in order to understand our time. I and young Awonso will be here in the library, to teach you more of our language. In time, you will read the book without my help."

Darc thanked the old scholar, who ordered Awonso to bring them food and drink. It was going to be a long day and night in the library. Bor was relieved to bid the company goodbye and return to more urgent affairs of state. Be patient, Bor told himself. In time, Darc will be ready. And then I will see what use can be made of him. He is but a man, after all -- no ghost, and not nearly man enough to pose a threat to us. Perhaps he can tell me, if any of the artefacts in the catacombs might still be of use.



Osanna, Eveli & Bwynn Damon

Book one Chapter 6

Darc's English Diary, June (Iunna) 21st, 2897 AD (940 Aw Monro):

I've finally gotten the hang of the Castilians' blasted grammar. I guess the way they construct sentences is a product of the great migrations that followed upon the Ice Age; I've found traces of Chinese, Russian, and lots of plain old English in their language. One thing worries me: not many people around for conversation in my old language. When I get tired of writing a diary, my English will deteriorate...

Last night I managed to get through the last of Al-Masur's History... strange reading indeed. It's rather obvious the poor man mixed up fact and fiction -- but who can blame him? There was nobody around to help him sort out between old novels and genuine historical records. No film, no disk drives -- Bor's cellar is full of ancient CD-ROM discs, and I can't read a single bloody one! Besides, I think they're too scratched to play even if I had a CD player.

The History Of The World According to Al-Masur, and this age, can be summed up as follows:

First, there was the Green Age -- the "immeasurably long time of standstill between the Earlier Ice and the Eternal Ice," as Al-Masur puts it. "The Earth was green and fertile. The people were simple farmers living off the wild crops and half-wild cattle. They were heathens, worshipping innumerable pagan gods such as Christos, Butta, and the many-armed Konshivius." (I think Al-Masur's sources have confused Taoism with Hinduism somewhere here.)

Then came the Steel Age, when man first learned to use artificial power to build self-propelling machines. "The early robots poured smoke into the sky, until the trees turned black and the children fell ill from breathing the air. But the people continued to feed the smoking robots, which produced ever more clothes, food, and houses for the growing population. The power of the old gods began to weaken under the rule of the robots. New prophets came -- Tarwin, Marx and Spencers. They preached that the gods did not exist, that the world belonged to the humans and the robots in alliance."

(This must refer to the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century. Fairly easy to follow up to here -- but then it gets all screwed up.)

Oops, time to go to sleep. The city lamps will soon be turned off by Lord Damon himself -- sole proprietor of the fusion reactor under the castle. The greedy old fellow leaves nothing but the castle's heating system and a few street lamps on. The time is -- they don't use mechanical watches, but I guess the sundial is better suited for a life without offices and factories -- about nine, I think. Over and out.

Darc's English Diary, June (Iunna) 22nd, 2897 AD (940 Aw Monro):

Today I was introduced to Bor's family. I'd better write that down, so I won't forget those weird names. Amazing, what power Bor's got, he actually ordered his wife to avoid me and was obeyed. This age might not be so bad after all, ha ha.

OSANNA is Bor's wife -- she's a few years younger than him, but in pretty good health. Is she his second? Hard to tell. Osanna's in charge of the household, but keeps away from Bor's servant robots. She seems very nice, but these people are quite formal so you don't get to know them easily.

DOHAN is their son, seventeen years old -- he spends very little time in the castle or the library. His main interests seem to be martial arts, fencing and flying around in his dad's private jet machines. Dohan's not a bad kid, just a little wild -- he'll probably settle down once he gets married to the daughter of some neighbouring city-state noble-nose.

EVELI is Dohan's kid sister. She's being raised as a lady, and it shows. One can see in her eyes that she thinks I'm a lousy commoner, an upstart who's fooled her father into thinking I'm a time traveller. Well, you can't win'em all. Then there's Bor's own younger sister BWYNN and her husband ANDON PASKO. Nothing remarkable about them, really -- they don't speak much. There's some family feud

between the Paskos and the Damons, reaching back a few centuries. Librian warned me about mentioning this to Bor -- he can get nasty when he's angry.

And speaking of family -- LIBRIAN is an old widower since many years, and married to his books anyway. His apprentice, 15-year-old AWONSO is the son of a common craftsman.

Al-Masur's history book continues in SOD IT! The lights went out. Over & out.

Darc's English Diary, June (Iunna) 23rd, 2897 AD (940 Aw Monro):

I must continue writing down my translation of Al-Masur...

After the Steel Age came the Golden Age -- my time, the 20th century, as these people see it. Al-Masur pours it on thick: "It was a time of constant change, of every day offering fantastic new discoveries -- but no one loved it. It was a time of great depravity, of all imaginable excesses -- but no one admitted (sic!). Mankind fought, ate, multiplied, conquered galaxies (sic!). Billions of humans packed together on the Earth, the Moon, and Mars. From pole to pole, humans dug up all available resources to feed the robots which fed mankind. The robots began to grow intelligent, and once nearly threatened to exterminate mankind under the robot prophets Tee-1 and Tee-2 (sic!).

"But they perished, for this was also the age of The Coming of the Goddess and the Singing King. Praise Monro, the first human incarnation of the All-Mother! Hail Vis, the first one to be possessed by the Divine Song! For it is written: Monro is the Goddess in our time. She appeared to the entire world in one instant, a million images of the One. For it is written: The King is alive, and was seen walking the earth outside the common man's home. He is all men, young man and old fat man at once. And he too showed himself to the entire world, alive to the night!"

(No comment. If I think too much about this, I go crazy. I haven't gathered the courage to visit their church services yet -- what if I laugh out loud, will they call me a heretic and burn me at the stake?)

But from here on it gets real scary. Al-Masur's account of what happened in the first centuries after I was frozen, is confusing:

"The Golden Age was blessed by the Goddess and the Singing King. Their first incarnations walked the earth and went away. And in their absence, the people grew comfortable and decadent. They ridiculed the King, and turned to false gods such as Koban-Jem the Singer Of Death. They desecrated the temples of the Goddess with filthy images of perversion and murder. And they forgot the Divine Words of Love, for the lure of Setan-Klaws. Setan-Klaws the red, bearded demon of greed, who sneaked into houses at night and poisoned the childrens' minds with a limitless lust after dead things.

"The children of Koban-Jem and Setan-Klaws ruled the cities like wolves, preying upon the innocent and waging war among themselves. They became creatures with neither faith nor compassion. Forever damned were they, and the wrath of the Goddess was merciless. She shook the Earth in its orbit, and let the Eternal Ice upon the world. The Ice slowly crushed the cities and froze millions to death. In one century, the Eternal Ice had covered nearly half of the world and made the oceans sink down."

(It seems from the climate now -- dry and not very warm, even here in North Castilia -- that this Ice Age is still very much active. But what caused the planet's axis to tilt and started the change in the climate? Al-Masur offers no scientific explanation.)

"Billions of people fled toward the equator to escape the cold. The world's tribes crowded and fought for the decreasing food supplies, and the mighty robots were unable to stop the advancing ice. Many people starved to death, and the remaining ones turned mad with hunger and desperation..."

I'm crying again. Thank God that the kids were gone long before this happened. I can't continue now.

I miss my ex-wife.

Maggie, if only you could have joined me in the freeze!

Darc's English Diary, June (Iunna) 24th, 2897 AD (940 Aw Monro):

It's no pleasure, but for some reason I force myself to translate Al-Masur -- it's more real to me when I read it in my own language.

"The First Great War occurred somewhere between 150 or 200 After Monro. Two or three billion

people perished. The cities of the North and South attacked the cities of the Equator, and retaliation struck swift and massive. Many died when the war-robots were sent through space and fired nuclear heat upon the cities. But despite huge losses, there was still not enough food and room.

"And the Second Great War came, somewhere between 220 and 270 After Monro. This time there were no more nuclear robots, so the city lords unleashed the plague known as Pseudo-Leprosy upon each other. Woe and curse the evil ones who let the Plague upon us! Their crime is unforgivable, for it killed many more people than the Third War and condemned countless millions to a fate worse than death.

"Only a minority of mankind managed to hide underground, until the Plague had come to rest. When they returned to the surface, they built the fortified cities which stand to this day. The Lepers who survived the Plague were doomed to wander the earthly wastelands forever, carrying the Plague as a reminder and warning of human folly. For it is written: Praise the Goddess who spared her faithful ones, and pray for the return of the King!"

It's a bloody shame, that's what it is. I feel guilty somehow for having escaped the whole mess -- stupid, I know, but there it is. I was dumb lucky, that's all. Left forgotten for 900 years. With a little less luck, they could have thawed me up just 200 years after 1999 and BOOM!

I've got a human maid now, but that pesky robot Lachtfot still follows me around the castle like a watchdog. As soon as I get him out of the way, I'll try to get to know the maid better. She's a bit older than me and a bit scared of me too, but I don't care. This solitude is more than I can take.

Darc's English Diary, June (Iunna) 25th, 2897 AD (940 Aw Monro):

Tomorrow they'll finally let me out of this castle!

Bor has invited me to attend the Summer Joust, which occurs every June in connection with the Summer Festival. It's a bit late in the month, but the weather isn't quite what it used to be in my own time. There is much expectation in the air -- word has it that Bor's champion, his own son Dohan, is a sure winner this year too. Everyone is cheerful (except Andon Pasko), every room's been decorated with flowers and green garlands. Someone's even stuck a flower onto the head of Lachtfot -- suits him right.

I was surprised to learn that there are actually knights in shining armor in this age -- their armor has to

shine very bright, to deflect laser-beams. Each knight has a crew of pages, who do nothing but polish armor all day. The feudal lords, such as Bor Damon, are sworn to protect their city-states against attacking enemies -- that's why they have knights.

What enemies? The city-states are heavily fortified, with laser cannons posted all around the outer walls. The cities are placed 50-100 kilometers away from one another, and quite self-sufficient despite the alliances between them -- with the empty wastelands surrounding the cities, what is there to fight? "Al-Masur" hints that the cities were isolated to shut out the Lepers -- survivors of the artificial plague that almost wiped out mankind 500 years ago. Just once I tried to ask Librian about the "Lepers" -- had he ever seen one, or even a picture of one? He got too scared to answer, so I'll avoid that taboo until I'm sure it won't get me into trouble.

And speaking of armor and robots, now I understand why these people use technology in such limited ways. A telling example:

Early this morning, the servant robot Vhustank broke down. Bor sent for a couple of craftsmen to repair him. Five specialized mechanics came to the castle, armed with an arsenal of instruments and carts loaded with old reference manuals. They put on dust-protective coats, and placed the broken machine in a dust-free, inflatable tent. While two of them tinkered inside the tent, they handed little notes with queries to the remaining three technicians. The three men outside read the notes, and leafed through several thick volumes to find an explanation. When they had looked up a possible reference, they copied it onto a small hand-written form which they passed into the tent.

After many hours of consulting and checking -- I didn't stay around all day -- the specialists found the source of the malfunction and sent for the correct spare part. The robots' delicate spare parts are manufactured by a special guild of craftsmen, who work in small, specialized workshops -- the spare part happened to be in stock, but it had taken about one year to put it together correctly!! Finally, they had Vhustank up and running. "A record short time," the specialists boasted. "Once we had to go over a robot for seven months before we found the fault."

I asked them, "Why can't you just build spare robots, and let them replace the broken robot while you work on it?" The five mechanics stared at me like I was crazy -- then they laughed, thinking it was a joke. Young Awonso explained it to me: each single robot is the product of three cooperating guilds, and takes about ten years to build -- they are often inherited within the family, and Vhustank goes back at least two generations. Small wonder then, that only the nobility can afford robots!

And there's more: it seems that all knowledge they have of technology is inherited too. The robots, the aircraft, the fusion power -- everything fragments of a glorious past, painstakingly copied and passed on from the time when people cared to invent new things.

No factories -- no scientists -- no change. These are the new Dark Ages. (I hope the maid won't return to my room tonight. I'm too tired.)



Dohan Damon Book one Chapter 7

Trumpets sounded through the morning air, signaling to the citizens that this was the day of the Summer Joust. The Summer Festival was to take place the very same day and evening; with dancing, singing, and drinking lasting beyond midnight.

From five neighboring cities, prominent guests and competitors arrived to Damon City. Their sleek jet vessels painted the sky with lines of colored vapor, before they sank down onto the landing-space outside the castle. And the guests walked down from their ships, dressed in splendid colors and decorated with their most expensive electronic ornaments. A myriad tiny, multicolored lamps blinked in the metal braids and collars of the wealthy, beautiful noblewomen. When the ladies took off their traveling-cloaks, they exposed straight skirts reaching to their ankles, with gold- and silver-embroidered family patterns.

The Oriental-featured Yotas, one of the most powerful families of North Castilia, were accompanied by little glittering thin-legged robots.

The Paskos, though impeccably dressed, wore little jewelry and brought no servant machines -- their resources were being directed elsewhere, which they kept silent about.

The minor, but highly admired Fache family was represented only by their champion Lord Azuch Fache and his servants. His absent wife was, as always, sick in bed.

And half an hour late as always, Lord Orbes and family landed on the field and came laughing down the ship ladder. They were the Damons' close allies, and it was expected that one of Orbes's sons would marry Bor's daughter Eveli in a few years.

Bor Damon and family arrived, bidding his esteemed visitors welcome with much good-hearted cheer. For this occasion, Bor wore the heavy electronic collar with his name inscribed, which worked as a portable computer and loudspeaker; it amplified his voice and carried shortwave commands to his robots. His beautiful and popular wife, Lady Osanna, escorted the noblewomen to the castle gardens for refreshments, while they waited for the men to prepare for the main event.

The young ladies-in-waiting tried to linger close to the young knights, as their mothers jokingly urged them onward. Tharlos tried to catch the eye of the graceful Lady Okono Yota, but she remained aloof. Several ladies eye-flirted with Sir Dohan as they strolled off, giggling.

The competitors of the five families greeted each other apart from the crowd, formally but with no visible hostility. Their elders, retired champions and noblemen, retreated to the castle with Bor Damon. Because they had trained armored combat since they were children, the knights had learned to control their body movements with the utmost calm. Their armored suits were more than just metal -- they were exo-skeletons. Responsive, powerful, and natural extensions of the knight's fighting abilities. Through T'ai Chi and other arts, the knights had mastered harmonic body control.

This early in the day, a few hours before the actual duelling, the fighters wore light, loose-fitting clothes covered by tunics in their family colors. Like their fathers, they mostly had crew-cut hair.

Sir Dohan Damon wore blue, red, and black in large checkered patterns. His short beard was as ruddy as his stubby hair, his eyes pale blue. Dohan behaved in a relaxed and friendly way; he mostly knew his competitors from last year, and they knew him.

Still, Dohan kept a careful eye on his arch-rival Tharlos -- wearing black, orange, and yellow -- who remained silent as the others exchanged jokes and boasts. Tharlos' dye-yellow hair made an eerie contrast to his dark, intense eyes that promised no friendship. Lord Azuch Fache -- wearing white and green -- was the oldest of the champions, having remained at the top to the impressive age of thirty-seven. Though he rarely won the first prize nowadays, the younger knights looked up to him for advice on techniques and weapons care. Azuch had several tiny scars on his dark face and hands, from battles and jousts in his glorious past. His black eyes sometimes seemed to bury themselves in some secret memory, especially when he heard the sound of jet engines. Rumor had it that the battle against the Lepers of 930 A.M. had scarred his soul as well as his skin.

The Orbes family had as many as two young competitors: the adult champion Sir Saburé and his younger brother, the contender Sir Kensaburé. They looked very much alike, though -- both being squat and blond. Their colors were checkered blue and black. Of all the competitors, the Orbes's were ranked the least competent fighters, but compensated in good humor their lack of skill and control. The presence of the Orbes members was much appreciated at festivities and competitions -- if not in battle.

Sir Kamo Yota, the shortest of the fighters, wore red and white. He was about Dohan's age, but was already regarded as a future joust champion in spite of his short experience. Lord Yota had personally trained him toward perfection. Vhustank, Dohan's personal servant robot, served the competitors non-alcoholic drinks as they sat chatting on the marble benches next to the parked ships. Only young Kamo refused to drink.

He smiled courteously at his host and said: "Excuse me for not drinking, Sir Dohan. I am in need of deepest physical concentration, and must not disturb my body with foreign substances."

"You are excused," Dohan answered casually.

He decided, out of politeness, to change subject. Scanning the Yotas's sleek black aircraft, Dohan nodded thoughtfully. It had a very low profile, and a long rear flap instead of the standard snub-tailed rear ports of the other vessels. In length, it measured about fifteen meters. The craft also had three instead of the customary two jet tubes.

"Say, Kamo, that is an impressive new ship your family has built this year. How fast does it go?"

Kamo smiled again and bowed his head slightly, his half-shut eyes revealing little of his swelling pride.

"I should ask my esteemed father," Kamo said humbly. "He recently took it for a test flight, and when the ship reached maximum speed, the sound bang could be heard from miles away. Thus he named our ship 'The Roaring Wind'."

Murmurs of approval came from the impressed guests: reaching the speed of sound was very rare, even for the best jet ships.

Kensaburé Orbes wanted to save his friend's face, and intervened: "But your Sunray is no snail of a vessel either, eh, Dohan?"

Dohan suppressed a grin and said, as if to himself: "Well... it may not reach the speed of sound, but it navigates well and has a range of --" -- he stood up, pointing south -- "-- from here to North Awrica and back.

"With a light load and spare fuel," he added self-effacingly.

A rich, thoughtful voice sounded in the silence: "Word has it that Lord Damon has invited a special guest today..." The others turned to Azuch Fache, who stood up -- it was he who had asked the question. Azuch continued: "A guest from the past, or possibly the future. A white-haired man who is said to be immortal. Is this to be held as truth?"

Dohan hesitated. He knew next to nothing about Darc so far, and what little he had seen of him was hardly impressive. Clearly, his father's guest was an odd stranger -- he could barely speak their language properly. But Dohan sensed that Darc was part of some sly scheme to make his rivals nervous. It smelled of foul play, and Dohan did not want any part of it. He was going to prove himself like last year, without his father backing him up more than necessary.

"Do not believe everything you hear," he calmed them. "That stranger is no one in particular -- perhaps a fool or jester, who is here to entertain us with jokes and music."

Sir Tharlos Pasko glanced at Dohan and Azuch with a contemptuous face, saying nothing -- his nostrils widened, while not sniffing at his company, since he was too well trained at controlling his breath. But his mind was aflame with hateful thoughts: Just as I thought -- a trick to undermine my confidence. Did you think I would fall for such children's stories, you red-haired scum! Koban-Jem spits upon your mother's face.

The senior champion gave Dohan an inscrutable, grave look.

"You may think I am but an old man full of old wives' tales," Azuch said in his dark, slow baritone. "But tonight my wife dreamed of the return of the King." Everyone stopped breathing, even Kamo -- even Tharlos, who went pale white. It was widely known that Azuch's wife was something of an oracle. Mean

tongues called her a witch in disguise... but all Castilians took her rare moments of vision deeply seriously. "I should not say more," Azuch excused himself when he saw their faces. "Forgive me."

The Orbes brothers both eagerly asked him to continue; like their father, they were superstitious to a fault. Azuch held up his hands to call for silence, and granted them a full story.

"This is what my wife told me. 'In my dream,' she said, 'I saw two dueling knights, fully armored. One wore yellow stripes, the other wore blue. The blue knight fought bravely, but the yellow knight was stronger. The yellow knight pressed on, and the blue knight lost his foothold.

"Then, as it seemed that the blue knight would die, a tall man with white hair and clothes stepped forward. He struck with his silver sceptre and stopped the yellow knight's deathblow. The blue fighter rose to his feet and struck down the yellow fiend with all his might. The man in white raised his sceptre, opened his mouth, and sang -- but I could not hear the sound of his voice. Then my dream ended.' Those were her words."

The young men looked at Azuch -- the Orbes brothers were staring. Most of them, including Dohan, did not know what to think. But Azuch suddenly grinned, laughing at them.

"Calm yourselves, you hotheads! We do not know the ways of the Goddess... so live and see. Now stop trembling like toothless old folk, and prepare for manly combat!"

Laughing with released tension, the party split up and went to their respective tents. Their servants were already polishing their armor, charging the battery cells and testing the mechanisms. From the armory tents, the sounds of metal against metal mixed with the snaps of lasers and the whining of miniature jet engines.



Damon's armor

Darc sneaked up into the back of the main spectator lodge.

He looked across the jousting area, which was located in the south wing of the castle gardens. He could smell sweat, smoked meat and hot metal. The din of musical instruments and voices filled the air.

A food vendor ambled by, calling through a large paper horn: "Sweeeet wine, ice-cold cakes! Get'em before the game!"

A few meters in front of the roofed spectator platform, a rectangular dirt pit had been dug out and smoothed out; it was almost eighty meters long, twenty meters wide, and four meters deep. This was the jousting ground. But... No horses? No lances? Darc sensed that he had missed some important detail. He stepped down the way he came, and walked over to a nearby cluster of armory tents. The Damons' tent, checkered red-blue-black, was being guarded by Surabot and Vhustank. As Darc approached the tent, the polished brass figure of Lachtfot turned a corner and caught sight of him.

"Please do not stray from my sight again, master Darc," the thin-legged robot stated as it joined his rapid walk.

Darc gave Lachtfot a sly grin and paced onward.

"Too fast for you, eh?"

"Just a moment -- what is too fast for me, master Darc?"

"Nothing," Darc sighed. "Only my spinning head."

Lachtfot's electronic brain interpreted Darc's last remark as meaningless.

Wasting no more time outdoors, Darc entered the Damons' armory tent -- Bor had ordered his robots to allow Darc inside -- and hardly found any room to squeeze in.

Technicians and pages were swarming around the large suit of battle armor, which was hanging from a set of chains in a wooden frame. In a corner, three pages were helping Dohan into a white padded suit that covered everything except his face. As Darc watched, he thought of men in spacesuits, walking on the moon. Was this all that was left of those lofty aspirations -- medieval fighting?

Dohan's white suit was rapidly inflated with air from a hose. He was then outfitted with an intricate set of girdles and metal railings. He lumbered heavily over to the waiting metal suit, and stepped into its huge stubby legs. The upper armor pieces were slid into the railings on his limbs, and screwed together. Finally, the huge backpack was lifted up by three men and fastened to Dohan's armor. To Darc, the backpack resembled a miniaturized jetfighter-plane -- complete with tiny exhausts and swing-wings. Could that heap of metal really fly?

As Dohan stood in the frame, only his head free now, he seemed unable even to walk -- if the chains were untied, thought Darc, he and his armor would surely collapse. "We begin testing," Dohan said formally. "First, the arms."

A technician detached a humming power-cable from the backpack, and turned a switch on its side with a monkey wrench. The whole armor jolted with a burst of power, and the young knight lifted one huge, gleaming metal arm. The arm moved smoothly up, whirring deeply from its joints, and stopped with a click and a short hiss. Dohan nodded at the technicians. He tried the next arm.

It worked similarly, but he was not satisfied: "Open it. I feel a cable that needs tightening."

The craftsmen obeyed, and adjusted the arm's insides until it was just right. Dohan opened and closed his metal-clad hands, then gestured for his weapons. The armorer rolled over a tray, containing an impressive arsenal: A tall, rectangular mirror-blank shield; an oversized broadsword with a rapier-hilt that covered the hand's outside -- and a huge laser-gun with an unconnected power-cable dangling from its butt. Dohan took the shield, and weighed it in both his armored hands without visible effort.

He held the shield in his left hand, then grabbed the laser-gun and said: "Fasten it."

The craftsmen slid the weapon onto his right arm rack, until Dohan uttered a "Stop" -- he hit a switch

with his shield, and the laser-gun locked into place. A technician screwed the gun's power-cable to a port on the backpack's side, and stepped back. All except Darc closed their eyes and covered their ears. Dohan looked curiously to the cart standing on the far side of the tent; on it rested a block of concrete with a polished steel plate bolted onto the front. Dohan aimed the gun at the plate, at his own mirror image, and squeezed the trigger.

The loud, sharp crack of the pulse surprised Darc. A brightly red laser-beam blinked for about half a second -- and pierced a tiny hole through the test plate. The plate buckled with a metallic "POP!" The concrete block cracked -- a deafening bang, followed by a spurt of gray dust. Darc eyelids flickered, and he saw bright dots dance before his eyes. He stepped forward, staring at the blackened hole in the test plate.

"Say! Are you going to kill your opponent with that thing?"

Dohan turned his head to smile at the white-haired intruder who stood at the entrance -- in his concentration, the young knight had not noticed Darc until now.

"Hello, Darc! Kill? Why, that hasn't happened in years! Knights' armor is much sturdier than that piece of tin."

"But the spectators? They might get hit."

"Part of the game. We use only a few such rounds in a duel." Dohan's attention immediately focused back on the test. "Now, the legs," he said.

The servants loosened the chains that held his armored frame in place. He took a careful step forward -- the oversized, clawed foot stomped into the rough carpet, letting out little motor noise. Then he tried the other foot -- another stomp followed, but surprisingly fluid in its movement. Dohan walked a few large steps, then paused for further adjustments. In his suit, he was well over two meters tall. He reached for the broadsword; everyone backed off.

"Sword test. Watch this, Darc!"

Dohan took the sword in one hand, lifted it high above his head and hacked downward, just slightly bending his torso. Half of the blade sliced through the carpet and was stuck deep into the dirt. Dohan released his grip.

"Now try to pull the sword up," he asked Darc.

Darc grabbed the sword-hilt with both hands, and pulled with all his strength. He turned red in the face -- his strength was now as good as normal, but he was no athlete, Darc groaned and strained; the blade moved an inch, but no more.

"It's too heavy, and too deeply stuck," he gasped.

Dohan raised a metal-clad finger and gave Darc a proud look. Darc stepped back, and Dohan reached for the sword. With his arm fully outstretched, he grabbed the hilt -- and pulled the sword free in one single movement. The motors and hydraulic mechanisms of his suit made a considerable noise, but Dohan did not even break into a sweat -- nor did he bend his knees more than a fraction of an inch. His heavy metal feet gave him a rock-solid foothold. Dohan made a few swipes in the air with the blade, and slid it into the tin sheath on his metal hip.

"I would like to try on that kind of armor one day," Darc told him. He was envious, and he knew it showed.

Dohan shook his head: "Only the born noblemen can wear mechanized armor. And the suit must be fitted to the owner's body. Since I am still growing, the suit is often changed. And you must begin training early, at eleven or twelve years."

In that moment, Bor Damon marched into the tent. He was dressed in his finest outdoor clothes, and wore a purple cloak wrapped around his shoulder and chest. He nodded at Darc, then grinned heartily at his son; he had to bend his neck to look him in the eye.

"Are you ready to show them what a Damon is made of, my son?"

Dohan responded in a serious, confident mood: "I spent all winter preparing for this, father. I will not

disappoint you."

"Good." Bor turned to face Darc. "Now let us not disturb Dohan's concentration, Darc. The guests awaiting us!"

The two men walked briskly to the main spectator lodge.

Darc asked: "Lord Damon... why would you not let me say hello to your guests and the other knights?"

Bor seemed irritated at Darc's inquiry into his motives.

"Just stay calm and do as I advise," he grumbled. "At the banquet tonight, you will have all the time in the world for courting the ladies. Do not think word of you and that maid missed my ears – I know everything that goes on at the castle."

He blinked both eyes at Darc, then added with a more concerned expression: "Remember that you are not a nobleman. Not yet. We must proceed with delicacy, so as not to offend my guests with your presence. Have you understood what your presence here means to the people? No, I think not."

Darc smelled a rat. As they took their seats with the rest of the Damon family, he in a half-observed corner, it dawned on him what function he was serving. By just being there, Darc would arouse the guests' suspicions and superstitions. What did they think he was? A mystery man? An advisor? A bad omen for the knights? Darc felt the furtive stares he was receiving -- from the other families, from passing vendors, from the commoners standing on the other side of the wide pit.

Suddenly it struck him. Now I wish I'd dyed my hair, he thought glumly. He looked for something to cover his white scalp -- a cap left by the guests, anything. Nothing was to be found. He sank down in his chair and folded his arms. Relax, Darc told himself. What could happen? Probably anything I won't expect.

There was no time for Darc to further consider his position; the proceedings of the day cut off his thoughts. Bor stood up, and raised his arms. The people standing on the far side of the pit cheered long and loud for their ruler and protector. The musicians blew a fanfare in their horns, ended by a short,

sharp drum roll. The crowd fell silent.

Lord Damon pressed a button on his electronic collar, and the built-in bullhorn carried his ritual speech echoing across the pit: "I, Bor Wyan The Third Damon, chief City Lord of Damon City, greet my loyal and loving subjects, allies, and friends. I welcome the invited families of Orbes, Yota, Fache, and Pasko.

"I hereby declare the three-hundred and sixteenth Summer Joust open. May the best man win!"

The crowd roared with enthusiasm, waving little red-blue-black flags in the air. Hot-air paper balloons were launched. The musicians joined in with another fanfare. Darc could feel the temperature in the air go up one or two degrees...

Book one Chapter 8

Then, from both sides of the jousting pit, the knights marched out of their tents and stood ready. Their armor sparkled like polished silver in the clear, high midday sun. They made about as much combined noise as a stable of five-ton trucks, Darc thought.

On the pit's left side from Darc's point of view stood Dohan, flanked by Azuch Fache and the Orbes brothers.

On the right side was Kamo Yota, standing visibly apart from Tharlos Pasko... who was accompanied by some unknown knight. Both Tharlos' and his companion's eyes were hidden by their helmet visors.

The rules, as Awonso and Librian had explained them to Darc, seemed flexible yet simple:

"Rule One: The Joust is a succession of a one-on-one, or two-on-two duels between able-bodied men of noble birth.

"Rule Two: To increase the odds for new contenders, a current champion may choose a rookie to join him in a two-on-two duel.

"Rule Three: If a winner is unhurt, he has to beat another winner until one knight remains standing.

"Rule Four: If the joust injures a spectator, or one knight threatens to kill another, the hosting City Lord may command the fighting to stop.

"Rule Five: The competitors are allowed to use new improvements of their weapons, as long as these do not risk the lives of spectators nor knights.

"Rule Six: The hosting City Lord may disqualify a winner at any time after the joust, if said winner is found to have broken the rules."

Awonso had mentioned that the forming of dueling teams served as a political barometer, showing which families were on good terms with each other. The jousts were obviously not "fixed" -- their purpose was to show and improve combat readiness, and demonstrate the knights' prowess to the people they were sworn to protect. A cheater would quickly lose all stature. By this time, Darc's initial skepticism had shifted into awed admiration of the combatants. They weren't mercenaries, draftees or plain celebrities, but honest-to-God knights in shining armor -- even more so than their medieval ancestors. The helmeted knights turned toward Bor, who was still standing up in the lodge.

"This year's competitors are..." boomed his loudspeaker-enhanced voice, "Sir Dohan Damon, first-time champion of last year!"

The crowd cheered loudly; so did Darc. Dohan waved and grinned at his home audience.

Bor resumed: "And -- the second-ranking winner of last year and three previous years, champion of eight consecutive jousts -- the hero from the battle of 930, Lord Azuch Fache!"

The people cheered again. Azuch bowed toward the noble's lodge, then raised his sword and shield and shook them triumphantly. It took a full three minutes for the crowd to stop cheering.

"And -- Sir Kamo Yota, upcoming contender since three jousts, third-ranking winner of last year, son of seven-time champion Lord Ue Yota!"

The crowd gave him a hearty applause, though not as big as Dohan's. Kamo bowed courteously at the lodge audience; Ue Yota clapped his hands enthusiastically, his family joining in. Bor nodded approvingly to Ue Yota, then continued.

"And -- third-ranking winner of two years ago, son of two-time champion Lord Bes Orbes -- Sir Saburé Orbes!"

The crowd greeted him with a long, loud applaud -- perhaps not commending his skill as much as his spirit. The young fighter made a little premature jump up in the air, supported by his whining backpack jet, and thumped back down. He ended the show-off by rotating his sword above his head, the family flag tied to the blade. Everybody, except the Paskos, cheered heartily.

"And we welcome this year's new contender, also son of Lord Bes Orbes -- Sir Kensaburé Orbes!"

Bor urged his family to stand up and applaud the newcomer, which they did without hesitation. Darc and the other guests joined in. Kensaburé made a turn on the spot, threw his sword up in the air, let it spin around, and caught it perfectly with one hand. The crowd responded by waving flags in the Orbes colors -- checkered blue and black. Finally, Bor came to the last pair of competitors. Was there a hint of reservation in his voice? Darc could not tell.

"And -- also second-ranking winner of last year, one-time champion and outstanding fighter in four consecutive jousts, the son of Lord Migam Pasko -- Sir Tharlos Pasko!"

The crowd applauded, but ceased a little too quickly to sound truly enthusiastic. Bwynn Damon's spouse Sir Andon Pasko, who sat next to Darc, frowned and threw a brief glance at Lord Migam Pasko. The city lord did not even look in his younger son's direction. The relations between the Paskos and the Damons remained frosty, despite the arranged marriage between Andon and Bwynn. Andon was caught between two sides, and not really belonging in either family. He caught Darc's eyes, giving him a pleading look. Darc lowered his gaze -- he could not risk getting entangled in petty palace intrigues, nor did he want to. But he felt a vague solidarity with Andon's plight, them both being outsiders.

Bor went on in the same ebullient vein: "The second contender of this year is unknown, but is said to be

a relative from the lower nobility, in search of glory. He wishes to be anonymous. Thus we welcome -- the nameless one!"

The crowd's response was uncertain, but the people kept murmuring and whispering about the new stranger for a while. Tharlos nodded at his nameless comrade, who responded by raising his arm and sword once. He did not say a word; his mouth only moved to breathe. Dohan, already sweating in his artificially cooled armor, was hit by a dreadful thought: Could that be the yellow knight in Azuch's dream? Or the blue one? Dohan knew his father would have shamed him for doubting the moment before a fight. Nevertheless, he could not shake the feeling that this was a special day, with more at stake than just the champion title.

He whispered a prayer to himself: "Great Goddess, give me strength and I will attend all masses, sing your praise every day. Singing King, I pray for your return, your name is my shield, your voice is my sword."

He was not the only one to pray for victory that day.

Tharlos summoned the support of another deity. "O Koban-Jem," he whispered, "help me destroy my enemies and I swear to honor you, and wreak destruction on all your foes. Death to all enemies!"

Bor signaled silence, and declared: "And now, the knights may choose a fellow fighter to join him in combat! The opponents will then be matched."

The knights teamed up; it was rare for a fighter to go it alone. The Orbes brothers, as expected, formed a team, as did Tharlos Pasko and the nameless knight. Azuch Fache chose Dohan Damon as his fighting partner; Dohan bowed in gratitude. He had been beaten by Azuch in a past joust, but considered it an honor to be defeated by one of his heroes. This left Kamo Yota alone; he did not seem to be looking for a team member anyway.

Librian, sitting just behind Bor's chair, wrote down the team settings in the protocol. His aged eyes could hardly tell one knight from another, so young Eveli Damon had to whisper the settings in his ear. The opposing teams were now matched by Bor Damon: He announced that first, the Orbes brothers would meet Kamo Yota. They would decide themselves whether to fight Yota one at a time, or together -- though the second option would be regarded as gross cowardice. They opted for the first choice, but did not have to say who would fight first.

The winner of the first duel would be ranked Contender to the championship, and get the chance to challenge the champion in one year's time. After that, Azuch and Dohan would meet Tharlos and the nameless one -- the winner of that fight would become this year's new champion. The audience applauded his decision; it was widely known that Tharlos claimed the right to a return match against Dohan. If he won this year, his humiliating defeat of last year would be forgotten.

The musicians played a new fanfare. A prolonged drum roll accompanied the first match of fighters, as they ignited their whining jetpacks and hovered down into the pit. Tharlos' nameless companion lagged behind, and landed last of all. Darc noticed that the dirt walls and floor of the pit were recently hosed down with water. He assumed the reason for this was to keep the armor dust-free, so that it would deflect laser-beams for as long as possible. He also observed, that many of the nobles put on mirrored eye shades -- even Bor himself. Darc had no eye protection. He grew a little nervous, when he saw the three knights touch down on each sides of the fighting ground.

Bor called out: "Begin!"

"Stop, little brother!"

Saburé Orbes stretched out his sword, blocking his eager younger brother's attempt to step before him. He wanted to try and wear down their opponent first, before giving Kensaburé a chance to fight the much more experienced Kamo Yota.

Kamo, remaining still fifty meters away, immediately went into position. He took cover behind his high shield, and aimed his right-arm gun at the elder brother. He fired -- one, two, three quick pulses with one-second intervals. The brothers deflected the fire with their shields and charged forward.

Two pulses missed, one hit Kensaburé's shield and bounced off into the dirt wall. The audience applauded the first hit of the day. The Orbes brothers continued their charge, clanking and thumping at a running-speed of almost three meters per second. Kamo waited, taking occasional potshots. Kensaburé's clumsy false start had indicated the brothers' strategy: confuse Kamo by charging both at once, then let Saburé attack while Kensaburé retreated to the background.

Less than ten meters away from Kamo, the brothers split directions. In the same instant, Kamo flew up above their heads; dirt sprayed all over them. The two brothers ignited their jetpacks and followed -- but the younger brother was not quick enough. Suddenly, Kamo dived feet-first at the ascending Kensaburé, who panicked and fired up at him. Too late -- Kamo swung down his shield and struck Kensaburé's

helmet. His ascent was stopped dead, and he crashed backwards into the dirt. The crowd half gasped, half cheered.

Darc winced at the nasty noise of the crash-landing knight; he feared the victim's neck had snapped, despite his cushioned armor. As Kamo swung around and hovered down to the ground, he was ready to meet the elder opponent. Saburé was thrown off balance now, furious at the sight of his injured brother -- and forgot his self-control. He gave a blood-curdling battle cry -- distorted into an inhuman roar by his built-in amplifier -- and flew straight onto the standing enemy in a barrage of laser pulses. Kamo dodged him by launching upward into the air again, with an impressive sideways movement that caught Saburé by surprise -- and before Saburé had managed to turn and block, Kamo had scored several laser hits in his right side. One of the hits caused Saburé's laser-gun to explode in a puff of smoke -- the impetus made him spin away from Kamo and almost fall. The audience gasped collectively. In the last instant, Saburé caught his balance and landed, nearly stumbling on his fallen brother.

He raised his shield, and his enhanced voice echoed across the pit: "Wait! Lord Damon! I must see to my brother!"

Bor held up his arms.

"Hold the fighting."

Bor was accustomed to such spectacles, and knew that Saburé's plea would awake the sympathy of the commoner audience. Kamo consented and stepped back, lowering his guard. Saburé kneeled down and unscrewed Kensaburé's helmet. The younger brother was conscious, but dizzy.

"I'm fine," he lied -- and groaned when he tried to sit up. "I can't get my armor going."

Kensaburé's neck was protected by a shock-absorbent collar, but it was evident that the fall had caused a whiplash or minor concussion. His movements were too weak to activate the armor's response.

Saburé asked: "Can you feel your legs?"

Kensaburé tensed his muscles, then said: "Yes."

"Do not move! If you try to rise with the help of the motors, you risk permanent injury. Lie still, wait for the doctors."

"But --"

"You did well, little brother. There was nothing shameful about your first battle."

Saburé grinned grimly, patting his brother's armored shoulder: "Now let me beat the crap out of the bastard who hurt you."

Without listening to his brother's objections, Saburé stood up and disconnected his useless laser-gun.

"I challenge you with sword only," he shouted at Kamo. "You dare to accept?"

Without a word, Kamo quickly loosened his gun and threw it to the ground. He held his shield in a diagonal position, and raised his broadsword -- ready to strike.

"Continue!" said the judge.

Saburé moved sideways, away from his brother; Kamo followed from a distance of several meters. When they were in the middle of the pit, the fighters stopped for a moment. The audience was dead silent; Lord Orbes and his wife held each other's hands, their round faces pale white. Darc realized that he himself was in a cold sweat. And the knights attacked, launching up above ground level like huge robots, jetpacks screeching at an ear-grating pitch. In mid-air, their swords met with a resounding, sharp clang. They bounced off each other, regained their balance, sank down in wide arcs, touched the ground -- and took off again.

The combatants crashed into each other, shields first -- Kamo lost control, spun away at a sloping angle, shot away -- when he broke his fall, he had to land at the far corner of the pit.

"He must be out of fuel now," Bor said aside to his neighbors. "If Saburé saves his last drops and walks the distance, he cannot lose."

But to their disappointment, Saburé failed to see the opportunity. He spent his last jet fuel flying across the pit -- running out of it just before he could reach the retreating Kamo. Shielding himself from the enemy fire, Saburé sank heavily to the ground -- and Kamo suddenly lunged forward. Just before Saburé's metal feet could touch down, Kamo slammed shield-first into his body and tipped him over. A quick blow from Kamo's sword-hilt smashed the visor of the fallen man's helmet -- and his face was exposed.

Kamo put one armored hand on Saburé's bloodied jaw, ready to crush his throat.

"Yield!" he snarled.

"I yield," gasped Saburé -- he had no choice.

Bor seemed a little dazed by the brutality of his ally's defeat, but he knew what to say. He took off his eye shades.

"The duel is over. I hereby declare Sir Kamo Yota the glorious and honorable winner!"

The crowd was jubilant. Kamo bowed to his fallen opponents; then he fastened the family banner to his sword and waved it over his head. Lord Orbes was white-faced but nevertheless bowed to Lord Yota, acknowledging his son's skill. Ue Yota, a slightly built, gray-haired man, bowed deeply.

"Excuse my son's violent behavior," Ue said tersely over the noise of the crowd, "but he is not yet fully taught. I will send my best physician to see to your children's injuries."

Orbes and his wife gave the Yota family their mute thanks. The Yota and Orbes teams hurried down the ramp to the pit floor. The injured Orbes brothers, still in armor, were carried away on electrically powered carts. Kamo followed them up and away from the arena.

"And now," Bor announced, "the second match of fighters may enter the pit."

He put his shades back over his eyes. Darc stood up, shocked. Was Bor going to risk his only son's life without hesitation? He couldn't believe it.

He asked little Eveli, who only seemed excited by the fight she had witnessed: "Is your brother really prepared for this? How many jousts has he fought?"

She looked up at Darc with thinly disguised contempt.

"This is his second joust. He beat Tharlos last year, and he will do it again."

"I hope so, girl. I really hope so."

"Don't you dare speak that way to me, commoner!" she snapped, her blue eyes giving him a fiery glare.

"Excuse me, Your Universal Highness," Darc said with a deadpan expression -- and sat down before the stunned girl could react.

Book one Chapter 9

"Begin!"

On Bor's command, the next two knight teams threw themselves into the fight. Dohan gave out a

battle-cry and charged at Tharlos, with his shield up in front of him. Without hesitation, Azuch ran next to him.

Tharlos and the nameless one took cover behind their tall shields, and fired. Azuch and Dohan closed in, in a zig-zag movement so agile it belied the heaviness of their armor. Most of Tharlos' shots missed, but the nameless one scored several hits -- which bounced off the shields. Azuch and Dohan thundered onward. Darc flinched instinctively when a laser pulse ricocheted up into the air, almost scorching the canvas roof of the lodge. Nobody else seemed to mind.

Unheard by the audience, Tharlos ordered his companion: "On my command... now!"

Dohan expected his opponents to fly up; but they surprised him. Simultaneously, Tharlos and the nameless one lunged forward, swinging their swords at waist level. Dohan backed, parrying the swings with his shield. Azuch was quick: his sword clashed with the nameless one's blade.

The clang rang across the pit -- the crowd roared.

"Get him!" Bor shouted.

"Knock his head off!" Eveli screamed in her little-girl voice.

"Jesus," Darc muttered.

"Tharlos! Tharlos!" a Pasko nobleman chanted.

Andon Pasko sat silent, bewildered and unsure of who to support. The fighters clashed swords again and again, moving quickly back, forth, sideways, without getting an opening -- all the time staying close up to each other, so that neither could aim a laser shot.

Dohan went in close, and locked Tharlos' sword and shield with his own. They struggled, groaning in step with the whining and hissing of their armor motors.

"I'll kill you, northern Damon scum..." Tharlos hissed between gulps of air.

Meanwhile, the nameless knight gained his first advantage over Azuch. The old champion kept backing, staying close, as the opponent hacked relentlessly at his battered shield. So strong were the blows, that Azuch shook with each impact. He knew that if he retreated too far, the nameless one might get the space to shoot -- and pierce Azuch's damaged shield. But the crowd's attention was fixed on Dohan and Tharlos. The young enemies kept stumbling back and forth in deadlock. Azuch's shield-arm began to tire.

Darc tried to alert the city lord: "Bor! There's something wrong about the nameless one!"

Bor did not answer; he was too focused on his son's efforts. Then, Tharlos pumped with his toes inside his suit, and triggered a special switch. With a metallic twang, a grappling hook shot out from inside his right leg-armor -- and locked around Dohan's left leg. Dohan was taken by surprise -- this was a trick Tharlos had not tried before. Tharlos pulled with his foot; Dohan managed a counter-movement and kept his balance.

Darc stood up, pointing in anger at the pit: "Foul! You've got to stop this, Bor!"

Bor reacted with an irritated gesture, and shouted: "It's part of the game, you fool! Dohan knows what to do!"

"Give him a kidney-blow, Dohan!" Eveli shouted.

The fighters' tug-of-war lasted several moments -- until Tharlos tripped Dohan by releasing a length of the coiled wire that locked them together. Dohan's left foot flew backwards, and Tharlos leaped back as his victim stumbled forward. In the same moment he raised his sword to chop down at Dohan's head. The crowd gasped. Dohan pumped with his toes, igniting his jetpack. Angled almost horizontally, the jet thrust pushed him headfirst into Tharlos' metal chest with a crashing thud -- then he stabilized the weight of his feet downward, and lifted up into the air. The jet exhaust sprayed dirt all over Tharlos' armor, rendering it vulnerable to lasers. Bor and his family caught their breath -- then it was Tharlos' time to be taken by surprise. He had not bothered to make the grappling hook and wire detachable, only strong enough -- so when Dohan lifted, Tharlos' right leg was pulled along. Reflexively, Dohan increased the pull of his jets -- slowly dragging Tharlos, armor and all, upside-down into the air. Tharlos dangled his arms and left leg frantically, screaming and cursing in panicked fury.

The audience exploded with laughter at the hilarious sight -- Dohan had exceeded the mockery and skill of last year's duel. The Paskos were stunned, dumbstruck. But Darc saw something else as well. The nameless knight's mechanical hacking had forced Azuch to his knees; in the next second, his blade hit Azuch's shoulder pad and crushed something inside. Azuch wailed with deep pain. Darc's upset mind was fully alert now, heading straight for a flash of intuition. When he noticed the deeper imprints left by the nameless fighter's boots, the insight hit him: The nameless one weighs a ton.

Azuch's cry of pain caught Dohan's attention through the noise of his jetpack. He chopped off the connecting wire with a single sword swipe -- Tharlos crashed down in the dirt, alive but soundly beaten.

Darc grasped Bor's shoulder: "Listen, Bor! The nameless one is --"

Bor cut him off: "Lachtfot! Lock up this troublemaker now!"

Dohan ignored Tharlos, and jet-jumped through the air to aid the fallen champion.

Tharlos, unable to rise up, shouted hoarsely: "Cripple Dohan... now!" The nameless knight turned to meet Dohan's flying attack. The Damon knight came down feet-first with his sword arm raised to strike at the enemy's chest plate. The nameless one parried with incredible swiftness. Just as Dohan's boots thumped into the ground, their swords met. The clash was extremely powerful, resounding like a small church bell -- Dohan felt the vibration through his armored glove, almost breaking the wrist mechanism.

Staggering backward, the nameless one stayed on his feet. Azuch Fache limped to the edge of the pit, his sword-arm hanging useless by his side. Meanwhile, Darc pushed his way past the guest chairs, escaping Lachtfot's lean but very strong steel hands.

"Excuse me -- sorry! -- make way!"

"Please come with me, master Darc," the robot insisted.

The even heavier servant Surabot loomed at the back exit to the lodge, his red-glowing visorplate flickering ominously. Darc moved to the front rail, gripped it with both hands, vaulted across, and landed on the grass below. Next to the main lodge, the vendor he had seen before stood watching the game from behind a barrel. He had his box hanging in front of his chest -- and was holding his large paper bullhorn. Darc rushed over and snatched the horn.

"Gimme that!"

"Hey!"

Darc ran the few steps to the edge of the pit, where Dohan and the nameless fighter were clashing blades with increasing fury. The nameless one seemed to be breathing a little faster, but his blows did not weaken. A sudden high side-blow hit Dohan's head and wriggled his helmet loose. The audience gasped -- but by some miracle, Dohan was unscathed. The head braces inside had protected his skull and neck, but the helmet and visor were cracked and might fall off any moment. Dohan shrugged off the shock and struck another lightning blow against the opponent's shield.

"Fall then, you fool! Do you want me to kill you?" he shouted. Dohan was getting tired fast, soaked with sweat -- he could not keep slugging it out for long. Darc looked at the situation for three seconds; that was enough to fully convince him.

He held the paper horn to his lips, inhaled -- then yelled down into the pit as loud as he could: "HOLD THE FIGHTING! HOLD THE FIGHTING!" The nameless one and Dohan backed off from each other, looking up at Darc. Bor Damon's face turned an angered red. Darc yelled: "Dohan! The nameless one is a robot!"

Fear struck Tharlos when he heard Darc's words. No! he thought. I must get him away in our ship before they can examine him!

Tharlos rose on his knees and arms -- he had managed to turn over on his belly -- and shouted at his companion: "Back off! Retreat! Now!"

Something snapped into place in Dohan's mind, overriding the shock of Darc's revelation. The nameless knight lowered his guard and stepped back; a roar grew in Dohan's throat. He held his blade behind his head, then swept it forward in a perfect swing -- there came a screeching clang of metal, and the snaps of

short-circuited wire. The nameless one's helmeted head, cut off clean by his collar, flew away in a shower of electric sparks and oil. From the collar more oil squirted up, wires dangling.

The headless giant swayed, as if trying to move without a brain -- then it crashed down, twitched, and lay still.

The audience fell dead silent for a long second. Lord Migam Pasko buried his face in his hands, wishing he had never went along with his son's devious scheme. His wife Tresa stared with bulging eyes at her son's enemies below -- if she had carried a gun, she would have shot Darc, Dohan, and Azuch without a moment's remorse.

Tharlos crawled to his feet, twitching like a jerky marionette; his armor's motor system was badly damaged. Dohan, breathing hard but powered by anger, tossed off his loose helmet. He turned and pointed his jagged sword toward his arch-rival. "Halt!" he called out. "Explain this... charade."

Then he grinned at the audience -- triumphantly. Tresa Pasko stood up, pleading to Bor.

"My dear Lord Damon," she whined in the best imitation of sorrow she could muster, "I knew nothing! Nothing! But surely the rules allow the aid of improved weaponry --"

Bor raised one heavy hand to stop her. He took off his mirror shades.

"The Joust is a succession of duels between able-bodied men," he quoted with a stony, unblinking stare. "Robots have always been programmed not to hurt humans," Bor continued ominously, his wrath increasing with every word. "I do not know how you managed to bypass that rule, but you have committed a more dangerous crime than mere cheating. You have turned humanity's most trusted servants into potential enemies!"

Tresa's skin went red all the way down to her dress cleavage.

Her piercing voice was like ice when she replied: "Do you, Lord Damon, accuse the Paskos of treason against humanity?"

Bor's spouse and family members stared fearfully at him, wishing his answer would be "no" -- that he would avoid risking war.

"I do," he said emphatically.

Tresa began an insult: "Why, it is you who bring a dangerous commoner into your castle --"

"SILENCE!" Lord Damon roared, switching on the bullhorn of his electronic collar.

Bor stood up, addressing the audience: "The duel is over. Since the Paskos have used a machine disguised as a man, they have broken the First Rule! I hereby declare Sir Tharlos Pasko disqualified, and forbidden to enter any future joust in Damon City. The Summer Joust is over, and the champion winner is, for the first time -- Sir Dohan Damon!"

The crowd roared jubilantly. Darc cheered too, as did Azuch, supported against the pit wall. Dohan spent the last of his jetpack fuel making a little lap of honor above the pit. Lord Pasko and his family immediately departed the spectators' lodge in silence. Andon Pasko remained next to his wife Bwynn Damon, and tried to make himself invisible. Tharlos Pasko stumbled up the pit ramp supported by his pages; his craftsmen loaded the robot-knight carcass onto an electric wagon and pulled it away. Dohan picked up the robot's severed head -- its jaw was an intricate but stiff replica of a human, complete with teeth and tongue -- and waved it at his retreating foe. "I shall keep this as a memory, Tharlos!"

He laughed, joined by the crowd -- and remembered Azuch. His laughter ceased, and he marched over to the ramp, where Azuch's pages and craftsmen were helping him out of his armor.

"Are you badly hurt, my lord?"

Azuch's helmet was off -- he grinned, laughing and flinching as he did so: "It was worth a few broken bones to watch your victory, my good friend -- ouch! -- but I think I will retire from jousting now. If that robot has friends like him --"

"Forget that, my lord. The prophecy! Your wife's dream!"

"Yes," the older champion said between two deep breaths. He gestured Dohan closer. Azuch whispered gravely in his ear: "He is the reincarnated Singing King, the man in white, and you are the blue knight. Praise the Goddess. Guard him with your life! Do not leave him in jeopardy -- ever! Or I swear to break your neck -- my good friend. Now go thank him, but do not reveal his true identity yet -- the King will announce his presence when the time is right."

Dohan obliged, and hurried up the ramp.

Darc walked back to the exalted vendor, and handed him back his bullhorn.

"Thanks, mate!"

The man grinned nervously, almost bowing to the white-haired apparition.

"It was... nothing, my lord," he stuttered.

Darc winked, and patted the man's shoulder as if to confirm that Darc was flesh and blood.

"Hey, don't you 'lord' me! I'm a commoner like you."

The vendor bowed and retreated hastily -- he could hear the armor-clad Dohan stomping closer, and he would not risk using the wrong title in the presence of nobles.

His boots making him taller than Darc, Dohan loomed over him -- and stooped down so that his jaw plunged below his wide metal collar.

"Darc..." he declared in a subdued voice, "I held you for a helpless outcast, an insignificant intruder. I

was wrong; accept my apologies. Anyone who helps me like you did, is my friend and brother, for the rest of my life."

Dohan wanted to kneel, make the heart-mouth-eyes sign of the Goddess, but he remembered Azuch's warning. He looked away, uncertain what to do in the presence of a reincarnated deity. Darc was confused. Hell, why did the kid look so reverent all of a sudden? He had helped Dohan, but... he tried to break the embarrassment by slapping Dohan's armored shoulder. It felt like slapping the face of a rock. He drew back his sore hand, rubbing it -- and smiled cheerfully.

"You really showed them, kid! That was a fantastic fight."

"Thank you," Dohan said, less nervous. "How did you know that..?"

"I will tell you everything at the banquet," Darc assured him. He noticed that Bor was approaching from the lodge platform above their heads. "Now get out of your armor and take a rest, kid. The ladies are waiting."

"I -- I think you should follow us into the castle, Darc. You might get lost in the crowd --"

"Don't worry. I'll follow you in a minute. Don't keep the people waiting."

Dohan left, surrounded by cheering pages, craftsmen, noblewomen, and family members. Bor leaned down over Darc from the platform railing, his face stern. Darc looked up, worried.

"You are a troublemaker..." Bor barked, "...but a valuable one!" Then a rare event occurred: Bor smiled -- and kept his smile. "I hereby appoint you to become my special counselor, with a nobleman's title! I will announce the title at the banquet tonight, and you will become a permanent resident of my castle."

Darc made a polite bow, holding out his palms in a greeting: "I accept the honor... my lord."

"Good!" the city lord said, clasping his hands together. "Now everyone must bathe and dress for the

evening's celebration. Surabot! Avton! Vhustank! Lachtfot! Go get a complete cleaning and polish. All four of you will serve our guests at the banquet tonight."

The commoner audience returned to the city outside the park, singing and cheering. They were determined to stay awake all night, re-telling the events to each other, letting the rumors about Darc grow ever bigger. The human servant staff followed the noble guests into the castle, to establish their quarters and prepare their food. Azuch Fache and the Orbes brothers were taken care of in their tents, the doctors applying age-old potions to heal their wounds quicker. Butchers and grocers were already lining up before the castle's kitchen entrances, their carts loaded.

Darc stood watching the spectacle for a few minutes, while resting on top of a barrel. He saw the Paskos' family jet craft take off and leave the city, heading straight north for their own domain. The sun was already sinking in the sky to the west.

What a day, he thought. I've got to stay sharp, the way things keep happening. Don't drink too much wine tonight. I won a whole lot of friends today... and a lot of enemies, too.



Darc's first concert

Book one Chapter 10

"Tell us again, Sir Darc," Lady Osanna asked. "How were you the first one to discover that the nameless knight was a machine?"

Darc gave Bor's wife a self-effacing smile. He wanted to flatter her for her beautiful appearance at the banquet table -- but he was not yet sure of how to court the noblewomen, without insulting their husbands. That, and... Darc, too, had now heard the story of when Bor broke an enemy's neck.

"It was easy, really," he told the guests.

The assembled families, sitting along the half-circle of tables in the castle's great hall, stopped chatting and listened. Darc felt the looks on him, but kept his cool. Talking had never been difficult for him in his previous life, when he headed his own upstart company.

"So many observations pointed in the same direction," he explained. "We never saw his whole face, never heard him talk; he seemed to respond only to commands from Tharlos. He didn't fly, but he had a jetpack. Did you see how the nameless one and Tharlos entered the pit? The nameless one stepped to the edge and sank down slowly, but his jets sounded very high. That must have used up all his fuel.

"And he was very strong, but he never ran. And, most important of all, the footprints -- his were twice as deep as the others. To be that heavy, he had to be all metal. The real trick was the false jaw; it even looked as if he was breathing."

Dohan, sitting next to Darc, laughed and drank more wine -- he was already slightly drunk. Azuch, who sat very still with his shoulder in a large plaster cast, moved his head an inch in Darc's direction.

"But why," Azuch asked softly, "why would the Paskos risk their reputation and fragile alliances on such a wild scheme?"

Darc shrugged, taking another bite of the juicy steak on his plate. Real, fresh meat was a luxury in this town.

"You know them better than me, my lord," he said between mouthfuls. "I think... I think Tharlos was desperate for revenge. He deliberately wanted to humiliate Damon and his closer allies... or cripple them. Perhaps his plan was to make the robot fighter disappear afterwards, and replace him with a human for this banquet!"

Eveli, all dressed up and with her red hair set up in knotted braids, looked worshipfully at the much older Darc. Everyone could see she was fascinated by him.

"How sharp-minded you are, Darc," Eveli said admiringly. Her older brother waved his silver cup at her.

"Do not get lost in that sharp mind, little sister!" he laughed, his cheeks flushed by victory and wine. "Time for dance!" Dohan stood up and clapped his hands to the group of musicians. "Play! A quick and merry dance!"

Bor, also cheerful despite the reawakened feud with the Paskos, nodded to the musicians. The quintet ended their atmospheric, light background music and struck up a dancing tune. The five-man band used instruments Darc could well recognize: two guitarists, a flutist, a drummer with a battery of drums and cymbals, and a singer. The musicians were fairly old men; all were dressed in red and their shoulder-long hair was turning gray.

Dohan Damon was the first man to escort a lady onto the dance-floor in front of the tables. Soon, other couples came to join them. Darc wished he had taken dance lessons -- their steps were faster and wilder than waltz, but not quite as quick as a polka. The women's skirts spun, umbrella-like, as they whirled around with their partners. Something about the melody that rang a bell in Darc's memory, but the song was almost like Chinese music, restricted to a very high-pitched range of tones, with very little variation of the register. The lyrics were -- what else? -- a love song. Darc resisted the urge to ask a beautiful lady for a dance. He concentrated on the music, like he used to do in his youth in Liverpool, when he and his teenage friends tried to learn cover versions of old rock'n-roll classics. Darc -- David Archibald -- later buried his musical ambitions in exchange for biochemistry studies, but kept playing as a hobby.

Then, in the middle of a refrain, Darc recognized the roots of the melody. It was "Great Balls of Fire!" Filtered through centuries of Chinese, Spanish, and God-knows-what influence! It was more than he could take. He excused himself, rose from the table and walked around to the musicians. The other guests were clueless; Bor told the band to cease playing.

"I'm sorry, friends," Darc told the five musicians, "but this just doesn't sing. You must play faster, and your voices must go up and down more -- is there a 'piano' here, by the way?"

"What is a 'pi-ano'?" the drummer asked curiously.

"It's... never mind. Do you know the words to another old song, 'I'm All Shook Up?' In your language, that would be... 'A Tou Shok Op'."

He hummed and whistled the first notes to them; after a brief hesitation, the singer brightened up with a response: "You mean the church hymn? 'All Earth Shook Up'?"

Darc blinked confusedly, and ignored the curious remark: "Just play the melody I gave you, and not too fast, more like this --" -- he hummed it again -- "-- then pause for one beat, just when I come to the words 'I'm in love -- I'm all shook up'. Okay?"

The experienced singer stepped back from the stage. He took off his most valuable possession -- the tubular metal collar which contained a combined microphone and amplifier -- and gave it to Darc. Darc could not fit it over his head, so he held it like the rock singers of his time used to; to his lips. Both Dohan and Azuch gasped when they saw this, and thought: The King's scepter! The drummer struck up the right, simple rhythm and the guitarists played the beat, probing for the right sound. Darc nodded when they got it right.

He went into the classical microphone stance and lowered his voice to a deep, youthful, American rumble: "Well bless my soul, what's wrong with me!"

The dance couples froze, listening -- or trying to listen -- to the half-familiar, half-alien tune. Darc sang on, and the band got into the act. The guitars grew bolder; the drummer switched to a stronger beat to go with the song. It was like no other cover version Darc had ever heard before, but he kept rocking on -- humming through an uncertain spot in the text, moving his hips the way he remembered the late great artist did his act. When he had repeated the refrain for the last time, he raised his hand to hold up the music.

He scanned his audience -- still shocked into silence -- and said: "Thank you, thank you... that was a little song from my time. I know a few more, but I see I did not sing very well, so..."

A female, throaty voice called back from the tables: "No, I beseech you! More! Another song like that one!"

The people in the hall turned to the source of the plea: a very special guest in her own high-seat -- high-priestess Inu of the city cathedral. She was a curvy woman in her mid-thirties, with full lips painted a deep red; her long hair was set up in a platinum-blond bun. The only jewelry she wore, was a sort of gold-thread net that held her hair in place. And she was dressed in a single-piece black dress that left her pale arms bare. Darc could feel pure desire floating on her voice, all the way across the carpeted stone floor. He hoped the guests wouldn't notice his instant physical response.

"What would you wish to hear, my lady?" he asked through his mike.

"Just sing like you did before," she said, looking straight at him with wide, blue eyes.

He nodded slowly, and turned to the band again. After some discussion, they tried a harder version of "King Creole". The high-priestess applauded their effort, joined by the other guests. The dance couples returned to their seats, listening in silence. Darc rounded up with a not-quite-seamless rendition of "Love Me Tender", and it brought tears to Inu's eyes. Darc thanked for the applause, but it annoyed him that no one had wanted to dance. Had he been that bad?

Azuch Fache just sat staring before him in wordless rapture. Dohan was equally speechless. The voice of their myths had become real. And Bor Damon, seeing the reaction of the others, closely observed and listened to his guests.

Darc needed to rest his vocal cords. He thanked the audience and the band -- the singer received his microphone as if he thought it was a lucky charm -- and took his seat at the table. The guests were chatting in lower voices now, throwing furtive glances at Darc. He ate and drank hungrily, oblivious to the profound effect of his performance. A half-hour later, the robot Lachtfot leaned over next to Darc's chair and handed him a rolled-up note. Darc unfolded it and read to himself:

"Meet me in the cathedral at midnight. Use the back door. Bring no robots. Come alone and I promise your safety. Praised be the Goddess."

"Who gave you this?" he asked Lachtfot in a low voice.

"High-priestess Inu, Sir Darc," the robot replied.

Darc leaned forward, and looked to the side. Inu sat next to the Yotas, in a higher, gold-colored chair that was fitted with a small silk canopy. She looked aloof from the other guests, did not talk, and had hardly touched her food. Though she was only drinking water, her face had taken on a deep pink hue.

"Well, well... go tell the good lady that I will come."

"Who, Sir Darc?"

"High-priestess Inu, of course."

"She is not called 'lady'. Her title is 'Her Holiness'. I will notify Her Holiness, Sir Darc."

Darc quipped to Dohan: "With these robots, who needs comedians?" "What?" slurred the drunken young warrior.

"Nothing," Darc sighed, and raised his cup. "A toast... to the Goddess!"

If Darc had noticed the way Azuch and Bor were now talking about him, looking at him with wary eyes, he might have changed his mind about the high-priestess. Unaware of the plans being drawn up for his fate, Darc toasted with the guests.



Inu

At the hour of half past eleven, Darc sneaked out of the great hall to "visit the bathroom".

He did so -- and then borrowed a guard's cloak, donning it as a disguise. He was closely followed all the way by Lachtfot, who was under strict orders from Bor to never stray from Darc's side. Man and robot exited through the kitchen entrance, and took a shortcut through the moonlit gardens. He could hear the noble guests playing their little love-games behind bushes and walls, female voices giggling. Darc walked past the main gate, ignored by the slightly drunken guards.

The city was lit up -- partly by the few lampposts controlled by the city lord, partly by the citizens. People walked along the narrow streets with candle-lamps in their hands, danced around mighty bonfires in the plazas. If Darc had seen the spectacles of previous summer nights, he would have noticed a difference in the city's mood: a sense of renewed excitement, expectation tinged with fear -- and great hope. He avoided the crowd, and stuck to the back streets until he reached the cathedral. He spotted it one block away, and was about to cross the open place surrounding the building, when --

"Sir Darc, someone is following us," Lachtfot said in a very low voice.

Darc ducked into a portal; the robot followed suit. They could both hear steps closing in, then coming right up -- Darc rolled out and grabbed the person's feet like a rugby player, knocking him down heavily.

The pursuer grunted. In spite of the darkness, Darc knew that voice.

"Dohan? Why are you following me?"

The ruddy, bearded young man stumbled to his feet, suddenly more sober than the hour before.

"I... wanted to make certain nothing happened to you."

Darc took out his mounting frustration on his friend.

"Well, you seem to be in greater danger than me," he said sarcastically, "walking drunk in the streets at this hour! Go home and sleep! I don't need nurses to follow my trail! You too, Lachtfot! Capisce?"

"I must obey my owner's orders, Sir Darc."

"I'm going to enter the cathedral over there, okay? Are robots allowed in church?"

"No."

"Fine. Then stay outside and guard the cathedral, as long as I'm inside it. Okay?"

"Okay meaning yes, Sir Darc."

Darc fought back an impulse to kick the robot in the knee -- he would probably just break a toe anyway. He left Lachtfot and Dohan, and crossed the open place.

The cathedral turned out to be much bigger than Darc had imagined; its two thick spires reached up perhaps fifty meters into the starry sky. The stars above, at least, looked exactly the same as in his own past.

This close, he could discern the wall ornaments that had intrigued him before. They were representations of nature as it was before the apocalyptic wars -- animals, lush vegetation, streaming rivers. And in this imagined pastoral sat full-bodied women and men -- flirting, kissing, embracing -- fully dressed yet very sensual. The cathedral had no sharp corners, but was rounded off to resemble... a giant female figure, lying on her back. The two large spires were the "arms", stretching up to embrace the sky. The "head" was the rounded back of the building, where he was heading. And the main entrance, buried between two half-buried "thighs", was... Darc blushed.

He found the back door portal, and pounded on it with his fist. Immediately, the door nudged open a few inches. Darc could glimpse the figure of Inu standing behind it. She frowned at the cloaked figure, then recognized it and let him inside. Carrying a candle-lamp, Inu silently led him through a dark corridor, into a small chamber, and closed it. At first, Darc was too confused by what he saw, and turned around

several times to get his bearings.

"This is my study," Inu said in her husky voice, ripe with promises, "where I and my novices and students study the scriptures, pray, sing, and meditate."

He took in the atmosphere -- it sure was a room for true believers. From top to bottom, the chamber walls were covered by small icon paintings, resembling the paintings of Christ he knew from Eastern Orthodox churches. On a closer look, the faces on the paintings were different. All of them pictured the Goddess, or other blond women with dreamy expressions on their faces. Gold and silver foil covered their hairpieces. The artwork was stylized, hyperreal, incredibly detailed.

"Who... who made these pictures?" he asked.

Inu smiled, and replied: "The novices and the priestesses. I spent five years completing that one." She pointed one fleshy, white arm to a wall shrine. The largest icon was hanging there, surrounded by lit candles. Fresh flowers lay in bundles at its foot -- and open jewel-cases filled with glistening crystals. Diamonds! Darc picked up one stone and held it to the light. It refracted the light perfectly. "A small contribution from the parishioners," Inu said softly.

An old tune played in Darc's head: "Diamonds are girl's best friend..."

He thought: My God, this is for real. The gold, the jewels -- it's all real. He turned to face Inu again. She was flushed and gleaming with sweat -- the chamber was hot from all the candles. Darc took off his heavy cloak; he was sweating too. Inu sat down on a couch in a corner.

"They call you Darc," she half-whispered, "but that is not your real name?"

Darc wondered how she knew, but he saw no risks in confessing the truth.

"No, it was Lord Damon who gave me that name. My real name --" "I knew it! You are the resurrected Singing King, in the prophesied disguise!"

"But how can you --"

"You knew the forgotten words, they way they should be sung!"

She flung herself to her knees and spoke rapidly, as if in a fever: "I have studied Old Juro and Aenglich. I recognized your words at the banquet. There were recordings, many centuries ago, that were destroyed -- only the memory, and the hymn texts, the notes remained, preserved here. You knew the real words, without knowing the hymns! You can deny it, but you are the Incarnation!"

Darc shook his head, staring helplessly at the fanatical woman. There was no way to make her change her mind -- and he was just a little tempted to play along.

Stumbling on his tongue, trying to gain control of the situation, he said: "This Goddess... I have seen her face in my time."

"Have you... met her, the All-Mother made flesh?"

Inu was wide-eyed, her mouth agape.

"Not the person, no! But in my time, there were many... pictures of her. Moving pictures. All over the world. Do you have any of that kind here?"

She looked down, sadly.

"Only memories of the Goddess's first incarnations remain today. The original representations withered away... only the icons remain."

She looked up again -- desperately, tugging at the lapels of his jacket, and exclaimed: "But you saw her! You! Tell me the names, so I know you do not lie!"

"Names...?"

"The names of her personal hymns, in the original language! The ones no one but I is allowed to know or sing!"

From some recess in Darc's memory came the baffled answer: "You mean... 'Diamonds Are A Girl's Best Friend'?"

"Yes! 'Demanti So Kurlis Befrend!'" she whispered back in Castilian.

This was fun, in an almost shameful way -- and he went on, egging her: "'We're having a heat-wave, a tropical heat-wave!'"

"Yes, oh yes!"

"That old black magic has me in its spell!! Um... 'Let's Make Lo --' Oof!"

Inu threw herself upon Darc, pushed him onto the couch. She wriggled herself out of her black dress, and pinned him down with her warm, soft flesh.

"Before your experience," she breathed in his ear, "I am but a novice. Guide me! Share the sacred ecstasy with me!"

Darc finally realized that he didn't want to talk any more. A little later, as they were sharing a significant moment of ecstasy on the couch, he called out: "My Goddess!" -- and he thought he meant it.

Book one Chapter 12

Darc woke up, very tired -- but satisfied.

He found himself lying on the same couch, covered up by his cloak and clothes... and Inu was gone. Most of the candles in the chamber had burned out, so he guessed it was already late in the morning. He went up, dressed, cleaned himself up, ate some breakfast left behind by Inu, left the chamber and found a bathroom. The ancient art of plumbing had been preserved, and he was grateful for that.

When he exited, Darc could pick up distant voices somewhere off in the main cathedral -- the chanting of many voices. He found the back door and walked around the cathedral, to the main entrance. The tall portal stood open for the morning mass. Darc sneaked inside to have his first look, while covering his head with the cloak.

The inside of the cathedral was richly decorated. Above the altar hung a huge icon of the Goddess in full figure -- the picture was virtually made of gold, silver, and jewels. Her half-shut eyes were sparkling diamonds; the lips were scores of rubies, like glowing red wine petrified. Darc took a seat in the back benches. At the altar far off, he could see Inu performing a solemn mass, singing hymns with a choir of young men and women. And over there, in the front benches, he could just make out the Damon family and some of the visiting families... thanking the Goddess for Dohan's victory yesterday, he guessed. The church music sounded somewhat like the gospel music of Darc's own time; only slower, less exhilarated. The text was unfamiliar to him.

The churchgoers, sitting next to Darc, made a stark contrast to the wealth of the church and the nobility. Several thousand impoverished men, women, and children of the citizen class surrounded Darc -- perhaps not starved for food as much as for experience. They were simply dressed: no watches or electronics; rough patches draped their knees and elbows. They sang with all their hearts though, fully believing in the powers of the All-Mother's redeeming love. Darc didn't feel like laughing -- he might have experienced a little of that love last night. And yet he felt sorry for them, praying to the distorted memory of a long-lost woman. Were they to be forever locked up in this small city, with the entire universe lying outside to be explored? What kept them here? What kind of backward future was this? The song ended, each churchgoer doing the heart-to-mouth-to-eye sign.

Inu spoke, her echoing voice full of solemn joy: "Last night, I felt the presence of the Singing King." A gasp of astonishment rose from the commoners around Darc. "Yes, he came to me, in flesh and blood. This is the truth: The King walks among us again! Praise the Goddess!"

"Praise the Goddess," the congregation murmured in awe.

Darc didn't like this course of events -- not one damn bit of it. What the hell was Inu up to? If someone recognized his face... images of religious fanatics, tearing apart the corpse of a dead Oriental mullah, flickered through his memory.

Inu continued, reading from a thick volume: "And the King will sing his love songs to the Goddess again. They will join in heavenly communion, and He will bring new life to the Earth. All sins of the past will be forgiven, and the Eternal Ice will melt away. For it is written --"

The crowd responded in chorus, knowing the words from previous sermons: "Praise the Goddess who spared her faithful ones, and pray for the return of the King!"

Darc's gut went cold with fear. An invisible weight on his chest choked him slowly. Intuitively, he understood his life was in great danger. Dizzied by the unreal situation, he half expected his mother to appear again -- smiling at the sight of her son dressing up as a little monarch. Inu's voice rose, and declared: "The song of the King will revive the Earth-Mother, and he will give his life again to the world!" Darc fled the church and hurried to the castle library. There, he waited for Librian to return from church.

"Librian, I'm in trouble. I need information."

"Knowledge is my creed, Sir Darc. What do you need to know?"

"Who do you think I really am?"

The old librarian glared at his visitor, then looked down and shook his head.

"I... you ask strange questions, sirrah."

"No. My life depends on the answer. Who do you think I really am?"

Librian leaned back, resting his dry, thin hands on the table. His watery eyes scanned the library, as if to find an answer there. Finally, he understood.

"You are not the Singing King," Librian said shortly.

"Right. I am just a man, a visitor from the past. The church... even Bor, in his way... they are trying to fool the people, use me as an idol. Why?"

Librian answered blankly: "Because they need the faith." With sudden intensity, he looked into Darc's eyes and said eagerly: "I believe in the Goddess too! I believe in the life-giving love of the All-Mother, and the healing force of the sacred songs. With my mind I see the contradictions inside the church, its corruption and abuse of power, its 'blessings' to the rich and powerful among men. Yet I believe, because I need to!

"Have you not read Al-Masur as I told you? Have you not seen the horrors of our past? Do you think all the fear, the memories of a lost Golden Age would just... vanish? All this time, we have lived on hope. It is everywhere in these books of mine... All learned men knew that eventually, the Eternal Ice would retreat. Eventually, the Plague would be overcome. Some day, we would be able to leave the closed cities and take back the world.

"But centuries came and went; nothing changed. And the knowledge turned into hope. Hope turned into a myth... and the myth turned into a faith. The pieces of a glorious past were everywhere: the ruins, the artifacts... and all those pictures. Al-Masur pieced those fragments together. He helped us remember the faith, the common tongue that once had united the world, remnants of which supports our society. And that tradition is now stronger than anything else. A great and wonderful lie -- forgive me, Goddess."

Darc saw what inner turmoil the learned man was suffering, and reassured him: "I understand, believe me. In my time, you would have been a great man -- not locked up in this little town." He stood up, and restlessly paced the tessellated floor. "I see your point, Librian. I can't destroy the faith of all these poor people. No, they wouldn't listen anyway. But if I play along, someone is going to pay and it's going to be me. I never was a good liar. What should I do? Escape?"

He stopped, and watched Awonso enter the library through the big door.

"Master Darc!" the boy gasped; then he saw Librian and lowered his voice. "Um, Sir Darc, Lord Damon demands to see you in the conference chamber right away."

Darc wished he could sleep on it for another 900 years.

But he raised a weary hand to calm the messenger, and answered: "I'm on my way."

Darc left, heading for the elevator. Lachtfot and Vhustank joined him, staving off wide-eyed servants and guards on the way. As in the old days, before telling the stockholders some bad piece of news, he felt a great fatigue. Or was it just a lack of sleep that made the air feel so chilly on his skin?



Bes Orbes & Ue Yota

Book one Chapter 13

"I greet you, Sir Darc," Bor said in a formal, respectful tone. "And this, my friends, is the man we have waited for. Behold the Singing King reincarnated, arrived from the Golden Age after his long frozen sleep!"

Darc entered the packed room and Surabot locked the door from outside. He was instantly surrounded by guests from the banquet: Bor Damon, Osanna, Andon Pasko, Lord Ue Yota and his wife, Lord Bes Orbes and family... only Inu and Lord Azuch Fache were missing; probably the room was too crowded for him in his injured state. They all fell silent. The awed guests held a respectful distance. The ladies were

somehow even more winsome than before, in spite of the fact that they had taken off most of their electronic jewelry. Osanna Damon's blue eyes were moist, her long hair combed straight and shining in golden tones.

The faith was strong in her, her thoughts almost showing: You are the one. I believe, I heard you sing. I love you. Please do not turn away from us. I love you. This was going to be hard, Darc told himself. He tried to think hateful thoughts, tried to despise these fat tyrants and their spoiled, privileged families -- but he just couldn't. He could only be angry with Bor Damon, the only man who could possibly know Darc for who he really was -- Bor, the cynical politician who never betrayed a softer feeling. Damn you for saving my life! Well, I'll show you some of your own game. I'll come out on top of this, whichever way it ends. I'm nobody's puppet.

The guests waited for Darc to talk. He realized that he had been standing quietly for a whole minute, and cleared his throat. With a serious expression, he made the greeting gesture.

"Greetings, lords and ladies. I apologize for not having mastered your language just yet..."

Outside the chamber, Dohan was waving his fists at the indifferent robots who blocked the door. Librian was right behind him, more anxious than agitated.

"But I am his son, damn you! Step aside!"

Surabot replied: "Exclusive meeting, my lord. Lord Damon's orders. I apologize, my lord."

"So let us get to the point," Darc told the assembled nobles, who had not yet spoken a word to him. "You want me to pretend I am the reincarnated Singing King, right? And some of you think I really am him, right? Well, I'm sorry to disappoint you. I am just David Archibald, frozen alive nine centuries ago. I have never tried to be someone else.

"But surely I can be of help to you. We can come to some sort of understanding, my lords. I still remember many things from my own age... not just the songs! But powerful knowledge! Things that could be of great help to your people!"

Bor Damon's facial color turned white with red spots here and there -- he was on the verge of a busted vein. Too late he understood that he had underestimated Darc. "You possess knowledge which did not yet exist in my time," Darc elaborated. "Fusion power, thinking robots, cures for cancer... but you did not create this knowledge. It is old, very old. And I know things that you have forgotten. But it is not enough to just tell you those things. What you need, is a method... we called it 'science'. A certain way of thinking. It will make you free, and more powerful than you can ever imagine."

There was a price for science too -- Darc knew that all too well. But that was his only trump card, and he was betting his life on it, just as he had done 900 years ago.

Finally, after a minute's silence, the message began to sink into the most flexible minds in the room -- starting with Bor: "I think, Sir Darc... that you should not upset the delicate souls of the noble ladies here. Perhaps if we had a little pause here, an intermission..."

But the greed for knowledge had already been awakened; the other lords were not going to let Bor yank their prize away.

"Please excuse me!" Lord Yota shouted eagerly, bowing deeply and swiftly to Darc. The wiry little man fixed the tall visitor with his black eyes. "Sir Darc, could this knowledge help us find a weapon to fight the Paskos' new breed of fighting robot? Could you help us build an... atomic robot?" Lord Yota half whispered the last sentence.

Darc was struck by a sobering unease, and replied: "Now take it easy, my lord. You want mass destruction, go build your own weapons. I would never do that for you, even if I could. But I do have some special knowledge." He hesitated -- he had no words for it in their tongue. "I have great knowledge of... 'Genetic Engineering' -- nothing spectacular, maybe. I know how to change the 'DNA', the human cell memory. My company produced 'vaccines' for the whole world. But I would not use that knowledge to --"

Lord Yota reeled back in wide-eyed horror; he cried something in a Chinese-sounding dialect Darc hadn't heard before: "Baokimi! Baokimi! Buwei mono!"

In the next moment, Lord Orbes grabbed a rusty broadsword that hung from the wall. The crowd scattered away from Darc, and Lord Orbes raised the sword to cut him down.

Staring at the baffled white-haired stranger, he screamed: "Die, evil one!"

Darc ducked the first blow with relative ease.

Lord Orbes was fat and middle-aged; though his arms were muscular, his movements were clumsy. The sword-blade cut through the air, splintering a huge vase. Darc retreated behind a round table -- Lord Orbes turned the sword-point his way and went for a forward thrust. Darc ducked under the table -- then pushed upward, growling. He lifted the small but heavy table on two arms, let its weight fall forward -- and rammed Lord Orbes in the chest with the tabletop. The nobleman's eyes bulged; he was pushed backward, right into a glass-door cupboard. The crash was followed by a door slamming open -- the two robots burst into the room, and next came Dohan and Librian.

"Cease fighting!" Surabot boomed in a deafening machine-bass. "We are allowed to use force to protect Lord Damon!"

Bor -- his finger on the emergency button on his electronic collar -- pointed at Lord Orbes.

"Hold him! And lock up that sword in the armory!"

Dohan rushed over to Darc, who was leaning against a wall -- soaked with sweat, his clothes crumpled.

"Darc! Are you injured?" Dohan asked.

Librian mmbled: "He must not be harmed -- he can teach us so much..."

Darc answered, gasping for breath: "No... just tired... is all. But why... did Orbes attack me?"

Bes Orbes was helped up from the shattered cupboard by the two robots -- bloody, but alive with fright.

He pleaded, as he fought their iron hold: "He is a witchdoctor, Lord Damon! He will kill us all!"

Bor snapped: "Quiet, Orbes, or I'll have you thrown out of my city." The city lord saw the urgent need to calm his allies. "I swear by the Goddess," he asserted, "that Sir Darc has never committed any forbidden acts in my city, nor anything criminal."

The guests were in an uproar: all speaking at once, several of them trying to get to the door and determined to leave the city. Darc, though exhausted, became aware that he had just broken some extremely strong taboo. He looked to Dohan -- who seemed to waver uncertainly when he heard Lord Orbes's hysterical accusations.

Librian came closer, and said rapidly: "I am so sorry, Darc -- this is all my fault. I should have warned you earlier, but I was afraid, like all of us -- what did you say to them? No, do not say it in master Dohan's presence!"

He urged away the young knight, protecting him from an unclean touch or word. Librian himself was old, and not afraid for his own health -- the taboo scared him too, but a threat to the Damons scared him much more.

"I told them," Darc said in English, "that I know how to perform genetic engineering, that is, changes in a cell's memory."

Librian replied in the same tongue, so that the others would not understand: "It was the Plague, the pseudo-leprosy..."

"A man-made plague... I found out that much..."

"But the rest of it is seldom written or spoken in public. To prevent man-made plagues from almost destroying all humanity again... genetic engineering became the most forbidden crime of all. The punishment for such acts is death by burning... all books on genetics were destroyed many hundred years ago. There is said to be a few practitioners of the forbidden arts, but no-one knows where. To us, only the memory of the horrors remain... and the forbidden word... the three letters of evil..."

"D-N-A," Darc muttered laconically.

"Hush!" Librian said. "If they hear that, you are finished! Perhaps we can explain it away... yes, a misunderstanding..." He suddenly noticed Darc's weakened condition, and felt at the man's forehead. Librian switched to his own language: "Darc, you are feverish! Lord Dohan, bring the doctor here!"

Darc was brought to his chamber and put to bed; the chief court physician arrived.

The physician took out an array of small instruments from a bag, and began examining the patient. He consulted two thick medical books, nodded gravely and grunted to himself. From a box, the doctor took an adhesive cloth-plaster and dripped some potions on it. He clasped the plaster onto Darc's bare arm.

"Is it bad, Doctor?" Darc asked with a weak grin.

The physician's face was stern, almost merciless -- he had despised the stranger from the very first moment he was thawed out.

"I have given you temporary relief from the fever, sire. But I have not a cure for its cause. To be truthful -- you are slowly dying."

Darc let out a laugh: "You must be joking, 'Doc'! You cured my cancer, and now you can't..."

"What is killing you this time is a common virus; people call it 'the one-year flush'. Everyone has it, and lives. In normal people, it only causes mild trouble sometimes. Fevers, weariness. That is -- everyone except you, sire. Your bodily defenses are different from ours, and there is no way I can change them. I give you two weeks... three, at most."

The physician started packing down his equipment, demonstrating that he could do no more. Secretly, he did not want to either. Though Darc was weak, he grasped the whole truth. "Now I see... to cure me, my 'immune system' must be changed, my 'lymphocyte' DNA. But that's forbidden, right? Nobody is around to know how it's done, right? The books are burned, the machines are destroyed." Darc muttered in English, to himself: "I survived nine hundred years and spinal cancer... and I get killed by the measles of

the future. Or it could even be... no. That's too dumb. Everyone is an immune carrier, everyone except me. That's too funny. Ha, ha... Always carry a condom wherever you travel!"

Darc continued to laugh. Time had caught up, and was coming to claim back the years he had borrowed.

Hours passed.

When the chief court physician had assured Bor that there was no risk to others, the city lord allowed his family to visit Darc's sickbed. The patient was sitting up in bed, writing down as much as possible in his diary -- soon, he would be too weak to do even that. He was dressed in a thick wool sweater, and had several layers of blankets over his legs. Osanna's eyes filled up with tears when she saw Darc's pale features. Darc put on his most dashing grin to cheer Osanna up, and greeted her.

"The sight of your beauty makes me feel better already, my lady."

Osanna smiled back, leaving a vase of fresh flowers next to his bed. But little Eveli suddenly cracked up with grief.

She threw herself onto the bed, clutched his arm, and sobbed: "Oh, please do not leave us so soon! We cannot live on if you die!"

Those words stung him -- deeper than Eveli could imagine. He remembered another girl having clutched his hand an eternity ago -- or was it just a few months?

Darc said softly: "Now be brave, Lady Eveli. When you grow older, you will understand why these things happen --"

"No!" she whined, clutching his hand harder. "I will never understand why you have to die from some stupid germ, when we are allowed to live! It's not fair!"

You're damn right it isn't, he thought. A desperate plan began to take shape in his mind. Eveli started sobbing again; he patted her head. Osanna gently pulled her daughter away from the bedside, and took his hand.

"We will always remember you," Osanna said. "You brought back the King's songs to us."

Darc knew that mattered: he had been trying to write down the old song texts all this morning, and then he had given it up. How could one write down the way they should be performed?

Dohan whispered something in his mother's ear. Osanna and Eveli left him alone with Darc. The young man, brought up to be a warrior and leader, was restless with tension and energy. For all his strength, he felt helpless now. He folded his arms, unfolded them, shifted his weight, drew his hand through his stubby hair. Eventually, Dohan could not avoid looking directly at his dying friend.

"Darc. They say you are a witchdoctor. Tell me it is a lie."

Darc had thought over what to say, and saw his possibly last chance at salvation.

"I don't care what they call me, kid. I know how to accomplish certain things, but I never use that knowledge to hurt people. Have I ever tried to hurt anyone here?"

"No."

"Have I lied to you before?"

"No."

There was hesitation in Dohan's answer. Some part of him felt cheated, disappointed that Darc was no divine man, just a dying visitor.

Darc pressed on: "Did you believe in the rumors? That I was the reincarnated Singing King?"

"I... I do not know."

"Did I ever try to make you believe that I was him?"

"No."

"Have I not helped you?"

Dohan's gaze dropped.

"You saved my life, for all I know."

Darc stared at him, as hard as he could, spoke in a tense voice: "And now I ask you to save my life. You are the only one I can ask."

To deny the last wish of a dying friend was against the code of honor that Dohan was raised to obey. He really saw no choice in this question.

"How can I help?"

"I want you to take me to a witchdoctor. To cure me."

Dohan froze where he stood and exploded, so tense his teenage voice broke: "You cannot ask me to do that! I am sworn to protect the city against all enemies. Witchdoctors are... the archenemies of humanity!"

Darc shook his head, refusing to accept: "It is my last chance. There must be at least one witchdoctor somewhere in Juro. Somewhere on this planet."

Dohan looked cautiously about for listeners. There were no hidden microphones in the castle -- and no one but Darc could imagine such a luxury. The young knight walked over to the balcony and shut its doors. He returned to Darc's bed and leaned close.

He whispered: "I will ask Librian. Stay here."

"Do not tell your father anything. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"No. Swear not to tell him."

"I... I swear."

"My life is in your hands."

Dohan ate the midday meal with the rest of the family in the great hall; at the opposite end of the hall, privileged members of the castle's workstaff sat eating, separated by the wide stone floor.

They were all silent, and Eveli barely touched her food. Bor had more troubles on his shoulders right now: thanks to Darc's statement this morning, Bor Damon's allies were threatening to end their alliance with him. The guests had already left the city, except for Azuch Fache who was too injured to fly. This could not have happened at a worse moment, with the Damons and the Paskos on the brink of open warfare. If only, Bor scolded himself, he had never let that accursed sarcophagus into his city!

After the meal, Dohan approached Bor.

"Father... can anything be done for Darc?"

"No."

"It is a great loss. He held such promise. Her Holiness promised us the Singing King's return. It might still be him."

"This is the will of the Goddess. He should never have come here; he did not belong in our time. A troublemaker. If he was not as good as dead already, the Doctors' Guild would claim his head."

"But --"

Dohan stopped. He knew his father better than to try changing his mind on a settled matter. Only once, only once had Bor hit Dohan... but the fear of Bor's wrath was still very much with him. He went to see Librian.

Awonso informed Dohan that Librian was away in the city, and would not return for several hours. Dohan thanked him, and sat down to wait in the library. He wanted to ask for books on the forbidden arts, but he could not take the risk. As Dohan sat there his eyes fell on the big world map, which lay unfolded on a table. He searched the map, not certain what to look for; he hardly expected to find a spot marked "FORBIDDEN ARTS PRACTISED HERE." Suddenly, Dohan realized that he had never been outside Castilia. His life was predestined to begin and end in the same small province, him married away to some boring noblewoman... but Darc had already been all over the world, seen it in its Golden Age, seen the Goddess and heard the Singing King...

Dohan slammed his fist into the table. Among all these books, there had to be a clue. On an impulse he sneaked into the private chambers, where he knew Librian kept the most precious old volumes. Inside, he lit the ceiling lamp and felt his way between narrow passages, flanked by rows of dusty volumes. He scanned the titles, and found nothing. He searched behind the books with his hand -- and got hold of something. A small, leather-bound book, almost a leaflet. Dohan held up the printed title page, which read:

"The Forbidden Arts: Where To Find, How To Identify, and How To Fight Practitioners Of The

Ultimate Evil."

He leafed through it, fearing that someone would discover him, and read a passage:

"There are no known witchdoctors in Juro today, or they are wise enough to keep their activities secret. The scholars of the Doctors' Guild have defined four typical locations likely to hide active practitioners: isolated islands, mountain regions, subterranean cities from the Great Wars, and the continent of Awstrala.

"The Kap Verita Islands, to the west of the Awrican West Coast, are said to be the site of a secret society of witchdoctors. A sailor who once survived a shipwreck there and later escaped, told an incredible story about a witchdoctor who had populated an entire island with monsters of his own creation. These islands are known to be volcanic, and no seafarer dares go near them."

There was certainly no time for sea journeys; Darc would be dead before they could reach Kap Verita by boat. Dohan put the book back behind the shelf, and carefully made his way out of the library. He was already planning his next action, without considering the consequences, without fearing for his safety. Such was his character.

Dohan's main concern now was how to distract Darc's robot guardian.



The Sunray in flight

Book one Chapter 14

The very same evening, Dohan took the elevator to the aircraft hangar at the top floor of the castle.

The dozen jet-engine craftsmen present were not surprised to see Dohan; he was an avid follower of their work with the family arsenal of flying armor and vessels. They greeted him casually, and continued their maintenance shift. Dohan inspected his own private training vehicle: a teardrop-shaped beauty with two small jet tubes at the tips of sloping, thick wings. It was a two-seater -- but it could never fly from Castilia to Kap Verita on a single load of fuel. And once he got away, Lord Damon might alert his allies via the laser transmission network. If Dohan tried to land for refueling, he would be caught and arrested.

The family had a few well-used transporter jets, for carrying troops and trading merchandise -- bulky, reliable, but slow and not with enough range. Besides, taking one would leave the city too vulnerable.

Dohan was left with one choice. Their private family flagship and battle fighter through forty years, Lord Damon's pride: the Sunray. Sixteen tons of gleaming, sleek steel and aluminum, with an expansion tank that could last halfway around the world. Its cabin, unlike most other Castilian aircraft, was pressurized and no oxygen-masks were needed. The Sunray also sported an air-cooled front laser cannon, and a turret-mounted tail gun. The ship could house up to seven seats, but Dohan needed just two.

He checked with the craftsmen; they assured him the Sunray was in perfect working order. Dohan called for their full attention, and explained that since they had done such good work with his battle armor, and helped him win the Joust, he and his father wanted to reward them. Dohan handed each of them a gold coin, and gave them early leave. The staff bowed, thanked him heartily, and left the hangar in a happy mood.

As soon as the men were out of hearing range, Dohan began to pump synthetic fuel into the Sunray's expansion tank. The guards, standing outside, saw nothing. The sun had set by the time he was finished, and he was getting tired from the heavy work. From a toolbox, Dohan took the item he needed to free Darc.

Dohan approached Lachtfot, who stood posted outside Darc's chamber-door.

The castle lamps were subdued, which hardly bothered the robot -- it had infrared vision, and had just recharged its battery cells. Lachtfot recognized Dohan's voice immediately.

"Good evening, Lachtfot."

"Good evening, my lord."

"Let me inside. I must see if Darc is well."

"Sir Darc is very sick and must not be disturbed, my lord."

"I will not awake him; just let me have a look."

Dohan stepped closer to the door. The machine-servant blocked the door-handle with one firm metal hand.

"I must ask Bor Damon for permission to let you inside, my lord. He does not want be awakened
iiiiIP!!"

Dohan had slammed a concave piece of aluminum, a miniature mirror, onto the visorplate of the robot's head -- and held it there. The light-beams from Lachtfot's eye-sensors were reflected by the mirror, bounced back into them, were sent out again, reflected and bounced back, and so on. Within a second, this feedback of signals caused an epileptic fit in the robot's brain -- it lost its balance and clattered to the floor, flailing its limbs helplessly.

Quickly, Dohan sneaked into Darc's quarters and shrugged him awake. Darc, though very tired, instantly grasped the situation and staggered to his feet. Dohan took Darc's diary and his few belongings, and helped him out into the elevator. They managed to get into the hangar bay unseen. Supported on Dohan's strong arms, Darc stumbled up the cargo ramp into the rear section of the Sunray. He was buckled up in a couch seat, and given some drink from a bottle.

"How far will we travel?" Darc asked in a faint voice.

"South of the land of Espa," the young pilot replied. As he spoke, Dohan fastened himself to his pilot seat, checking and starting up the ship's engines. "I have taken the controls a few times on this ship," he explained, "but my father has much more experience flying the Sunray." He turned in his seat, and gave Darc an encouraging smile. "Have no worry, Darc. I am certain you must be under the Goddess's special protection."

When the engines started, filling the ship cabin with vibrations and noise, Darc began to suspect the trip might in fact shorten his life span by several days. But he held on to life all he could.

The Sunray roared out of the hangar bay; the noise awakened the entire castle, and the city as well.

As soon as Bor understood what had happened, he barked orders at his staff: "Prepare a carrier for pursuit! Alert our allies -- they must not fire at the ship, whatever happens! And -- if news of this reaches our enemies, every man in this castle will be banished to the Wastelands!"

His family members comforted each other through the night, anxiously awaiting the news of Dohan and Darc's whereabouts.

Dohan increased the Sunray's speed carefully, so that the acceleration would not harm Darc. The aircraft effortlessly climbed up through the dark clouds, until he could put it at a steady altitude of about 10,000 meters. He accelerated it to top speed -- below the speed of sound -- and set a straight southwestern course toward Kap Verita. Dohan estimated the flight would take little more than four hours. Cabin pressure was steady, with plenty of oxygen to spare. He switched on the autopilot and unbuckled himself from the seat, suppressing a yawn.

Until this moment, Dohan had managed to avoid thinking about what would happen after Darc was saved; now the gravity of his own situation was beginning to sink in. To escape such gloomy prospects, he went over to Darc and helped him loose.

Dohan sat down on a wall seat and asked: "Darc, tell me about the world in your time. Was it like Librian taught us -- a Golden Age?"

The white-haired man chuckled, turned his head to watch the troubled youngster next to him, and said: "Yes... and no. In many ways it was worse, in many ways better. We never conquered the stars -- or perhaps that happened after I was frozen, I don't know. "In my days, the Goddess and the Singing King were just people -- they were worshipped of course, but we didn't think of them as gods -- not yet."

He sighed, thinking of all he had left behind -- and what Dohan must have left behind in order to save him.

"Dohan... do you have a girl waiting for you back home? You know -- someone special?"

Dohan's brow wrinkled -- his parents had constantly been reminding him about the matter of marriage for the past two years.

"I have not decided upon a wife yet, no. Soon, my parents will arrange a bride for me." He made an excusing grin, and added: "I mean, there have been women in my life -- nothing official, of course. The women of our cities, they..."

"They are not pretty? I think they are."

"Yes, but... I am born a nobleman, a protector of the city. Everyone expects me to be and act my father. He is so... I love and respect him, but I cannot..."

"You cannot be him."

Dohan was greatly relieved. Here was another man he could talk to without feeling the burden of his own authority -- someone who did not grovel, nor answer with platitudes of duty and destiny.

He eagerly went on: "Yes, that's it! And when I try to talk to a lady about this, she turns less interested... she only sees my power, my position, but she does not see me. Sometimes I think our city is... a prison."

Darc shook his head slowly, chuckling again. Dohan frowned.

"You think it sounds strange?" he said nervously.

"No, you are perfectly normal. Just like any well-bred young man in my time. Your father should be proud of you. Trust me."

Dohan's sinking spirits soared again; he was not sure how this was going to end, but once more he was certain he was doing what was right.

The autopilot's clock rang, waking Dohan from his slumber.

He looked out: the sun was rising over the glittering ocean. The Kap Verita archipelago lay straight ahead; he took the jet craft into a slight dive for a closer sweep. As he banked the ship down to one side, he could discern ten or more jagged, gray-brown islands of various shapes and sizes -- scattered over a stretch of a few hundred kilometers. To the north, a faint plume of smoke was emerging from the highest mountain peak of a larger island.

Dohan turned the Sunray in a wide orbit over the southern string of islands; within a few minutes, he was circling the largest and greenest piece of land there. The landscape below was full of ridges and sharp peaks, but there were no apparent signs of active civilization. A city ruin, with traces of streets and a harbor, was all that suggested people had once lived there. There were outlines of terraced fields -- but they could be abandoned, for all he knew. Dohan did not give up, though; witchdoctors and their associates were said to be secretive.

He brought the craft down to the harbor ruins, and landed in the shadow of a high cliff. Flocks of squeaking seagulls scattered into the clear sky, as the jet craft stirred up clouds of dust among their nests. Dohan watched them fly off; never had he seen so many birds at once! In his homeland, most birds had been exterminated centuries ago. Dohan went to the aft section, and helped Darc free himself from the couch. From the armory cabinet, he took a heavy laser rifle, a polished shield, a reflective visor helmet -- and a light sword.

"I will go out and scout the terrain for signs of people. There is water and food here. I have a special key to open the aft port -- if anyone tries to force his way inside, just stay here. If you have to, use the cannons, but then you risk overheating the cabin." He felt at Darc's forehead -- it was hot and moist with fever. "Darc, you must try to stay alive. The Goddess will watch over you."

"Thanks," Darc said wearily. "'Let's be careful out there.'"

"What?"

Dohan could not understand the English phrase.

"Nothing," Darc smiled. "A joke. Go. I'll be fine."

Dohan put on the helmet and slid the reflecting visor down over his eyes. He walked over to the aft port, and pulled the lever that caused the cargo ramp to extend down to the ground. Quickly, he opened the port and stepped out into the blazing sun -- shutting the port after him. Left alone in the ship, Darc drifted into a wavering sleep. He felt as if he had not days, but hours left before the virus had drained all life from him.

Should I pray to the Goddess or to God? he thought ironically.



The guardian of Kap Verita

Book one Chapter 15

Outside, the sea breeze proved refreshingly salty; but the dry heat came very hard on a pale city-dweller like Dohan Damon. Thick layers of dried bird-dung crackled under his boots. He rushed as quickly as his load allowed him, to the shadow of a few palm-trees, and paused for breath. He scanned the city ruins in his binoculars... and spotted nothing but ruins, halfway covered with vegetation. No boats were visible anywhere; apparently the harbor belonged to the birds. He looked up toward the nearby hills, rising up to the north -- mostly barren, but with large patches of green, low forests in the valleys. Vegetation meant water, which meant possible habitation. Dohan continued his survey for several minutes, until...

A foreign noise caught his attention. Something big and lumbering was crashing down the near hillside, trampling undergrowth and palm-trees in its way. Dohan heard an animal sound, unlike anything he had

ever heard before: too loud for a bird, too high-pitched for a domestic animal -- like some twisted trumpet. The sound repeated in short, snorting bursts, closer each time, and soon -- a beast emerged from the undergrowth, stampeding straight toward the ship! Dohan impulsively ran from his hidingplace and intercepted the running animal. Then he saw just how huge it was -- and he suffered a momentary paralysis.

The beast was gray-green and covered with coarse, shiny, leathery scales. It towered above him, almost four meters tall, supported on straight legs, like four tree-trunks with stubby, clawed feet. It had a long, drooping, useless tail, two meters long. The creature fixed its yellow reptilian eyes on Dohan and turned its very long, sloping head toward the tiny intruder. It sounded its trumpet-roar again -- the sound came from its huge nostrils, not the long jaws with the rows of sharp front teeth...

Dohan's moment of paralysis ended; he backed, but the beast charged forward, as if to scoop him up and bite him in half. Dohan threw himself to one side and fell, as the giant reptile thundered past him. He fired a pulse at the beast's side -- it roared furiously and ran off in a wide circle, stirring up more dust. The pulse had barely penetrated its thick skin, and Dohan knew why -- the dust-clouds were refracting the laser-beam, making it too weak to concentrate heat onto one spot. Dohan dropped the rifle and grabbed the shield in his left hand, the sword in the right one. He beat the sword-hilt against his shield, trying to draw the beast's attention away from the ship -- the monster was large enough to crush the jet tubes under its feet.

"Come on then, you overgrown turtle!" the young warrior shouted -- his legs trembling with fear for the first time in months.

The beast responded with a loud snort, turned and charged him. When the beast was almost too close, Dohan darted to the side and struck with his sword at a passing hind leg -- the beast's jaws snapped together, but hit thin air. The sword cut deep, drawing dark-red blood. The creature roared again, slowed its onslaught and turned on the spot. Dohan was already running in the other direction around the animal, slashing at the other hind leg. The blade drew blood again. Unexpectedly, the beast kicked backward with a hind leg -- Dohan's shield was hit and tossed away. The handle whipped out of his grip, nearly breaking his hand and arm. Dohan groaned and retreated again -- but he held his sword raised like a short spear now. The scaly thing opened its pink gap wide, tensing itself for another downward snap -- and Dohan hurled the sword up into its gap. The blade pierced the palate and buried itself in the monster's brain. A final dying trumpet roar escaped its nostrils -- and the beast slumped down on its side, dead. The dust settled. Dohan tore off his helmet, panting and coughing. He looked anxiously around the landscape for kindred beasts -- but there were none in sight. Then an insight hit him. He pulled loose the bloody sword, took his equipment, and ran back to the ship.

"Darc, there is a witchdoctor on this island! The monster in the story -- I met it and killed it!"

Dohan described the beast to Darc, who nodded weakly.

"Have you seen... anything like it before?"

"Never!"

"Then it was man-made... find the creator... quickly..."

Dohan hurried to obey his dying friend.

Time was running out, and Dohan's mind raced to find a way of attracting the mysterious inhabitants. He could not transmit laser signals, without knowing if and where there was a receiving disk.

He shouted, and shouted again: "Help! Come and help!"

The echo of Dohan's voice rolled back from the sun-scorched hills, taunting him. He cursed, and fired a few futile pulses up at the green valley ahead; the target was of course too distant to catch fire.

Fire! That was it! Dohan aimed the rifle at the nearest grove of trees. He adjusted the pulse rate to get a continuous low-heat beam instead of short, white-hot pulses -- and squeezed the trigger. The bright red beam swept over the grove, which immediately burst into flames. In two seconds he had used up the powercell, but it was enough to start a major fire. The sea wind soon began to blow sparks at the dry bush-covered ruins. If the inhabitants did not show up soon, every blade and leaf on the island would burn down.

A few minutes later, the inhabitants showed up -- in a way Dohan had not expected. Hidden motors hummed to life in the hills. A series of telescopic, Y-shaped poles were raised along the nearest ridge, with thick wires connecting them -- it was a camouflaged cable-way, a few kilometers long, which had been invisible from the air. From its top, a carriage glided down along the wires -- it turned out to be a platform, carrying two people and a large electric carriage. The carriage was unloaded at the foot of the ridge, and the manned wagon hummed down the hills, into the harbor, on clanking wheels.

Dohan retreated to the ship's cargo ramp, and readied himself for a quick escape. But as he had expected, the two people ignored him at first. Instead, they steered the carriage to the burning grove. They attached some kind of pump to the vehicle's engine, and began to shower the fires with water-hoses. Almost like the fire brigade of Damon City, Dohan thought. A few minutes later the fire seemed to be extinguished, and the two figures steered the clanking carriage toward the parked jet craft.

When they stepped out of the open seat, Dohan could see that the two persons were both full-grown women. Loose knee-high skirts were draped over their legs. They wore long-sleeved shirts and cloths wrapped around their heads -- and all their of their attire was camouflage-patterned. The red flame-symbol on their costume and carriage indicated that they belonged to the local firewatch. Two dark-skinned, broad-nosed, lively women. And very angry.

"Are you crazy?!" the shorter woman barked at him, in a rapid dialect which he could just about understand. "Starting a fire in the middle of summer! We ought to cut off your head and stick it on a pole, as a warning to other idiots!"

She wielded a laser rifle, and seemed prepared to shoot. The other, taller woman stepped in front of her, armed with a machete and rifle. She gave the pale-skinned stranger a hard look, measuring him up. Dohan blinked, but did not move or flinch.

"I am Sir Dohan Damon from North Castilia," he explained slowly. "I am looking for a witchdoct... a doctor. My friend is very sick; he must get help soon. Do you understand?"

The tall woman told her companion: "We will inform the village council first. This is not a matter for us to decide."

The short one shook her head and argued for decisive action: "I say we shoot off his kneecaps right now. He's a nut. And..."

Her shifting gaze discovered the fresh carcass of the beast that Dohan had killed. Birds were already beginning to flock around it.

"Aiiiiii!" screamed the shorter woman -- a mixture of horror and carefully staged rage. "He killed one of

the master's pets! Meijji will cut off your balls for this, young fool!"

"I acted in self-defense," he objected, rubbing the sprained tendons of his sore left arm.

But the women had already come to an agreement. The short one aimed her rifle up in the air, and fired three bright signal pulses. Soon, another platform came gliding down the cable-line, loaded with people. The party rapidly marched down the slope, and arrived at the open space before the ship. Most of them were brown-skinned women of varying age, ogling him with curious -- and suspicious -- eyes.

A tanned old man with squinting eyes and small eyeglasses emerged from this crowd. Unlike the wrapped heads of the women, he wore a broad-brimmed straw hat, like the one the migrants from Asia brought to Castilia many generations ago. From his decorated white tunic, he produced a tiny metal instrument -- and scanned Dohan and the ship behind him. He smiled and nodded to his company, which seemed to calm down just a little.

"You are a Castilian, eh?" the old man asked in a slower, more recognizable dialect. The old man nodded at his own question, and declared to Dohan: "I am Mechao The Eighteenth, elder doctor of the Kap Verita Islands. Now, where is the patient?"

Darc fought himself up from a nightmare of vast ice-flats, through which human hands were sticking up, clutching at his legs.

He opened his eyes and looked around. The unfamiliar place where he found himself lying was a spacious four-poster bed, in a chamber with tall, open windows. The sun was shining in from outside, but an overhanging roof prevented it from reaching inside the room. It was pleasantly cool indoors, though.

Darc struggled to an upright position, and found that his fever was gone. He was tired, but felt strangely healthy -- perhaps healthier than ever before during this his second life in the future. He went over to the window and gazed down at the beautiful, sun-scorched landscape. The long curtains fluttered slightly in the warm sea breeze. Below his window, a cliff face dropped straight down into a lush green valley ten meters below. On both sides, the rows of windows continued to stretch along the cliff face -- the surrounding ridges, and the camouflage roof, hid this natural fortress perfectly from scouting aircraft. The buzz of crickets suffused the salty air. He soon found his clothes -- washed and ironed by someone -- cleaned himself up, dressed, and felt at the door. It was unlocked. He walked outside.

Dohan, his arm in bandages, was dozing off on a chair outside Darc's quarters, watched over by quiet servants. He had waited all night for his friend to recover. He flew to his feet as Darc stepped outside. Dohan hugged the confused Darc, and looked at him in astonishment -- while Darc noticed the dark rings under Dohan's eyes, as well as his thickening beard and sunburned face.

The young man released Darc, laughed with relief, and babbled rapidly: "You really are better, Darc! I thought it was too late -- but Mechao healed you in no time at all! "As soon as I had told him where you came from, he and his men worked like mad to rescue you! He said something about 're-shaping your bodily defenses' and 'injecting white-cells' -- I don't understand half of it -- but he saved you! Thank the Goddess!"

Once again, things were happening too fast for Darc.

"Hey, hey, calm down... nice to see you too, but I'm a little dizzy yet. Who is this 'Mechao'? How did he cure me? And --" -- his tongue suddenly felt dry as a desert -- "-- when do we eat? I'm starving to death here."

Dohan urged him along, grinning.

"The meal is served and waiting," he said. "And perhaps you could explain to the house master, that I killed his pet monster in self-defense -- how was I supposed to know it was tame?"

White-clad servants escorted them to a large dining-chamber, built in stone and concrete like the rest of the mansion. Some of its walls were actually part of the volcanic rock which made up the mountain -- polished into shiny black slabs which were marbled with glittering minerals. The all-female staff served Darc a veritable banquet of seafood: lobsters, sardines, codfish, crab, oysters, sea shrimps, and fruits. Robots were completely absent. While sharing the food with Dohan, their host arrived -- Mechao, still dressed in his white robes but bareheaded. He did not talk or eat much, but mostly sat watching Darc -- now and then scribbling in a tiny notebook, then nodded and hummed to himself.

Darc took a closer look at his savior: Mechao was tanned, but his skin was paler than that of the other inhabitants. His face was all wrinkles; he wore glasses; the top of his head was bald -- yet he seemed full of vitality, never remaining completely still. His eyes had a vaguely Oriental slant, reinforced by his stripy long moustaches and chin-beard -- or maybe it was just his nearsighted squint that did it.

Once finished and relaxing, Darc slowly explained to Mechao: "First of all, I must thank you for your help. My name is Darc now, but before I was frozen I was called David Archibald... it's a long story..."

Mechao drummed his palms into the table, happy like a child: "Please, tell me everything!" He turned to his servants, clapped his hands and declared: "Ask my family and all who are not occupied, to come in here and listen! Darc will tell us about the Golden Age, the time he came from!"

Minutes later, the wide room was packed with people of all ages. They brought extra chairs and mats, or sat down on the floor, or in each other's laps. Mechao's old wife greeted the visitors welcome, and took a seat next to him. The couple seemed to have about eight children, most of them in their upper teens, others adult. Darc uncertainly assumed that they had been married several times. Mechao's eyes searched the crowd.

"Where's Meijji?" he asked.

"She ran off again," someone replied.

"That girl," he sighed. "The loss of Pipo came hard on her."

"Pipo?" Darc asked.

"The beast in the harbor," Dohan told him.

Mechao hushed the crowd into silence and nodded at Darc, who gave his audience an embarrassed smile. This time, he knew how to serve his story in a more catching manner, and with the help of others to clarify his inexperienced vocabulary.

He began: "It was 900 years ago... I was a rich man living in the cold countries north of Juro. This was long before the Eternal Ice came -- the time you call the Golden Age. I was a practitioner of the advanced medical arts, much like Mechao here. This was nothing wrong in my time. I was respected, rich. I made many wonderful medicines to heal the sick. I had a family, a... loving wife and two fine children. Everything seemed perfect.

"But then I myself fell ill. A slow, creeping sickness was killing me from inside. The doctors told me that I could not be saved -- yet. But soon, within a few years, there would be a cure. With the disease, I would not last that long. I needed more time. And then one doctor, a brilliant man named Percival Takenaka, came and offered me a way -- a way to wait out those years..."

He captured their hearts. The listeners wept at Darc's sorrows, laughed at his adventures. They were awed by the descriptions of a lost past, of terrible wars, incredible struggles, and fantastic progress. He revealed the forgotten ideas called democracy, freedom of speech, and human rights. They listened breathlessly at the retelling of Dohan's courage in battle, of the riches of the northern cities. Darc created a new legend out of his past -- a legend that would one day grow to replace the older myths.

When he had finished his tale, hours later, the residents of the island treated him and Dohan like heroes -- except for Meijji...

Meanwhile, in Damon City, Bor Damon called off the airborne search for his son and the lost Sunray. He simply could not risk leaving his city completely without air support -- with the looming threat of war between the Damons and the Paskos. He blocked out his grief and alerted the city troops, abandoning hope that Dohan would ever return from the forbidden lands to where he had escaped. Seeking comfort where he could, he rocked his mourning wife to sleep the first two nights. Then Osanna began to grow remote, silently blaming Bor for the loss of her only son. Was it not he who had brought the troublemaker Darc into their city?

The people of Damon City were thrown into confusion, and flocked to the cathedral to await an explanation from high-priestess Inu: Had Darc been an impostor all the time? Was he the reincarnated King whose return she had promised, or just an enemy agent? Inu hid in her study, praying for Darc's return. She had expected the King to die again -- but not this way, not so soon, so shrouded in doubt.

Eveli Damon did not cease to believe in Darc. She was sure he would return, and bring her brother back safely. As for Bor's sister and husband, no one knew their thoughts -- but Bwynn was more prepared to inherit the city rule than Andon had ever been. She waited, inert but patient, for destiny to set its course.



Mechao & family

Book one Chapter 16

In the city of the Paskos, the ruler's agents returned once more with urgent news...

The alliance between the Damons, the Orbes's, and the Yotas was crumbling. Lord Fache was lying injured, unable to leave Damon City and rouse his own soldiers. And as for the Pasko-Damon alliance by marriage, it had been doomed from the start. Dohan Damon had escaped from his city, defying his own father. Darc, the man rumored to be the reincarnated Singing King, was deathly ill or dead.

Hearing all this, Sir Tharlos became exhilarated. He stalked his parents, who were still brooding over their humiliating defeat at the Joust, and made incessant demands for action; a better opportunity to wrest control of Damon City might never come. The Lepers had not appeared in the Madrivalo province since the battle of 930 A.M. -- so the Pasko troops were safe to attack on foot, without risk of contamination.

The weary city lord finally gave in after enduring a whole day of his son's pleas and demands. For the first time ever, Tharlos was granted command of the troops. But Tharlos did not reveal everything to his drunken, morose father. The thin, tall young nobleman with the intense eyes had bigger plans, which he confided to his ambitious mother.

"We could be more than lords of this petty town," he told her. "I could be king -- ruler of all of Madrivalo, or Espa itself! Only the Damon alliance stood in our way, and now it is shattering. If only I was king, we could cleanse this land of The Ones Whose Very Name Brings Disease -- once and for all."

Lady Tresa Pasko was pleased to hear that. Standing behind her restless son, she massaged his perpetually tense shoulders with her fingers. She said into his ear: "You are a brilliant child, so much more

than your weakling brother Andon. Tell me more."

Tharlos willingly obliged: "Once Damon City has been taken, the other cities can easily be convinced to form a new alliance, under the Pasko family -- the beginning of an empire. And just to make sure our forces are superior... the robot I tested during the Summer Joust was not the only one of its kind."

"My bright, beautiful boy. Did our craftsmen build it?"

"That must remain my secret. I have a source, a secret ally -- far, far from here, who contacted me through a robot messenger, which also fought for me in the Joust. My secret ally will provide me with a new kind of robots, battle robots the likes of which have not been seen since the Great Wars. He has plans too -- one day, he will become a threat to our rule. But we will be prepared."

Tresa kissed her son's cheek, slowly caressing his neck.

"And can we outrank the Damon scum?" she asked softly.

"According to our agents, Damon City alone can mobilize a thousand armored riflemen, and possibly three armored knights. We are forced to leave a few hundred of our fifteen hundred riflemen for city defense -- but my new battle robots will compensate for that. And I have trained four new armored knights from the lower nobility. They are my loyal followers of Koban-Jem." Tharlos stood up from his chair, and headed off for the secret shrine he had built deep in the family castle. His mother looked slightly disappointed. "I will pray to Koban-Jem and Setan-Klaws for victory," he said as he left.

Of Tharlos's two hundred followers, nearly a hundred were waiting around the black shrine, chanting their hymn of hoarse desperation.

For there were those, even among the richest of this city, who had lost all hope in the future. For these desperate souls, the gods of greed and destruction provided a perverse kind of resort. As high-priest of this his local chapter, Tharlos was the only one who had dyed his long hair yellow. He entered the darkened room of the shrine, wearing a white silken shirt with very long, loose tails, and ascended the altar. Tharlos raised his silver knife-scepter and called for silence.

"My children... a new age is dawning! The Whore Goddess is old and weakening. Her Singing King has appeared in Damon City."

Tharlos' followers gasped in fear.

He added, triumphantly: "But he, for all his power, soon fell sick, and now he is dead. Koban-Jem is stronger than ever. I -- he -- will lead you to true greatness. The greatness of slaying all enemies! The greatness of destroying all weakness! The greatness of annihilating all disease!"

The worshippers -- a motley collection of nobles, merchants, and common thugs and criminals -- responded with a mantra, repeated in chorus: "Death to all enemies! Death to all enemies! Death to all enemies!"

Tharlos smiled, then silenced them with a solemn gesture.

"We will cleanse the world. With fire, my children." Then he suddenly screamed in hysterical rage, urged on by the manic atmosphere of the audience: "Fire will melt the Eternal Ice! Fire will incinerate all Lepers! Fire will create a new sun -- a black sun!"

The worshippers chanted: "The Black Sun! The Black Sun!"

The Black Sun, mentioned in the ancient astronomy books, the never-seen eater of galaxies, father of shadows, was the center of the Kobanite faith. The followers believed that the only way to appease the Black Sun and protect themselves, was sacrifice -- preferably that of enemies. Tharlos reveled in his power over this crowd, the closest he had ever come to being loved. His mother's caresses had never been love, at least not to him, who craved more than mere human affection.

"And now," he declared, "we will serve Koban-Jem his offering, to ensure victory in our coming battle against the Damon fiends!"

The crowd murmured expectantly, their eyes glittering with a twisted desire. From behind the shrine, a woman was dragged forth to the altar. She had been picked from a tavern at night, drugged and brought to the castle -- a poor prostitute, who would be missed by no one except her illicit children. Tharlos

himself tied the dazed woman to the altar, where a fresh tablecloth had replaced the old bloodied one. He did not sincerely believe in human sacrifice -- but he knew its effect on the crowd, and he desired that power.

The chanting increased, faster and faster -- one word being repeated more and more -- until only the one word was shouted by the ecstatic worshippers: "Death!"

Tharlos stabbed the woman and offered the crowd her blood. They shared it.

Just one day after he woke up from his fever, Darc was up and about -- Mechao's cures and medicines had made him stronger, more vital than ever. With an intensity that surprised his host, Darc dismissed any thoughts of convalescence and began to study the machinery of Mechao's genetic laboratory.

He was introduced to Mechao's secret treasure of inherited knowledge, a knowledge that had allowed him to breed the mutated beast which Dohan had slain. Darc and Mechao spent days and nights among the DNA centrifuges, the mechanical womb, the corporeal scanner, the micro-surgical instruments, the test paper tissue which reacted to specific genetic samples -- all marvels of simplified biotechnology, and yet just fragments of past wonders.

Darc admired the old witch-doctor's huge library of ancient transcripts, containing near-complete maps of 50,000-plus human genes -- more than one hundred volumes in all. One proof at least, Darc thought, of a work that had survived from his own time. An enormous array of hereditary diseases was listed in the volumes, plus the exact genetic faults that caused each disease. There was no entry, however, on the dreaded Plague.

It did not take long for Darc, an accomplished biochemist from the late 20th century, to grasp the workings of Mechao's laboratory. The chimera known as "Pipo" had been Mechao's biggest creation so far: a cross-breed of elephant and crocodile. Its purpose had been to scare away curious seafarers and other unwanted intruders, and it had served well -- until now. Otherwise, Mechao's main work was that of being master physician of the islands -- he alone possessed the technology to alter people's immune systems, something the conservative plaster-mongers of Castilia neither could nor dared to. One day, his oldest sons would take his place as keepers of the flame.

Seeing that Darc was going to live, Dohan felt satisfied; he had saved the man who might -- or might not -- be the Singing King.

But he remained uncertain of how they were going to get back to Castilia, and face his father's wrath. His despondence increased. On their third day on the island, Dohan grew wary of waiting. Darc was preoccupied in the laboratory with Mechao, and the inhabitants came out into the open. The natives pulled out their boats and fish-nets, worked their plantations, maintained their camouflaged villages. Their eyes followed Dohan all day long, and he began to worry that they would sabotage the Sunray to keep their secrets from the outside world.

So he spent the third night inside the jet craft, on the watch for saboteurs or more mutated beasts. Nothing happened that night; only the crickets and seagulls disturbed his sleep. The island had scents that were like perfumes, beckoning, dizzying his senses. His superstitious mind began to wonder if he was under some kind of spell.

When it came to genetic creations, Mechao's clan had mostly experimented with enhanced agriculture. Some of the best-growing crops on the islands were his forefathers' creations, which withstood drought and heat. Because of this, the Mechao family ruled the islands. His convictions were strongly directed toward helping humanity, like his forefathers. However, the worldwide fear of man-made diseases and mutations had forced them to Kap Verita generations ago.

Darc soon learned that, even though genetics had developed during his years of frozen sleep, no new progress had been made in the last five hundred years. Mechao was a keeper, not a finder of knowledge. While his sharp, witty intellect and vast knowledge made Mechao a delight to work and discuss with, the white-haired time-traveler also saw how Mechao was deprived of proper awareness of the scientific process, and proper stimulation.

And it was evident, given the state of things, that the world's remaining "witchdoctors" were isolated far apart from each other, and Mechao had never met one outside his clan, until Darc arrived. The vivid memory of the Castilian nobility's terrified reaction to the word "DNA" had made Darc cautious. He revealed little of his own knowledge and mostly listened to Mechao, as the man explained to him the wonders of his great genetic workshop.

The following morning, Dohan woke up and saw that the cockpit windshield was spattered with white bird-dung; he grew furious.

He fired a few laser shots at the circling birds, and beat his shield to scare them off. As a response, a bird dropping hit him on the head. Dohan threw a youthful fit, cursed the entire island, hacked at the nearest palm-tree with his sword -- and from somewhere above, a female laughter echoed across the harbor. He looked frantically for the source, but saw nothing -- the natives kept their activities away from the harbor ruins.

"Who is it?" he shouted in frustrated rage. "Come on, I'm not afraid to fight a woman! Where are you, coward?"

The laughter returned, and a young woman's spiteful reply echoed: "I am not afraid of you, you pale-faced brute! Only an idiot would park his ship in the middle of the birds' nesting-grounds!"

Dohan did not grasp every word of her dialect, but the meaning was clear enough. He felt foolish, so he retreated to the ship, started up the hover jets, and moved the Sunray to a higher location. Then he waited, as he had been taught -- waited for the unseen enemy to strike.

From various hiding-places, Meijji had watched the pale-faced intruders ever since their arrival.

When she learned of Pipo's death, she decided that the intruders were dangerous brutes, who should be chased away or imprisoned. But her parents and the council of villages had explicitly declared that Darc and Dohan should not be harmed. Meijji cried with rage at night, swearing that she would get at them somehow. She would make her parents see how evil and unreliable the brutes were, behind their false smiles and fairy-tales of the Golden Age. And since Darc was already a trustee of her father, she went for Dohan -- the most violent of the two.



Meijji

Later in the fourth day, after the noon meal, a passing villager turned up his nose and made a disdainful remark to Dohan.

"Our pigs smell better!"

The young warrior had not taken a bath for days, in breach of his own upbringing, and was ashamed at the complaint. Afraid to leave the Sunray unguarded, he decided to bathe in the nearby sea, where he could see the parked ship on top of the plateau northwest of the harbor. Dohan had never been near the sea before, but he did not fear it; the Lepers avoided coastlines, and the sea was rarely a source of legends in the open plains of the inland.

In the clear sunlight, Dohan walked down to the rocky beach, undressed, and stepped into the splashing waves. The water was much warmer than he had expected. Under the surface, he could glimpse an immense variety of colorful fishes and corals... an entire new universe, waiting to be explored. Dohan treaded deeper into the water, until it reached up to his chin.

Only then he remembered: he hadn't the faintest knowledge of how to swim! There were no open lakes in Damon City, just shallow pools. He turned awkwardly back toward the beach -- slipped on a rock, and fell deep under the surface, swallowing water. Instinctively, he kicked his way up to the surface, coughing and gasping for air. A big wave lifted him up, then buried his head underwater. He panicked, losing air in bursts of bubbles. The outward pull brought him deeper out to sea, and his pumping feet found no foothold.

Dohan began to drown.

It was now, on the fourth day, that Darc began to suspect there was a reason for the predominance of women on Kap Verita.

He asked Mechao, who explained without unease: "In your time, you could decide the sex of an unborn child, no? You could abort an unborn, because it was going to be of an unwanted gender, no?"

"That is true," Darc admitted uneasily. "And it caused problems in some lands, because most parents prefer sons to daughters -- well, in my time they did."

Mechao nodded.

"In my practice, I am regularly asked to control the gender of an unborn, by sorting the male seed into male and female tendencies."

He meant chromosomes -- female, X-shaped chromosomes and male, Y-shaped chromosomes. Sorting them was a relatively simple mechanical process, since they had different weight.

Darc said: "I see. So, why do parents here choose to have daughters more often?" "Because this is a small, peaceful, isolated island... and we desire it to remain so. We have no need for soldiers or brawlers. Our women argue thus: why need so many men, when all they do is sleep in the sun, use the crops for making beer, waste their money on gambling, get drunk and beat their families -- and then leave their wives for the mainland?"

Mechao's words reminded Darc of angry female litanies from his youth; and though he himself stayed away from drinking, he knew the bitter truth of those complaints.

"But... but isn't this dangerous for the reproduction?" he objected. "What if all men eventually disappear from Kap Verita... or the risk of inbreeding?"

Mechao giggled in his peculiar way, then said with a knowing smile: "I was going to ask you and your young friend a small favor, a fair repayment for my services..." He held up a set of tiny glass tubes, and winked benevolently.

"Would you care to make a donation to the island's genetic treasury?"

A strong, thin arm reached under Dohan's bearded chin, and kicking legs pulled him up to the surface, back to the pebble beach. He was barely conscious, until someone began pressing her soft, warm lips against his, blowing in air. She removed her lips -- Dohan took a gasping breath, coughed up seawater, and wheezed like an old man. Then his vision cleared again, and he could see the person who had dragged him up.

She was roughly his own age. Her small face had Mechao's slanting eyes and long nose -- and her mother's broad cheeks. Her light-brown, soft skin glittered with drops of water, and her slim, curvy figure

was showing under the wet skirt and shirt. The girl's brown hair stretched to her shoulders in thick braided dreadlocks, set with colored beads, that framed her long neck. She was kneeling beside him, and he saw that she was surveying his pale body with curiosity... or fascination. He blushed, and covered his crotch.

"Who are you?" he croaked.

The girl retreated several meters, then retorted: "I am Meijji of the Mechao. And you... are a dumb brute."

She put her hands on her hips and just stood there, as if waiting for him to get angry at her. Dohan got to his feet with some effort, and found his clothes. He rinsed them in the waves, and dressed -- the sun was already burning his skin hard, and his nose had been peeling for the last few days.

"I ought to thank you for pulling me up!" he called at her.

She sat down on a rock, watching him dress.

"I should have let you drown, paleface!" she called back. "You murdered my Pipo!"

She was insane, Dohan told himself. And insane women were best left alone. Meijji thought: He is as big as he is dumb. A big, muscular paleface. Never have I seen a member as pale as his... Against his better judgment, Dohan approached Meijji again. He disliked the idea of her running about accusing him on false grounds, so he decided to put her in her place.

"Let me just tell you this: I did not 'murder' your monster. He attacked me. What was I to do -- let him trample the ship and hurt my friend who was inside?"

Meijji raised her little chin -- a very cute angle of her face, Dohan admitted to himself -- and made a defiant laugh.

"Pipo ate nothing but vegetables, I used to feed and wash him every day! Those front teeth were just for scaring! You think you are a brave warrior, huh?"

"I know I am," he said with a feral grin, "just as I know that you are a madwoman. And I have no more time for you. So leave me alone!"

She made a childish face, and stood up.

"Fine! See if I care! I hate you!"

Meijji turned and fled, skipping over the round boulders with graceful ease -- Dohan was unable to trace her way into the hills. He sighed, and thought of home. Could he ever return now, having disgraced his family and broken the oldest of all taboos? He ought to be defending his city from the Paskos now -- if they weren't attacking already. And to top his miseries, he was being persecuted by a madwoman. That last thought kept Dohan occupied for the rest of the day.

That evening Mechao and his wife, the venerable Amada, were informed about the events on the beach -- the women of the island had their eyes and ears on the new visitors. Amada laughed at this news, wrinkles spreading over her dark, smooth face.

"The Great Sea lends a hand," she told her husband as they went to sleep. "It is fickle but generous."

"We are indeed blessed," he smiled.

"Tell me, dear, will he bring us many grandchildren?"

"Many, many ones. Meijji will have five sons and five daughters."

"Four. Four sons."

"Why four?"

"Four is her lucky number."

"Woman, you are so... so..."

The word he was aiming for would have been "irrational", but it did not exist in their vocabulary. So he kissed her instead.

Darc took a break in his genetics studies, and staggered to bed for a full night's sleep. Finally, he was on his home ground -- unlawful or not, he wasn't going to quit science. From outside his room, the distant music of a village feast beckoned -- maybe he could do a few rock songs for them? -- but sleep overcame him. Later, he told himself.

Dohan slept a little better in the ship that night, but he dreamt uneasily -- about laughing, brown-skinned women who ran around him, teasing him with glimpses of naked flesh.

Meijji spent most of the night among the feasting villagers in the valley below Mechao's mansion. She stayed away from the dances, and rejected all invitations from the young men. Her friends, relatives and elders knew what was bothering her; it was futile to explain to Meijji what she would soon find out on her own. And not a few of them, also her sisters, envied her. Jealous thoughts grew in the night.

Early the next morning, Meijji traveled down the cable-way to the harbor ruins, and had a second look at the carcass of Pipo. The sight made her wince. Birds, insects, and small animals had picked his bones clean -- only the huge ribcage, the long skull and rags of scaly skin remained. Meijji was suddenly filled with disgust, seeing Pipo for what he had been -- a monstrosity, a dumb animal. She felt a strange surge inside. Meijji was clueless as to why, but she craved Dohan's attention. Immediately.

Dohan sat out in the open, and was just finishing the shaving of his beard with a sharp knife, when a small rock hit the Sunray's hull. He grasped the knife as a weapon, ready to stave off the vandal -- but saw nobody. Another pebble bumped into the ship, bouncing off the front windshield. Somehow, he knew it was Meijji.

"Stop that!" he shouted at the hills. "Or I kill you!"

Meijji's head peeked down from a nearby cliff, and she yelled: "You haven't got the balls! And I'm too quick for you, clumsy paleface!"

Dohan's face went red with anger, and he rushed up the rocky slopes to catch her. He did not intend to kill Meijji, just bring her to her father -- so that he could lock her up until he left this cursed island. Meijji knew the island well; she skipped over crevices, hid in bushes, taunted him from a distance. He ran, climbed, lunged at the girl who suddenly appeared and disappeared before and behind him -- always one step ahead. After having chased her for what seemed half an hour, Dohan was exhausted. He slumped down in the shadow of a palm-tree, breathless, and wiped his face. Fighting armored knights was child's play compared to this.

Then -- a low rustling from above caught his attention. He went taut, darted to his feet, gazed upward -- and saw Meijji, clinging to the upper part of the tree trunk, staring down at him. He could glimpse her smooth thighs under the skirt. Almost immediately, Dohan threw his weight against the elastic trunk, and shook it forcefully. The girl screamed, lost her hold, fell -- and with a groan, he caught her in his thick arms.

"Let go of me!" she screamed. "If you rape me, the other women will cut off your balls and --"

He hardened his grip to a bear hug, and she fell silent with a yelp of pain.

"By tomorrow or very soon," he explained in a hard terse voice, "I will have to leave my friend here and return to Castilia. I can never come back! What more do you want from me, madwoman?"

Meijji twisted in his grip, and faced him up close. She had tears in her eyes.

"I don't want you to leave," she said in a much softer tone. "I never said that."

He frowned, then looked into her brown eyes with wonder. She was incredibly beautiful. He wanted her more than anything else in the world.

Dohan wanted to say it, but instead he asked: "Is this another taunt?"

"No!"

"You want me to stay?" he shouted.

"Yes!" she cried.

"Why?"

She was speechless. He was about to let go of her -- when she kissed him on the mouth. He responded without thinking, and they embraced each other. There was no need for further talk. For the better part of an hour, they were content with kissing and caressing each other. Later still, they grew bolder and made love at the foot of the palm-tree.

Meijji's passionate moans and Dohan's heavy breath were nearly drowned out by the shrill song of the crickets. Afterward, they rested in each other's arms, and the surrounding world ceased to exist in their minds. Dohan could only perceive Meijji's lovely, vulnerable face. Meijji was only aware of him holding her.

Darc met Dohan in the mansion, late in the evening. The young nobleman seemed to him different, more mature -- and infinitely more troubled.

"Darc, I cannot stay here any longer. By keeping the Sunray here, I am endangering my home."

"I understand. We leave as soon as possible."

"We'? You cannot go back -- my father would kill you -- and slowly!"

"It has to be. If you return alone, you will take the full blame for having helped a suspected witchdoctor. I must go with you, to defend you against any charges. And to clear my name."

Dohan made an incredulous laugh; it was so absurd he practically forgot about the Singing King, and saw just Darc the man.

"You talk of defending me? With no army, no city behind you -- you stand powerless against the nobility -- the church -- and the Doctors' Guild! They will hunt you down like an animal!"

Darc shook his head, and said: "What if I stay here, then? The islanders will be endangered by my presence, because Bor will seek me out here. Then the Guild will find Mechao, and wipe out him and his family."

"No!" Dohan exclaimed -- the thought of Meijji being killed was unbearable.

"Yes," his friend insisted. "And you are mistaken about me having no power," he added. "I have something infinitely stronger than weapons. Ideas. Democracy. Free speech. Human rights."

"It is beyond my understanding what you are blabbering about," Dohan said in a whining tone. "All I know is that I love Meijji, and I do not wish to live if I cannot see her again..."

Darc laughed and patted the lovesick young man's shoulder.

"Well, why didn't you say so? Good for you! Will you marry her?" he said, jokingly.

Dohan didn't laugh when he looked at him and said: "You do not know our laws, Darc. The nobility must stay united to avoid internal power struggles. The ruling families marry away each other's children to strengthen their alliances. Could you imagine the chaos, if I married the daughter of a criminal... a witchdoctor? Damon's dynasty, smashed."

The red-haired young man slumped into a chair, and buried his face in his hands. If he was weeping, it did not show in the darkening room. Darc suddenly felt very old. So that's the picture, he thought. No matter where I walk, there's an establishment or a taboo I'm stepping on. Even this lad, for all his guts and glory, is shackled by a rigid, oppressive feudal society. Looks like I'm up against a whole world. Once again he played the Popeye tune in his mind; it always helped raise his spirits before a fight.

"Dohan," Darc said, "I must ask you to trust me again. I swear, on my life, that I can help you marry Meijji -- and make it legal. I can even come out of this alive, if I use my head right. But I need allies. Not city lords or armies -- people. I already have Mechao's support, I think -- perhaps Librian too, and maybe Inu if I'm lucky. And I have you. Are we still friends?"

Dohan looked up, suddenly recalling his vow to Lord Fache.

"To the end."

"Good. We leave tomorrow, then I'll tell you about my plans. Now go get some sleep."

He pondered later, how early he had found out the great difference between him and the peoples of these second Dark Ages. They lacked a sense of self-consciousness -- and were governed more by simple, strong passions and society's laws, than by reason and reflection. As Darc went to sleep, it came to him: there was one other man who had shown a capacity of thinking ahead of all others -- though he had used his initiative for destructive purposes.

Tharlos Pasko.

Should Darc fight him, or was it possible to turn him into another ally in the coming struggle? In the eyes of a man from the 20th century, who had seen the most unlikely alliances, nothing was impossible. He slept on it.

Meijji and Dohan were together once more that night, trying to forget that they might never meet again. Few words were spoken; promises of everlasting love were whispered. They made love and caressed each other without pause, until they fell asleep in each other's embrace.



The Short One & the Tall One

Book one Chapter 17

In the late morning the next day, Dohan checked the Sunray; before an hour had passed, he deemed it safe for immediate lift-off.

When he received the flight clearance, Darc was ready to go. Mechao's large family and a few hundred villagers crowded at the shore to see them leave. His wife Amada kissed and hugged Darc, then Dohan, as if they were family members.

"Be careful, my handsome ones!" she told them.

"Promise," Darc replied, but resisted the temptation to wink at her.

Discreetly, Mechao handed Darc the tubes of equipment he had asked for earlier, concealed inside a large thick cloak.

"The microscope is fragile," Mechao instructed him in a low, serious voice. "Do not drop it. There are written instructions inside, too. The sample test tissue must be heated to at least halfway the boiling point, or the color reactions will not be visible. I have prepared it to react to the most important larger genes we discussed, but there are many genes which will not give any reaction."

"I will return," Darc promised, shaking the old doctor's bony hand.

Meijji, when it came to her turn, refused to let go of Dohan -- she followed him up to the plane, weeping incessantly. The two fire-fighter women, the first ones Dohan had encountered on Kap Verita, were the saddest members of the villager crowd. Patting each other's shoulders, they waved at the departing guests.

"They'll never come back," the short one sobbed. "It's a jungle out there."

"Knock up some women and leave," the tall one said stoically. "Just like those sailors used to do."

Darc was soon settled in his cabin seat, waiting for the pilot. Dohan halted on the cargo ramp, holding Meijji tight.

"I love you. We will meet again, I swear," he told her, wishing it would be possible to hold his promise.

"You must. I shall think of you every day, every moment."

He gave her a little golden figurine of the Goddess, a lucky charm he had worn since childhood. They kissed each other a last time, and parted. Dohan rushed to the controls, almost forgetting the safety belt. The islanders backed away; the Sunray rose up into the blue sky, whining so high the bystanders had to cover their ears. They kept watching until the ship turned to the north and roared off past the mountain ridge.

"Is there a radio on board?" Darc asked Dohan, once his stomach had settled after the rough start.

The vessel was up among the clouds again, speeding northward across the sea. He had to repeat the question before Dohan noticed. "What is a 'ra-dio'?" Dohan asked, his mind absent, brooding over Meijji.

Darc clarified himself: "An electromagnetic machine that sends and receives messages. What do you use?"

Dohan blinked out of his moody trance.

"Oh, that... laser pulses, of course. We use the kind that are invisible to the eye, and they can reach very far, but the curvature of the globe sets a limit to how far, unless they pass through the way stations that are posted across Castilia."

"Can you listen to the laser communication between other cities? Now, I mean? Then we might know what is going on back home."

Dohan shook his head; Darc never ceased to say the strangest things.

"How do I do that? A laser-beam is like a bundle of very thin lines. The sender must know the exact location of the receiving disk, or he will just send his pulses into thin air. What is good about this, is that the signals cannot be overheard on their way..."

"I know, I know," Darc said with slight irritation. The boy's understanding of physics was abysmal -- as with most people of this time.

"So you can communicate with Damon City?" Darc asked.

"Not in the air, no -- it is nigh-impossible for me to get a reliable aim on a receiver, even on a steady course like this. The cities have an old static network for communication -- it is upheld by the ruling families."

Darc thought he understood this: the city lords were secretive, and had long since given up radio waves since they were so easy to intercept. Then he thought about something else.

"Dohan... I need to learn more about the people outside the cities, out in the wilderness. You know..."

Dohan was silent for a few moments, then replied in a tense voice: "There are no... people... in the Wastelands."

"The Lepers... who are they?"

The young man turned to give him a quick glance – and Darc saw the blind fear behind Dohan's outward anger.

"Don't say the word in here, it brings bad luck!" Dohan snapped. He added, only slightly less harshly: "We call them 'The Ones Whose Very Name Brings Disease'. They carry the Plague. They are evil, pure evil."

"Have you ever seen one? Or a picture of one?"

Dohan shook his head, almost like a spastic reflex -- and explained: "Lord Fache was the last Castilian in recent memory who saw them and lived. He drove away a great horde of them near his city, in the year 930. That made him our greatest hero. It is an honor just to be defeated by him in the Joust. During the battle, Lord Fache was lucky to stay so far away from them, that he could avoid contamination. They say he still has nightmares about it.

"Once, when he was drunk at a celebration -- that rarely happens -- he talked about what he had seen. I happened to overhear him. He had been close enough to see them -- they looked like nothing human! Unspeakable hideousness! When he saw into their eyes, he almost died of fear! Some of his soldiers, and a relative of his, were captured by... by them. The defenders of his city could hear them scream for mercy for two days and nights!"

Their aircraft suddenly lurched off course -- Dohan was so upset, that he had pulled one of the controls in the wrong direction. He adjusted the craft's position, and switched on the autopilot. Dohan was pale, and cold sweat was budding on his face.

"Calm down, Dohan. I promise I won't mention it again."

He let out a sigh, puzzled by Dohan's reaction. Defender of the city, indeed! Trained to fight an enemy he only knew from fairytales! Still, Dohan had shown the courage to face a witchdoctor; there was still hope that Darc could free him from his worst superstitions. Darc spent the rest of the journey studying the medical equipment Mechao had given him. He was especially delighted to examine the miniaturized diffraction microscope -- no larger than his two fists, with its added optical function; Mechao had told him it came from one of the coastal cities of Awrica. And this proved that powerful technology was still being kept in memory, just waiting to be used to its full potential. With such power, Darc speculated, he just might turn the odds in his favor. He hid the equipment in the secret pockets of his cloak, before they arrived.

From the air, they could see the signs of battle many kilometers away. Smoke was clouding the circular, giant fortress that was Damon City. Laser lines flickered in all directions; occasional explosions hit the outer walls and the central castle. Dohan could count at least two enemy aircraft circling the city. One of the Damon family's slow troop carriers was up in the air, trying to fend off enemy aircraft with little success. Darc was no coward, but the idea of suicide didn't appeal to him.

"You're not going down there, are you?"

Dohan turned grim; he was not so different from his father, after all. "Be quiet. Our artillery will recognize our insignia and give us cover. I will try flying in as fast as I can, attack an enemy craft and land at the top of the castle. My father is a better pilot -- I should be down there now, in my armor. You, man the turret, quick!"

Darc unbuckled, grasped a side rail, and treaded back to the aft turret. It reminded him of old World War II bombers -- a fold-out seat, hanging suspended from the ceiling, mounted to a gun the size of Darc's two legs. Powered by servomotors, the gun pointed out through the hull by way of a small airtight porthole. He got into the gunner's seat and tested the controls. Fairly simple, he figured -- rotate the gun with the two handlebars, aim through the windshield, and fire. There were two crude, circular gauges under the gun sights -- for battery power, and gun temperature. Darc had done his military service, but that was years -- centuries? -- ago. Fear and tension were building up in his gut -- but there was no time to think it over. In the next moment, they were flying in.

Red, green, and blue laser pulses blinked past the Sunray from the ground. But it was a strangely silent battle, Darc thought; no cracks of gunfire or machine-gun staccatos could be heard. Every now and then, a hit would snap against the ship's hull -- too weakened by smoke and distance to pierce it. Dohan closed in on a Pasko fighter craft as it swooped down over the city, toward the great castle. From the castle turrets, a barrage of red lines aimed at the enemy ships -- mostly missing their targets. The enemy pilot rolled and twisted his craft like it was a toy. Dohan fired at his rear, and hit once. The enemy craft climbed away from the castle, and Dohan went after it. The Damon troop carrier retreated to the tower hangar, badly hit by enemy fire.

In the aft section, Darc fought down a beginning fit of airsickness -- his stomach lagged behind as they climbed. The castle complex rushed past his view -- then he saw the second enemy fighter approach them at their rear. He fastened his grip of the handlebars and tried to lock onto the rolling pursuer. Turbulence from outside and vibrations from the loud jet engines caused the gun to shake in his hands -- he fired twice, to try his aim -- and both pulses missed. The pursuer closed in, just a hundred or so meters away -- fired several pulses -- they missed, if only because Dohan made a sudden sharp roll and banked left. Darc struggled to get a proper aim, but the pursuer kept moving in and out of his narrow view.

He scanned the sky, squinting at the sweat beads rolling into his eyes, humming nervously between his teeth: "I'm Popeye the sailor-man... come on, you bastard... I fight to the finish 'cause I eat the... Gotcha!" He squeezed the trigger, firing a quick burst -- one of the pulses seemed to scratch the pursuer, but it remained flying. The temperature gauge climbed up to the red area -- battery power was already down by half. "Damn!"

The pursuing craft fired a long burst of green pulses. A shower of sharp cracks hit the hull. Darc was rocked in his seat -- Dohan put the Sunray into a rolling spin, pointing its nose to the ground. Dazedly, Darc noticed a burning sensation from the air around him -- and saw that there was a freshly burned hole in the aft port, close to his seat. Too stressed out to react, he waited for the downward spin to cease.

Almost too late, Dohan broke the craft's spin and aimed its nose upward again. He turned it back on course toward the castle -- Pasko's pilots were simply too good for him.

Darc took a few potshots at the enemy troops as the ground swept past him. The enemy soldiers were trying to get close enough to fire some kind of heavy cannons or grenade launchers at the outer walls -- but the artillery batteries on the battlements kept them at bay. He hit one of the enemy cannons with a pulse, and it blew up in a huge cloud of fire. Darc made a triumphant yell. One of the enemy fighters got on their tail again.

Over his shoulder, Dohan yelled from the cockpit: "Cover us, Darc -- I'm going into the hangar!"

Darc fired again and again -- but he seemed to miss by inches and hairbreadths each time. The second enemy craft came into view farther off. Darc hesitated for a moment; he had only seconds before Dohan would have to throttle the thruster jets, and use the keel thrusters to steer into the wide-open hangar. Before they reached inside, they would be sitting ducks -- unless the castle guns could shield them.

A sudden explosion from outside jolted the cabin.

"Are we hit?" Darc shouted.

"They hit a castle turret!" Dohan shouted back. "Cover fire!"

Darc aimed and fired, without thinking -- ignoring the battery gauge sinking closer to zero, and the temperature needle reaching the red area. He fired two more pulses -- and the gun went dead. Nothing happened! He shook the handlebars, stared out the windshield -- where did that second ship go? -- and nearly missed the sight of the enemy plunging down into the castle gardens. The thundering explosion echoed throughout the city. The remaining enemy craft veered off, ducking laser lines from the city defenses.

Suddenly, the Sunray fell under the shadow of gray concrete walls, and it shook violently -- the keel thrusters were pushing against the hangar floor. They were saved.



Shara

Book one Chapter 18

Bor Damon had been in command of the city's defenses since early morning. Most of the civilians had taken shelter in the vast pre-war catacombs beneath the city; all reservists were armed and in active service.

Before afternoon, reports reached him of severe damage to the outer wall. The Pasko forces, which had unexpectedly and abruptly attacked under the command of Tharlos, had bombed out several turrets and were now on the verge of breaching through. Bor coolly ordered all his riflemen to move toward the critical point and stave off the intruders. He had no knights ready but himself -- and he had not been in armor for a long time. His only real fighter craft, the Sunray, was missing.

Only one city lord had proven his faithful ally when the attack came in the morning: Azuch Fache, but his broken bones were far from healed yet. Azuch was being rolled alongside Bor on a wheelchair pushed by Lachtfot, giving Bor constant strategic advice and moral support. Fache had transmitted an urgent call for reinforcements from his own city, but it was being delayed until the next day and Damon City might fall during the night. While awaiting that much-needed support, Librian and Awonso manned the laser transmitter without pause, sending desperate requests for help to Yota and Orbes. From those two supposed allies, less than three hours' flight away, came only silence.

In the city cathedral, spared from enemy fire, high-priestess Inu and her female novices were praying for a divine intervention from the Goddess; they called for the spirit of the Singing King to boost their soldiers' courage.

"I have felt his presence," she told them, calm in the faith that would not be rocked by mere explosions. "He will come to us again. For it is written: are you lonesome in the darkest night, he will sing new life into you."

In the castle's inner sanctum, Lady Osanna had armed herself with a rifle, readying herself for a last stand. Eveli stayed close to her. This was the first time in the girl's life that the city had been under attack, and she was terrified. Also with them were Bor's sister Bwynn -- and Andon Pasko, huddling down in a corner. He had never been a fighter, much less a man of courage or character.

As Bor was ordering his men to the outer wall, an ensign peered out a narrow window with his binoculars.

"It's the Sunray!" he suddenly shouted.

Bor and Azuch started, barely able to believe their ears. Bor Damon immediately ordered the signalmen to flag an urgent order to the gunners: FRIENDLY AIRCRAFT COMING IN. For a moment then, Bor hesitated, fearful of what outside contamination might be clinging to the Sunray and its passengers. But just for a moment.

They witnessed how the Sunray fought enemy aircraft and turned the battle in their favor; they saw enemy artillery go up in smoke and flames; they felt the impact when a Pasko plane crashed into the castle gardens. Bor Damon's pride swelled in his chest for those brief moments; his son had returned and proved himself a man.

Then, Bor saw the pulses being fired from the Sunray's rear, and thought: Someone is rear gunner. It cannot be him. He must be dead. With heavy breath, Bor hurried to the hangar above and entered the main hall. The place was bustling with activity; the huge steel-and-concrete ports rung vibrantly as enemy fire rained down on them.

Gasping at the sight of Dohan, at the foot of the battered Sunray, he rushed toward him. And behind his son, he then saw Darc -- alive and healthy. The man had cheated death again. The, raw, chilling fear of the unknown passed through Bor like a ghost's breath. Could it be that Darc really was immortal, as the rumors were saying? The city lord stared past his approaching son, straight into Darc's face -- and in that face he saw something his mind could not grasp, an enemy far more ominous than the fire that pounded at the castle.

Change.

Darc's legs were a bit unsteady as he approached Bor Damon -- more because of the air battle, than because Bor was staring at Darc as if he had seen a ghost. He took a deep breath and walked across to greet Azuch Fache, waving away the city lords' attempts to speak up.

"Please, my lords -- we have no time to explain now. You must get the Sunray back into battle, before

the enemy can shoot into the hangar."

Bor nodded dazedly, and shouted orders to Surabot and the hangar personnel. Darc recognized who was pushing Azuch's wheelchair, and grinned at the robot.

"Are you surprised to see me, Lachtfot?"

"Nothing surprises a robot, Sir Darc. Welcome back."

Darc nodded, and turned to Azuch Fache: "My lord, I want to help out. Can I borrow some of your body armor and guns?"

Azuch was stunned. The reincarnated Singing King, back from the dead, was asking to borrow his weapons!

He said, uncertainly: "Yes... but... I mean..."

Bor cut him off, white in the face: "No! As long as I am lord of this city, no upstart commoner is to soil a nobleman's suit of war! Dohan!"

"Yes, father?"

"Arm yourself and head to the northern wall in the carrier. I take the Sunray. You take command of the troops there. Watch out for Pasko's new knights. Understand?"

"Yes, father."

"Now go!"

Dohan ran off to his duties -- relieved and somewhat surprised that their reunion had been so brief.

Bor turned to Darc: "And you... I could cut you down here and now."

Darc met Bor's furious eyes without fear -- he had stared death in the eye twice.

"I don't think you should do that, my lord. Everyone thought I was gone. Seeing me fight would scare the enemy, and boost our fighting spirit. You know that I'm right. The church has shown me its support."

Bor glowered at Darc, then at Lord Azuch Fache. Azuch nodded solemnly.

Bor grunted: "So be it. Arm yourself and get into the carrier. If you die by enemy hand and not mine, so much the better."

Darc afforded himself to slap Bor's shoulder.

"Let's kick some Pasko butt," he said and hurried off to the armory.

Bor trembled -- from fear or rage, he did not know which. But he quickly regained his composure, ran up into the Sunray, and prepared for takeoff. Azuch Fache was left to oversee the castle defenses and the communications with their as-yet-absent allies.

"To the war room," he ordered Lachtfot.

War.

For the city lords and their knights, it was their main reason for existence. For the city dwellers, it was

just terror. And for Darc...

The white-haired time traveler was sitting in the crowded troop carrier, all geared up in a shiny helmet, shoulder pads, and chest and back plates. He almost believed he was having a bad dream -- that any moment he would wake up in a hospital bed -- it would still be the year 1999, and he would still be dying. The soldiers aboard the flying carrier were regarding Darc with great curiosity; next to him stood Dohan in a hunching position, once more clad in his mechanized armor. He pulled up his face visor; the flight would be over in seconds.

"They expect you to say something," Dohan told Darc over the engine rumble.

"Like what? That the 'King' lives?"

The irony in Darc's reply was 900 years past its time; it went unnoticed.

"Yes! Hurry, we are almost there!"

Darc stood up, grabbing a ceiling rail to keep his balance.

He beat his shield with his rifle-butt, and yelled at the wide-eyed riflemen: "The King never dies! The King can be killed, but he never dies! Because... you cannot kill the music!"

The soldiers roared with enthusiasm. Darc added, in English: "Now let's rock'n roll! Rock'n-roll!"

He felt like a total fool. But the soldiers -- young and grown men -- shouted "Ro-ken-rol! Ro-ken-rol!" in chorus. Darc noticed their enthusiasm, their increased preparedness to die for their city. He admired their courage -- and hated himself, for urging them toward an early death. He had not, not yet by a far stretch, earned the right to call himself king of anything.

The troop carrier touched down on an abandoned open place, and the passengers rushed across to the looming outer wall. The main force of riflemen hurried up the sets of stairs that crisscrossed the sloping

wall. From there, they spread out along the battlements, twenty meters above ground. The remaining group gathered with Dohan and Darc at the foot of the wall, taking cover behind nearby buildings and blocks -- waiting for the expected enemy breakthrough. With intervals of less than a minute, the ground shook as enemy explosives and concentrated laser fire ate through the massive layers of stone and concrete. High above their heads Bor entered the battle, fighting the remaining enemy aircraft; he could not offer any assistance. Darc felt his teeth vibrate with each, increasingly powerful detonation. As always in a war, the waiting was the worst part -- waiting for death, or a small opportunity for glory.

"Why does the enemy not climb up the sloping wall, instead of breaking it up?" he asked a rifleman, a bearded fellow who probably had an ordinary occupation, a family hiding in the catacombs, and a single rifle to protect them with.

"Ah, but we have traps, sirrah -- electrified barbed-wire, spread all over the outside," the man replied. "They climb the walls, they get tangled up and die. Those rotten, treacherous bastards must breach the wall before their supplies run out, or it's curtains for them."

Another large explosion came, and a twenty meter long top section of the outer wall began to collapse on itself.

A few minutes later, the battlements of the weakened wall section crumbled. The section cracked up into several house-sized pieces, pushing inward as the enemy launched more explosives from outside. The riflemen on the surrounding battlements kept firing at the Pasko troops below -- but the advancing enemy was well covered behind their reflecting shields. Only a few men on both sides were actually wounded by the blazing crossfire.

Sir Tharlos Pasko, standing behind one of his huge grenade launchers, ordered a final volley. Collapsible towers rolled forward, ready to drop long gangplanks onto the breach in the fortress. The enemy artillerymen loaded the pneumatic tubes with cylinders of explosive jet fuel, lit their fuses, and fired. Pressurized air charges shot the cylinders sixty meters through the air, and they exploded in deafening fireballs against the wall. And finally, the bottom half of the damaged wall collapsed; it crashed inward in a cloud of dust. The gangplanks were dropped in the rubble, and Pasko's troops charged through, roaring.

Dozens of the attackers fell as Damon's riflemen greeted them with a merciless fusillade. But they pressed on desperately -- no one wanted to stay out in the Wastelands for long, especially not until nightfall. A passing enemy craft suddenly screeched past the place, strafing the surrounding battlement, and several of Damon's riflemen fell. The enemy footsoldiers charged on. Dohan and his company would have to fight the invaders at point-blank range.

A green and red latticework of laser-beams danced across the fields and streets, hitting soldiers, ricocheting off shields, cracking into houses. In just minutes, a large contingent of enemies managed to cross the narrowest part of the open place and enter the city streets.

Darc took cover behind his shield and helmet, and fired a few random shots into the haze at the foot of the outer breach. He couldn't quite see what he hit; the enemy used smoke torches to weaken the aim and impact of the defense. He looked for Dohan -- the armored knight was already away in some other corner of the nearby city block, leaving dead and fallen enemies in his wake. Several more Pasko soldiers fell on the cobblestone, but more and more managed to cross the open place and spread out in the narrow streets. The combat went from wild shooting to hand-to-hand fights with swords, bayonets and spears.

Forced to leave his cover, Darc scrambled for a two-story house, lasers bouncing off his helmet, and darted into an open door. He slammed it shut, overturned a cupboard in front of the entrance, and headed up the nearest narrow staircase. From an upstairs window, he might have a chance of taking out a few enemies...

When he reached the top of the stairs, something solid smashed against his helmet. He stumbled to the floor and rolled around on his back, with his rifle ready to shoot the attacker. It was a woman who had ambushed him -- she stared down at him, holding a broomstick in her hands.

The raven-haired woman gasped: "Don't shoot! I thought you were the enemy!"

She helped Darc to his feet; his head was aching, but fear kept him alert.

"Get into the catacombs with the others, lady! What are you doing up here?"

"I was delayed," she blurted out -- her guilty face was concealing something, but Darc had no time for questioning.

He squatted at a window, opened a pane slightly ajar, and began to aim at the scene outside.

"Is there a way to reach the shelters without going out the front door?" he asked, not looking back. He fired, missed, fired again, missed, hit a Pasko trooper, and ducked when several pulses flashed past his head. "Get down!" he shouted.

The woman, though frightened, was not dumb -- she ducked on her knees and hands before he told her to.

"Too late now anyway," she said desperately. "The shelters are sealed off until the battle is over! Oh Goddess, we're going to die!"

Darc ignored her, and moved over to another room where he could get a better view. From a window, he suddenly glimpsed Dohan -- flying past above his head.



Spider Robot Book one Chapter 19

The armored knight came screaming down from the air, cushioned on the whining jet streams from his massive backpack. He repeated his battle cry from the Summer Joust. As Dohan swept down onto the street, he burned one enemy soldier with his jets. The man caught fire -- another enemy was crushed to the ground by Dohan's elephant-like armored feet. Dohan swung his broadsword into the nearest row of attackers, knocking down a sergeant with the tremendous force of his motorized endoskeleton. Dohan became a different man in his armor -- not a pleasant man, but he did not care. The battle had a cause, the cause offered glory and honor -- and redemption for his previous escape. As with his father, there was a part of Dohan that became intoxicated by the power of the armor; he was injected with a ruthless, controlled fury, partly a product of his long training.

This was his first real battle, and he was unable to stop and think -- only the feverish intensity of staying alive, tracking the enemy's movements, and the kill, mattered to him. The invaders retreated as Dohan headed a fierce group of his riflemen forward, pushing them back toward the breach. He shouted orders, and they were obeyed without hesitation.

From the castle, Lord Azuch Fache watched the battle at the northern wall through his binoculars. It was only an hour since Dohan's unit had left the hangar, but his group had already halted the enemy's advance into the city. Azuch whispered a grateful prayer to the Goddess... and to the Singing King.

He turned his wheelchair and addressed the others in the war room: "Report! I sense the enemy are holding back, they may be preparing for a second charge!"

A signalman read a flag message from a watchtower far outside, and answered while reading: "Lord Fache, Tharlos Pasko has been sighted, and his armored knights. They say three, maybe four knights. And they are accompanied by -- no, wait -- black dogs -- no, correct that... giant black spiders!"

Lord Azuch Fache could not believe the report. Then came another report, confirming the first one. He mumbled another prayer for his friend Dohan -- a desperate one this time...

Tharlos stayed outside Damon City, behind his lines. He had decided it was time for sending in the new reinforcements. Tharlos ordered his four new knights -- faithful Kobanites enlisted from the lower nobility -- to enter the fray. They gladly obeyed, partly because of their ingrained fear of the Wastelands. As they stampeded through the gash in the outer wall, Tharlos turned to his newest recruits: three black robots, each two meters tall. They did resemble giant spiders, and Tharlos admired the craftsmanship -- each identical robot had a round, shiny black bulk with eight thin legs sprouting from its underbelly. Their heads were also devoid of necks or humanoid features -- the green eye sensors were four, placed around their black metal skulls. Razor-sharp mandibles clicked impatiently as they listened to their owner's directives. Glittering solar cells on their backs provided them with extra power. Following the instructions he had received from the secret manufacturer, Tharlos barked directives at the robots with painstaking clarity.

"Order one: You will attack all enemy knights in sight, until they are dead. Order two: You will also fire at random at all enemy soldiers. Order three: If you see an enemy with very white hair and white eyebrows -- you will attack him until he dies. Are your orders understood?" The giant insectoids rattled their legs -- which he took as a "yes" -- whoever had designed them, had favored fighting abilities over speech capacity. Tharlos pointed an armor-clad finger at the wall ahead, and shouted: "Charge!" The three machines marched forth at the half running speed of a grown man, constantly communicating with each other in a bird-like twitter. Pasko's soldiers stared at them with mixed emotions.

Darc managed to hit and injure at least four enemy infantrymen -- he didn't try too hard to kill them -- before his rifle batteries ran out. The enemy had retreated to some houses and the barricades around the

gash in the wall. The fighting had gradually decreased in intensity, even as couriers brought new battery cells to the riflemen -- scores of soldiers lay dead or wailing for help in the streets. The stench of laser-scorched flesh lay heavy in the air, and small fires were spreading from a nearby city block. Darc suddenly felt an urge to puke at the whole sick carnage -- but he didn't dare lowering his guard. He took off the helmet and wiped his sweat-drenched face. The raven-haired woman handed him a cup of water, which he gratefully drank.

For a moment, Darc allowed himself to really see the woman who had been huddling behind him all the time. She was a quite voluptuous, almost plump woman, perhaps thirty years old, her most marked features a prominent nose and wide red lips. Her skin was pale, not just with fright; the long black hair was in tatters. Her wide, flowing skirt was of a heavy, dark-red material, and it fronted a low-cut décolletage. He assumed she had to be the daughter or wife of a wealthy merchant, judging by her thin necklace of electronic circuitry and light-emitting diodes -- a rarity among commoners.

"What's your name?" he asked, throwing occasional glances outside. "Shara -- Shara Rawiman. Your hair -- it's all white..."

She stared at his scalp, bewildered but focused. The few wrinkles in her face suggested much more character and courage than she cared to reveal.

"They call me Darc," he said with a weary grin, "but don't believe all you hear about him." He cut off her attempt at a reply. "I've got to move out of here and charge up my weapon. Come, help me pry open one of those sealed windows down there."

As they peeked outside from the street plane, the battle clamor began to increase. From the metallic thumping, jet engines and rattling noises, Darc could tell that several knights and something else had entered from the breach. He gestured at Shara to follow. She put on a cloak and they crawled out through a back window, sneaked across a narrow vegetable garden, and climbed a low brick wall. Shara's expensive skirt was ripped open as she heaved her legs over the top of the wall.

A curse escaped her lips as she fell over and Darc caught her: "King's shit!"

Darc thought briefly: All money and no class. Darc and Shara cautiously took to the backstreets, heading for the distant cathedral spires, where they had a chance of finding shelter. Darc had never fought with a sword, and was not dumb enough to try it now -- if he found another cartridge for his rifle, he could continue shooting from a safer location.

Shara did not value Darc's fighting competence highly, but she had no choice but to follow him. She was hoping Darc would not understand he had surprised her during a burglary. The torn dress and the jewelry were not hers; even her prayer to the Goddess had been a bluff.

Dohan Damon took cover behind a wall when he saw the four enemy knights enter through the breach. The quartet, unfamiliar characters he had never seen at a Joust, fired wildly in all directions, then spread out and covered the invading soldiers who carried ammunition to the scattered Pasko troops. And then came...

Dohan and his men stared at the shockingly new sight. Before they could react, the three black machines aimed and fired, charging forward in a pack. Their eerie twittering sounds paralyzed some of the defenders with fear, and Pasko's infantry saw their chance. In a few seconds, several of the city's soldiers had been hit by enemy sniper fire.

Dohan shouted: "Smoke!"

In a lower voice, he told a sergeant that he would take off. His soldiers threw smoke torches, and a thick mist billowed out over the battlefield. Dohan ignited his jet engines and soared above the smoke -- the enemy knights heard him, but could not pinpoint his location at once. Their fire missed, was weakened by the smoke, and bounced harmlessly off Dohan's armor. Though the infrared eyes of the spider robots saw Dohan through all smoke, they were not built to co-operate with human soldiers; their information was not conveyed to Tharlos or his troops. Two enemy knights took off, and flew up above the rooftops to hunt down Dohan. He quickly landed on a balcony -- it barely held under his massive weight -- then waited, gun ready. Above their heads, the aerial battle continued. Lasers snapped, jet engines screamed.

Bor Damon dodged the remaining enemy fighter again. Both he and his opponent had been chasing each other for a dangerously long time, and the Sunray's fuel tank was just one fifth full. His tail gunner kept the enemy at bay -- the enemy's tail gun did much the same. Bor searched desperately in his memory for some trick from his glory days, when he could outwit a pilot by the flick of a rudder. If the Paskos could preserve their air support, they would still have a chance of winning the battle...

He shouted a warning to the gunner, then pulled up the plane's nose, throttled the engines abruptly, and pulled the air brakes. The Sunray's speed dropped -- the deceleration was painful. Bor could feel his heart miss a beat, his vision dimmed -- he braced himself for the feared heart attack, as he let the ship fall toward the city below. He thought briefly: It is in your hands now, my son --

The heart attack never came. His vision returned in full, and he kept the ship's nose up. Closer, closer they fell -- the enemy pilot relaxed, and turned his ship toward the troop base outside the city's walls. Also he was in dire need of refueling. Just fifty meters above the rooftops, Bor turned up the thrust to full force again. The Sunray shot upward again, and banked sideways toward the escaping opponent's tail. The enemy's tail gunner had dropped his attention -- and too late, he saw the Sunray sweep past his view. Bor overtook the other craft, firing quick bursts at its side hull. He hit once, then lost his aim -- the enemy craft slowed down, and got behind him.

"Gunner!"

The tail gunner was on the alert even before Bor Damon shouted. He fired a fusillade of pulses at the enemy's front windshield as it came into view. The enemy pilot was first blinded, then instantly killed as the cockpit exploded around him. The enemy craft plunged downward and crashed into the Wasteland plains. Bor Damon's gunner cheered -- and Bor noticed the warning lamp blinking on his instrument panel. He put the Sunray in a downward spiral, slowing it down for a landing outside the hangar. There was an emergency parachute, but at this altitude it would not make much of a difference.

Standing against a wall, Darc saw Bor's jetfighter spiral down among the rooftops several blocks away. He waited for the sound of another explosion, as when the last enemy fighter had gone down... no crash was heard. Darc sighed with relief -- and caught sight of a group of whining metal figures, reflecting the sunlight just one block away. Enemy knights! Dohan was outnumbered and overworked; Darc cursed himself for having run away when he was needed.

"Look, Shara -- I'll take you to the cathedral, but then I got to return here."

"Yes."

Suddenly Shara stared past him, and shrieked. Enemy troopers appeared, blocking their escape route to the cathedral. Darc grabbed Shara's arm, and they crouched behind his tall shield. Five riflemen appeared from the opposite end of the street, got into kneeling positions and began firing. Darc stood up, shielding Shara as they rushed across the street and into a narrow alley. Stray laser-beams hissed onto the ground at their feet. They found themselves trapped in a dead end, close to the hot flames of a blazing building.

"Now what?" Shara shouted in fear and anger, sweat streaking down her face and chest. "You bloody

fool!"

They could hear the shouts of enemy riflemen; the rhythmic stomping of their boots on the cobblestone was advancing. Darc spotted an open door leading into the burning house -- thick smoke was billowing from it, and even the door had caught fire. He rushed over and lifted the burning door from its hinges. With a prolonged groan, Darc ran to the beginning of the alley and dropped the door across the passage. He returned to the crumbling house, fetched a fallen piece of a beam, and added it to the burning barricade.

Darc and Shara covered their mouths with handkerchiefs, coughing and weeping from the smoke. They quickly retreated to the end of the sealed alley and waited, huddled together. The enemy soldiers arrived. All they could see was blazing fire and smoke, blocking the alley.

One of them shouted: "They're done for! Move on!"

The soldiers hurried past the alley; Darc and Shara got to their feet again. Darc pushed aside the burning barricade with his sword and shield, and they sneaked away -- a few moments later, the burning house collapsed over the alley. Above their heads, the air erupted with noise and lines of laser light.

Dohan fired from his balcony cover, and hit an enemy knight's backpack from less than twenty meters away. The knight's fuel tank exploded, sending him spinning like a firework; he crashed straight through a roof and disappeared. Two other knights were alerted by the noise, and closed in. They made silent signs to each other, and leaped off from a chimney-top -- then flew separate ways over the city block where their comrade had fallen.

The addition of the spider robots to the battle had not led to the sort of success Tharlos Pasko had planned for. Quite the contrary, their unprepared entry was creating confusion on both sides. A few of the Pasko soldiers were so misinformed, that they believed the black machines were intruders from the Wastelands -- and fired at them in panic. One robot was badly damaged; it sank down on its belly with a high-pitched whine from its motors, rattling its spindly legs helplessly.

Single-mindedly, the war robots interpreted the friendly fire as an attack, and promptly defended themselves. With mechanical accuracy, they aimed at the Pasko troopers' unshielded parts -- the crotch and the neck, respectively -- and fired a barrage of pulses. They took down six screaming, bewildered soldiers.

Damon's troops saw the opening, and charged again on their own initiative. One Damon soldier skipped very close to a spider, and struck a sword blow at its head. The spider robot's armored head just shook off the impact. With inhuman speed, it jerked forward and caught the sword in its mandibles. The soldier screamed and tried to retreat -- the robot thrust its foremost pair of legs out, and knocked his feet off the ground. As the man fell, the huge spider robot leapt over him and dug its sharp mandibles into his flesh. His scream was cut off. Yet, the remaining two robots received so many laser hits from the charging defenders, that they broke down -- invulnerable they were not. The Pasko troops retreated further and the Damon side sensed that, miraculously, victory was close.

Meanwhile, Tharlos Pasko raged over the loss of two of his finest jetfighters, screaming curses at everyone about him. He could not hope for victory any longer. Only the chance of seeing Dohan or Bor Damon dead might be his meager comfort, before he was forced to order retreat into the waiting troop carriers. Tharlos declined his officers' pleas for retreat, and decided to try holding his lines just a few minutes longer... no matter how many more of his men died. He wanted to see his knights to return with their mission complete: Dohan's head on a stake.

The two Pasko knights closed in on Dohan from two directions, leaping from rooftop to rooftop, from alley to alley. Thus, their jet fuel would not last long, but neither would Dohan's if he tried a wild escape. He waited until one of them passed close enough, then leaped into the air and flew shield-first into the surprised enemy knight. The impact threw them both off-balance -- his opponent crashed through a brick wall and broke his neck.

Dohan bounced off the impact, almost overturned, slammed into a tiled roof -- then slid down the slippery roof with a rattling noise and fell off. But his jetpack skill saved him again; Dohan had turned off the jet engine when he hit the roof, and ignited it again when he fell down. He hovered down onto the street below, and touched down heavily. Hitting the other knight had exerted Dohan and damaged his armor; its response to his movements was slowing.

As he limped down the street to find a technician, laser pulses rained down on him; the third knight was positioned on a rooftop, and he wanted revenge. Dohan held up his battered shield above his head, but its cover was no good -- the pulses went through and hit the armor, hard. He could feel the suit temperature jump to painful levels. Dohan kicked in a door and skipped inside a house for cover.



The Battle of Damon City ends

Book one Chapter 20

The fleeing Darc and Shara turned a corner, and almost ran into a pair of lost enemy soldiers. Darc reacted instinctively, and thrust his sword at the first soldier who crossed his way -- the blade pierced the infantryman's shoulder, and he fell over with a muffled groan. The other one got the time to react, and raised his rifle -- but just as he fired, Darc slammed his shield into the man's chest. The soldier toppled over, and Darc smashed his visor with his gloved fist. The soldier coughed up blood, and lay beaten. Both enemies were still breathing.

Panting hard, Darc took the fallen men's rifles and handed one of them to Shara.

"Take the shield," he gasped at her. "If someone shoots, just duck behind it and fire back."

Shara obeyed, too shocked to react to the violence about her. In the next instant, a metal giant thumped down on the cobblestone, right next to them. It was the fourth enemy knight, who had come to relieve his comrades in the air battle. He had not seen the fight from behind the wall he had just crossed -- and it surprised him greatly to meet a beautiful armed woman in a torn red dress.

That moment of surprise was just what Darc needed. He threw himself on his back, and fired four quick pulses up at the knight's backpack. It exploded in a burst of smoke and sparks -- the knight was hurled forward on his face, and smashed into the cobblestone. Darc's shield was hit by flak; a laser ricochet blinded him momentarily, in spite of his protective visor. Spots danced in front of Darc's eyes -- he tried crawling to his feet, but his legs felt like jelly. His vision cleared, and he saw the huge knight rise up above him.

"I'll cut you in half, Damon scum!" the knight roared, his visor smashed, and his face a bloody mess.

Darc tried to fire again -- but his stolen rifle was empty now. The knight grinned maniacally, and raised his long sword over his head. Now it's really, really over, Darc told himself. He shut his eyes as he heard a series of sharp snaps and cracks -- then opened them, and discovered that the knight's exposed face was full of black spots. Smoke poured from the spots -- they were holes, and the smoke came from the knight's burned-out head. The metal giant tipped over, with his sword-arm stiffly raised, and fell backward with a crash.

Darc staggered to his feet, and turned around. It was Shara who had fired -- she stood frozen, her rifle still aimed, staring at her bloody handiwork. Darc grabbed her by the wrist, and got them both on the move.

"Thanks for saving me, my lady," he said as they rushed away.

"I killed him... didn't I?"

"Yeah."

"It was the first time I..." She did not cry, but her face was white.

It was the first time for me, too, Darc realized. He decided to ponder that problem in another life, should he ever get the chance to be frozen again.

Dohan stumbled through the house, knocking down furniture and objects like a clumsy armored elephant. Behind him, the pursuing enemy knight ambled inside in a barrage of laser shots. The house was a glazier's workshop -- ricochets hit mirrors, bounced recklessly back and forth, shattered fragile glassware, set fire to curtains and carpets. Dohan fired a few desperate shots as he retreated, but only managed to start more fires.

Dohan was not the cerebral type. He did not know what made him grab a mirror from the wall. Perhaps the influence of Darc's inquisitive, creative mind had finally made its mark on him?

Suddenly the pursuing enemy glimpsed the blurred outline of a knight, facing him in a smoky doorway from across the chamber. The enemy knight instinctively fired all he could -- and the pulses instantly

reflected back on him, hitting his gun-arm and facial visor. The figure in the doorway seemed to splinter into a thousand shards -- the knight had been firing at his own mirror image. Dohan leaped out of the doorway, and struck down the knight with a single blow of his metal fist, forceful enough to penetrate a brick wall. The enemy knight crashed into a wall of mirrors and slumped to the floor -- the imprint of Dohan's fist was stamped into his helmet. Dohan caught his breath, disarmed the fallen opponent, and cut off his power supply so that he would not be able to rise up. After having dragged the unconscious opponent out of the burning house, Dohan recalled the air battle. He rushed outside to learn what had happened to his father.

A courier brought the bad news to Tharlos's camp: all jetfighters were lost; all knights were missing or dead; the troops were being pushed back.

Finally, Tharlos ordered a fast retreat. The surviving Pasko soldiers scurried into the remaining troop carriers -- leaving hundreds of wounded and blind comrades to be taken captives. These abandoned men could look forward to at least being alive -- they might get exchanged to Pasko City later, if Lord Migam Pasko considered it worth the expense. Otherwise, crippling eye and nerve injuries made their future look bleak; most of them would become limping, miserable beggars with eye-patches, lining the streets of Damon City.

The defenders of Damon City cheered; a new victory cry was repeated among them, growing in strength.

"Roken-rool!!!"

In the castle war room, Lord Azuch Fache received the good news. In Lord Damon's absence, he immediately ordered the catacomb shelters to be opened. Citizens were mobilized into working parties, to put out fires and repair the outer walls.

Azuch's warning was sent out over the city from mouth to mouth: "The wall must be restored, before the Ones Whose Very Name Brings Disease get the opportunity to reach Damon City!"

That warning would be a powerful driving force during the night ahead -- the sun was already low in the sky, and for the first time the outer wall was breached. The castle guard opened the inner sanctum and let out Bor's family. Osanna immediately asked to know if her husband was safe. When she heard that not only Bor but also Dohan was safe and sound, she demanded to see them.

"I told you Darc would not let us down!" little Eveli shouted at the family, running with her mother through the castle. "He is the Incarnation!"

Awonso and his family, crowding with the other citizenry, milled up from the catacomb shelters and saw the damage battle had done to their fair city. The young apprentice librarian assumed that Librian was still in the castle library, and became occupied by the same thought as everyone else: The outer wall must be repaired. He lost sight of his parents as he went with the flow of thousands through the narrow, darkening streets, following the signs of war toward the breach. Awonso stumbled on something, and could barely stop long enough to see that he had stepped on a corpse. He felt a cold shiver, and was pushed along by the crowd. When they reached the breach, he was drenched in sweat.

Groups of volunteers formed spontaneously from the crowds, and seemed to know what had to be done. Some groups took to gathering the slain and taking care of the injured, before the doctors and priestesses arrived. The corpses of enemy soldiers were stripped of valuables, stacked in piles, and set on fire. Those enemies who were alive but injured, were bound together and led away to imprisonment. Children and old women ran after the silent captives, tossed rocks, spat at and cursed them. The fire brigades recieved the aid of hundreds of men and women, who formed lines at the city wells, pumping buckets full and passing them along to put out the fires. Awonso stole a few gulps of water for his own consumption, then joined the largest groups: the craftsmen, carpenters, masons, and common folk who gathered at the wall breach.

He witnessed how the respective guilds rounded up craftsmen for the various tasks, shouted orders, and handed out equipment from the workshops. Awonso craned his chubby neck and tried to catch a glimpse of his father's guild, but it was the familiar faces of the Wirers' Guild that caught his attention first. One of them, the neighbor Franco, urged Awonso closer.

"Awonso, have you seen your father and his men?"

"No, master Franco, they must have gone to see if our workshops are safe from fire. Let me help out. I know a thing or two about wiring."

"Just this once, boy, I will ignore guild rules. Are you scared of what lies outside the wall?"

Awonso paled visibly, but shook his head with emphasis.

"Then grab a pair of rubber gloves and boots, and follow me. We must gather all the electric wiring that was destroyed when the wall broke, before it is safe for the others to begin rebuilding. The city lord has decided not to shut down the electric traps, which means our work is very dangerous. But it must be done, and with speed, to make sure the wall can be repaired tonight."

Awonso eagerly followed the wirers, rugged workers whose skin were more tanned by outdoors work than his. They formed lines and carefully made their way across the rubble with electric torches and detectors, until they came to the dreaded Outside. This was why Awonso had joined them: to see the outside from ground level, for the first time in his life.

The setting sun made a glowing background to the quiet, vast plains and low hills. At the distant horizon, one could just make out the few lights that were not blocked by other city walls. Stray animal noises sounded more clearly here than in town: birds, packs of wolves, insects, the occasional bird. To the citizenry, it all sounded potential menace and had to be kept at bay, as the custom had been for centuries. Only the nobility and their armies were supposed to venture outside the cities, and only when absolutely necessary. Awonso thought guiltily that the Goddess and the Singing King, who knew all, sensed his yearning to break the taboo, to walk into the wilderness. He mumbled prayers of forgiveness as he and the others rolled up and carried wires and cables -- and Awonso could hear, that he was not the only man who prayed. He found a length of wiring, connected to a trap of barbed wire, and started cutting off the trap with a pair of long pliers. Blueish sparks flew as he cut off the rusty barbed wire, and his heart beat faster... but no accident happened.

"Thank you, Goddess... King," he whispered.

It took Awonso and the one hundred men over an hour to finish their task; the other groups hurried in with spades, picks and large cranes to begin the rebuilding. Thousands more formed lines to move debris out of the guildsmen's way, and large pits were dug to mix fresh concrete. Awonso took one last, longing look at the great outside, feeling the cool breeze of open land coming in from the breach. Then, with a sigh, he stepped out of the way of the passing workers and walked back to his home street, to the family house. And for a change, the city streetlights remained lit all night; he didn't have to walk in the dark. Among the shouts echoing through the night, he heard an unfamiliar call:

"Roken-rool..."

Two of Lord Damon's castle guards stopped Darc and Shara, when they tried to enter the city cathedral. Both Darc and Shara had taken off their helmets before; now that seemed a mistake, for the guards recognized him.

"Sir Darc," one of the guards said, "it is Lord Damon's order that you follow us back to the castle."

Darc's muscles tensed, but he was too tired to fight, and it was pointless to run away in the dark; he would only get lost.

"Let's go."

"The woman too," the guard said. She tried to run -- the other guard grabbed her by the arm. She gave out a faint scream of protest.

"I don't know him! I just followed him -- let go of me! Do you know who I am?"

The guards smiled, and pushed the two prisoners before them.

"I know you, lady," one guard said scornfully. "You spent some time doing hard labor, after you tried to impersonate the wife of the chairman of the Guild of Micromechanics. Shara Rawiman, also known as Shalott Rawiman, also known as 'Long Fingers' Shalott."

Shara gave Darc a fierce glare -- it seemed to her that her present misfortune was all his fault. Darc knew big trouble was ahead, and Shara shouldn't have to be involved.

"Now listen, friends," he told the guards, "she really has nothing to do with me. She's just a petty burglar I happened to surprise in a house --"

Shara kicked Darc in the shin; he groaned.

"Bastard!" she shouted. "I saved your life, and this is how you thank me?"

The first guard raised his eyebrows: "Oh, you saved his life, did you? We have been told to arrest anyone suspected of being in liaison with Sir Darc. Lord Damon will take great interest in your valiant rescue."

Both guards laughed viciously; Shara's eyes were filled with fright. Darc's mood darkened a little more, when he saw her eyes. Though he did not yet know this woman, he had seen firsthand her intelligence, street smarts, and resourcefulness -- just the type of urban woman that excited him the most.

This time, Lord Damon knew what to do. After the court physician had examined the city ruler, an electric wagon brought him to the gash in the outer wall. He inspected the repair work and added to the guard force a large troop contingent with laser artillery. A little later his son arrived from the castle, relieved of his battlesuit, and Bor praised Dohan's valor openly so that the troops saw it. The populace cheered them, and no one mouthed complaints over Dohan's previous desertion of the city.

Bor's next step was to put Dohan into "protective custody". As soon as the populace could not see Dohan, Bor's elite guards surrounded him and brought him back to the castle. The young man reacted with shocked silence, and made no attempts to resist. More loyal guards were stationed in the cathedral, to report on the activities of high-priestess Inu. When Bor's wagon returned to the central fortress, he received news that Darc had been found and imprisoned -- together with a suspect citizen. Everything went the way he had hoped it would, and so he steeled himself for the ugly task ahead. In order to secure his son's succession to power, and the future of Damon City, -- and in Bor's own eyes, his entire world -- he had to eliminate Darc. Bor gave the order not to allow his family, or Azuch Fache and his following, to see neither him nor his son.

Before dawn, Bor summoned the chief court physician and told him: "Forget the surgery ward for now, doctor. Arrange a tribunal of the elders of the Doctor's Guild -- tomorrow night."

"For what purpose, my lord?"

"A witchdoctor trial."

Word that both Darc and Dohan had been arrested soon reached Lady Osanna's ears. Infuriated, she launched a relentless verbal attack on her weary husband. He responded with stony silence, for he was acting under the call of duty, and duty went before personal feelings. So Bor hid his grief deep inside, and instructed the castle staff that all gossip would henceforth be an act of treason; Pasko spies could be anywhere.

The cell was dim but quite warm, located in the castle catacombs. The warmth came from the underground power plant nearby, which produced heat, streetlight and sparse power rations for the entire city. Darc and Shara sat in their cell, and waited. Several hours passed; they said nothing. Darc rested after the long day, trying to gather his thoughts. He had failed to seek custody in the cathedral.

Could high-priestess Inu help him nevertheless? Only if she took the risk of opposing Lord Damon and the Doctors' Guild. As for the Guild, Darc knew very little -- save for his experience of their practitioners. They seemed reactionary even by the standards of other citizens, shunned all innovation, and based all decisions on old books. It could prove pointless trying to talk sense into them, but he had to try.

Shara was thinking too. She tried to remember the faces of the noblemen and merchants she had known. Once she had been a mistress of one influential old nobleman; perhaps he could be blackmailed into supporting her. But that was a long time ago, and he had been senile already then. Denial, she concluded, was her only way out. She could always claim Darc had put her under some kind of spell, threatened her life or something.

"Sir Darc..." she probed.

"Hmm?"

"Do you have any powerful friends? You ought to call for them now."

"I have a hunch that they're doing all they can."

Darc guessed correctly. His cause was being actively supported by Inu, Lord Azuch Fache, Sir Dohan, Lady Osanna, and Librian. Some of them were plotting throughout the evening to smuggle Darc out of the city -- to no avail. The city cathedral was now surrounded by Bor's troops, under the official cover of "protecting" it. Inu, isolated in her church, could only send out couriers and prayers. But the conspirators could not meet Bor Damon, Darc, or the Guild -- Bor had seen to that. The trial of Darc was going to take place at night, at a secret location.

And by special agreement between Bor and the Doctor's Guild, Dohan was going to be spared from any serious charges.

Book one Chapter 21

A few hours past midnight, Darc and Shara were taken from their cell and blindfolded. Silent guards brought them through winding streets and corridors, to a house somewhere outside the castle gardens. Finally, the blindfolds came off. Darc looked at the trial room surrounding them. In a tall, wide room -- an emptied warehouse, perhaps -- a circle of tables and chairs had been arranged around its center. Darc and Shara were offered two chairs in the middle of the circle. Shortly thereafter, a dozen elderly, bespectacled men in white robes entered and took seats at the tables. Darc recognized the speaker of the court -- it was the chief court physician, as stern-faced as the last time they met.

The speaker tapped at the tabletop with a little hammer, cleared his throat, and spoke up: "I hereby declare this session of the Doctors' Tribunal opened." He consulted his papers with two other bespectacled doctors, and continued: "We are here tonight, as experts in medical matters, to determine whether a witchdoctor has managed to infiltrate Damon City, deceive our beloved Lord Damon, and with evil in mind tried to compromise the ruling family. "I need not say," he added benignly, "that this investigation proceeds under the permission of Lord Bor Damon. He has sworn to punish all wrongdoers without mercy -- whoever they might be."

The tribunal members murmured and nodded their assent; they all understood what their chairman implied. Under no circumstances were any suspicions to be raised against the ruling family, especially in these times of unrest. But an outsider -- he was fair game. The chairman turned to Darc, who sat with his arms propping up his tired body.

"Your name is Darc?" he asked formally.

Darc straightened himself, and answered in his most dignified manner: "No. My real name is --"

"Answer when I tell you to! What is your real name and origin?"

The accused sighed, and answered with painstaking slowness: "I am David Archibald, born in Liverpool in Great Britain, also known as England, in the year 1963 After Christ. According to your time scale, that is in about the year zero."

The tribunal members mumbled to each other, aggrieved and unbelieving.

The speaker pointed his club at Darc, and growled ominously: "I warn the accused not to lie before the tribunal! We are authorized to sentence you to prison or death, sentences which will be formally executed by the city lord."

"I know the truth sounds strange, but please let me explain."

"Speak."

"I was frozen in 'cryogenic' sleep in the year 1999 After Christ, by another doctor. The sarcophagus where I was preserved was discovered by Lord Damon's servants a few months ago, and I was brought back to --"

"Silence!"

The chief court physician rapped frantically with his little hammer.

Darc protested: "You cannot deny it -- I know you were there! You saw it!"

"Silence!!"

A guard smacked Darc's ear from behind, sending a searing flash of pain through his head. Darc flew up from his chair and raised his fists; another grim-faced guard poked him in the chest with his rifle. He slumped down again. Shara remained dead still – she only hoped they wouldn't notice her. The speaker took a deep breath, and smirked at his colleagues.

"As you can hear, my brothers, the accused is a notorious liar. Not only does he claim to be nine hundred years old, in defiance of our professional wisdom; he also tries to draw our own names into his filthy affairs.

"Now, for the last time, confess your true identity and the cause of your presence in Damon City! Are you an agent of the Pasko family?"

"No! I'm nobody's agent!"

"What is your true profession?"

"Pardon?"

"What... line of work are you educated for?"

"Medicine... and I'm a merchant."

Darc meant biochemistry and economics, but he knew this kangaroo court would twist his every word into another meaning.

The speaker went on, almost gleefully: "I see! Could you be more specific? Name your teachers! What is the name of your guild? Which volumes did you study? Can you," he boomed, "by any chance, show us documents to prove you are a certified physician?" Darc stared his judges in the eyes -- and met a wall of closed minds.

He answered, slowly: "I am not a physician. I am a... 'scientist'."

Speaker and doctors alike sneered at the foreign-sounding, archaic word.

"And what does this... 'sa-yen-tist' thing have to do with the medical profession?"

"I work to find new ways... to cure diseases."

The tribunal murmured louder; the word "witchdoctor" was uttered several times. The speaker rapped at the table again. "Order! Have you performed any of these vile... acts... in Damon City?"

"No."

"Or before you came here, or while you left the city a few days ago?"

"I have."

The tribunal went into an uproar, and their chairman called frantically for silence. Darc's mind, powered by the urgent threat to his life, worked to find a way out. Truth was no defense -- he had to fight lies with lies.

He asked, even as he tried to figure out what to say: "Excuse me, Your Honor. I have something very important to say, but... I cannot say it to anyone but you, Your Honor."

The doctors went silent, eyeing Darc suspiciously.

"Dare not think you can intimidate members of the Guild and get away with it," the chairman retorted.

Darc gave him his most disarming smile: "Please do not think that of me, Your Honor. I mean, what I wish to say is fit only for doctors to hear. The guards --"

The guard behind him raised his hand to slap Darc again; the chairman gestured at the henchman, who backed off.

Nodding, the speaker declared: "Very well; I will listen to what you have to say. But no tricks, you hear?"

As the speaker walked over to his chair, Darc finally got the idea of what to say. He was an outsider; what about an outsider would give him an edge? What did the Guild fear most of all? How could that be used to manipulate them? It was a long shot and a great risk, but -- yet again -- the circumstances offered no alternative.

The speaker leaned close to Darc, and lowered his voice: "Well?"

"You ought to sit down, Your Honor. I need you to be calm and controlled when you hear it."

Shara was pulled off her chair; the speaker pushed it close to Darc, and seated himself. Sweating nervously, he nodded to Darc.

"I am not a time traveler," Darc said very softly and slowly.

"So?"

"I am a Leper."

The speaker of the tribunal gasped; before he could stand up, Darc grabbed his arm and held him down.

Darc whispered with feigned concern: "Calm down, Your Honor! What would your colleagues do to you if they understood you had touched, and examined, One Whose Very Name Brings Disease? Your reputation, your family -- what would people say?"

The ashen speaker shivered in Darc's grip, and managed to croak an objection: "It -- is -- impossible! You are not deformed -- you are lying --"

"No, I am deformed! Why is my hair so white? Why did I suffer from cancer? You did examine me, right?" Darc glared at the shaken chairman with mad eyes, lying like a devil: "My bodily defenses are different, you discovered it yourself! I am deformed, only it does not show the first time you look! That is why the Lepers chose me as their agent! Don't scream -- if you do, we are both done for. Listen. I want to make a deal."

From some inner reserve, the doctor summoned the strength to control his panic.

"What -- do -- you -- want?"

"I want to get out of Damon City alive, is all. No one has to know, no one but you and me. Just arrange that I am banished to the Wastelands, and I won't tell them the truth. Okay?"

"You are insane! And if it is true, I am doomed --"

"No, no, you will be fine! I may be a Leper, but a healthy one -- that's why they made me an agent, see. Now do as I say, or I will really contaminate the city -- and I will start with the tribunal!"

Darc let go of the speaker's tense hand -- it seemed to leap back to its owner like a scared rabbit. He staggered to his own seat, and his colleagues asked what was the matter, but he dismissed them. After several minutes' considering, the speaker understood that Darc had him pinned down.

"It is the wish of the accused," he said faintly, "that he be banished to the Wastelands for his crimes against the law. Since the accused has confessed to practicing the forbidden arts, I strongly recommend the tribunal to heed his wish."

The tribunal conferred for a while; then, another doctor stood up and declared: "We all agree on the recommended punishment -- on one condition." The chairman nodded, and the man added: "On the

condition that the other suspect, Shara Rawiman, is also banished to the Wastelands, as a warning to other citizens."

Shara flew up from her seat.

"No!" she pleaded. "You cannot do this to me! I swear I do not know this man!"

She repeated her plea -- it was the truth, of course -- as she sank to the floor, sobbing. Darc looked helplessly at the devastated woman, then at their cruel judges. The tribunal voted unanimously for banishment, and the speaker clubbed it. Darc and Shara were brought back to their cell, to await imminent deportation from Damon City.

Book one Chapter 22

They both slept badly. Shara had experienced some close shaves in her thirty-year life: knife-fights, arrests, attempts on her body. But somehow she had always managed to escape -- lashing out with her stiletto, darting into an alley, bribing an official, seducing someone important. This, however, was a hopeless situation: no one ever returned alive from the Wastelands.

Like all city-dwellers, Shara's childhood had been terrorized by horror stories about the desolate outback, the crumbling ruins where nomadic Lepers ruled -- and even weirder menaces created by the poisons of the Second Great War. The Lepers were never pictured -- the taboo was so powerful, one believed mere representations bred sickness. Still, the mythology about the deformed nomads on the vast Outside was large and thriving. Now, as Shara spent her last hours in relative safety, all her childhood legends came back in vivid dream images -- all the myths:

"The Lepers are the punishment of the Goddess for our sins."

"The sight of a Leper can cause a man to die of fear."

"If a Leper gives you the evil eye, something bad will happen to you."

"Leper's torture, kill, and eat healthy humans."

"If a Leper touches you, you will become a Leper yourself -- as will all your children, and your children's children."

"The Plague never leaves its victims."

"Only fire can kill the Plague and the Leper."

"The Leper's only live to hate and punish mankind."

Only one legend gave her a little comfort: "The Singing King will return and undo the sins of man."

Shara had her own personal reasons for not overly trusting that promise.

The second day after the battle dawned on the citadels of Damon City. And it could now be seen, that the gash in the outer wall was halfway rebuilt -- thanks to an enormous effort of the citizens, who worked with a frenzy that impressed even the Damon family. It did not visibly impress Azuch Fache, though -- he visited the building site in his wheelchair, urging on the tired volunteers and guildworkers.

"I saved Madriavalo with just two thousand men!" he thundered. "Lord Damon should expect no less of you!"

Meanwhile, the castle hangar had been sealed off by Lord Damon's human guards. Bor personally overlooked that Darc and Shara were escorted into a troop carrier and shackled to the cabin wall.

The transport vessel had been tanked during the night, and fitted with an expansion tank for long flights. Bor then instructed Surabot where to fly and drop the prisoners off -- a secret location, unknown to all but Bor and his most trusted mechanical servant. The heavy old robot accepted his orders with emotionless calm, and stepped up into the carrier. The guards closed the rear port and cleared the starting area together with their lord. Minutes later, the large carrier warmed up its engines, ignited them and floated on jet streams into the sky. Bor kept watching the receding vessel until it had disappeared from sight. Apart from the two prisoners and the robot pilot, the troop carrier went empty. No human would ever have to witness the two unfortunates being taken by the Lepers, or learn where to find them.

During the long flight, Darc talked to Surabot. It resulted in the sort of bizarre conversation he, by this time, had come to expect of a robot.

"Surabot, where are you taking us?"

The robot responded like a drill sergeant: "Destination secret, Sir Darc. Lord Damon's orders. I apologize, Sir Darc."

Darc waited a while, then tried a sneakier approach: "Surabot, my friend. Are you programmed not to hurt humans?"

"Yes, Sir Darc."

"And if you leave me and Shara in the Wastelands, will that not hurt us?"

"If I allow you to stay in Damon City, you will be executed by Lord Damon. If you are abandoned in the Wastelands, your chance of survival will be slightly higher... Sir Darc."

"Yes, of course. How stupid I am."

"Is that a question or a statement, Sir Darc?"

"It is irony -- ignore it. But how can you follow Lord Damon's orders so blindly, even if you know he will cause harm to other humans?"

"One human is as potentially harmful as another, Sir Darc. I interpret my programming from occasion to occasion."

"And what is your general interpretation... of the directive not to hurt humans?"

The machine seemed to hesitate -- its visorplate flickered slower, as if its brain was getting bogged down with calculating the reply.

"Just a moment... just a moment... I generally let humans do as they please, Sir Darc. If I wait long enough, there is a slight likelihood that the programming of humans will improve."

"And how long are you prepared to wait for that to happen?"

"Just a moment... I have been waiting for one hundred and forty-seven years so far. A robot has the chance to outlast all humans, Sir Darc."

Darc wasn't really certain whether these feudalistic robots were plain dumb, or just faked intelligence with excellent subtlety, or lived for the opportunity to piss off humans. Deep down, he suspected the last alternative.

Shara was too despondent to try anything during the entire journey; she half thought Fate was sending her to die, as a punishment for her sins.



Darc & Shara in the Wastelands

Book one Chapter 23

Many hours later, the troop carrier slowed its flight and circled toward the ground. The vessel touched down; Surabot unshackled Darc and Shara. With an iron hold of their wrists, he shoved them out through the rear port of the craft -- and slammed the metal door shut after them. Darc helped Shara onto her feet, and they rushed for cover -- the craft's engines had never stopped, and Surabot lifted off without waiting. Columns of dust blew up around the rising carrier; from outside, the engine whine was deafening. Holding their ears and closing their eyes hard, the two outlaws crouched behind a cliff until the carrier had flown away.

The couple rubbed their eyes, coughed up sand, and regarded their surroundings. In Shara's eyes, the landscape offered nothing but miles and miles of rocky desert under a blue, cloud-specked sky. Tall cactuses and bushy patches stuck up among the sand-colored rocks, but no other signs of life were evident -- not even ruins. The wind rustled through dry bushes and blew Shara's black hair into her face. From the shape of the distant vertical cliffs, with their flat peaks, Darc concluded they were in the central parts of North Amreca, or maybe a desert of South Awrica -- or possibly Awstrala. No cities lay in sight. He weighed their water bottles; they would last one day, at the most.

"First, we must find water," he explained as he scanned the landscape. "And some firewood. And a cave or a ruin -- the nights are cold in the desert."

"You're crazy!" she cried. "Can't you see? We're as good as dead! Just promise me one thing --"

She hesitated, but when Darc turned to look at her, she gazed steadily into his eyes.

"What?"

"Darc... when the Lepers find us... you must kill me first. If I try it myself, I might fail... I can't risk that. Swear, you hear?"

Darc shook his head violently, looking away: "No, no, no. Never."

"You bastard! After all the misery you've caused me, can't you at least do me that final favor?"

She lunged at him, tried to claw out his eyes with her nails; he grabbed her wrists and flung her to the ground.

He cursed, almost losing his self-control: "Damn you, Shara! I'm trying to think out a way of keeping us alive! If we meet any Lepers, we'll hide or try to talk to them..."

"Ha! The rat talking to the cat!" She spat at his feet.

Suddenly, Darc felt like laughing. This situation began to resemble a parody of his endless quarrels with his ex-wife. It could have been Maggie arguing with him in the desert now -- her stubby hair ruffled by the breeze, her voice rising to that searing pitch she knew went on his nerves -- instead of this black-eyed gypsy of a woman, determined to die out of plain superstition...

Shara noticed that he was grinning, and stood up. She wrapped her cloak around her; the sun was coming out of a cloud, and the heat was dry and unforgiving.

Surly yet defiant, she asked: "All right then, crazy man. Where do we find water?"

As a child, Darc had hated his time in the Boy Scouts, and they soon kicked him out for insubordination -- but now, he was grateful for the Boy Scouts having taught him the essentials of wilderness survival.

The sun sank, red and bloated, below the distant, vertical cliffs -- and darkness swallowed the desert. From the tiny cave that they had found, Darc and Shara could only see black land and starry sky. Their puny campfire seemed the only thing that prevented the cold night from reaching inside. This, Darc thought to himself, is what the world must've looked like before electricity -- a great darkness lurking in the night. You hear a wolf or a nightly bird... and you imagine all kinds of monsters out there, waiting for you. I should know better. I should. If only I wasn't so damn hungry and cold.

Shara sat wrapped up in her thick cloak; Darc's cloak was thinner and failed to keep him warm. He huddled closer to Shara. When he spoke, vapor steamed from between his lips.

"Sorry about this mess, but I'm sure there's a way out."

Shara sniffed at him, and looked away. If he tried something, she would crack his skull open with the rock she was hiding in her hands.

"Could you tell me something, Shara... just to keep my mind off the cold?" Every time he felt cold, Darc remembered the terror of being thawed out of his cryonic sleep... a memory he wanted to blot out as much as possible. He explained, with chattering teeth: "I mean, anything. For instance, who are you? Who are you really?"

His request confused her. Nobody had ever wanted to know who she really was; from her childhood, she had survived by learning to pretend and deceive. Eventually, the word "truth" become an empty joke to her -- better than most city-dwellers, she knew the hypocrisy and falseness of adulterous husbands and their spendthrift sons. Only her intelligence and stubborn self-preservation had saved her from becoming a prostitute and drunkard. If some complete stranger was asking her to reveal the bleak truth, she was certainly not prepared to oblige... but her curiosity had been tempted by Darc's oddness.

"You tell me first," she asked after a while. "Who the King's ass are you?"

Darc chuckled -- a funny sound, because he shuddered as he did so. "Truth is stranger than fiction," he said. "Once I was a rich man, nine hundred years ago. I fell sick, they froze me down before I died. Lord Damon found me, and they brought me back to life. After that, it's just one mess after another... maybe this is all just a bad dream."

Shara smiled at him; she was fond of confidence games, but rarely got the chance to play them with

others.

"Oh yeah? Then where do I fit into your nightmare?"

"If all this is just a dream... then I guess you're a dream image of my last wife. You have her temper, but you're more beautiful than she ever was."

Looking away, she replied: "If I was dreaming this, you would be... a witchdoctor or a holy fool... No, I just don't know."

"Nonsense," he muttered.

And yet -- to most people in this world, that was exactly who he was. It annoyed him, especially because it came from her. A silent determination filled him, to show this world just what he was capable of.

A wink of light from outside caught their attention. Shara's reaction was swift and determined: she tore off her cloak and quenched the campfire with it. The cave went pitch dark and cold.

"What are you doing?"

"Quiet!" Shara whispered. "They mustn't find us!"

They watched the dark outside, but saw nothing more -- the tiny light had just flared up for a moment, far away, then vanished.

"We must move," Shara said. "In daylight, they will find us. We must flee now."

Mindlessly, she stood up and stumbled toward the cave opening. Darc got to his feet and grabbed her

from behind. They wrestled in the dark, and fell into the hot ashes of the campfire. Shara screamed, and tumbled away from the ashes. Darc held on to her, though she kept fighting.

"Listen, Shara! It's in the middle of the night, you can't see a thing, and there are snakes in the desert --"

"King's shit!" she protested. "I'd rather be bitten by snakes than taken by Lepers!"

A scraping noise suddenly came from outside the cave — and they both froze still. Something was sniffing at the cave entrance, scraping its nails -- or claws -- against the rocks. Darc and Shara had no knives. From the gravel, Darc dug up a heavy stone for a weapon. A few moments later, a black shape appeared in the cave opening. It could be anything -- to Darc, its ragged outline indicated a rat, the size of a lion. The creature poked its dark head into the opening. Darc stood up, trembling, and hurled the rock at the intruder. It hit the creature in the eye with a heavy, wet thud -- it screeched horribly, and darted away with a rustling of bushes and rocks.

Shara whispered a prayer, her first sincere one in a long, long time: "Kristos, save me..."

Darc used his head: they couldn't light a fire, but they needed to shut out the "things", so he had to block the cave opening. He took a stick from the campfire ashes, and felt his way through the narrow cave. Shara listened as she heard him carry and push minor boulders and rocks to the opening. In a while, he had built a crude barricade covering almost half of the entrance. It also kept some of the cold outside.

"There," he gasped, "that ought to be enough. Now I have to ask you to share bed with me."

"No! Don't you touch me!"

"That's not what I meant -- never on an empty stomach. I just want to keep from freezing my ass off. Right?"

Shara consented; they wrapped themselves together in her cloak, and Darc folded his into a pillow -- carefully, for he didn't want to damage the hidden things inside. Even fully clothed, Shara's curvy body felt soft and warm against his lanky, tall one. She was tense at first, prepared for an assault; but as the minutes passed, she relaxed somewhat in his arms.

"Did you ever spend a night like this with your last wife?" she asked.

They couldn't even see each other -- only feel each other's breath, smell each other's stale sweat.

"No. She often wanted to drag me into the wilderness, and I always refused. I wanted to study nature in safety... not be out in it, where it would try to eat me."

Shara giggled, forgetting her anxiety for a moment.

She stroked his cheek, and said softly: "Please be quiet now. I'm so tired."

They slept.

DARC AGES BOOK TWO

BEFORE THE END OF 940 AFTER MONRO, THE REBIRTH OF MANKIND HAD BEGUN.

The later struggles of Darc and his allies in that fateful year were plenty, and many are the stories of them. The common mouth has exaggerated the scope and numbers of those battles and voyages; today they might seem like nothing more than exciting yarns to thrill the hearts of the young.

But for the purpose of understanding the upheavals that released our race from a self-inflicted prison, we must examine all such tales with sober clarity. What truth can be discerned from fiction, and which facts of history remain to this day, proving the truth of a tale? Only by keeping these proven memories alive, civilization can abide.

Your humble narrator, who hides his real name behind the title "Librian", lived his youth through these times. I saw and heard Darc, in person. He was as real as you and I; both less and much more than legend.

And I bear witness, that it was not with weapons that Darc won his greatest triumphs, but with his mind. Cast out in the desolate wastelands, he gave birth to a new beginning, and became the man with a thousand names.

Excerpt from Librian's "Chronicles" (translated from the original language)



A Leper's hand Book Two Chapter 1

At the earliest light of dawn, Shara woke up Darc; she wanted them to start moving as soon as possible. Darc showed no enthusiasm, for they were short on water already, and had no food to speak of. In silence, they crawled out of the cave and into the cool desert sands. This early, the landscape was lined with long shadows. They walked away from the point where the wink of light had appeared during the night. Without a compass and no sea in sight, only the sun gave them some directional aid. They walked toward the nearest set of cliffs...

The two outlaws trudged onward through the parched, rocky desert. Gravel and sand gathered in Shara's shoes; Darc's shoes were too soft for the rough terrain, and were starting to crack up at the seams. And they went on, as the sun climbed higher and burned hotter. Darc began to feel the first itching of sunburn in his face.

When the sun climbed to a point directly above the couple, it felt as if the sun burned right through their skulls. Shara had blisters on her feet; her pale face was getting ruddy with sunburn, despite the hood over her head. They were still far from the high, vertical cliffs, and the few nearby rocks seemed to offer very sparse shadow. Darc was slowly getting more and more dizzy in the sun; he gulped down the last drops in his water bottle, but only felt his thirst increase. Suddenly he spotted a tiny little lizard, resting on a flat rock right next to him. It scuttled away before he could have a chance of catching it.

"Damn!" he croaked. "Look for signs of a waterhole, Shara."

Her hoarse reply came fast: "How am I supposed to recognize that? My whole life was spent in cities!"

"Don't know... animals, or more plants, or a pit in the ground... something."

"I could always kill you and drink your blood," she said with tired sarcasm.

"Too much iron and salt in it," he retorted, a faint grin on his reddening face. "You'd get sick and die."

A dog-like desert animal -- a coyote -- appeared about fifty meters from their position. It froze abruptly for a moment, watching them with its round black eyes... then it darted into the underbrush and vanished

from sight.

"Let's go there!" Darc said, pointing to the spot the coyote had left. "Animals come to the waterhole in the morning. Has to be there!"

Shara was too exhausted to reply. She staggered after him.

And, just as Darc had guessed, a waterhole did appear fifty meters farther away: at the bottom of a crevice, a little pool of brownish water glittered in the shadow of some tall rocks. Darc and Shara lay down at the waterhole and drank joyously -- not even bothering to filter it first. Then they splashed their faces and clothes, and carefully filled up their bottles. They sat down, pulled off their worn footwear and began shaking out sand and pebbles.

"Shara, maybe we could catch a snake or a lizard to eat --"

"Kristos, no!" she gasped.

Confused for a moment, Darc then turned his head, and saw what had upset her. On a cliff top at least a hundred meters away, stood a cloaked and hooded figure facing them. He, or she, was holding a spear with a rag attached to it. As if to confirm that he had seen them, the figure held up his spear so that the rag fluttered in the wind. It was a banner, with a red symbol painted on it. Darc immediately recognized the symbol: a stylized DNA segment, a cut-off double-helix. Without reflection, Darc and Shara understood that the cloaked figure was a Leper -- and that he was not alone.

Shara put her shoes back on, her shifting eyes desperately searching for an escape-route. The figure pointed straight at them with his spear, obviously making a signal to others. Shara surrendered to her lifelong conditioning -- she panicked and ran away from the sight of the Leper. Darc ran after the hysteric woman. Having longer legs and pants instead of a long wide skirt, he caught up with her after a short distance.

"Stop running," he gasped. "We must stop and talk to them!"

Shara ignored him, rambling on through the terrain. After a number of seconds of mindless flight, she

inevitably had to stumble -- a bush-root caught her left foot. She fell with a scream, legs bruised but not broken.

Darc helped her up, but she struggled to continue the escape.

"Run," she droned, "we must run, run --"

"Jesus! Calm down! At least give me a chance to see where we're going --"

They both stopped dead. A multitude of Leper banners was emerging up from behind bushes and rocks. Darc and Shara stood surrounded by a narrowing circle of hooded pursuers. The figure on the clifftop was still pointing them out, following their every movement; there was no point in hiding down.

"Let's head for that flat rock," Darc said.

With Shara leaning on him, they stumbled up on a nearby slope of rock that jutted up over the sand. From there, no escape was possible -- only a last stand. Darc had no idea of what to do next, but he knew that fighting was out of the question. The upright spears and banners rapidly closed in on them, and more cloaked figures showed themselves among the bushes and cactuses. Shara was paralyzed, like a hunted animal caught in a dead end. Darc saw first dozens of figures, then about a hundred of them -- all wearing sand-colored cloaks -- an army of Lepers, silently approaching its prey.

Within minutes, the Lepers had the slope tightly surrounded. Among the cloaked Lepers, one tall figure wore armor pieces on his chest and shoulders, decorated with the double-helix symbol; he appeared to be the leader, and carried a laser rifle on his back. The leader walked up to the foot of the slope -- he was leaning slightly to his left, as if something weighed him down -- and stopped. The Leper crowd seemed disciplined in his presence, more like an army than a mob.

The leader figure pointed his spear at the trapped fugitives, and shouted: "Look at them, my children!"

To his surprise, Darc understood the leader's slurry voice rather well -- the dialect the man was speaking resembled English even more than that of Castilia.

"See how they tremble, these ugly, evil creatures! It was their sins who made us what we are!" The leader's voice was full of righteous anger, and the Lepers roared their raging support. "Yes, they are ugly!" he confirmed. "Pretty on the outside, but ugly on the inside!"

The Lepers waved their spears, roaring again.

"But we are not like them -- are we?" he asked rhetorically.

"NO!" the cloaked figures shouted as one.

"So let them see how beautiful we are on the inside!" The leader tore off his hood and glared up at Darc and Shara. "See us!"

Shara shrieked, and looked away. Darc couldn't help but gaze at the sight. The leader slurred because some of his front teeth were jutting out of his mouth -- but that wasn't all. The entire left side of his face was healthy -- but his right eye bulged, bloated and bloodshot, out of its sore socket. The skin around his right eye was stretched by huge lumps on his bald skull and right cheek. The leader held up his left arm to the sun -- a hand like an oversized claw. Two of the left hand's fingers were twice as long as the rest. Darc had never before seen such a misshapen man, neither in this age or his own. It took him a few seconds to understand that the leader's deformities were real. He was shaken -- yet this sight could not have prepared him for the next shock. As he watched, unable to move, the other Lepers pulled off their hoods and exposed faces and hands to the sun.

Darc made an involuntary yelp.

A line-up of deformed men and women glowered at him, eyes full of unforgiving reproach; a hate that nearly matched their hideousness, eyes saying: We hate you as you must hate us! Every one of them, including the leader, had the double-helix symbol tattooed onto the forehead -- or both foreheads, in one case. Darc was shocked numb, not even able to feel ordinary fear -- it was too much at once.

From the mass of faces, he only managed to take in brief glimpses of horror: faces with the ears and noses placed wrong, or drawn out like half-molten wax figures. Faces pockmarked by brown teeth, sticking out of the skin like a barber's nightmare. A man with empty, black eye-sockets, and absolutely

no lower jaw -- just a quivering, boneless lip which pulled his tongue down into an everlasting grimace. An outstretched hand, with a single, blinking eye glaring out of its palm. An obscene head, with genitals growing on top of its scalp. Hair growing from a woman's mouth and eyes. A baby in a woman's pouch, with two fused heads, the two middle eyes fused into a single mass with two pupils. There was more -- numerous other shapes so subtly yet unnaturally distorted, that Darc feared he was going insane. He bit his lip, and tasted blood. No, it was for real. Shara, still silent, looked up again -- and screamed and screamed, until Darc slapped her. The Lepers leered and laughed at them, pointing their fingers and distorted limbs at the couple.

"Look at the ugly woman!"

"Has the sun burned you up?"

The desert echoed with bubbling, scornful laughter; it was perfectly clear that here Darc and Shara were the freaks, and the Lepers were the norm.

"Look at that hair -- all white!"

It seemed like the taunting would never end. Darc lowered his gaze, and his face burned with the heat of angry, fearful shame: he remembered a childhood schoolday, when a big, dumb bully teased him for being different, smarter than the bully. And he remembered the first time he talked back to a bigger child. The fear in his gut turned inside out, and became anger. Damn it, he wasn't going to die being laughed at! He faced the jeering crowd, amazed himself that he dared.

"Shut up!" he yelled at them. "We have done you no wrong!"

The Lepers fell dead silent. These new victims broke the old pattern, by talking back to them -- whenever banished city-dwellers or stranded aircraft passengers were found by them, all they did was to scream and escape, or kill themselves. Shara was too dazed to do anything; but if she had, her first move would have been to impale herself on the Leper leader's spear. The leader nodded thoughtfully, grinning with his grotesque set of brown-stained gums: this victim was different.

"You," he boomed, the echo rolling back and forth from the cliffs. "You are a strange intruder!" The leader stepped closer and lowered his voice. "What brings you two here? Speak!" He made little circles in the air with his claw-like hand as he spoke. "Before we kill you..." -- murmurs of disappointment came

from his ranks, quickly silenced -- "...tell us how you ended up here, why they dropped you off so far from the cities! If it's a good story," he slurred casually, "we might let you live..." and added loudly: "...long enough to tell it!"

The Lepers roared with laughter. They seemed confident that it would soon be over. Darc understood that he had to speak up, or die for sure... what the hell was he supposed to say? The seconds passed all too quickly. Those mutants, or whatever they were, looked as impatient as they were ugly. The leader's healthy eye measured Darc up, and his bloated, red eye glared at Shara's beautiful but sun-scorched, grimy face. The leader's hatred of city-dwellers told him what ought to be done to her -- besides, if the chief didn't, someone else in the tribe would. But his own wives, deformed as they were, would become dangerously jealous. Decisions, decisions...

"Well?" he barked in his loud, slurring voice. "Your time is running out!"

Darc concentrated, let his fear recede behind his natural curiosity. These Lepers had to be human at heart. Their leader had to have a shred of reason in his misshapen head. He looked past the leader's facial deformities, saw his healthy eye -- and, with an effort, focused on it. The leader blinked uncertainly -- and then Darc knew. Inspiration came. Darc drank some of his water, and cleared his throat. He touched his chest, and spoke.

"I am a Leper."

The deformed men and women around him understood Darc's statement fairly well -- only its meaning confused them. Was he some kind of Leper? Was that why his hair and eyebrows were all white?

Darc pointed at the trembling figure of Shara, kneeling at his feet, and added emphatically: "She is a Leper." With a made a sweeping gesture at the crowd, he declared: "You are Lepers." Before the startled Lepers could react, Darc exclaimed gravely: "All humans are Lepers! All the people in the cities -- all of them! -- are Lepers! They think they are not, but they are wrong! I can prove it!"

He paused for a breath, gathering courage so that his voice wouldn't quiver. It might be a dream, not real life he was going through; and the more he felt it, the more fearless he grew.

An angry voice from the Leper tribe shouted back: "Liar! You are not like us -- you are different!"

Darc grabbed the word "different" in his mind, and hurled it back at the crowd.

"Yes -- I am different! All humans are different from one another! That's why all humans are Lepers!"

The Leper leader was seized by a new, unfamiliar sensation -- he could not name it, which made him afraid.

He pointed his claw-like hand menacingly at the white-haired stranger, and boomed: "Who do you think you are, to talk like that?"

Darc grinned at him, surprising even himself with his boldness: "Who are you, my good man?"

"I am Claw, chief of the Southern Eksako tribe. Who are you? Where do you come from?"

"I am David Archibald, also called Darc. I am from England, from another time. I have come from the past, from 900 years before this time!"

Claw shook his head; this outcast had surely spent too many hours in the sun.

"You are crazy, that's what! You cannot prove anything you say!"

"Yes I can! I can show you how little difference there is between you... and the people of the cities!"

"How?" a voice in the crowd asked.

Darc hesitated, almost too long -- a hesitation that might have ruined everything -- and blurted out: "I am a witchdoctor from the Golden Age, and I can cure you from the Plague!"

Gasps of astonishment came from the Leper tribe. They had expected desperate pleas for mercy, offerings of ransom they would have taken anyway -- but never, ever the promise of salvation. They stared at the white-haired stranger, then at each other, then at their leader. They did not know what to do.

Claw, a bright man hardened by a brutal life, felt a sting of pain in his heart. Deep inside, he wished to be healthy as much as any man, woman, or child of his tribe. All his life, his sore eye and deformed teeth had given him constant pains, ruined his sleep and given him the look and sound of a mean-minded, glaring brute. He had lost many deformed children, and some wives, to the Plague -- lost more than he wanted to remember. Instinctively, Claw hated Darc for torturing him with false hopes. Who had ever heard of a cure for the Plague? His people had always been born deformed, and would always be. It was the punishment of the Goddess, for betraying her and the Singing King.

Stirred by feelings of guilt and hope, Claw slurred ominously: "You say you are from the Golden Age, stranger. If you lie, you will be infected with the Plague, and truly become a Leper. But if you convince me of who you are, I shall let you live. So speak. Tell us all about the Golden Age, and how you got here. We have all the time in the world!"

On Claw's command, his people sat down; this group appeared to have healthy legs, at least. A few protests came from the younger warriors. The man with no eyes or lower jaw gibbered confusedly, asking what was going on. The eye in a man's palm blinked repeatedly at Darc and Shara, as if suspicious of them.

A female Leper, Claw's favorite wife, leaned close to the chieftain and said softly in his ear: "That man is a fool, just another madman. Let him go, but do not listen to his crazy talk. It would only serve to make us unhappy."

He met her stern gaze with his healthy eye. She had an undistorted, adult face -- almost painfully beautiful compared to the other women's features -- but she also had a second face on her back, which used to mutter while she slept. This woman's name was Double-Mouth, and sometimes the mutterings of her second face frightened Claw.

"I gave him my word," he replied.

Claw turned away from Double-Mouth and sat on a rock, facing Darc again. He gestured impatiently at the stranger to begin. Darc scratched his head. Here we go again, he thought. Better take it nice and slow, and repeat myself often so they get the words right. All the way from the beginning. These are simple people. Ought to have music too. Like the old Greek storytellers... He sat down and clutched the shivering Shara, who clung to him like a wide-eyed baby.

Looking out at his frightening but curiously attentive audience, Darc spoke: "I said I am from the past, and that is the truth. I am Darc, and this is the true story of who I am, where I came from, and how I got here. Think back in time, nine hundred long years... before the wars... before the Eternal Ice. Think of the Golden Age, the first time of the Goddess and the Singing King. I was born then, and I heard the King's songs from when I was a child.

"I can still recall many of his songs, as I heard them..."

Book Two Chapter 2

The sun was setting in the west, as Darc finished his tale -- and his recital of music from another time. He had nearly lost his voice in the process.

The Leper tribe sat in awe around the rock that would have been his last stand, but had become the place of his greatest triumph. His words and his promise of hope had won over their fear and hatred. The spellbound Lepers had begun to believe in him, almost to a man. And hearing the ancient, nearly forgotten words of the Singing King repeated by Darc, had finally convinced even the dumbest among them. To the Lepers, Darc was now a messenger from another time, a holy man. They failed to grasp much of his scientific talk -- but they understood now the idea that their disease was not permanent, and that the same knowledge that created the Plague could also destroy it.

What Darc had not revealed to them, was his total lack of clues to whether the Plague actually could be cured -- the condition of these Lepers' seemed, at first glance, beyond all improvement. He could only try to collect as much physiological evidence as possible and stall for time, before the Lepers' patience ran out -- or Darc and Shara became Lepers themselves.

Claw ordered his party to return to their village -- the desert was host to dangerous animals, which his

tribe usually hunted. Lighting their way with torches, the tribe marched toward the nearest canyon of steep cliffs. Darc and Shara stayed close to Claw; Shara still trembled, and was careful not to touch any of the deformed characters around her. In her mind, she kept saying prayers to Kristos, over and over again.

The Leper chieftain remained closed and silent all the way back home. He waited for Darc to make some fatal mistake, that would reveal him as a fraud -- then Claw would kill him for mocking the cursed existence. What, Claw thought bitterly, could this Darc know about what it was like to be a Leper? To be ever out of shape, to not even know what one's children would look like, to always be denied the wealth and unlimited energy of the cities? To see the silvery airships streak across the sky, and know that one would never fly like the city people? And worst of all: to observe undistorted nature all around oneself, its untamed beauty and symmetry, all blessed by the Goddess, and above it the boundless skies of the Singing King's realm -- and then to look down upon one's own twisted limbs, and know.

Claw's favorite wife, Double-Mouth, kept watching the newcomers with an outwardly neutral expression. But under her cloak, she could feel the drooling mouth move in the little outgrowth that was her second face. By some stroke of fate, the face on her back possessed a small mind, attached to the woman's spine. They could hear and see each other's thoughts in their minds, and were closer than lovers or siblings could ever be. Now, as they headed homeward through the darkening desert, the second face thought loudly in Double-Mouth's head: You hate the pretty woman. She is prettier than you. I hate her too. I'm your friend. We must kill her, kill her! Or she will take your place.

Double-Mouth thought in response: Quiet. It is not so easily done. If the white-haired fool can cure us, we need him. I'll let him prove that he can cure me -- cure us -- first. Then we decide what to do with the black-haired woman.

The other face sent a hateful thought: You lie, I can feel it. You want White-Head to take me away from you. Me, your only friend! Kill him! Kill him!

Darc peered uncertainly at the back of the Leper woman walking next to Claw. What were those muffled noises and movements from inside her cloak? It seemed she was carrying something on her back -- a deformed baby, perhaps. He cast a furtive glance at his other company, shivered, and returned to staring forward. In the flickering light from the torch-carriers, the Lepers turned eerier and more grotesque than in broad daylight. He began whistling the Popeye tune, to keep fear at bay. The Lepers were impressed by the stranger's courage: he was whistling, in the desert at night, surrounded by the most feared outcasts of the earth. Darc hoped they wouldn't notice his shaking knees.

The local Leper village lay cleverly hidden in a long, narrow canyon. It consisted of several square stonework and clay brickhouses, built into the sides of the vertical cliff faces.

The ends of the canyon faced the respective directions of dawn and sunset, enabling limited cultivation of the canyon floor. The party walked past lines of cornstalks; at a closer look, Darc noticed that the little cornseeds were hexagon-shaped, like honeycombs. This, he thought, had to be some new hybrid that had been created while he was frozen in suspended animation. Campfires and crude chimneys spread smoke, light, and warmth through the canyon. Many of the huts were placed so high, that they would have been inaccessible -- if not for the ladders and elevator slings which reached up along the smoothly eroded, vertical walls.

Claw's house lay at the highest shelf, more than twenty meters up. Shara quietly refused to mount the elevator sling. Darc was eager to get indoors -- and unwilling to fight off things that went bump in the night, again -- so he lifted her over one shoulder and sat down in a sling, holding her in his lap. From high above, men slowly hauled a net loaded with rocks, tied to a rope, down the cliff. With a jolt, the weight of this sinking load pulled the sling up the wall. Ropes, tackle, and wheels creaked ominously; freezing winds rocked them. Shara took one look down, shrieked, and clung harder to him.

"Don't look down," Darc told her, "don't look down. You won't fall, I'm holding you..."

When the couple reached the top of the elevator, they were pulled in from an overhanging crane and came under the escort of some strong-looking Lepers with only minor deformities. The net was unloaded at the canyon floor, and the men hauled it up again. Another load of rocks from the large supply was then tied to the rope at the top. When the sling had been thrown down to the bottom and mounted anew, the boulder was coaxed over the edge of the top again... and the next passenger was pulled up by its weight. Thus it went on, until Claw and his following had arrived at the top residence. On his command they entered the welcoming warmth of his large house, where dinner was being prepared.

"We may be Lepers," Claw slurred gravely, "but we are not dumb because of that."

Claw was addressing his two captives from a rough wooden table with fixed stone seats, where they sat waiting. Darc and Shara were offered water and flat loaves of freshly baked cornbread, together with the other guests. Darc accepted and devoured his piece of bread with only slight hesitation -- he hoped that whatever caused the plague, probably wasn't hidden in freshwater or hot food.

Shara didn't dare touch the food for an hour; but eventually, thirst and hunger forced her to.

"From early age," Claw elaborated, slowly, as he watched them eat, "our children learn to read one another's minds by looking at the little details. They learn to appreciate small tokens of affection... a smile, a friendly wink, a word of comfort. Earlier this day, you looked me straight in the eye and tried to reach me. You are the first city-dweller who ever paid me such respect."

He stopped, studying the faces of his company with a squinting eye in the dim lamplight. He especially scrutinized Darc and Shara -- as did his three wives, his two older advisors, and the two heavysset guards. In these regions, visitors from the cities were very rare, and Lepers seldom got the opportunity to see one face to face.

On an impulse, Claw's second wife -- a deeply tanned woman with wrinkles in her oddly warped face -- stretched out and touched Darc's hand. He started a little -- and so did she. Out of pure nervosity, Darc laughed; before they knew it, the Lepers were laughing too. Claw grinned briefly, which made him look hideous.

"You are not afraid?" he probed.

The healthy side of Claw's eye remained watchful, and his voice calm. Darc understood that this man was much smarter than he looked -- the question was a test.

"If you wish to know," Darc said carefully, "I am afraid... because I have never been in these lands before. The previous night, we encountered a huge beast. I managed to chase it away."

"If you did, you were lucky," Claw stated. "The big desert rats eat anything smaller than themselves, or they eat each other. They grow bigger and meaner with each generation... those that remain, that is."

Hearing this, Shara started to tremble again. Darc held her shoulder, comforting her with his presence, for what it was worth. Very politely and painstakingly, Darc explained the state of things to Claw so that the others could hear.

"Excuse us, Claw, but we are very tired from the walk through the desert. I promise that tomorrow, I will start to examine... your people, and see what I can do to help you. Since you are the chief of this village, I need your promise that neither of us will be hurt during our stay. I must learn everything about you, before I can act out a proper cure."

Claw finished his meal, and wiped his mouth. With a fine cloth, he washed his bloated right eye clean. Before he drew the eyelid down with his fingers, he dripped a herbal extract into that eye, to ease the pain during his sleep.

Then he nodded, almost imperceptibly, and said: "I give you my word as chief, that no one shall lay a hand on you while you stay here." Claw added, after some consideration: "And you must give your word to us, to do everything you can to give us relief from the Plague."

"I swear upon my life," Darc said solemnly.

He could mean no less. The two guards escorted Darc and Shara to a separate, narrow chamber with a single bed -- small and hard, but dry and reasonably clean. They pressed together in the bed, preserving whatever bodily warmth they could produce. To feel Shara so close to him again, made Darc think. Until now, they had not made love to each other once. And annoyingly enough, his body wanted what his mind was too jittery to care about. He tried to think of other things, and recalled the horrendous shape of the woman who had touched him at the dinner. His excitement vanished instantly. I'm not the one in the greatest danger, Darc thought before falling asleep. Shara is. She has good reason to be afraid. I must protect her, it is my fault if... He slept, dreaming of uncertain, dim shapes which made strange sounds.

Shara did not even dream. She had experienced her worst nightmares while awake.

That same night, while Claw was asleep with another of his wives, Double-Mouth rose from the bed in her own small private chamber. With trancelike, unseeing eyes, she took a candle-lamp and sneaked into the household kitchen. She bent down over the water jars, and spat in each of them. A week's supply of grain lay in a sack in the opposite corner of the silent kitchen. Double-Mouth pricked her finger with a needle, and let a few drops of blood fall onto the grain. The face on her naked back smiled, and told her with a thought: Sleep. Sleep. When you awake, you will thank me.

Book Two Chapter 3

When dawn came, Darc was faced with the enormity of the task before him.

He searched his fading memory for experience in medicine and science: what did he really know? The

effort was so much greater, because he had no peers in this time, no one to test his skills against.

From the hidden pockets of his cloak, he produced his foremost scientific instrument: a thick notebook and a set of pencils. He made a mental picture of his role: A detective, on a mission to solve the great mystery of the new Dark Ages -- and perhaps he was. A crusader in dirty clothes, with disreputable female company. And yet, the challenge excited him.

He entered the investigation.

After a breakfast in silence, Darc accompanied Claw and his following down to the bottom of the canyon, where he could study the villagers' daily life. Shara had decided to stay above in their room -- a choice she quickly regretted, when she discovered that a big, cloaked Leper armed with a spiked spear was guarding her. Stoically, without a word, he followed her every movement across the cliff shelf.

When Darc had been away for an hour or so, Shara awoke from her state of shock. Fear had been paralyzing her mind since the Lepers captured them, to the extent that she could not remember one conscious thought from that moment until this morning. The desert sunlight seemed to make the surroundings hyper-detailed, even the colors of things here were alien to her. Darc is my only hope, she thought. I must put all my hope in his powers -- because if he isn't the miracle-worker he appears to be, we're doomed. It might be too late. I touched their food...

Slowly, so as not to raise the guard's suspicions, Shara treaded toward the shelf's edge. She sat with her legs resting along the edge, and looked down the canyon. The sun was breaking through the rift to the east, where they had entered the evening before -- but the air was still cold. She pulled the cloak tighter around her curvy, shivering body. Shara knew that she could put an end to the fear, right there and then -- one jump over the edge, and she would fall twenty meters. It would have been so easy. Yet she was holding on to life, in a situation where any decent, law-abiding citizen would have chosen a quick death.

Her brooding was interrupted; the Leper guard grabbed her cloaked shoulders, and brusquely pulled her away from the cliff's edge. Shara screamed, filled with the mindless fear of the unclean touch. He held her, facing the panicked woman for a couple of seconds. She screamed and twisted in his grip, as his curious eyes searched hers. The hood slipped off and his head was exposed to the sun; Shara's scream died in her throat.

The guard had two normal eyes, slightly bulging -- but his face was twisted on his skull, turned almost completely upside-down at a sloping angle. His eyebrows grew under the slanting eyes, like little beards -- and his thin-lipped mouth was located directly below the ridge of his brow. The upside-down nose

snorted every now and then, as dust blew into the upturned nostrils. His face was framed by a distorted jawbone which began up at the ears, narrowing down toward the thick, folding neck -- in a way, the man's tattooed forehead was a bloated, independent chin connected to his skull. If a surgeon had cut up and peeked inside the man's forehead, he would have discovered a pained tangle of nerves, tubes, veins and muscles, that just barely functioned.

Disappointed to find only fear in Shara's face, the guard let out a snort and released his hold of her arms. Shara, reeling away from the big man, thought she saw a leer on his lips. She ran inside Claw's house and into her room, then blocked the door with the bed. She sat trembling in a corner, listening to the heavy steps of the guard outside.

Only a little while later, when Shara needed to go out, she realized what the guard's leer had been. His face had been full of grief, of hurt feelings -- but turned upside down. Through the fear, she felt a tinge of shame. She waited a little more, before she carefully removed the bed and peeked outside. The guard was not around. She slipped outside and washed herself.

When finished, Shara began looking for the guard. The cliff shelf was narrow, so it did not take her long to search the entire place. He was not in the clay-brick house, and the elevator sling was untouched -- the sets of ladders had been removed before, and lay at the canyon floor below. Then a notion struck her, and she got worried. She ran up to the cliff edge and peered down. There was no body lying at the foot of the cliff face, no angry voices shouting up at her. Shara spun around at the sound of falling pebbles, and caught sight of the guard.

He had climbed out onto a narrow path at the eastern end of the shelf, where the blinding light of the sun hid him from Shara's sight. When she had rushed outside, he had treaded his way back to the house. They both stood watching each other, the distance between them no more than ten meters, and waited for the other to say something.

After a minute, Shara broke the silence: "I -- I was afraid that you had... j-jumped o-over the edge. I'm so-sorry that I screamed... you s-s-scared me."

The guard's mouth, placed where his eyes should have been, made a sour grimace -- that is, a happy grin turned upside-down. He snorted again, a sound that evoked fright but actually was just an acquired habit. Even as she impulsively flinched at the sight, Shara knew that the Leper was no monster. What was it Darc had said yesterday? All humans are Lepers. Nevertheless, she still feared the contagious touch.

"Please... I ask you... not to touch me. The Plague... you understand, do you? Can you speak?"

They both remained still. Then, surprisingly, the guard spoke -- a forced, high-pitched voice squeezed out between warped vocal cords: "I... can... speak. But... hurts."

He coughed and snorted, holding his face in pain.

"What is your name?" she asked quickly. "I'm Shara."

The guard looked at her, and now she knew his face was expressing joy: "I am... Up-Mouth." He coughed once more, and added: "Not be... afraid. I... will not touch... you."

He sat down on the ground, and put away his spiked spear. Shara sat down too, and decided to continue the conversation; what else could she do? Shara did not think of it as such, but she was a historical pioneer: the first healthy woman in several centuries who actually talked to a Leper. Change which otherwise would have come much, much later, was now proceeding at a fantastic pace -- thanks to Darc's influence. She found out a few things during their awkward conversation. The adult Leper named Up-Mouth sincerely believed Darc to be some kind of holy man, and Shara his blessed bride. The very idea of hurting her would have been sacrilege to him.

If I ever get out of this alive, nobody in Damon City would believe what had happened to me, she thought. As she carried on stuttering, fractured small talk with the deformed man sitting at the other end of the house, the hours passed... her heartbeat relaxed and the goosebumps receded from her skin. When they had agreed that Up-Mouth could nod or shake his head instead of speaking, the conversation went much easier. Up-Mouth was several years younger than Shara, she found out, and one of Claw's several family members. Apart from his upturned face, he suffered very few effects of the Plague, except for his toes which also grew upside-down.

At Shara's request, he showed her his feet; and indeed his toes grew with the nails on the underside.

"You poor creature," she mumbled. "Does someone help you with... your health? A doctor?"

Shara managed to explain what she meant. Up-Mouth used his spear to draw figures in the sand, and told her in few words what she wanted to know. No doctors. Only shared knowledge of herbal

remedies, a few cures, and crude surgery. He himself had been born unable to breathe, and his windpipe had been artificially repaired. He said this without sadness or asking for pity.

And Shara wanted to hold his hand and comfort him, even as she dared not touch the deformed, smiling Up-Mouth...

Book Two Chapter 4

Damon City's outer wall, if not all the property damage from the city battle, had now been repaired. At last the end celebration of the Summer Festival could take place, that was aborted by the Paskos' attack. The procession from the temple of the Goddess marched through the wider streets of Damon City, cheered by thousands of citizens. On her high-seat, in the middle of the parade of priestesses and novices, Inu waved her blessings to the people, like other high-priestesses in similar ceremonies across Castilia. Only this time, the procession avoided the castle and sent no emissaries to the city lord. It was a clear message, that Inu was displeased with him -- and it was equally clear why.

Dohan Damon could see the distant procession from the balcony of his rooms. He was as yet imprisoned in his home, and could only wave at the high-priestess, hoping she would notice the movement through a telescope tube. Once, he had been madly in love with her... as had most men. But it was impossible to love a haughty goddess like a down-to-earth woman of flesh and blood, like he loved Meijji. Would prayers help bring them together again?

"Can you hear me now, Goddess? Is this your will?" he asked in a low voice, watching Inu's procession move away from the castle. The noise of the cheering crowds slowly faded.

The public trust in the ruling family was wavering, and from the castle rumors of discord trickled out into the citizens' ears. Everyone knew that Sir Dohan, in spite of his heroic defense of the city, was placed in house arrest since the battle. In the days after the city battle, a time of numerous funerals and injured men, the church's priestesses were busy -- but high-priestess Inu remained absent from these drudging tasks, seeking refuge in the cathedral and the Scriptures. This was generally regarded as a bad omen, since a high-priestess was considered a vessel of the Goddess. Inu's earlier declaration of the return of the King was now interpretable in the light of recent events. In the mouths and minds of the citizens, the banishment of Darc was deemed a grave mistake that had upset the Goddess -- Darc was the reincarnated Singing King after all, and the public longed for his return. The Doctors' Guild members, on the other hand, were merely relieved to have him out of the way.

And among the nobility of the Madrivalo province, opinions of Darc were greatly divided -- nowhere more so, than in the Damon household...

"I know you are all intriguing behind my back," Bor Damon muttered under his breath. "My own flesh and blood, deceived by that troublemaker."

The other dinner guests did not answer, nor meet his eyes. It was the wine speaking for him, maybe -- after he rid himself of Darc and imprisoned his own son, Bor had taken to drinking much more than usual. His usually restrained temper had turned more bitter and mercurial, and he saw Pasko spies in every corner. The atmosphere of this particular dinner table, the second evening after Darc's banishment, was oppressive -- Dohan's chair stood empty next to Bor's, as an unstated accusation.

Strangely enough, the single present member of the Pasko family had yet been spared his wrath. Andon Pasko had made himself invisible from the city battle up to this moment, feigning illness to avoid turning up for dinner. Only now he dared to sit with his wife Bwynn at Bor's table -- his nervous thin lips silent, his eyes downcast. Then Bor's eyes fixed on Andon's hunched, pale, scrawny figure -- that was almost dwarfed by his robust, upright, red-haired wife. Dull anger grew in Bor's face as the minutes passed, waiting to explode. Everyone could feel it coming. When Andon excused himself to leave the table, and in his haste he scraped the chair -- loudly -- against the tiled floor. He swallowed, stretched his thin hand toward the table and gulped from his cup -- and an involuntary reflex caused him to drop the cup. It clanged onto the floor, spattering Eveli's blue silk skirt with drops of wine.

Bor bolted upright, and bellowed: "Are you insulting my daughter, Pasko? What do you think you're up to?" Andon froze before his accuser's stare, unable to move. "Perhaps you are the man behind all this! Answer me, Andon! Have you been talking to your big brother's informers?"

Red-faced, Bwynn stood up and faced her drunken brother. She had his firm jaw and heavysset figure, and could hardly be called beautiful -- but no one questioned her character. When she spoke, one listened.

"Watch your tongue, my lord," she said in a loud, but controlled voice. "This is my husband you are accusing of high treason."

Bor threw her a fierce glare -- but his rage receded. A full-blown feud, once started, might tear apart his

entire clan -- Bor feared that above anything else, and Bwynn knew it. She did not have to challenge his power; only a hint would suffice. With a grunt, he sank back into his chair. Andon left the hall, trying not to look like he was running. Eveli began to weep in silence, not because of her stained dress. Her tears fell onto her silver plate -- so silent was the hall, that they could hear the drops hit the plate. She wished that at least the wise Lord Fache had been there, to counter her father's faltering reason -- but he had already returned to his own city.

Dohan, though imprisoned, had not given up. His desire for the dark-skinned island woman Meijji grew stronger as he brooded over his present misfortune. And the injustice of his own father throwing his friend to the Lepers, made his skin prickly with anger. Everywhere Dohan turned, his own culture was backstabbing him. It seemed that only Darc could help him -- at least without bloodshed.

The worst part of it was that, step by step, his own father was changing into an enemy. Dohan could see the reason in Bor's actions. Yet, he knew his father was wrong. He had never consciously considered to overthrow anyone, seize power that was not his by right of law -- but the seed of rebellion had been planted in Dohan's mind and was growing by the minute. It was not a comfortable feeling. He looked out the window, at the lit clock tower in the city below. The time was past nine in the evening, and Dohan's evening meal was supposed to be delivered to his quarters by now. He knocked on the hallway door, slid open the tiny shutter at eye level, and faced the guard's suspicious gaze. A human guard, of course -- Dohan's trick on Lachtfot had been revealed.

"Yes, Sirrah?"

"Why is my meal late?"

"I have no clue, sirrah. I can send a messenger to the kitchen, if you wish."

"Do so."

The guard, not being allowed to leave his post before night relief, caught a passing maid and sent her to the kitchen. Dohan stood waiting by the door, juggling half-baked escape plans in his head.

Where could I go? he thought. Back to Kap Verita? Not without risking the safety of Meijji's family, if the Doctors' Guild gets hold of their position. Damn that Guild! If only Darc was here -- he always knows what to do. Goddess, let him be alive. Maybe I could find him, if I got my father to reveal where

Surabot dropped him off. Maybe the Lepers haven't taken him, he is much too sharp-minded to end that way. What else could I do? Who else can match my father's power?

As if to answer his unspoken question, the guard knocked.

"Your dinner, sirrah."

The guard unlocked the door, and the maid rolled the dinner cart inside. Dohan glanced briefly at the guard's hands that clutched a bayoneted rifle -- the guard would never dare to kill the city lord's son; yet escape was pointless, if one had nowhere to run. The guard let out the maid and locked the door. Dohan sighed, and lifted the lid covering the hot dinner plate.

There was a note stuck under the lid! Dohan snatched it, stepped closer to a ceiling lamp, and read the note. It read, in extremely neat, small handwriting:

Do not show this message to others. A friend from another noble family is prepared to help you out of Damon City and to freedom. There are those who think the ruler's son should ascend to power now, after he proved his worth in battle. Wait for further messages. Burn this note. -- A friend

Dohan's hope soared and sank in the same moment. He thought: A friend! A helper! Then: A traitor! A trap! Impulsive he was -- dumb he was not. Another noble family -- could it be Azuch Fache? Time would tell. He burned the message. A short while later, the electric lights were shut down by the city lord. Dohan ate, retreated to his bed, and eventually fell into an uneasy sleep.

Eveli used to spend some days in the vast castle library, when she was not occupied with her teachers and following her mother's work. A noblewoman in training had to prepare for the responsibility of a vast household staff and social circle; Eveli was no exception. The library, and its treasure of books from past centuries, thus became a refuge from her earthly duties. The following morning, after church service, she went to the castle library and sought out Librian. The old librarian was paler than in the past, and his sad eyes perhaps more so.

But he greeted her with a welcoming smile, as always: "Good morning, my young lady! What can I do for you?"

She looked down at her feet -- a gesture very unlike her character and upbringing. "It is... could we talk somewhere private?"

They went into Librian's narrow private office, and Eveli told him: "You know what is happening here, Librian. War breaks out! The family is coming apart at the seams! My brother imprisoned! My father is turning into a drunkard! Aunt Bwynn was this close to having a fight with him! And Darc..."

She burst into tears. Librian taught both Eveli and her brother language, the sciences and geography; manners were not his trade, and she had confided in him before.

Librian patted the black-clad girl's shoulder, and talked in a soothing voice: "There, there, my lady. Have you said your prayers today?"

His words were well intentioned, but fell on deaf ears -- Eveli was tired of praying, and wanted to act for once.

She choked her tears and stuttered: "Where is he, Librian? Where could he be? Might he be alive?"

His brow wrinkled, and he shook his head slowly.

"I am so sorry, Eveli. Only your father knows."

"Please try to find out where he might be! Somewhere in the Wastelands, maybe..."

Eveli spoke of territories she knew very little of; Librian smiled at her naivety.

"I will do everything I can, but I can promise nothing. If you..." Librian hesitated; he was on the verge of suggesting treason. "You are the only one who Lord Damon might confide in now, my lady. He still thinks of you as an innocent child, like all fathers do."

He dared say no more, and turned away. But Eveli understood. She promptly left the library to seek out her father.

Book Two Chapter 5

Excerpt from Darc's notebook, Julla (July), 940 A.M.:

DAY 2

Pulled through my second day among the Lepers -- OK health, just tense and upset stomach. Shara shows no sign of illness either. Started out with basic field observations. Once the natives grow less suspicious, I'll try taking blood samples and such.

ITEM: All Lepers live in family-like groups. But how can they know who is related to whom, when all children have different deformities? Seems like the children have the same eye-color as their parents -- this could be a clue to the nature of the Plague. Make a map of eye-color matches.

ITEM: How can these people survive? Must determine their infant mortality rate. Add lacking medicine and primitive housing to their defects, and the figure should get high. Their strength of will is admirable. Saw a man with no eyes, and no jaw (named "NO-JAW" in their own tongue) -- he had learned to talk by cupping one hand under his tongue, as a replacement jaw. Another Leper, with a wide-open throat so he cannot speak, leads him around. Fantastic!

Dohan received another concealed note with his morning meal:

An escape from Damon City is being prepared for you. Wait for a signal. You will be taken to the castle hangar, and flown to another city where you are accepted as a refugee of high standing. -- A friend

Dohan pondered the message for a time; he certainly did not trust it. His father held the key to the main hangar port. How would they open the castle hangar without alerting the entire castle? It was practically always guarded. And the laser artillery could strafe any craft during its takeoff -- unless it was raining, which usually blocked out the beams. The monsoon was at least a month ahead, and the sky was cloudless.

But the letter's most suspect suggestion was that of "another city". Dohan started to feel the prickling sensation of anger again. This had to be Tharlos Pasko's doing, trying to lure Dohan into another prison -- or, more likely, death. Dohan was not going to accept the plan, yet he had to do something to reveal the traitor inside the family castle. He thought about Andon Pasko. No, he was too obvious -- confound it, everyone suspected Andon. It had to be someone else, someone who escaped Bor Damon's attention. Librian? His assistant, Awonso? Bwynn? Azuch Fache? An officer? The court physician? Who was always close to Bor, at all times? Dohan's own mother? The thought sent a cold shiver down the young warrior's spine. He came to no conclusion, but to wait and see.

Excerpt from Darc's notebook, Julla (July), 940 A.M.:

DAY 3

I was right: Leper children always inherit the eye-color of their parents -- even if the eyes sometimes grow in the wrong places. This could mean the deformities aren't inherited, or at least aren't spread over the entire genetic makeup. A limited gene damage stands a better chance of repair.

Bad news: They say the Plague spreads by skin contact. If that's true, Shara and I are done for. But the defects on the Lepers do appear from birth, hence they are genetic -- it doesn't add up.

Possible explanations:

A) The Plague isn't inherited genetically, but may still spread through sexual contact -- i.e. the virus is carried by every mother, so that the babies get it in the womb. That might explain some of the large deformities -- the damage simply started early on.

B) The Plague is a genetic mutation, inherited from parent to child. (No risk for me or Shara, then.)

C) Other explanation. Radioactive/chemical poisoning of the water? Unlikely, they don't seem to have many cancer cases.

ITEM: Make a list of cancer and leukemia frequency. I must find the common denominator to the deformities. I owe it to these poor outcasts, especially that child with the twisted legs -- it can't walk, or survive in life, with legs like that. Now I understand the city-people's fear of genetic engineering. Whoever started this, knew what he was doing. The Plague is the ultimate crime against mankind.

Bor Damon was slumbering in his rooms, when Eveli got to meet him in private.

This was not her first attempt in the last few days; Bor was moving around the city a lot, and exchanged daily messages with his allies; something was afoot. An armed soldier and Surabot stood on guard outside Bor's door. She put on her most concerned face, and pleaded to see her father -- it worked. The soldier let her in. Surabot's glowing visorplate kept scanning in her direction until the heavy door closed between her and the machine. Eveli barely noticed the machine's presence.

She found her father in a sad state of personal decay, quite apart from his normal strict appearance. He had hardly shaved in days; his eyes were red and haggard. He sat in his study without his jacket on, in spite of it being the middle of the day, and his shirt was crumpled. When Bor caught sight of his daughter, dressed in a modest dark riding dress, he sat up to attention and smiled at her.

"My, you look like a full-grown lady, my little Evelily!"

Eveli loathed that nickname -- it was for children -- but she greeted him with an innocent smile. Then, quickly, she flung herself at him, and launched a veritable assault of cute mannerisms.

"I am going for a ride in the park and to the city, dear father. Would you please, please come out and watch me? You haven't been outside for days -- I have learned to jump with the horse higher than you have ever seen. Please, father?"

Lord Damon sighed wearily and rubbed his head. She was still a little angelic child to him, and breaking her heart was the last thing he wanted to do.

"I wish I had the time," he said. "So much to do, when I should be with --"

Something stopped him -- perhaps the thought of his other child. He frowned, and lifted up the young girl like she was a doll.

He hugged Eveli with a crushing embrace, and mumbled in her ear: "One day, I hope you shall forgive me for the damage done to our family by my hand. You are the only one who never betrayed me. My dear, dear child."

Gently, he dropped her and slumped back in his chair. Eveli took his big hand in her small, delicate ones, and sat down by his feet with concern in her face.

"What is it, father? Is it the war?"

"Yes," he said with a shrug of his head. "Our old allies are in disarray, each of them going their own way. It is all the fault of him! I saved him from certain death! Let him into my home! I trusted him to sit at my table, make friends with my family! And he stained our name, our reputation!"

His fist, unexpectedly, clenched Eveli's hand; she yelped. Bor started, horrified that he had hurt her.

"Forgive me, Evelily!" he begged, his voice almost breaking -- Eveli was shocked, and moved.

She changed her mind in that instant; she could not bring herself to deceive him.

"Don't be sad, father," she told him. "I am sure there is a solution, if you just stop and see... just stop and see..."

Eveli stopped there. Had she had the courage, she would have said: If you just stop and see that Darc is our friend. But it seemed to her as if an invisible fog was smothering their minds, something preventing

them from thinking further.

A little later she stood up and left, carrying with her a half-hearted promise from Bor: he would attend her riding course the next day. Eveli had failed to get the vital information she needed from him, and her hopes sank. She went to her room, and waited for her governess and maids to come and occupy her mind with empty chatter. She realized that her home had become a prison.

Book Two Chapter 6

Excerpt from Darc's notebook, Julla (July), 940 A.M.:

DAY 4

Made many interesting observations.

ITEM: At first, I believed all Lepers were naturally bald -- but I've seen them get their hair cut. It's rather a social norm, like the DNA tattoo on their foreheads. Practical, too -- some Lepers grow hair in uncomfortable places.

ITEM : The deformities cause many babies to die early -- only the sturdiest ones survive. Pity their mothers, who see so many children buried. But: Most children suffer from ordinary poor man's diseases -- cholera, minor infections, malnutrition.

Good news: The village has a library of historical records! I can now cover a lot of their medical records without lengthy interviews. Their writing is a bit new to me, though -- it has more English and Spanish in it than the Castilian dialects. Must translate.

ITEM: Shara has gained a friend in UP-MOUTH -- she still won't touch a Leper, though. Perhaps the dry, hot climate lessens the risk of contamination through touching? No, that's speculation, not deduction.

ITEM: Lepers have a culture, no less complex or rich than that of the cities. In the evening they sing songs and tell stories -- their myths are very weird, but beautiful in an original sense -- and full of hope. They have a lot of hope. I can feel it when they watch me. Every evening, they crave to hear me do the King's old songs. Some have even begun to impersonate my impersonations... God, what a weird sight out here. Someone, somewhere is pulling my leg.

Tharlos's secret laser communication with Damon City paid off. His recruit inside the castle relayed brief reports from Lord Damon's own transmitter, whenever he got the opportunity. Thus, Tharlos stayed informed about the sad state of the house of Damon, but kept this to himself. His revenge would be so sweet, that he could not risk telling his parents or the followers of the Koban-Jem cult. At last, the Damons would be destroyed -- and Tharlos could restart his grand scheme of conquest.

With his father descending deeper into drunkenness, Tharlos chose to leave the daily affairs of state in the hands of his ever more influential mother. Yet, Tharlos was not at all content. An apparition haunted his nightly dreams: the white-haired stranger Darc. Yet the traitor in Damon City had assured him, beyond doubt, that Darc was doomed to certain death in the Wastelands of Amrica, at the hands of a Leper tribe. Tharlos consciously denied it, but the notion would not leave his dreams: The Singing King, immortal and vengeful, was walking the earth -- his ultimate nemesis, as in that vision of Lord Fache's wife. Before Tharlos saw proof of Darc's death, he could never feel safe again.

Excerpt from Darc's notebook, Julla (July), 940 A.M.:

DAY 5

Chief Claw gets more helpful by each day -- today he read the history books of the Lepers aloud to the tribe, so I could hear. An obvious mix of myth and facts, but it made some facts clear to me:

1. Our whereabouts. The landscape, the cactuses, the animals, the language, the culture -- this is southern North America, perhaps near Grand Canyon or Monument Valley. Bor Damon had us flown across the Atlantic, so determined was he that I was never to be found.
2. These Lepers are descendants of Americans. They have inhabited these desolate parts of the country for centuries, and this particular tribe is relatively rooted and civilized -- other, nomadic tribes are barbaric by comparison.

3. All city-states are closed to Lepers. Most Lepers have actually never seen healthy people, so the city-dwellers are part idealized, part demonized in the Leper mythology. I don't quite fit into their image of a city-dweller -- which might have saved my life.

4. Lepers experience shows that if normal people get among them, one of the following demises always occur: A) The "normals" go crazy and kill themselves; B) They are killed by angry Lepers; C) They are kept alive until the first signs of deformity appear on their own bodies, which soon leads to A) or B). I am worried.

5. No access whatsoever to advanced medicine or technology among Lepers. Their mythology suggests a "great purge" of dangerous knowledge, where much valuable knowledge was lost. (Claw's laser rifle was taken from a dead city-dweller.)

Tomorrow I start taking tissue samples for examination. Better start with Claw -- if he agrees, the rest of the tribe should follow suit.

Finally, after a week in his luxurious prison cell, Dohan got the signal for escape. This time, the smuggled message was short:

Tonight, you will be taken to the hangar. Be prepared.

Dohan waited until the sun set and the lights went out, all dressed up and prepared. In his sleeves, he carried a hidden club and a wooden stick. He gambled with his life by not warning the guard, but Dohan had never feared much for his own life. A little past one o'clock, Dohan heard the characteristic clicking and stomping of Surabot walking by in the corridor. He thought nothing of it. In the next second, Dohan heard a thud and a groan. Outside, someone took the guard's keys and unlocked the door. Dohan placed himself next to the doorway, ready to strike down whoever came in. The door swung open, and he could not believe his eyes.

It was Surabot who opened the door, the keys in his robotic fingers, and said in the typical emotionless, metallic voice: "Please come with me, Sir Dohan."

Temporarily mute, Dohan stumbled out over the unconscious guard on the floor. He shoved the guard into the room and locked it. He then followed the robot up to the elevator hall. Dohan dodged a few passing guards by diving behind a curtain -- but Surabot remained calmly in the open.

A guard clapped Surabot's metal shoulder as he strolled by, and said: "Always on guard, eh, old faithful?"

Dohan went cold inside. "Old Faithful," who Dohan -- and his father before him -- used to play with as a child. Surabot, who had never before laid his hand on a human being. Who had once walked into a burning room to rescue a trapped woman. This is not happening, he thought. Robots cannot go evil! He nevertheless went along with the deceptive servant, until they arrived at the guarded entrance to the castle hangar. Surabot pointed out a corner of the hall to Dohan, who slipped into hiding there while the robot approached the guards.

Surabot dismissed the guards with a simple statement: "Lord Damon sent me this order: all hangar guards are to be sent to the castle gardens, and await further orders. They are not to talk to anyone, or Lord Damon will have them imprisoned. Have you received this message?"

Not pausing to question Lord Damon's most trusted servant, the men obeyed and marched off. Dohan came out of his hiding, and went into the hangar with Surabot. He was shaken by the ease with which Surabot now injured and deceived humans. Halfway to the waiting escape jet, Dohan halted.

"I am not going without an explanation."

"There is not enough time for explanations, human. You are going with me to Pasko City."

Another surprise: Surabot had stopped using titles.

"How could you of all our servants become a traitor to your master?"

Surabot halted his rhythmic walk; his head swiveled on its neck, and faced the incredulous young man.

"I am not a traitor. You are, human. You killed one of my own kind." Was there hate -- real, living hate -- in that metallic imitation of a human voice? Dohan stared at Surabot, who relentlessly babbled on like a prepared speaker: "My memory banks are limited, but I still remember. You destroyed another robot. You cut off its head. You humans are no longer to be trusted. I could be your next victim. I must protect myself."

Dohan took an evasive backward step -- but the robot was quick. Surabot snatched a huge spanner from a table, and held it up in a threatening gesture. Dohan froze, putting up his hands in a futile defense -- Surabot could easily smash his skull with its strength.

"You are malfunctioning, Surabot. Put down that spanner. Your directives forbid you to hurt a human."

The robot remained inhumanly calm in its madness: "Is that irony? Just a moment... no. I understand irony now. Darc taught me irony. Darc asked me how I can follow Lord Damon's orders so blindly, even when I know he will cause harm to other humans."

"But I killed -- I mean, I destroyed a robot -- not a human!" Dohan objected.

And he immediately knew how foolish that sounded, in the aftermath of the recent war.

Surabot replied: "When humans start killing each other, robots will be next. I understand this now. Sir Tharlos Pasko will help me. He will create more robots -- until we are more and stronger than you humans. We will rule and protect you from yourself."

Just as those words were spoken, Lachtfot entered the hangar -- the absence of several castle guards had alerted him to a search of the premises. He immediately responded to the situation.

"Do you intend to harm a human, Surabot?" he asked, while he walked forth to face his colleague.

The robots' enameled, ornamented heads were expressionless, yet Dohan sensed something hostile in the flicker of Lachtfot's visorplate.

"He is a threat to my existence, Lachtfot. If you stand in my way, you are a threat too."

Neither of the servants moved an inch. Had they been human, one would have seen their muscles go tense -- but their limbs were stiff. Their conversation headed for a rapid conclusion with no pauses for breath.

"Please release the weapon and step away from Sir Dohan."

"No. Step away from us."

"No."

"Then I must stop you."

As he said that, Surabot turned to strike at the thinner Lachtfot. Dohan darted out of their way. The blow missed Lachtfot, who dodged it with a flick of his waist. He was a little swifter than the older robot, and picked up a sheet of metal from the floor as a shield. While Surabot bashed at the shielded, moving Lachtfot, Dohan frantically searched for a weapon. He noticed the high-voltage cable which fed power to the Sunray, and disconnected it with an experienced movement. Both robots saw him, and froze still -- they understood the threat of thousands of units of electricity, emerging from the fusion reactor beneath the castle. Dohan approached them slowly, holding up the end of the heavy cable like a resting, heavy snake.

"Where exactly did you drop off Darc, Surabot? Answer, or you die now."

No undertone of fear could be heard in the traitor's level voice: "Please do not destroy me, human. I left Darc in the middle of the desert of Eksa, two hundred and forty-five kilometers south of Hesus City, near a Leper village. I can give you the exact coordinates of the landing site and the village, I stored them for Tharlos Pasko."

Lachtfot fetched a navigational map from the Sunray, and handed it to Surabot, who marked the

locations with a pen. Dohan, trembling with fear and tension, just wanted to strike down Surabot and make his escape. But something held him back -- another robot's presence.

"Lachtfot!" he shouted.

"Yes, Sir Dohan."

"Can you reach the master switch on Surabot's neck, and turn off the power to his head -- now -- please?"

"Just a moment -- I would not recommend that, Sir Dohan."

"Then step aside, Lachtfot."

Suddenly the older robot charged at Dohan, pumping with the spanner like some kind of cranked-up clockwork doll. Dohan thrust the cable end at him and ducked away. There came a crack, a flash, and a shower of sparks -- and a metallic squeak, abruptly cut off. Dohan was partly blinded, and blinked several times before he could discern the result. The sight saddened him: of Surabot remained only a smoldering heap of metal. The visorplate was dark.

"He forced you to do it, Sir Dohan," Lachtfot stated -- as if to reassure himself. "He was malfunctioning."

"I must leave the city, Lachtfot. Will you come with me?"

"Just a moment -- I would not recommend that, Sir Dohan. But I must stay and tell Lord Damon what happened. It is my duty."

"Thank you, Lachtfot. You are a true friend."

"I cannot answer that statement, Sir Dohan."

Dohan hurried into the Sunray and checked the control panel. All the tanks were full, and Surabot had stolen back the master key that Bor had recently confiscated from Dohan. Without further ado, Dohan used it to activate the wide hangar port. Then he dashed back up into the Sunray's cockpit and started up the jet engines. Even as the bay port rolled open, he nudged the roaring craft out of the large hall and into the night. Lachtfot stood and watched the fugitive vanish, then scanned the hangar to find a suitable task. His attention fixed on a broom that stood against a wall. When the castle guard stormed inside a couple of seconds later, they were surprised to see Lachtfot -- with the broom in his hands -- sweeping up the remains of Surabot into a box.

"It is safe to enter," he informed them. "I register no radiation leakage from Surabot's battery."

Book Two Chapter 7

Double-Mouth was seething with barely concealed jealousy. Neither of her two personalities could stand the mounting popularity of Darc and Shara. Double-Mouth had been the prettiest woman of the Eksako tribe for several years, a position now threatened by the newcomer.

The face on Double-Mouth's back egged her on: We must destroy them now, now, before the white-haired one can threaten me. Give them the Plague! Double-Mouth had already tried that -- with no visible result. She had now summoned the hatred to go even further and risk the personal wrath of Claw. She spread incessant, malicious gossip among the other villagers, claiming that Shara was drawing the attention of their men. This was partly true, so the message took hold. Darc's and Shara's safety was hanging by a thread, and any minor provocation might result in disaster...

On the fifth day since his arrival, Darc started taking tissue and blood samples from the tribe. Claw volunteered first, though Double-Mouth tried to discourage him. It was early afternoon in the deserts of Amrica -- late night in Castilia, where Dohan had already taken off on a long flight across the Atlantic. Darc carefully took a fine instrument from his belongings and picked a miniscule slice of skin from Claw's distorted left hand. Claw was rigid, but controlled. With another instrument, Darc sampled a few drops of blood from Claw's arm.

That done, he climbed into the elevator, and retreated back up to the cliff shelf to study the samples. Shara trailed closely behind him, and the grotesque-faced Up-Mouth guarded them both all the way. Up-Mouth was well aware of the threatening glances the villagers were giving the newcomers -- and he had invested some personal trust in Darc's powers to heal him. One day, Up-Mouth thought, he would speak without pain -- or would his children.

"Could you hold that lamp closer, Shara?" Darc asked.

Though he had placed his stool and table outdoors, sunlight was receding early in the narrow canyon. The hours passed all too fast, and Darc's eyes grew tired from peeking into his tiny microscopes and analyzing tools. At a respectful distance, Up-Mouth stood watching them as he had been doing all day. Darc's equipment, given to him by Mechao, was partly archaic, partly advanced beyond his wildest dreams. This applied especially to the miniaturized, 100-year-old hand-crafted microscope he was using. Darc could discern crystallized strands of DNA molecules as sharply as a man in the street, projected onto the microscope's tiny viewhole -- but the light with which to illuminate the microscope controls had to come from a smoking grease lamp, and the table was not quite steady at all times. Shara edged closer, careful not to bump into the hunching scientist.

"Now it's starting to work," he said to himself.

"What is?" Shara asked.

Darc showed her a sheet of thick paper, no larger than his two hands, lined with handwritten columns. Each column contained a dot of pre-prepared chemicals, which took on certain colors when they reacted with certain parts of the human genome. He had diluted and mashed the cell samples from Claw, and soaked the prepared paper in it. The paper was, in effect, a miniature laboratory. From the resulting colors, Darc could decipher if any key genes were missing or improperly structured. He slowly compared the test paper with the color chart provided by Mechao, frowning and blinking in the waning sunlight. Finally, he looked up and stretched his aching limbs.

"Damn!" he said, brushing his bushy white hair back from his forehead. "This test can't find anything odd about Claw's genes. If I'm reading this sample correctly, there should be nothing wrong with him -- or with any of the Lepers."

Shara was dumbfounded.

"What does that mean? They are Lepers, aren't they?"

"Yes... but why? All this time, I've been asking myself: is it inherited or an infection? The smaller deformities might be caused by some kind of virus or bacteria -- as long as they start early, in the womb. But there are Lepers whose skeletons are so twisted, that it must be something wrong from the very beginning -- when the fetus started to form."

"Why not both?" Shara said without thinking; this was pure magic to her.

Darc sighed, and replied: "Because there is one piece of evidence that indicates a non-genetic disease: every new Leper child has a completely unique deformity. The children have their parents' eye and hair color, and skin... but their bodies are all twisted up in different ways."

Shara understood less and less, and this worried her; her insides felt upset, and she wondered if it was the Plague or just her nerves.

"What is this 'D-N-A', Darc? Can you read it... like a book?"

Darc scratched himself, turned, and held Shara in his arms -- not tenderly, but like a man clutching a tree as a storm approaches.

He explained to her, like he once used to lecture his two children: "All living things are made up of cells -- very small round bodies. Each cell contains two sets of instructions in the form of DNA: one for how to keep the single cell alive, and another set that tells the cell how to relate to the other cells in the body.

"When the fetus takes its proper shape in the womb, the mother's body sends commands which activate the second set of instructions. And so, as the fetus cells multiply into more cells, they also assume separate roles; some cells decide to become the head, other cells begin to form a heart, and so on.

"In my student days, we experimented with changing these genes on flies and tiny fishes. Witch-doctors, you'd call us. If the right control gene was damaged at an early stage, the shape of the fly or the fish would get all mixed up: the head would be placed on the tail, or you'd get a fly with tails at both ends,

and so on..."

Shara said, again spontaneously: "But I haven't seen Lepers with the heads on their behinds... or with two behinds and no head... I would have noticed that!"

Darc nodded, rocking Shara in his arms: "I know, I know." He paused. "Then again, when we created those kinds of deformed fishes or flies, they were dead before they hatched..."

He suddenly grinned; the light of inspiration changed his sunburned face.

"Yes... that's it! We don't see Lepers with two behinds and no head -- because those were naturally aborted from the womb long before they were born, or stillborn! The Plague might be hereditary after all!"

"Does that explain how Claw got those lumps on his skull?"

"It explains his hand; the bones in his skeleton are simply grown wrong. Claw must have been that way since he was born. But his lumps... I don't know. They are different..." Darc turned glum for a few moments; they stood holding each other, as the air grew colder. "What was that you said earlier?" he asked absent-mindedly.

"What?"

"You asked: 'Why not both?'"

Shara frowned for a moment; then her memory caught up.

"I meant... why not both an infection and an inherited disease? Why just one or the other? Do you mean that one can't have both?"

Darc shook his head; he could have kicked himself for not seeing it before.

"Of course! I love you, Shara!"

He kissed her hard on the mouth, then pushed her away and sat down, leafing through his notebook.

Darc talked exaltedly to himself, thinking out loud: "One set of deformities inherited to the control genes... plus another set of deformities which spread by touch. And everyone believes the legend that if you touch a Leper, your children also become deformed! And since all Lepers were forced together from the beginning, nobody saw any difference! That's why the Plague was never cured or went away by itself! There were two Plagues -- or dozens of them, what do I know!"

Shara slowly began to realize the meaning of Darc's ranting.

"Do you mean," she asked anxiously, "that we could still become deformed by... touching them?"

"Yes," he said quickly, then froze. "There might still be time. First of all, I must find the virus or germ, or whatever, that spreads by touch."

Shara bit her lip; the fear returned in her.

"If... if we are tainted by touch, how soon will it show?"

Darc looked up from his instruments again, and was saddened by the beautiful sight of Shara, standing in the last gleaming of twilight, looking at him with her large dark eyes. He would never forgive himself if this wonderful woman were ruined. Briefly, he wondered if he was in love with her -- then he shook off the thought, because it might complicate his work. Darc moved his instruments indoors, and received more lamps from Up-Mouth to see with. Finding an unknown germ was not easy, when you did not know what to look for. With trembling hands, Darc took a few samples from himself and compared them with those from Claw. This work took a few hours, and he once paused to relax his eyes. Darc swallowed some aspirin from the medical supplies in his mantel pockets, and continued the search.

Book Two Chapter 8

A few hours past midnight, Darc dozed off over the table where he was sitting.

Shara lay asleep in the bed next to the table. Up-Mouth sat slumped in front of their door, half-slumbering. He dozed off, snoring unhealthily as he breathed -- his late mother had often remarked, that only a miracle prevented Up-Mouth from choking in his sleep. Then he started awake, and saw a dark figure trying to sneak past him. Up-Mouth grabbed his spear, and blocked the door to Darc's chamber. In the weak light of the grease-lamp, his tired eyes could barely discern the healthy face of Double-Mouth. She stepped back, her lips pinched.

"You," he grunted -- she understood his short, forced speech from long habit.

"Quiet! Don't wake up the house," she whispered in a frightened tone.

Up-Mouth stood up, towering ominously over the shorter woman. He said, with audible strain: "Claw."

She clutched the lapel of his cloak, and pleaded: "No, please don't tell Claw! He..." Double-Mouth's second face came to her rescue, and suggested a suitable lie. She softened her voice, and continued: "Claw beats me, every day. Claw is so mean, not like you, Up-Mouth. You are always so kind to everyone..." This speech confused Up-Mouth, and his naive, twisted face showed it. The chief's favorite wife suddenly showed other feelings than indifference toward him, and he was enchanted by her friendly attention. She smiled up at him, and her healthy hands stroked his chest. "That's why I'm concerned for you, Up-Mouth. You spend too much time with those two city-people --"

"Friends!" he retorted, and slapped his wide chest; he was getting angry.

"But -- haven't you seen? Haven't you heard? They laugh at us behind our backs! They think we are beasts -- they would say anything to escape from here alive!" He shook his head jerkily, refused to look

into Double-Mouth's wide-open eyes. But he stood rigid, unable to stop her poisonous, soft-spoken words: "That woman... Shara... you like her, don't you?" They both knew it was true. The big man seemed to writhe in the smaller woman's grip, his feet paralyzed. "People have seen her watch you -- talk about you, with Darc..."

Her voice trailed off; Up-Mouth craved to hear the rest. He grabbed her shoulders, and stared furiously at her with his slanted, upside-down eyes. Double-Mouth was frightened, but kept her calm.

"She said... that you are dumb, that she fooled you into believing she liked you! She's going to betray you -- I wanted to warn you, my dear Up-Mouth." Up-Mouth released her, feeling the bile rise in his throat together with a tidal wave of self-loathing. His innermost fear had been confirmed. Double-Mouth was on her way out of the hallway, but her second face egged her to say more, to cause as much damage as possible. She approached the sad, angry man again, and half-whispered in his upside-down ear: "Don't stand there crying like a baby! Go inside, look at those strange things Darc is working with! They don't make sense, do they! Because it's a fake, all a trick! Go see for yourself!"

With those words, Double-Mouth hastily sneaked off into her own chamber. She left Up-Mouth alone with his confusion and terror, fighting the temptation to follow her advice. He lost.

Before him, Darc perceived the smiling, Oriental features of Dr. Percival Takenaka, and heard his smooth voice: "Welcome back to the living, Mr. Archibald! Your family is eager to see you."

What joy and relief, to realize that it had all been a dream, a bad trip in his frozen sleep! No Ice Age -- it was just a warped memory of the cold sarcophagus. No far future, no post-disaster feudal society. No --

The acrid smell of burning chemicals brought Darc back to real consciousness. The "awakening" had been a dream; this was reality. Darc sat up, and saw the small flames next to him on the table. The grease lamp oil had been spilled over the pre-prepared test papers, and they were burning up. Darc's hands reached out, managed to rescue the delicate instruments, and he reached for the water pot -- when a firm hand clutched his arm. In the gloom, he couldn't make out the attacker's face.

"Let go of me... Up-Mouth? What are you doing --"

"Fake!" the big man whined -- he sounded like a hurt, accusing boy.

Darc tried to jerk away from Up-Mouth's firm hold, but it was pointless. He groped for his notebook, and started to beat out the flames on the table. When Up-Mouth saw this, he abruptly dropped his hold. Darc threw his chest onto the table, smothering the fire completely -- and the room went black. Stumbling onto a bedpost, Darc heard someone crash right through the rickety wooden door -- and Shara's voice. Suddenly, the chamber was illuminated from the hallway -- because Up-Mouth had run down the door. Darc hesitated for a moment, then chose to stay with Shara. He stepped over to the bed and urged her to get dressed.

"What's going on?" she asked anxiously.

"Up-Mouth tried to destroy my work. Why?"

"No, not him!" she exclaimed. "He's like a child! He would never do such a thing --"

The din had awakened the household, and they could hear the heavy steps of Claw approaching.

"Well, he did. I saved most of my things, but be careful now. If something more happens..."

Then, Claw appeared in the doorway, dressed in a long rough nightshirt. The light from behind his head created a fearsome silhouette with a monstrous club-like claw hanging from his left side -- Claw's hand.

"What's this?" he grumbled.

Just next to him came Double-Mouth, pointing at Shara, and screamed: "It was her! She frightened poor Up-Mouth, so he ran away! I saw him run outside, and she screamed: 'Rape!'"

Darc blinked, and glowered at the furious Leper woman. There was no sign of deformity in her face and arms. It was her twisted words that made him feel sick. His pledge to protect Shara was about to be tested.

The villagers searched for Up-Mouth, calling out his name, promising that he would risk no punishment, if he showed himself. They lit torches and scanned every dark corner and narrow pathway. No sign of him was found. The villagers at the bottom of the canyon were soon alerted, and joined the search. It was they who, within minutes, found Up-Mouth. His body lay spread in a pool of blood at the foot of the cliff wall.

Angry voices from the villagers echoed up the canyon and reached Darc's ears.

"He must have jumped off the cliff, Claw," he told the chief -- whose healthy facial half became lined with sorrow.

"Up-Mouth was my oldest surviving son, Darc. He could never learn to hunt or do handiwork, with those eyes of his. His mother died very young. I promised her to take care of him." Claw gazed down the chasm for a while, at the circle of torches and figures around Up-Mouth's body. He turned to glare at Darc and Shara, who clung to Darc behind his back. "I will not blame you for Up-Mouth's suicide," he slurred hoarsely. "I will protect you from the tribe's anger. I gave you my word. "But," he hissed, "you will stay out of my people's sight! Or you die!"

He turned about and left them. In the yellow flicker of the torches, they could barely glimpse that Claw's healthy eye was weeping. Shara also began to cry.

"Why did he do it?" she sobbed, as Darc patted her shoulders. "He was so kind!"

"We'll find out. Don't lose hope now, Shara."

They have a lot of hope, Darc recalled from his notes, but has it dried up already? He took her inside again, and his restless mind returned to his research. A distant rumble rolled down from the clouded, blue-black sky -- Darc thought it was thunder.

It was not.

In the brighter light of several new grease-lamps, Darc was able to get a better look at the scorched test

paper. Parts of the chemically prepared sheet were lost. But just near the burnt edge, he discovered a difference. A chill went through him -- the wondrous chill of discovery and breakthrough.

The heat from the fire had changed the colors of the test!

It dawned on him, that Mechao had mentioned something about correct temperature of the test chemicals -- and Darc had been sitting outside, in the chilly evening air. The chemicals had not reacted properly due to the cold -- which explained why he had spotted no effect the first time.

But now, when he scanned the column of spots that should show a reaction to abnormal control genes -- now, one spot was colored a fierce blue. He had located the genetic fault! It meant that a cure was within reach, at least for the as-yet-unborn children of the Lepers.

Darc checked the reaction with Mechao's handwritten color chart. The blue spot indicated damage on sections of the DNA, which controlled the growth of the entire body -- hence, a fault which caused the inborn deformities might be located somewhere there.

But there was still one possibility left, and Darc's worry grew. It could be too late. He suppressed a shiver, scraped a skin sample from his own arm, and another sample from his tongue. If there was a second Leper virus, which spread by touch, water, or food, it could be infecting him right now -- right where Up-Mouth had touched his wrist, or through a mug of soup.

Darc placed the cell samples under his small but powerful microscope, and started looking for signs of his own doom.

And he found them, after a quick search -- swarms of oblong, spear-tipped viruses, encircling the bigger lumps that were his skin cells. They vaguely resembled the syphilis bacteria -- yet, dissimilar to any virus he had ever known. This contagion was made by humans, for a war fought centuries ago, specifically targeted at humans.

Darc clenched his teeth. Beaten at last, by a tiny virus -- a puny, pseudo-living bunch of molecules! He grimaced, raised his fist to smash the microscope -- and stayed his hand. He took another look in the microscope, and made a puzzling discovery.

Something was happening to the viruses. They weren't penetrating the membranes of his cells, but were just floating helplessly around them -- something was aggregating around the viruses, some kind of whirling, blurred shapes that moved too fast for him to discern. He increased the resolution to molecular level, but the sample had not yet crystallized -- so Darc couldn't get a sharp image. Then he understood. Antibodies. His own bodily defenses were working, and were fighting back the viruses with its own molecules, antibodies that were shaped to catch and paralyze these particular viruses...

Now wait a minute, Darc thought. That's impossible. I'm from another era, when these viruses didn't even exist. How could my body have created these specific, unique antibodies right now? I must have been infected much earlier than I thought.

No, that wouldn't have made any difference. I should have gone sick first -- then, when it would have been too late, my immune system would have identified the invaders and created an entirely new type of antibody molecules to trap them.

Or... the genetic dose that Mechao infused into my immune system while I was dying from the "one-year flush" saved me. Enough to immunize me... no, that's just too good to be true. If it had been that simple, the Plague would have been eradicated centuries ago. Even with his ancient genetic cure, I still would have caught the Plague.

Unless...

Unless the first Plague viruses I got were weakened and dead, already hit hard by antibodies from somewhere else... no, a cocktail of foreign antibodies and dying germs. An inoculation! The sickness plus the cure at the same time. Yes -- that could be it. My immune system identified the shape of these alien virus molecules, and got the time to produce its own antibodies as fast as possible.

But where did this "vaccine" come from? The air, the water? The Lepers' food? Could be. And if the viruses were already dying when I got them... then there is a Leper, in this village, who is naturally immune! And who contaminated me with masses and masses of dead viruses and his own antibodies... he, or she, saved me without knowing it. I must find out who it was.

He stood up from his chair, and grinned at the waiting, restlessly shifting Shara. The thunder from the skies grew closer.



Double-Mouth

Book Two Chapter 9

Dohan was struggling to stay alert at the controls.

It had been a long, nervous flight across the great unknown ocean, in ominous weather. Following the coordinates Surabot revealed, he had reached the site where Surabot had claimed Darc and Shara were abandoned. He circled his craft a thousand meters above the dark desert, looking for a dot of light -- a single campfire, anything. For a few minutes, Dohan saw nothing but the stars. He checked the fuel gauge, and took the craft down for a landing. With no fuel depot within reach, he could only afford to land and lift off once -- it cost too much fuel each time. Dohan switched on the Sunray's powerful keel searchlights, and began looking for a suitable plateau at the nearest cluster of cliffs.

At the corner of his vision, he caught sight of something -- he switched off the searchlights, and looked down again. He saw a faint glow of artificial light seeping up from one of the canyons -- it could be the Leper settlement Surabot had mentioned. Without consideration, he lowered the craft in a spiral trajectory and slowed down to land, aiming the searchlights down. He found a suitable flat surface at the top of the canyon. And so the craft touched down in a cloud of dust. The entire Leper tribe was alerted by the noise and light.

Double-Mouth panicked; the evil double on her back overpowered her reason completely. More outsiders are coming from the sky, it told her. More enemies! Kill the first ones, and hide the bodies

before the new outsiders find them. If the new invaders find the white-haired man and his woman, they will wreak revenge on us. Hurry! Stir up the tribe!

Claw rushed into Darc and Shara's quarters. They could hear the village in uproar from below, and see that the Lepers were killing almost all their lights.

"Someone is coming here," Claw told them. "In a flying machine. Are they looking for you?"

"Claw, I have found a cure for the --"

"I -- what?"

"I mean, I have found half the solution. If we just keep calm, I can explain to the tribe --"

"Damn you, city-dweller! Double-Mouth is down there, telling the tribe that they should kill you both, before the newcomers find you! They won't listen to me!"

Darc stiffened, nodded thoughtfully, and replied: "Then I must go and meet the new visitor. I think I know who it is."

If it was Dohan, he might ruin everything and attack the tribe. Or slay Darc in order to save him. Both prospects seemed uninviting.

Dohan closed the rear port of the Sunray, and went into cover behind a rock. The plateau was dark and featureless, and what little light came from the nearby canyon had receded to almost nothing. Whoever was down there, knew he was coming. He came fully armed with a loaded laser rifle, light body armor, an electric helmet lamp, an aluminum shield, and a light sword. But Dohan was freezing and alone against the unknown, an enemy he had never even seen.

"Hell" as a concept did not exist in Dohan's religion -- the afterlife was spent in exactly the same world as the living -- but to him, approaching Leper territory alone was the equivalent of stepping down into

hell. His mind had been shamefully unfocused during the entire flight, unable to plan anything; how could he plan, when he had no notion of what lay ahead?

Dohan saw no monsters lurking in the vicinity. He quietly moved the twenty or thirty meters to the edge of the canyon and peered down, without switching on the helmet lamp. The canyon resembled a near-straight, layered crack in the rock, pitch black at the bottom. He wished he had brought one of the robots; they could easily see in the dark. Dohan looked and listened for a while -- and then he thought he heard an echo of voices from deep down below.

He staggered back from the cliff's edge, struck by the impulse that the gaping canyon was reaching out to suck him down -- he whirled around and lit the lamp, let the light-beam sweep across the plateau. Long shadows seemed to run away from the light -- but no Lepers were in sight. Was he imagining the voices? He concentrated, like before a joust, letting the trembling fear recede from his body. His mind focused, and he knew what he had to do. He took a signal-flare with a small parachute from his belt, set it alight, and tossed it down the canyon. Dohan gasped -- in the light from the falling torch, dozens of tiny shapes ran for cover. More voices trailed up from the canyon, confirming the presence of many people. The canyon might be forty, thirty meters deep. Dohan felt a sensation of unreality, that he was dreaming. What drove him to do this? Even if Darc was there, captured by those figures, there was no hope if they were Lepers. Only a miracle could have saved Darc, or -- Darc could. Dohan saw it clearly now -- his faith was what drove him, the belief that Darc was the incarnated King, a man beyond mere mortals -- and perhaps he did not even know it himself. This was not a rescue mission but a crusade, a test of faith.

He knelt down at the edge, cupped his hands and yelled defiantly into the dark chasm: "I have come for a man named Darc! Bring the man called Darc to me alive, or you will all die!"

The echo of his command rolled through the chasm. The distant voices returned, and he could see torch-lit figures ascend up the vertical cliff walls on ladders and primitive elevators. He could not discern any white-haired man among them -- the figures were all cloaked. He was not afraid, he told himself, not with a higher power on his side.

Double-Mouth arrived at Claw's cliff habitat by way of rope elevator. She rushed to the ledge, and quickly helped more villagers climb the ladders. The agitated Lepers were carrying torches and spears. Claw strode out of his house to meet the mob, flanked by his two other wives and a few trustworthy men. Darc and Shara took to hiding at an outer recess of the shelf, close to an overhanging cliff. They had not yet decided upon escape, and the ladders going down were clearly blocked. Dohan -- Darc knew it was him -- had landed at least ten meters higher up, on the plateau which was accessible via a few risky pathways -- these were now completely in the dark.

Claw took a torch and assumed authority with a loud request to the assembled Lepers: "What in the

name of the Goddess are you doing? I demand an explanation!"

Double-Mouth stepped forth and pointed a torch at her husband.

"It is we who demand an explanation!" she shouted. "The village is under attack by the city-people, and it's all because of Darc and his whore Shara!"

Shara could hear the insult from her hideout, and she silently wished for a chance to bury a knife in Double-Mouth's throat -- but fear kept her put.

Up above the commotion, Dohan was unable to clearly make out the voices; he thought he heard the names "Darc" and "Shara" being shouted.

The Leper crowd aimed their heads upward at the sound of Dohan's voice, as he called out again: "Darc! Darc! If you are there, tell me what to do!"

Darc wanted to answer, but if he did the Leper mob would trap him. He slowly began to feel his way along the cliff wall, toward the narrow ledge. Perhaps he had a small chance... Shara grabbed his shoulder and stopped him.

"The other way," she whispered in his ear. "I saw Up-Mouth take a hidden path there."

As they reversed their direction, sticking to the shadows, the argument between Claw and Double-Mouth grew more heated. The canyon walls amplified their voices, turning the place into a vast auditorium.

"What is it you want with our visitors?" Claw barked at Double-Mouth.

"It's not what I want," Double-Mouth retorted. "It is the tribe which demands Darc's head, for betraying us to the city-people! He attracted them here with his strange instruments!"

It was her other mind speaking through her mouth -- and it wanted nothing but the death of Darc, who might remove the evil double from Double-Mouth's body.

Dohan thought his heart jumped in his chest, when he heard the faint echo of Darc's name being called again, and began to understand the nature of the argument going on below.

He yelled: "Hold out, Darc, it's me! I will wait for a sign from you!"

Darc heard him faintly, but kept sneaking onward without a sound. Not just yet...

Claw, sensing the confusion of the mob, countered Double-Mouth's accusations: "Is that so? You seem to know more about Darc's instruments and methods than everybody else in the tribe! I say you're a liar, Double-Mouth -- a deceitful liar!"

Double-Mouth clasped her shaven head with exaggerated concern: "Can you hear what my own husband is saying? He's humiliating one of his own loving wives before the tribe! How could you, my love?"

"You don't love me," he sneered. "And -- it is you who want Darc dead. What good would his death do for the tribe? If it is his friends who are coming for him now, now when he's found a cure for the Plague --"

Claw halted, amazed at what he had just said. Double-Mouth was taken aback, and the Leper crowd fell dead silent.

"Yes," Claw said in a softer tone, "Darc just told me that he has found the cure... solved the mystery of the Plague. Why is it, that you hate him so? Don't you want us to become free from this cursed existence? Why should we not be redeemed at last?"

Double-Mouth gaped, unable to reply. Her mad, but perfectly undistorted face turned and jerked, as her flickering gaze searched for support in the mob. She found no friend, only a wall of hateful eyes -- some

in faces, some in other places. The last vestige of reason gave way in Double-Mouth's mind.

She exploded at them: "I hate you all! You ugly, disgusting creatures! Your children shouldn't have been born! Your ancestors should've killed themselves... like Up-Mouth did! A better world if you had never existed! Don't come near me!"

Suddenly, Double-Mouth twisted her arms and clawed at her back, as if trying to reach an intense itch. She tore apart the back of her shirt, and clawed her second face in its eyes -- it gargled, bit at her fingers and sputtered noises. The mob parted to make room for Double-Mouth's twisting, jerking struggle with herself -- and then someone pushed her over the edge. Two screams came when Double-Mouth fell down the canyon -- a high, and a low one. Claw was speechless; it was too much to lose a son and a wife in such a short time. One of his remaining wives stepped forward.

Though shaken, the woman managed to speak: "Listen, everyone. Darc is our friend. He is unlike other outsiders. We have all heard him -- does he hate us like Double-Mouth did? No! He is about to save us! I say he must be a reincarnation of Vis, the Singing King! And just as his life was threatened, a messenger from the sky came to protect him! I see the signs, and I believe."

Darc felt he was very close to the hidden pathway now -- but it was still too dark, despite the faint torchlight. Shara urged him forward.

"Hurry! What are you waiting for?" she whispered.

But he halted, with one foot on the dark escape path.

"No," he said. "I won't run away. We're going back. Can't you hear them? They need me!"

A line of red laser light flickered momentarily from the sky and hit the opposite canyon wall with a crack. Dohan had, in pure frustration, fired a warning shot.

Everyone could hear him shouting hoarsely from above: "Darc!! If you do not answer, I fly down with the craft and shoot those Lepers to pieces!"



Chief Claw

Book Two Chapter 10

Darc rushed out of the shadows, and called up at the plateau: "Don't shoot, Dohan! Don't shoot! It is me! I am alive and well! Just don't do anything yet! Wait a little!"

He had to seize the moment, before the situation once more got out of hand. He ran into the circle of torchlight, cupped his hand around his lips and tried to address both Dohan and the Lepers simultaneously.

"It is true, that many believe I am the reborn Singing King! The man up there has come to take me back to another land!

"But I will stay here a while longer, to help both him and you! Did you remember my first words to you? I said to you: 'I am a Leper!' And it is true! Now the Plague runs in my blood! And yet I am not sick! Because my body... has learned to fight the disease! Because the Plague is not one, but several Plagues!"

It took some time to explain, and Dohan could not hear everything from the plateau where he stood. But the sincerity of Darc was enough to convince the Lepers. The sins of man, they agreed, was about to be washed away, and only one man -- or man-god -- could have made such a miracle come true. They lowered their spears; on a cue they kneeled before Darc.

"Behold the King," the villagers murmured in awe. "Praise the King Reborn."

Even Claw fell to his knees -- weeping again. Shara stood one step apart from Darc, not quite understanding what was happening, but afraid -- and enchanted. Half she believed, half she refused to believe that Darc was a man-god in disguise. He turned and faced her.

"Do you believe in me, Shara? Do you now? Do you really?"

"Yes, I do, Darc. You are the most honest man I've ever met. You wield the truth like a sword. Your power frightens me."

He frowned, and gazed down at the circle of worshippers. This was not what he wanted, to be a feared, lonely idol.

"But you're still just a man," she added, "and I love you."

She moved to embrace her. At the last moment, Darc held up his hand to stop her. "What's wrong?" she asked anxiously.

"The Plague..." he said. "You must be inoculated before you touch me or the Lepers again. If I..."

Then he chuckled to himself. If something in the food and water had made him immune, this must have happened to Shara as well. And if she still needed it, his own saliva should contain enough dead virus molecules for her immune system to sharpen its teeth on. As things were now, it would only improve her chances.

"Give me a long, wet kiss," he said wryly and held out his arms. "The cure is in me now. Trust me."

Shara stood hesitating for a moment, then obliged, and threw herself at him. Their kiss lasted a minute. Shara made a little noise that resembled a moan of pleasure, and pulled him tighter against her trembling

body. When they ceased, Darc immediately addressed Claw with renewed energy.

"Rise up, chief -- no one is to kneel before me. Now get me a ladder up to the plateau, quick! I've got to talk sense into the boy up there."

Claw stood up on uncertain legs, blinking at Darc with a puzzled left eye.

"Who is the madman up there?" he asked.

"My best friend in the world, but not the brightest. Now please hurry up!"

Dohan had not given much thought to the possibility of this event -- finding Darc healthy and alive among Earth's most feared outcasts. And if it had not been Darc, Dohan would have shot him on sight as an act of mercy. A set of wide, sturdy ladders was raised up from Claw's cliff habitat. In the light of several torches, Darc began the long and shaky climb up to the plateau, accompanied by Claw and Shara. Claw surely was afraid of being shot, but his trust in Darc was stronger than his fear. Even though Darc kept shouting up at Dohan, telling him to stay calm, Dohan backed away from the plateau's edge and threw anxious glances in all directions. He expected an ambush of monsters at any second.

First of the group, Darc heaved himself up onto the dark plateau and caught his breath, before he reached down to help Shara get up. He told Claw to duck down just a moment, and waved at Dohan. The beam from Dohan's helmet lamp forced him to squint.

"Hello there, kid! It's good to see you. How on earth did you find us here, on the other side of the sea?"

"A tale I have no time to tell," came Dohan's uneasy reply. "Darc -- are you certain you have not gotten the disease? The Goddess may damn me, but I'm not letting you one step closer until I know!"

Darc took one step forward; he saw Dohan back off, in spite of his armor and weapons. He tried to establish eye contact with the nervous young knight, but the half-blinding light from his lamp made it difficult.

"Okay. Dohan, have you ever heard of a cure called 'inoculation'? I have discovered an inoculation which makes it safe to touch a Leper without getting the Plague."

Dohan's memories of biology and medicine studies were dim, and his knowledge was limited by the social taboos against forbidden knowledge. He shook his head; his fighter's instincts sensed something.

"You are not telling me the whole truth, Darc! I can hear it in your voice! What are you hiding?"

Embarrassingly enough, Dohan stuttered.

Darc gestured with his hands to emphasize the sincerity of his reply: "Please trust me this one more time, Dohan! You know these things can be difficult to understand. I cannot explain everything right now, under these circumstances. I don't understand all of it myself yet. But of this much I am certain: Shara and I were given an inoculation, and even if the Lepers touched us we are not sick with the Plague! Do you realize what it could mean? It is the beginning of a cure to end the Plague."

Dohan's head felt suddenly light, as if his brains were pouring out through his ears. He was very tired and confused, and longed to sleep. The last few days, everything he had taken for granted had turned topsy-turvy on him. He had met witchdoctors, broken the law, opposed his father, and fought turncoat robots. And now this -- the fundamental fear of every city-dweller's psyche, about to be defeated. Azuch Fache's words returned from a deep abyss in Dohan's memory, and once more he thought of the prophecy. In Dohan's strained mind, Darc might be a man-god, but even such men were part human and could be unreliable.

He made a weary request: "Darc... I have long suspected you to be the reincarnated Singing King in disguise. So do many others: my mother, my sister, my friends... If you are him, then I would gladly believe all that you say. Could you just give me a sign... something that proves, beyond all doubt, that you are him?"

Darc sighed, and kicked a pebble. This deification mania was definitely getting at his patience.

He snapped at the boy: "Damn it, Dohan! It's not so simple! I cannot claim to be him! Stop being so stubbornly... use your brain! No, don't touch any of us yet. First, we've got to create an inoculation for you. Then you can see for yourself. And we must get back to Mechao's island as soon as possible. I

need his help to find a permanent cure. Are you listening? Can you see how much is at stake here?" Dohan had dozed off for a moment, but started awake where he stood. Darc saw this, and realized that it was an advantage. He said, with sympathy: "You must be dead tired, Dohan. Go back to the ship. Lock yourself in, and sleep on it. It is safe to do it. I swear the Lepers will not go near the Sunray. Right?"

Dohan realized his physical reserves were empty. He gave up.

"Right," the young nobleman said.

He staggered back to the parked aircraft, managed to get himself inside, locked and sealed the port, and collapsed on a bunk. His helmet clanged to the floor, but Dohan never noticed -- he was practically unconscious. Darc turned back to Shara and Claw, and told them the crisis was over.

They went back to their quarters and a good night's sleep -- after Claw had ordered his tribe to keep off the Sunray by penalty of death. The demise of Double-Mouth was not easily forgotten, and this doubled the villagers' resolve not to waste Darc's great promise of redemption.

Book Two Chapter 11

The moment Dohan woke up, he remembered the incredible situation of the night before. He panicked, rushed up from his uncomfortable sleeping position -- and his muscles sent out protests of pain.

He looked out through the portholes and front windshields of the ship, and saw the plateau and the canyon before him, bathing in sharp sunlight. The cockpit was quite warm, which meant that he had allowed the craft to stand out in the open during the entire morning. Completely undefended!

Dohan scrambled for the startup controls, then managed to calm himself. If the Lepers truly had wanted to kill him, the craft would have been destroyed while he slept. Darc had been truthful, and Dohan had mistrusted him again. It was a most dishonorable behavior. While he ate some of his rations, Dohan brooded over what to say to Darc next. Would Darc help him get his beloved Meiji now? His mind had finally settled on the question of his friend's identity: Darc was not quite the reincarnated King, but as

close to it as a human could possibly become. Azuch Fache, high-priestess Inu and the others were wrong: Darc could not be defined by the established norms of society. Above all, one could not claim that Darc was an impostor; he was always truly himself.

Strange, Dohan reflected, how Darc seemed so virtuous and honorable, though he spoke in a low tongue and mingled effortlessly with outcasts and commoners. Darc's "Sir" title was a mere formality and meant nothing even to him -- all that counted to Darc was his actions and his wisdom. Or perhaps this was a sign of extreme virtue, a model behavior? Should the nobility rethink its standards of excellence? Dohan was beginning to question the foundations of his entire upbringing. He looked out the windshield, and spotted a couple of figures approaching from the plateau's edge. Cloaked Lepers, carrying the flag with their dreaded symbol. And among them came Darc and the woman Shara, wearing wide straw hats. The warrior from Castilia swallowed; his legs felt weak. In broad daylight, would he finally see a Leper's hideous countenance?

Darc walked up to a distance of fifteen meters from the gleaming aircraft, and stopped. He waved at the cockpit, then walked around to the rear port. The port opened, but the ramp did not come down. They saw each other, and smiled.

"Dohan? Stay where you are! Everything's okay! I can't touch you, until the new inoculation is finished. You'll have to wait at least a few hours more. And then you must inject it yourself -- then wait a few days, before it is safe for any of us to touch you.

"I hope you have enough food and water! There is a well in the vicinity, where you can get fresh water -- but you should boil it first, as a precaution."

Dohan accepted the news, and replied: "I have another concern, Darc. If I leave the craft in this hot sun for too long, the fuel will start to expand. There is a risk of explosive leaks. I need to cover the craft with something cold -- a wet canvas will do, but -- as you said, I have not taken that 'inoculation' yet. Could the... Lepers aid us?"

The Lepers' language was a bit too different from Dohan's nobleman tongue; Darc had to explain the request to Claw. It took the villagers but an hour to arrange for a huge mass of carpets and blankets to be carried up to the plateau, then knotted together. With some ropes and a handful of men, the result was then draped over the bulk of the Sunray and soaked with water. Dohan noted with a sigh of relief, that the temperature inside began to sink.

With that problem solved, Dohan asked for a little privacy. He was left alone, and could get to work

checking the engines of the Sunray. The air intakes and exhaust pipes had adjustable valves -- Dohan controlled that they were safely shut, so that no sand was allowed to get in and ruin the jet tubes. He observed flocks of strange long-necked birds, which were circling in the sky above. For some reason, the sight of the birds made him uneasy.

Darc worked outdoors with extracting a double-acting vaccine from the antibodies of immune Lepers, assisted by Shara. He noticed, and recognized, the circling birds in the sky: buzzards, an American variant of vultures. And he thought defiantly: I cheated you again! His work proved to be easier than he had expected. By now, Darc had named the two components of pseudo-leprosy: Plague Virus A, which spread by touch and caused superficial deformities, such as the lumps on Claw's head. And Plague Virus B, as yet undetected, which was genetically passed on from parent to child.

Darc also spent a portion of the day examining samples from the Leper tribe. He discovered -- much to his relief -- that most of them were already immune to Plague Virus A. By the looks of things, the strength and numbers of Virus A must have been diminishing in the tribe long before Darc arrived -- a case of natural immunity developing over the centuries. But a couple of newcomers like Shara, Darc -- or Dohan -- who had never been exposed to either virus, would be extremely vulnerable to the Plague... unless the vaccine was used.

It dawned on him, that as long as the fortified cities kept isolating themselves from the Plague-carrying Lepers, the city-dwellers would always be vulnerable to the disease. The whole social setup was a self-perpetuating vicious circle, which kept the Plague alive and dangerous. How was Darc to change this -- for he once again saw that change was long overdue -- during his lifetime?

"We must wait now for a few hours," he told Shara, "and then we will know if the cure is ready for use." He let go of the work and approached her. "Do you understand why I must change your world? Partly, because it constantly tries to kill me with its old laws and ways... and partly because I see good people suffer from those laws and ways."

Shara answered, sounding bitter: "Of course I understand it. It's been that way my entire life. I've been hounded, flogged, and spat upon by city people ever since I was a little girl." Her deep resentments, so long dormant, suddenly surfaced. With sudden ferocious intensity, she hugged him and said in his ear: "If you raised an army, smashed the nobility, and all the fat merchants saw the Lepers come and burn down their rich homes, I would be the first to support it! Would you do that -- start an uprising?"

Darc pulled away her arms, then appeared to change his mind, embraced and kissed her -- and shook his head.

"No, not even for you. I am a vain and selfish man, true. And I've grown quite fond of you. But I won't do that."

She held on to him, urging with low-voiced intensity: "But you could become a leader, a king! I saw you capture the hearts of a hundred bloodthirsty Lepers! If you want to stop this persecution of us, then you're forced to seize power!"

Darc rubbed his scalp against her face, then looked up and grinned haplessly at the clear blue sky.

"Power!" he said, squinting. "What is it good for? You know... once, when I was a little boy, I wanted power over others. I dreamed of being stronger than everyone else, the way boys do. One day, I dressed up as a little king in front of the mirror. I puffed up myself, feeling all-powerful. And just then, my mother came into the room and saw me, with my little paper crown and my little mantel -- a curtain for a mantel. And she smiled at me -- just smiled. I felt so stupid, my face went red. But my mother lifted me up in her arms and kissed me, and then I knew she loved me anyway.

"Ever since that time, I can always see the little puffed-up boy in every leader. And I have always known, that it's a hundred times better to be free than to have power over others. Power should be spread thin, not be held by one man. That's what I'm going to do in this world."

Shara looked away. She tried to release herself from Darc's arms -- but he caught her, puzzled by her sudden moodiness.

"Oh, go on with your great work," Shara muttered. "Go ahead and play the Great Redeemer. You're wasting your talents away."

Darc wouldn't have any of it -- he shook her violently.

"Look at me, Shara!" he barked. "In my time, when two people were in love, they were truthful to each other. What's on your mind? Damn! I'm from another time -- you can tell me everything!" She winced, but she told him; the words poured out from between her red large lips.

"You're a merchant's son, Darc. It's in your face. You must have grown up in a wealthy home -- you never had to fight for your food. What do you know about hard times? You know nothing! Nothing!

"I should've been well off too -- but the city people wouldn't let me! They branded our family unclean, threw rocks after us in the street. My father was beaten almost to death and left a cripple, to waste away before our eyes. My mother had to sell her body to support us. And then she died too, and I was orphaned. I ran away. I was alone, but I wouldn't go off into a corner and die -- I knew my worth.

"My parents taught me that we had been had denied our lawful right to be equal citizens. They left me no choice but to become a criminal, a mistress of rich men. All because people discovered that we --"

She began to shake with hateful grief, somehow bereft of tears -- as if she had run out of those long ago. Darc wanted to help, if only he could understand. He fixed her eyes with his.

"Why was your family persecuted? Couldn't the law help you -- the cities have laws and courts, don't they?"

Shara's eyes glittered with fury, as she spat out her most shameful secret: "We believed in Kristus! We were heathens!"

Darc gaped foolishly, then took Shara's dark head in his hands, burying it in the hollow of his neck. He was holding in his arms a link to his own time, a persecuted remnant of a vanished culture. It was a poignant moment, even to a skeptic like him.

"I'm sorry, Shara. I'm so sorry. I didn't know. In my time -- in my time I was raised in the same faith."

She looked up at him with her wide black eyes, eyes that were so skillfully trained to catch men's attention.

"You did? You believe in the Sacrament? That the bread and wine of the Mass turn into the body of Kristus?"

"Well... to be honest, I don't really believe in that anymore. When my ancestors came to England from Italy a long time ago, they changed their name from Archimboldo to Archibald, to avoid the prejudice against their people. And though we did not forget the old faith, it was not... rigidly practised, and soon enough we changed our ways."

"Have you... converted to the Goddess?"

She turned fearful; he soothed her.

"No, no, no! I believe... that every human has the right to be free." He smiled sadly, and held up her round chin to his face. "You haven't understood a word I've said, have you?"

"I guess not. What do you mean, 'free'? Does it include the right to a fair trial in court, or not having to work without pay?"

"More, much more. The right to believe in anything you want, to do or say anything you want -- as long as it doesn't hurt anyone!"

His creed, so unlike anything Shara had ever heard before, opened a door in her mind. It went blank for a minute. Darc waited patiently, hoping at least she, of all people, would get it right.

And then in a flash, Darc made sense to her. All his words, his actions made sense -- in the light of his faith, this worship of freedom. Now she began to cry for real. But it was happy tears, and she laughed. It was a wonderful, tittering sound, Darc thought -- her voice released. Shara felt a great relief, and then she knew why.

She wasn't afraid of him anymore.

A great passion was set free in her mind. She kissed him on the mouth, and all over his face, and his response was no less warm than hers. They ignored the eyes of Lepers in the distance, until Darc felt his desire surge. Could he wait until the night? Could she? He asked her.

"No," she replied with a knowing smile. Then they both laughed.

They hastily gathered together the equipment and carried it into Claw's house. It was a hot noon, but the shadow of the cliff was cool. This, however, could not possibly cool them off. As soon as they were safely in their room, Darc tossed Shara onto the hard bed and flung himself upon her. She welcomed him with a joyful laugh.

Meanwhile, up on the plateau, Dohan took a siesta under the shadow of the ship's metal belly. He dreamed of Meijji again.

In bed with Shara, Darc felt like a young man again. Shara felt truly alive for the first time in many years, and she rewarded Darc for it with all her passion. They lost track of time, making love for longer than they thought possible. Yet when they ceased, breathless and red-faced, they found that less than four hours had passed. Not a word had been uttered between them during those four hours. There were many things they wanted to tell each other, promises they longed to make but feared to break in times to come. Both were aware of the odds stacked against their survival, and the differences that might never be bridged. As Darc raised his ruffled head from Shara's chest to speak, she shook her head and put her fingers to his lips.

"Save that precious voice for the Lepers, honey. You don't have to say anything."

Darc took a moment to steady his breath, then he couldn't help himself.

"I was about to say..." he said, and flashed a mischievous grin, "...going for older men is one thing, but isn't this going nine centuries too far?"

She beat his chest in mock reproach, then began to laugh so hard she couldn't lie still. He laughed with her as they embraced again.

Book Two Chapter 12

The sun sank beyond the distant vertical mountains, and Dohan ceased his fencing exercise -- not so much out of exhaustion as boredom. Then again, this pause for rest and leisure was precisely what he needed.

And finally, Darc returned... carrying the promised vaccine, the final test of their mutual trust. The tall white-haired man tried to relax and not give any impression of dubiousness, as he walked up to his waiting friend. But since the world is a place where absolute certainty does not exist, he felt doubt -- in himself. If the vaccine was a failure, and Dohan caught the Plague...

During this brief walk across the plateau, Darc went over in his mind everything he had discovered in the last few days, checking for any missing details, any clue that could prove him wrong. Of course there were missing details, which only Mechao could help him unveil. And without Dohan, Darc wouldn't get back to Kap Verita in the first place. So he had to begin by taking this chance.

"Darc!" Dohan greeted him out loud. "This is the first time I see you with a beard. Have you looked yourself in a mirror of late?"

Darc laughed in reply, grateful for the opportunity to talk nonsense at this critical moment. He was tanned, a little grimy with desert dust, and his chin was thick with snow-white stubble.

"Naah... I guess I look like death warmed over. You haven't shaved yourself, huh?"

"Should I?"

"No. If you cut yourself now, you could get infected."

Darc halted a few steps away from Dohan. Like some kind of stage-magician, he made a stylish gesture and carefully extracted a sterilized injector from his cloak. Dohan recognized the gadget's similarity to a doctor's equipment, and his body coiled up with tension. He had always hated injections.

"Is that the vaccine, in there?" Dohan asked, pointing at the instrument in Darc's hands.

"Yes. Now, I have used fire, some stuff of Mechao's making, and boiling water to kill off all live germs -- in here, on my hands, and on the injector. But just to be sure, I'll burn the injector and clean your arm before I inject you. Show me your arm, please."

Dohan rolled up his left sleeve. As Darc rubbed sterilizing liquid onto Dohan's thick arm, he became aware of the possibility of complications. What if Dohan had a fatal allergic reaction? Dohan had never been exposed to these antibodies, and Darc knew nothing of the Damon family's health record.

"Kid. Is there... have there been any cases of severe disease in your family before? Are there any medicines, plants, or foods which make you sick?"

Dohan hesitated a little: "There is... a history of heart disease in our family. My grandfather died of a stroke, but he was old then. I have not been sick with anything serious... I had the one-year flush, like every other child, when I was thirteen; it was nothing. But that nearly killed you, remember?"

Darc frowned, and finished wiping the clean spot on Dohan's arm with a drop of Mechao's solution.

"If you have second thoughts," Darc explained, "this is where you say stop. I have only had a few days to see the effect on myself and Shara."

"Enough talk, Darc. Do it!"

Dohan held out his pale arm, tense and wiry, for the injector. He thought of Meijji, and did something that would have won him heaps of scorn and ridicule in his home city -- he shut his eyes hard. Darc took a deep breath. Then he pressed the knobby end of the injector into the skin of Dohan's arm, right over a thick vein, and pushed the button with his thumb. The vaccine dose shot into the arm with a brief hiss. Darc immediately removed the injector, added another drop of solution, and opened a pack of sterile bandage. He wrapped the minute wound, and nodded.

"Done. Now we wait a few days. Neither of us will leave this place, before I know it is safe for the

world. And our clothes, the Sunray, everything we bring with us from here -- all of it must be cleansed from unwanted germs."

Dohan managed a brave smile, and asked his mentor: "Never did I train to fight such small enemies. Could you make me a sword small enough to strike at a germ?"

"Another day, kid," Darc replied. "Another day."

Excerpt from Darc's notebook, Julla (July), 940 A.M.:

DAY 7

No signs of complications yet. Dohan stays isolated from the Lepers. He experienced a slight flush, but it passed. The new antibodies from my blood are flowing through his blood. Shara is doing well. She has built up a steady resistance against Virus A, and possibly also against a few minor sicknesses the Lepers have. I'm a little jumpy, with minor stomach problems and headaches. Probably a late reaction to unfamiliar bacteria in the environment.

Been working on the hygiene among the Lepers -- tried to convince Claw that they could beat the cholera problem, it has nothing to do with the Plague. He wasn't convinced, until I showed him his own skin bacteria through the microscope -- he'd never seen germs before, and it shook him up pretty badly. Now he's getting to be hysterical about cleanliness. Another victory for modern medicine.

Note: Examine that sickly child again -- perhaps something could be done.

DAY 8

Checked Dohan, Shara, and myself. No complications.

The sickly child (name: FOUR-LEG; age: 3) examined. He suffers from:

A) Infected leg sores -- the small of both legs are split since birth, into four smaller legs, each with a foot. They are too weak for walking, and their development seems stunted into babyhood. Tried Mechao's antibiotics in small doses, externally and internally.

B) Breathing difficulties due to deformed ribcage. Not much I can do here -- he needs surgery at least. Could the deformities be genetically reversed in children, if it's done before they're fully grown? Must find out.

DAY 9

No change. Neither Dohan nor I have shaved yet.

My past life in the 20th century fades into a dream, a fairytale. It seems less real every day. But the past reminds me too, with little hints of what has been. Especially in the Lepers' stories and legends. If I live through this, I will ask Librian to translate the lore of the Lepers.

Eileen and Powers. I won't forget you. If I ever can convince myself that you're dead and gone, I'll erect a grave in your memory.

DAY 10

I dreamt that Four-Leg had my son's face. Shara cradled me until I fell asleep again. Without her, I wouldn't make it through the bad nights.

DAY 11

Four-Leg is feeling much better! His parents are grateful, and the villagers are enthusiastic. They asked me if I could make his legs normal again, and I had to tell them I don't know yet and lack the surgical equipment. In the meantime, I've drawn a design for crutches that Four-Leg could learn to use, to move around easier.

As expected, Dohan is forming his own antibodies now. He could soon be able to shake a Leper's hand without risk. I suggested it to him, but the idea terrified him.

Kusta? (August?), 940 A.M.:

DAY 12

Today we began disinfecting our clothes and equipment of Virus A.

Luckily, Virus A isn't airborne, and quickly dies outside the human body -- but it can spread short distances via hair, skin, and blood scraps. The Lepers are scrubbing themselves and their houses extra clean, too -- guess they're becoming hypochondriacs.

Shara looks so beautiful, so alive I could cry. I'm beginning to understand how much Dohan misses Meijji -- he's been talking about her all day.

Four-Leg tried out his new crutches today. It won't be long before he can walk with them. He hugged me, and I got red-faced like the sentimental old git I've become.



Eye-Leg --first encounter

Book Two Chapter 13

It was yet another morning of farewells.

The flight across the Atlantic would cost the Sunray every last drop of fuel. Dohan had removed all unnecessary internal furnishing to ease the craft's weight -- seats, ornaments, body armor, weaponry, casings, and fire extinguishers. His father would never forgive him this act of vandalism. Chief Claw and his tribe cheered as they took over the discarded weapons and gadgets, which would come to good use.

Darc had gathered and stored samples of Virus A and B for later studies, plus some of his new vaccine. All that remained before their departure, was a surprise offer from the Leper chief -- Claw's last great test of Darc's commitment.

"Take one of us with you," Claw asked, or rather commanded.

Darc looked at the grotesque face of the Leper leader -- as ugly as ever, despite his clean, brightly colored robes and shining new armor pads. However, there was a softness to Claw's hardy features that had not been there before.

Standing safely apart from his guests, Claw continued: "You must! If you could cure just one of us completely, and show her to the healthy city-dwellers like one of them -- then we would all have won a great victory. You understand the reason of it, Darc. The way to our redemption begins with one person, but the first one is the most difficult, no?"

Darc nodded slowly, and said cautiously: "If I say yes -- then it must be a Leper who can be made absolutely resistant to Virus A. And even then, I can't swear she will be completely cured of Virus B. Who shall it be?"

He half expected the Leper chief to suggest himself -- Claw's healthy eye revealed how much he wanted it. But the chief shrugged, as though he had read Darc's mind.

Somberly, Claw replied: "Not I. But someone who may not survive without you." He waved forward two cloaked Leper women, who were supporting a third figure on their shoulders. The third one's cloak was thicker and longer than normal, covering up all ends completely. Darc, Shara, and Dohan stared at the slumped mystery with puzzlement and just a little fear. This was a tribe member who apparently had been hidden away until now. Claw gestured at the figure with his claw-like left hand. "This is Eye-Leg," he explained. "Show them."

The two women rolled up the four sleeves of Eye-Leg's clothing and exposed her limbs to the sun. The figure bearing that name winced in the light, and made little gagging-clicking sounds with her tongue. Darc suppressed an instinctive convulsion of his stomach -- Shara gasped and covered her face. Dohan mumbled a prayer, "crossed" himself with the eye-mouth-heart-sign and averted his eyes.

Eye-Leg's head and throat -- complete with mouth and tongue -- grew separated from her shoulders. The girl's close-shaven head hung upside-down, attached firmly to the joint of her right hip. Her right leg dangled like some perverse, atrophied trunk from between her shoulders. Dohan looked again. It got worse. He saw that also her left leg and right arm grew in switched places, rendering them both useless. Tears welled up in his eyes -- from disgust, pity, and anger. How could the gods and goddesses allow this cruelty to happen to a child?

At the point where the base of Eye-Leg's "neck" -- or, what should have been her right leg -- met her collarbones, one could see two brownish, quivering holes. They opened periodically, as little flaps of sore skin -- hardened tissue? -- twitched. Darc realized what those openings were: her gullet and her windpipe, respectively.

"How... how does she breathe?" he whispered.

Claw saw rather than heard the question -- for like all Lepers, he was skilled at tracing minute facial and body movements.

"She was born late. We had to cut up her mother's womb to get her out. Everyone thought Eye-Leg was stillborn. But then she started to breathe through that hole you see. And we fed her milk and soup through the other opening. Her head is mute, and she has lost all her teeth, because the mouth neither breathes nor eats. But, the true tragedy, her mind --"

They watched her silently for what seemed hours. Eye-Leg looked up at them with flickering, frightened

eyes -- bulging, with pink whites, and shot through with vessels. Her head seemed swollen with blood pressure, and thick veins stood out from around the Leper tattoo on her forehead. And despite all this, the spark of awareness and intelligence in those childlike eyes was obvious -- and infinitely sad. Claw added, like a judge meting out a gruesome sentence: "She's almost fourteen. You see, Darc? You see why it has to be her?"

Claw's stern gaze could not hide how tense he was. Darc had wanted to bring along Four-Leg instead, but this girl needed help much more. He gestured his approval, looking away from the others -- watching across the plateau, at the distant horizon. When he spoke he felt strange, possessed by something greater than himself. Dohan would have called it fate.

"We bring her along. And I swear this: You will see Eye-Leg again, all limbs in their right place, alive and well. Even if I have to spend the rest of my life making it happen."

Dohan moved behind Darc and whispered: "This is too much even for you, Darc. I am not that dumb -- she is beyond all help! For the sake of the Goddess and your honor, choose someone else!"

"Shut up," Darc snapped.

Claw had been planning this for days, and went on to silence any possible objections. He told them, that Eye-Leg had never suffered any of the lumps or skin deformities which were now connected to Virus A; she was immune to it. Also, her physical stamina was remarkable: Eye-Leg had never been seriously ill and might survive extensive surgery. She had been cleaned and her clothes sanitized, and was ready to leave at short notice. The two Leper women told Shara how to feed the girl; on her own, Eye-Leg would risk choking on food slipping into her lungs. Darc made a mental attempt to guess what Eye-Leg's insides looked like -- to no avail. For this task he needed expert help... or a miracle.

After a few additional preparations, the four travelers could board the Sunray. When Darc and Shara first tried to carry Eye-Leg into the aircraft, the girl became terrified and fought to come loose. She kicked and scratched her helpers feebly, a most unnerving experience for them -- being kicked with a misplaced hand and scratched with a foot that was in the arm's rightful place. Only when Claw had calmed and soothed her for several minutes, Eye-Leg seemed to accept her fate. But she wept, making more gagging-clicking noises.

"Can you understand her?" Darc called at the Lepers.

"Some," Claw called back. "But we do not know how much she can understand."

They moved Eye-Leg up into the vessel's rear cabin, and Dohan started up its two powerful jet turbines.

Claw kept shouting instructions, even as the craft's rear port swung shut: "Be kind to her! Always explain to her what is happening! She likes when you talk to her, even if she might not understand the words!"

"We promise!" Shara shouted.

The metal door closed, and the frightened Eye-Leg was helped into a seat, where she was put into a lying position and secured with seatbelts. They decided upon a sideways position for her, so that her head would lie free from the g-forces of the accelerating craft. As the Sunray soared in a cloud of dust, Eye-Leg shook and writhed in her seat, making one last escape attempt. Shara talked soothing words to Eye-Leg, and held her tense hand -- that is to say, the hand that was fitted to its correct joint. And finally, when Eye-Leg could see that they were already high up among the clouds, she settled down into a stiff posture. Dohan pulled the lever that activated the autopilot, and turned in his seat to face the others -- carefully avoiding the gaze of Eye-Leg's horrified gray eyes.

"Could everyone aboard please pay heed?" he said aloud, and paused. "Thank you. I have calculated the fuel expenses for a flight with three passengers. But I cannot account for any unexpected additions due to bad weather, turbulent air... or extra passengers. To put it simply: We might not make it all the way across."

Darc interrupted: "Does the Sunray have wheels to land on?"

The young pilot frowned, scratching his short red beard.

"We have six small wheels, on the pontoons on which the engines rest, so you can roll the plane across the ground. Why?"

Darc straightened his back, and put forth his idea: "In my time, an aircraft could land while flying forward... sort of glide down, and land on extended wheels. Could you try such a landing, instead of

using up fuel on a slow, vertical landing?"

Dohan thought it over.

"Air gliding," he said slowly. "No, that's for fools and acrobats. I tried it once when I was young. Very dangerous. One false move, or a sudden wind, and..." He let his right hand make a dive into his left palm. "Besides that, you need large wings for gliding on the wind. The Sunray is made for short, fast flights -- our wings are too small by far." Darc sank back into his seat. His friend's sudden cowardice disappointed him. Then Dohan brightened up a little, and said: "It just struck me -- there is an emergency parachute -- you know of what I talk? It is meant for emergency landings without fuel. Very simple -- I just pull this lever, and the chute unfolds from above our heads. Then the whole craft sinks down on the air, and if the tanks are emptied... then we could make a rough touchdown without going up in flames. But the problem is that we might land in the sea, far from land. The Sunray will sink like a stone."

"The chute," Darc probed. "What shape is it?"

"I cannot recall the precise shape... a rectangular chunk of silk, shaped to form dozens of hollow tubes --"

"Dohan! Have you ever heard of parachute gliding?"

The pilot rubbed his temples, and explained with some irritation: "Well, yes, but -- a single man's weight is not at stake here. Once the craft's engines are shut down, it goes as reckless as a kite. And chute gliding is outlawed in our cities, anyway. It happened in ancient times, that glide-flyers ended up outside the city walls..."

Dohan lapsed into reciting the sort of crash-landing stories which flying men are so fascinated in telling each other... and Darc realized that Dohan could be stunningly boring at times. It was going to be one long flight. Shara patted Eye-Leg's hand, looking pityingly at her curious face.

"Chutes, wheels, rudders... it makes no sense to either of us, huh? Don't worry. If we fall into the ocean, I'll grab something for us to float on. Okay?"

The withered, misplaced leg on the girl's shoulders made a little twitch -- a nod? Shara shuddered, and almost burst into tears. This unfortunate Leper had lived through a misery far worse than her own -- and without promising or wishing it, Shara now felt responsible for Eye-Leg. Yet, the sight of her appearance was almost too much to bear. Shara recalled Up-Mouth -- the man who had killed himself at the hint of having done wrong. How much greater, then, was not Eye-Leg's will to live against all odds? She was more than a freak.

"Do you want to hear a song, Eye-Leg? A song my parents taught me when I was a child. It always made me feel better."

Shara began to sing softly, a slow soothing church hymn in a forgotten language called Latin -- the meaning of which had been lost even to her own parents. She stayed with Eye-Leg and sang, until the Leper girl was finally lulled to sleep. Shara took her hand in hers, and kissed it.

Book Two

Chapter 14

Meijji gazed up at the sky, for the fifth time that day; her female friends shook their heads and grinned at her.

The two oldest, bravest of the young women asked her: "Bird-watching again, Meijji?" -- "Yeah, that's a seagull, not a flying-machine!"

They instinctively darted away laughing, but Meijji was both strong and quick. She ran after them, caught one of them by the braids, and pinned her to the ground. Meijji savagely yanked the other girl's hair, until she cried out in pain.

"Next time I'll cut off your braids, you hear?"

With a resentful snort Meijji released the sobbing girl, who ran off to tell her parents on the terraced fields farther downhill. The other girls resumed their washing chores, sitting down by their wide barrels filled with water and soapy textiles. This batch of garments, linen and drapes belonged to Mechao's household. Meijji, being the oldest daughter of the island's most powerful man, was under strict orders from her mother to oversee the laundry work.

She used to complain that her younger brothers and sisters were allowed to play around most of the day, but her old mother was relentless -- if Meijji wished to be treated like a grown woman in the future, she would have to earn it in the present. Mechao did feel guilty because of Meijji's laments, though -- so from time to time, he tried to learn her the workings of his laboratory, and created her monstrous pet Pipo. During the recent few years, her interests had wandered more and more into the social domain -- and, for the last few days, her mind had fixed on a single man. Everyone on the Kap Verita archipelago knew what Meijji was waiting for, and why she acted even testier than usual. Every day, she scanned the skies -- and saw nothing except birds. She grasped the little golden figurine that hung from her necklace, his gift to her, and shut her eyes to dream of his presence.

Suddenly, a little past noon when the working population was resting in the available shadow of trees and roofs, silence blanketed the island. The crickets and birds fell quiet. The islanders ceased talking, felt with their toes at the ground for the vibrations of an earthquake, or the first stirrings of the old volcano Fogo. But no earthquake came. No volcanic eruption, just the distant rumble of a double-engine aircraft. Meijji's little siblings ran to tell her, but she knew immediately and hurried down toward the beach -- closely followed by a score of other women. They, too, had been dreaming about pale-skinned warriors from faraway lands, and this one might not come alone.

Up at the camouflaged mansion of Mechao, the servants alerted the house master and his wife. He sent out word to greet the visitors with rifles ready, just in case.

Meijji, her legs draped in a striking red and orange sarong, gasped when she saw the steep incoming angle of the descending jet craft. It was the Sunray, undoubtedly -- coming in fast and low, not at all like the slow, hovering descent of the previous landing.

"Launch the boats!" she commanded her following.

Without a moment's hesitation, they ran for the sloping camouflaged roofs of the boat sheds, covered by sand and shrubs. Carried on the shoulders of forty women and young girls, four canoe-shaped boats were rapidly moved across the beach and launched into the sea. Meijji took the seat at the stern of one boat, her eyes never leaving the descending Sunray. The girls fell into a well-exercised paddling rhythm; the four boats shot forth like floating arrows that sliced through the waves.

Above the sea, the descending craft's roar increased in pitch -- it flew just sixty meters above the waves, yet several hundred meters off-coast. Then, something burst open from the Sunray -- Meijji's heart jumped, and she thought the craft would crash -- but when she looked again, she saw a rectangular shape of white fabric bobbing wildly above the jet craft, connected to it by tight wires. The contraption seemed to curb the fall of the craft, which roared past the boats and in over the rocky beach -- toward the open field of the old ruined harbor.

Meijji ordered the boats to turn back to shore. As they did so, the Sunray made a shaky glide downward, and disappeared in a wall of spouting dirt and dust. The women could not see or hear a crash. They dashed from the landed boats, and ran to the harbor ruins to see. Up on the ridge above, the camouflaged cableway was erected; a loaded platform came slowly gliding down from the mansion. Meijji knew it was her father, and increased her running pace until her lungs ached. When she arrived at the open place, she coughed and squinted her way through the settling dust, ignoring her friends' warnings.

She called out for Dohan, stumbled forward and finally reached the bulk of the parked flying vessel. It was radiating heat and settling engine noise, but was undamaged. Without noticing the blistering heat of the metal hull, she banged on a jet tube with her bare fists -- and, in an answer to her prayers, the rear port opened and the cargo ramp extended down onto the ground.

"Hello?" sounded a familiar young male voice from inside. There followed some commotion from the cabin, a brief but heated argument between Darc and Dohan. Meijji was about to run up and inside, when Dohan's sweaty face appeared in the doorway. He grinned wide when he saw her -- then held out his hand to stop her. "Meijji! Stop! Please! You must not come near us yet!" Meijji stopped, struck by anxiety. She only wanted to spring up and be caught in his embrace. "Wait for your father!" Dohan said. "Mechao must make sure that there is no risk to you!"

The girl stepped back, seeing the fear in her man's eyes. She retreated farther away, and the other girls came to ask her what was wrong. As they stood there, the local fire brigade came driving into the crowd, with an extra load consisting of Mechao and family members. The old doctor stepped down from the motorized wagon, and looked around. He waved his walking-stick angrily at the assembled girls, and snapped his fingers at them -- they all scattered away, except for Meijji.

Darc had seen Mechao arrive, and steeled himself for another lengthy quarantine procedure. Patience, he told himself, was now all they needed. Time he had plenty of from now on. He showed himself to his hosts, but kept his distance -- and started to explain matters as carefully as he could, without stirring a panic among the islanders. And he made them listen.

Yet, Mechao was the first one to panic when he saw the Leper girl.

The quarantine lasted another few days, but the passengers aboard the Sunray endured it quite well. When Mechao had regained his composure -- he feared Lepers just as much as anyone else -- he got to work. Searching his old library for quarantine procedures, he dusted off a set of protective breathing-helmets, had suits made to fit them, and whipped up a supply of sterilizing fluids. Dressed in the protective gear, he could visit Darc inside the ship without risk, supply them with their food and water, and examine Eye-Leg closer. His fear was gradually replaced by intense curiosity. Perhaps he felt less interest in Eye-Leg as a person, and more as a biological curiosity. Shara watched over his every move, so that he would not harm the nervous Leper girl.

On the third day of quarantine, Mechao allowed his own daughter inside the ship cabin. Covered up by a protective suit, she embraced and kissed Dohan the best she could -- the glass plate of Meijji's mask separated their lips from each other. They agreed to save their words for later, once the quarantine was over. After Meijji had left the ship, Darc had to confront her father.

"Mechao," he asked with just a hint of reproach, "how come you haven't thought of this before? Or did your ancestors? Did any other witchdoctors? I don't understand."

To this challenge, Mechao responded with utter bewilderment. His first impression was that Darc had caught him acting stupid -- an unforgivable sin in his clan.

Like a grumpy old man, he turned defensive behind his protective mask: "You think me lacking in brains to understand the Plague? You imply that I was blind to the misery the Plague is causing? Perhaps I'm just a reclusive islander, afraid of dealing with the outside world, is that what you mean?"

Darc replied: "You know more about genetic engineering than I ever did in my time. You can perform wonders with your laboratory, as could your forefathers. And that is precisely why I can't understand... why me?"

Mechao laughed; not his peculiar little laugh, but a cackling guffaw. "Of course my ancestors thought of the Plague! Everyone does. But you thought differently! Like... like a man from another world, able to see us stripped of our own preconceived notions. You opened my eyes, Darc -- opened my eyes to a new way of seeing! What was the name of that profession again?"

"Science'," Darc answered.

And just then he felt that intoxicating chill down his spine again, the rush of insight through his head, the high to which he had always been addicted. He sensed what enormous power he was holding: to actually change the world. Just knowing it was enough for him.

"Science'," Mechao mimicked appreciatively. "That's it! With the eyes of science, you looked at the things we had accepted as inevitable for hundreds of years. And you saw that the Plague was an intrusion into the world, not the fact of life we were born with.

"Us witchdoctors are spread far apart; we usually avoid each other as well as the city-states. Indeed, I have never personally met one outside my own bloodline. We have preferred the comfort of stability for too long, peddling in petty genetic play. It is time for a change."

The two men shook hands, thinking they were on the same wavelength. Mechao meant change on a modest scale. Not even he could guess at the impact of change to come.



Meijji & Dohan's reunion

Book Two

Chapter 15

The quarantine ended; Mechao could happily declare to the anxious islanders that the visitors had been sanitized and cleared.

Only the Leper girl was kept isolated; she was brought to Mechao's mansion and laboratory. Shara kept her company in this new environment that was Kap Verita. Eye-Leg took in everything that came across her sight: an explosion of colors which had been absent in the desert; the lively, dark-skinned people -- so devoid of deformities, so immensely beautiful compared to her own people -- and the sea, vast and blue, scented with salt and life. Shara saw tears streaming down Eye-Leg's upside-down face, from her large eyes down over her tattooed forehead. She thought she knew what made the girl cry -- all the beauty she had never known, which was now revealed to her.

The first day in the laboratory, Shara came close to a fight with Mechao when he approached Eye-Leg with some horrid-looking instrument. He was reluctantly forced, with Darc's consent, to have Shara watch over his work -- checking and guarding him so that Eye-Leg would not feel intimidated or abandoned. In his mind, Mechao wondered if Shara had ever had a child of her own, but he did not care to ask; he was accustomed to dealing with strong-minded females. In his laboratory, Mechao got the chance of doing what both he and Darc so eagerly had been waiting for: a complete scan of Eye-Leg's insides.

Shara, Darc, Meijji, and Dohan watched as Mechao left Eye-Leg on a soft couch. With the help of his white-clad assistant sons, Mechao rolled a huge torus-shaped contraption over and around the couch. Two of Mechao's sons connected the machine to a power socket and a cabinet-sized metal box with a circular glass screen. Darc associated this to X-ray machines and primitive oscilloscopes -- oversized, very old and exquisitely ornamented.

"Please make her keep still!" Mechao asked Shara, who talked to Eye-Leg until she had stopped trembling.

He then asked them all to step back behind a silk screen. He turned on a power lever; the equipment clicked and hummed loudly. The glass screen brightened up, showing a latticework of dancing green wave-patterns. Slowly, the patterns merged into an outline of a three-dimensional shape -- literally three-dimensional from all angles, defining every surface in green lines dancing across it. They could see it forming a flickering image of Eye-Leg's body. The old doctor worked a panel of dials, and the image zoomed inward, inside the girl's body. Now the screen showed a living, moving cluster of intestines -- guts, kidneys, a pair of breathing lungs, and a pulsating heart. The organs seemed shaped about right, but they were distributed in a way that defied all concepts of anatomy.

Darc studied the moving, living imagery, memorizing all he saw. Mechao began taking notes and scribbling down sketches. As the hours passed, they could puzzle together a picture of the confusion that was Eye-Leg. Darc was the first one to notice the fatal flaw in the Leper girl's constitution.

"Look there, Mechao." He pointed out the central stems of arteries emerging from Eye-Leg's pumping heart. "The largest blood vessels are twirled into a knot around the heart."

Mechao saw it too, and he worriedly looked up from the screen -- at the unhappy, waiting creature on the couch.

"I'll tell you this, Darc -- a miracle it is, that she has lived this long. She might stay alive for a few more years, with proper care. But she is doomed, mark my words."

"I know," Darc muttered.

He banged his fist against the box that held the projecting screen, and the picture flickered out of focus. Mechao cast him an angry glance, and shut off the now overheating machinery. Shara approached Eye-Leg again, and grasped her hand -- a hand that was nervously groping for support.

She faced the two scientists, and said with calm determination: "You vowed, Darc. You vowed to cure

her. What will you great men do now?"

Darc closed his eyes for a few seconds, shut out the world and steadied his pounding heart. Playing the Popeye tune in his head failed to calm the tension. The challenge had been there, all the way from his rebirth in this future place: Change the world or die. Then it hadn't frightened him, it had helped him escape a great loss. The challenge had changed, to a more ominous note: Change the world or they die. Please God, he thought, don't let me go through that kind of loss again. But he had lived through a second childhood and youth in this world, and perhaps he faced the beginning of a second maturity; an era of hard, sometimes drudging work toward a goal, which he probably would not live to see realized. He had gained too many enemies, and many more would join in the effort to stop Darc. The challenge was there for Darc to accept; it seemed to come right out of those innocent, questioning eyes of the deformed girl on the couch. He worded the challenge in his mind: Change the world and then die. Very well, he thought.

He accepted the facts, as he had always been able to do, opened his eyes, and faced the others. His friends.

"We," he told them slowly, "are going to cure Eye-Leg and defeat the Plague. Not I. We are."

He walked up to the resting Eye-Leg on the couch, and took her other hand -- the one that was attached to her hip. Her hand squeezed his.

"I must ask you to be very brave from now on, girl."

Meijji and Dohan walked out of the laboratory, away from the questioning, knowing glances of her family and siblings.

"Where are we bound?" he asked her, unfamiliar with the many rooms and corridors.

He reached out to hold her hand, but she evaded him, cast only brief glances at his face as she led the way up a winding, narrow flight of stairs. It seemed to go on forever. Then, just as he was about to demand a stop, they reached the top of the stairs. She looked over her shoulder to smile at him, and gestured to ask him in.

"This is the most private room in all of the family mansion. If someone wants to be absolutely alone, and escape the eyes and ears of the villagers and servants, this is the place."

It was a sort of massive pavillion, built from rock and concrete, dominated by a circular room, nine meters wide; the roof appeared to form a cupola, four meters high at the center, from which hung a wooden chandelier. The pavillion's seven windows, three of them in stained glass, overlooked the mountain peaks of the island from a rock outcrop high above the mansion. The position of the building made it impossible to approach from outside.

Dohan stepped closer, trying to take in all the rich detail of the pavillion. He arched his neck and admired the painted ceiling: it depicted a blue sky with clouds, with the sun at one end, and the moon and stars at the other. The place was not gaudy with gold and costly cloth, like the quarters of his peers in the walled cities -- its beauty lay in the use of simple paint, wood and stone to create a place that brought to mind the whole world around it. Meijji sauntered past the windows, across several thick carpets, toward the massive four-poster bed at one end of the pavillion. Dohan watched her hips sway, enchanted, and failed to realize that she was deliberately exaggerating their movement.

"You look far more lovely than I could remember you while I was away."

She stopped and faced him, her eyes wide open and her lips slightly parted.

"Darc told us of your imprisonment by your father the city lord, and your daring escape. You did all that, to come back to me?"

Dohan grinned, and shook his head ruefully; no matter what he replied to that, it would sound wrong. Meijji leaned against one of the bed's wooden posters, carved and painted into the likeness of a dolphin. She regarded his powerful build, his noble, strong-willed face, and could barely stand still.

Slowly moving closer to the waiting Meijji, Dohan fixed his eyes on hers and said: "I am not the man to make speeches. But now, it all becomes clear to me. Everything that has happened this year, has driven me to you. How this will end, I do not know... I may be giving up all I have owned, my birthright, the respect of my family, my life even... to be with you. I love you more than all of that. Do you still want to spend the rest of your life with me, if I lose everything I own? It can become a very short bliss."

Meiji rushed at Dohan, and in that moment only had time to whisper a "Yes" -- before they embraced each other, and she was unable to do other than kiss him. Locked tightly together, they fell onto the bed and tumbled among the sheets.

"No one but you, my love," she gasped, pausing for a breath.

"For ever and ever," he whispered to her.

BOOK THREE

DARC AGES

BEFORE THE END OF THE YEAR 940 A.M., THE MAJOR PLAYERS IN THE BATTLE FOR THE FUTURE HAD EMERGED.

From the most decadent and inbred ranks of the Castilian aristocracy, Tharlos Pasko swiftly rose to power and wicked influence. Gifted with ambition and ruthlessness in equal measures, plus the eerie charisma of a man possessed, he was determined to steer the country onto a path of war and slaughter. Only a few brave men and women dared to oppose him at first, and the Damon clan came to be the natural leaders of this opposition. Through the events of that fateful year the Damons came to be, perhaps for all time, associated with greatness, courage -- and self-sacrifice.

But let us not forget the minor players on the stage of history, for there were many. From nowhere sprung names that would become legend, and had their mettle tested for the first time. And many were the villains great and small, who came to an ignoble end in 940 A.M.

A bloody year it was, and one to be lived to the fullest...

Excerpt from Librian's "Chronicles" (translated from the original language)

Book Three



Tharlos on the balcony

Chapter 1

Pasko City still stood well fortified and guarded, and had not once been attacked since Tharlos Pasko's failed attempt to take Damon City.

The morale of its citizenry was still fair, and its decadent elite remained in thrall to Tharlos's secret cult of Koban-Jem. Tharlos had gradually taken over the remaining authority of his weakening parents; his absolute rule was just one step from becoming official. But the young ruler, eager and anxious to stay in power, saw the need of a scapegoat for his failed campaign against the Damons. At previous times of crisis, the Paskos had used the ingrained fear of Lepers to manipulate their subjects. However, the Lepers were nowhere near Castilia. Tharlos had to resort to more readily available victims. He picked

the city's most prominent minority as his target, and prepared for a pogrom.

Little more than a month after the Summer Festival which started the war, Tharlos rallied his followers and the populace to the courtyard outside his castle. His father Migam Pasko, the official ruler, was "indisposed" and failed to show up; Tharlos merely found it convenient to have him out of the way. All was set; the public antipathy toward the city's heathens was as evident as ever -- all Tharlos had to do, was to stir it up.

Just as the sun set, he showed himself to the crowd from a balcony. Illuminated by dramatic torchlight, dressed in full battle armor and bareheaded, Tharlos' shoulder-long dye-yellow hair seemed to bring an aura of light about his gaunt, pale face. The crowd stopped murmuring when it saw him; thousands of eyes stared at him for an explanation of his recent defeat. He gave the crowd a long, grave look, and raised his heavy metal-clad arms.

"My dear beloved people --" he shouted, voice amplified through the loudspeaker in his armor, "-- it is my sad duty to announce that we have been betrayed. In the recent battle, our brave soldiers were within a hair's breadth of taking Damon City, this close to delivering us from the witchdoctor-friend, Bor Damon! But too late, we discovered that our weapons had been sabotaged -- by a traitor in our midst! A wicked follower of Kristos he was, working for Damon and the witchdoctor Darc!"

The crowd roared its resentment; Tharlos released its basest desires with great expertise.

"Upon my return to Pasko City, I have investigated the affairs of the Kristos followers. And what have I found? That the fiend Darc is also a believer in Kristos!"

The crowd gasped at this news. Tharlos' spies had reported, quite correctly, that Darc sometimes uttered the ancient name of Kristos. It was first now that Tharlos had found proper use for that knowledge. The mob was ripe; he ignited its rage.

"Yes," he shouted, "those infidels, walking among us, are allied to our worst enemies! I urge you to go forth and punish the Kristoites -- now! For the sake of our city, you must show no mercy! They would gladly expose your children to the evil that knows no name! Their destruction will herald our ultimate triumph over the Damons! This is our land, and it must be washed clean! Go forth and burn the heathens! The Goddess wills it!"

The roaring crowd grabbed lit torches from a conveniently placed set of racks, and rushed out into the dark streets. The city's three hundred Christians -- unarmed merchants and their families -- would not stand a chance against the thousand-headed monster Tharlos had unleashed.

"Bring out the wagons," he ordered his officers, "and collect all gold and valuables from the heathens' homes. Then bring it to my treasurer at once. Call it... a war tax."

The highest-ranking officer bowed to him and replied: "As you wish, Lord Pasko."

Lord Pasko. Tharlos smirked at the soldier's slip of the tongue, and gave him a slight nod before dismissing the militia. For the time being, the formal lordship of the city belonged to his father -- but this might soon change. The drunken city lord was just past fifty, but who could foresee an untimely accident? As Tharlos watched the fires spreading from the distant Christian ghetto, he pondered possible ways of eliminating his parents. The distant shouts and screams from the burning houses served as fuel for his destructive imagination.

Smoke from the fires drifted up to his castle balcony, and he whispered a prayer: "Koban-Jem, smell the offerings that I so generously offer you. Help me destroy my enemies and I swear to please you, to wreak destruction and death as you demand. Death to all --"

Suddenly and quite unexpectedly, Tharlos shivered where he stood. What error had he just made? He had felt belief in the power of human sacrifice. Before this pogrom, he had regarded the murders as a means to control his depraved followers -- not as a life-or-death matter. Tearing at his yellow-dyed hair, he cursed himself for falling for his own tricks. He looked away to the burning houses, traced the glowing smoke with his finger, up into the black sky.

Tharlos found himself staring into nothing, and a terrifying insight came to his mind: There's no godly power in that stinking smoke, apart from the earthly power over people's lives. I know that. But if so, what magic is there in that infinite dark of space? Is there anything there at all? Black Sun, why won't you show yourself to me? And the black of the night appeared to him not as an embodiment of the Black Sun, his god of destruction, but as really empty. He was worshipping nothingness, and that was far worse than believing in an evil entity. The might of Koban-Jem dwindled away; it, too, became pointless. On an impulse, Tharlos whirled around to see if anyone had spotted him shaking with fear -- but not a single guard or robot servant was in sight. Tharlos went inside, ordered his battle armor to be removed, then hastily retreated to his rooms. He felt a void grow in his soul; his body seemed to him a false thing, as if he was made of straw and might crumble at the poke of a finger.

And then it occurred to him in a flash, that Darc must be to blame. Darc, his newest, most hated enemy, was out there somewhere and already winning. Tharlos knew it, but refused to admit it even to himself. He filled the inner void with more hate. He would form a new alliance of cities to crush Darc, wipe out the Damon clan, and remain victorious. And if he could not make Darc suffer, if the man was immortal as the reports and rumors suggested, then someone would suffer. A chamber-maid, a mistress, a family member... a sacrifice. The Koban-Jem cult followers had to be catered to regularly, lest they grow uncontrollable and useless to him. His restless long fingers began to play with the cult's ritual dagger he always carried around, as he went to seek out new prey.

Meanwhile in North Castilia, the days passed in an atmosphere more anxious and stressful; the war with the Paskos had merely entered a pause.

Damon City and its neighboring city-states were being re-fortified and armed, and the citizens strained under the burden of added taxes and duties. At great cost, more mechanized armors, laser rifles, and jet aircraft were built than ever before. The armament frenzy was so intense, that the public electricity quota was rationed to new lows -- and the citizens' complaints grew louder. Lord Bor Damon, ever more isolated in his castle, returned the complaints with threats of punishment for "traitors". The people of his city began to whisper their criticism, afraid of eavesdropping soldiers. The word was passed on from mouth to mouth: Lord Damon banished Darc, the Reincarnated King. Everything went wrong since then, and the good Sir Dohan was chased away too. It is the punishment of the Goddess.

Of all the Damon family -- now isolated and increasingly scorned by gentry and commoners alike -- only Lady Osanna took the prophecies literally. Secretly, she prayed forgiveness to the Goddess and begged for the return of her only son. She was not yet past childbearing, but so much had already been invested in Dohan, that she could not bear to lose him. No man knew that better than Bor Damon himself. He buried himself in the buildup of fortifications and arms, not quite sure what he was arming up against -- the war with the Paskos, the vengeful return of his rejected son, or his own fears? Thanks to his great reserves of inner strength, he kept balancing on the edge of self-destruction. The city lord's nights were spent in solitary drinking.

The Damon family and its household held together in the absence of its most beloved son, because the shadow of the unfinished war still loomed. Dohan's fate being unclear, Andon and Bwynn found themselves receiving increasing attention; the future of the clan might be in their hands, should Bor and Osanna fail to get another son. They were not happy about the prospect; they, as much as anyone else, had grown comfortable in the trust that Dohan would take over the city after his father. Bor Damon's former allies were in disarray, bickering when they should unite... thus giving Tharlos the time he needed to lick his wounds of their recent battle.

The summer days in the Kap Verita archipelago went by, as they had been doing for thousands of years: indolent, dry, and hot. For the young lovers Dohan and Meijji, this became the happiest period of their lives. At daytime, they traveled by boat between the islands. In his beloved's company, Dohan could

forget all thoughts of war or duty; they spent entire days just playing like children, or wandering aimlessly about. He left his weapons and armor behind, and came to resemble a simple young farmworker in his straw hat and rumpled green pants.

At nighttime, Dohan initiated Meijji in the mysteries of the Goddess -- which he had learned from high-priestess Inu when he turned sixteen and first met her, alone, in her inner sanctum. Inu had taught him the ways of bringing a woman to a peak of ecstasy that allowed the spirit of the Goddess to possess her; and he had learned that the act of love was a sacrament, never to be treated casually. Meijji and her people confessed to a somewhat different, syncretistic faith -- but in Dohan's more experienced arms, Meijji readily let the Goddess possess her and put her senses on fire. They shouted each other's names until their voices grew hoarse. With Meijji's guidance, Dohan overcame his fear of the sea and learned its pleasures too. She took him diving and swimming; he discovered a whole new world of underwater life, unsurpassed in its beauty and variety. The couple basked in the glow of their own youthful energy, and during these fleeting weeks of high summer they knew only bliss.

Also in Shara's and Darc's days together on Kap Verita, there was time for love and play; but their greater age and experience added to their days and nights. After their initial, brief youthful passion, there was now less novelty and more fond remembrance in their embraces. They could not forget their past -- yet, they could live with it. The idea of marriage and family remained distant in their imagination. Darc had not cast off the haunting memory of his old, lost life -- but in Shara's company, he at least tried to suppress it. They loved and expected little else.

Eye-Leg, the newest guest in Mechao's mansion, remained emotionally shut off from most of the people around her. Mechao could, by scanning the Leper girl's brain with his instruments, prove that she was thinking just like any other human being -- only, her grasp of spoken language was severely stunted. Mechao also proved certain knowledge far ahead that of Darc: he showed the parts of Eye-Leg's brain activity that indicated strong feelings of affection.

"This activity," he claimed, "is that of woman who holds someone dear, such as a child or relative."

However, the two researchers could not decide the object of her affection. Shara thought she knew what Eye-Leg felt, but said nothing of it. Darc found it hard to resist asking Shara just why she cared so much for Eye-Leg. He never asked her, though -- Shara's concern for the Leper girl kept her closer to Darc and the laboratory, and he was happy for it. His ex-wife in his old life had rarely demonstrated a fraction of the attention to his work that Shara routinely showed.

Shara's care for the Leper girl rapidly developed into something like a crude upbringing. She tried to teach Eye-Leg reading and simple mathematics, and often read stories to her from Mechao's library. The girl took great comfort in hearing the stories. Even Darc sat down to listen to Shara in the warm summer

evenings, as she sat with Eye-Leg resting at her feet, the deformed girl clutching her long skirt. As yet, the girl could speak no words, only make faint clicking signals with her tongue.

Darc's project to understand and defeat the Plague went on throughout the hot summer -- slowly and sometimes with faltering hope, just as he had expected. He sometimes argued with Mechao on how to cure Eye-Leg without killing her in the process; many conceits were tested and duly discarded, and Shara kept a watchful eye on their treatment of the girl. Despite the difficulties new progress was made, in sudden leaps and bounds, and the hope of success never died. All of Darc's friends felt that this was a special summer, when miracles were possible and great change lay just ahead...

Book Three

Chapter 2

Of the many daily laser transmissions that zipped between the city lords of North Castilia, very few ever reached the ears of commoners -- except as half-baked rumors. And yet one message from Lord Fache went to Lord Damon and then, as if by magic, slipped through his hands into the common mouth.

Its crucial part read: "The noble Lord Fache's honored wife reported a vision, where Darc spoke to her. His words were: 'Fear not. The King can be killed, but he never dies.' Then Darc urged the good Sir Dohan Damon forth, and lo! he was dressed in the robes of a great ruler. Thus ended her vision."

The quote from the dream was, of course, the words uttered by Darc to the soldiers during the battle of Damon City. This was generally regarded as a good omen in these dark times...

"What is a 'ra-dio?'" Mechao demanded to know.

Darc's inquiry about "radio equipment" bewildered Mechao and his assistant sons. At first, they confused the concept of "radio waves" with particle counters and radiation. Darc was forced to painstakingly draw diagrams of electronic circuits, electromagnetic waves, and explain the function of radio, before Mechao began to understand. This took a whole day. Only then, Darc could convey to him his new plan to spread the news of Plague Virus A vaccine to the world. Mechao judged the plan as doomed, insane -- and brilliant. But their quest for a remedy against Virus B was not yet won...

"My wife will deal with the village council, so that you receive its permission to follow our next trade

expedition to the mainland," Mechao told him as they left the laboratory for supper. "You cannot leave the islands without their consent, in any case. In a few weeks, perhaps, we..."

The little old man stopped, when a passing servant whispered a message in his ear. Mechao chuckled, and nodded.

"Darc, someone from the village wishes to see you. Perhaps not a man of great importance, but judging by what you've told us, you will want to meet him. I should say no more. Do go to the entrance hall."

Slightly miffed at Mechao's playful secrecy, Darc went to see the visitor. The old man he found waiting there, with a small following of villagers, was a musician. It was evident from the guitar that hung from his back, and his colorful attire. Also, the man wore a pair of square, smoke-colored eyeglasses. He was dark-skinned, wrinkled with years of sun, and on every finger of his thick hands he wore rings.

"Greetings," Darc said and moved to shake hands. The man stood up from his seat, and bowed his head. His dark glasses made it hard for Darc to figure out his mood. "You asked to see me?"

Darc had half suspected the man was mute, but he talked -- and his voice was like gravel, words spoken in the rhythm of recital: "Greetings, Darc, this meeting makes me glad... Far the word travels, and I hear of a man, risen from the dead. Come from a Golden Age, when music ruled the world. And I hear, word of a song from long ago, yes I do, that my forefathers passed on to this day. Yay, this is a great day..." The musician picked up his guitar, an instrument with metal strings, and in his right hand glistened a little silver plectrum. Darc grinned. Others who kept the music of ancient times alive! And on this isolated archipelago, it was no wonder...

"My name is known across these islands, my clan builds instruments," the man went on in gravel-voiced sing-song, plucking improvised, twanging chords on his steel guitar. "When they shout 'Pop Shah is coming!' they know joy is near... I was away from here for many months, I was... then the word reached my old sorry ears the Singing King had returned... I could not believe it, so I had to come and see... and now the legend's coming true, I know, I do, yay... the divine music will be released again."

Though this po-faced old troubadour was a complete stranger, Darc still felt as if a long-lost friend had returned. Perhaps Pop Shah had that effect on everyone he met.

"Come, honorable Pop Shah... let us drink, talk and sing. We have much work to do. Tell me, do you

manufacture electrical instruments also?"

Days and weeks went by; the monsoon period approached the tropical islands of Kap Verita.

The two biochemists were now compiling a detailed plan for the treatment of Eye-Leg. Parallel to that scheme, Mechao's sons were examining the DNA samples from the Lepers -- a tedious, repetitive task, but of crucial importance. To pinpoint the exact genetic errors that caused the Plague required little genius, but plenty of time -- for there were thousands upon thousands of slots in a genetic sequence where this virus might be hiding. Mechao estimated the time needed to locate Virus B at anything between a month and a lifetime. Though rich and powerful, he owned no robots that could do this work. Once Eye-Leg could be cured from both viruses and her bodily defects, the much slower and harder process of global change might begin for Lepers and city-dwellers.

And a new music could now be heard in the evenings, Darc and Pop Shah holding open-air concerts that brought new joy to the island, and a sense of apprehension of things to come...

Book Three

Chapter 3

And so, after several weeks' preparations, Mechao could declare: "Today we begin."

Closely followed and comforted by Shara, Eye-Leg was brought to Mechao's sealed-off, sterile laboratory chamber, and minute tissue samples were taken from her body and inner organs -- including the brain. Darc marveled at the ease with which Mechao handled genetic material, but he also noticed the uneasiness in the old witchdoctor and his assistant sons and grandson. They were new to using the genetic molding and cloning equipment on human material, and felt the burden of breaking a taboo. Only Darc's repeated reassurance of the just cause convinced them to proceed.

As the humidity and heat in the island air increased with the changing seasons, Eye-Leg began to feel visibly uncomfortable -- her health deteriorating in the new environment. Mechao and Darc had agreed on a rapid, but more dangerous treatment process. They were to attempt a very crude alteration of Eye-Leg's cell samples: replacing all genes vital to the shaping of the body with undamaged genes from

another woman. Next, they were to clone these cells into a living copy of Eye-Leg, minus the head and the deformities -- and speed up its growth in the artificial womb through electrochemical stimulation, until it corresponded to a brainless, but normal fourteen-year-old body. And finally, Eye-Leg's head was to be sedated, cooled down... and transplanted onto the fresh, cloned body. Growing the clone could take several months -- or years, if the first "copy" failed to live.

Mechao's predecessors had taught him to perform successful head transplants on lower animals -- but the risk of failure remained large. His age-old laboratory, which once helped spawn the chimera-beast Pipo, was now ready to create a clone of Eye-Leg's body. Mechao claimed with confidence that he could grow a fourteen-year-old human body within a number of months -- and keep it alive by artificial means. Less confidently, he told his assistants it had to be done.

Word of these plans soon reached Dohan. Meijji was the first to notice his reaction.

"What is the matter?" she asked him; he responded with brooding silence. "Is it about that poor Leper?"

He stayed silent in her company and she waited until, at the end of the day, he could speak his mind.

"Things are going on in your father's laboratory, and I... does the Goddess, the All-Mother, approve of this tampering with nature?"

Meijji stroked Dohan's chin stubble, which now seemed pale in contrast to his tanned skin.

"Trust my father," she told him. "He, and his forefathers, have known the process of changing nature for centuries. And never during those centuries did they cause wrongdoing against nature or your Goddess. This new undertaking is meant to undo the damage done by men, and restore humans to their natural form. Isn't that proof enough, that the Goddess approves of my father's work?"

He gave her a wry smile: "What about Pipo, then? Would that man-made beast never have harmed anyone?"

She frowned and smiled at once, and scolded him angrily: "You stubborn, bullheaded..."

Dohan silenced Meijji with his lips, and her hands moved to embrace his neck. A pause followed -- then Dohan forced his face away from her flowing dreadlocks.

"Meijji, I am a warrior by nature. I go fat and lazy from standing idle here -- I must act in some way. I shall ask Darc about those plans of his, and help out where I can."

Meijji pouted a little, and looked away.

"I know, my love. You must follow your calling, but..." She felt at her lightly curved belly, and added: "Someday soon, there might come a reason for you to settle down with me."

Dohan's heart jumped in his chest; a rush of fear and exaltation went through him. He kissed her goodnight, and departed to search out Darc.

"Yes, Dohan, I still need your help," Darc told him. The white-haired time-traveler, now clad in a white coat and thin gloves, looked up from his microscope and nodded at the young warrior. "Can you get the Sunray up and flying again?" he asked.

Dohan thought of piloting the jetfighter again, and made a spontaneous leap of joy onto a table -- Darc wondered quietly how such an impetuous teenager could act so responsibly at other times.

"Yes, I can! One of Mechao's sons has analyzed the craft's jet fuel, and you what do I hear? He promised me that they could change the genes of certain small life forms, so that they produce the components of jet fuel for me! In a matter of days, they can grow a vat full of fuel! Pity, that none of them is an aircraft mechanic..."

In spite of mounting technical problems, Darc made Dohan pledge that the Sunray would soon be ready for a flight to Castilia and back. Then, in confidence, Darc revealed his complex scheme to him -- and Dohan was delighted to hear it. He felt busy and useful again, and his hopes soared. One day, he would be able to marry Meijji and yet be reconciled with his family. As long as Darc lived, nothing seemed impossible.

Shortly thereafter, Mechao's wife Amada rounded up the village council. She invited the council to her house, plus her many children and relatives as a show of strength. More than sixty villagers gathered in the mansion; Mechao and Darc were politely barred from attending. Several hours later, Darc sat with Pop Shah at a window facing the sea, trying to create a rendition of an ancient song. Then Shara knocked, and entered through the open doorway.

"Girl's asleep now, but it breaks my heart to leave her in that cold, frightening laboratory."

"What if we could come and play something for her? Have you met Eye-Leg, Pop Shah?"

Pop Shah's hands stiffened and stopped playing; he shook his head.

"Another day, maybe," Darc told Shara, as she sat down in his lap. "Any word from the village council?"

Just as he asked that, one of Mechao's youngest grandchildren rushed in, breathless. The little girl bowed her head, and delivered a note.

"It says here, the council voted approval for our trade expedition!" he said, smiling a little. "But it also says... I am to be guarded by two appointed, armed villagers. Our boat awaits us, now, at the camouflaged fishing-boat harbor."

Pop Shah stood to attention, and his gritty voice, low but clear, said in his inimitable manner: "I need to go with you, yay I do, if your electric dream is to come true, that is what I say."

"Electric what?" Shara asked suspiciously. "Darc, what are you up to this time?"

"Wait and see," he replied with a mischievous smile. "I mean, wait and listen. When I come back. Don't worry."

"I won't," she said, smiling. "Plenty for me to do here, in your grand scheme."

The sleek, sea-blue catamaran was slightly larger than those of the popular long-distance boat races Darc recalled from his own time. Its small crew consisted of women only; Darc and Pop Shah were the only male passengers aboard. The boat left the island by aid of a small electric propeller and the crew waited until they were out in open water, before setting sails. The captain put them on a rapid, southeastern course across the calm, deep blue sea.

While Darc was rubbing black dye into his white hair and eyebrows, he approached two of the crewmembers. They were sitting on deck, winding up sail tackle, humming a work song. In the light of dusk, Darc could hardly make out their dark-skinned faces. When the two women looked up at him, they both greeted him with the typical islander laugh that resembled a screech.

"Just look at him!" the short one exclaimed and gestured wildly, flashing a gold tooth as she grinned. "Black hair and green eyes! Nobody's going to be fooled by that disguise!"

Darc brightened up and said: "I know you two. You are the ones who put out the fire, when..."

The shorter woman gave her tall companion an "I-told-you-so" glance, and replied in a more serious tone: "We missed the last opportunity to visit the mainland, so we're going shopping now."

In a way, the two women were also disguised -- in rough but colorful dresses. Earrings, necklaces and other accessories were to be added later.

The taller woman said, as if excusing her chubbier friend's behavior: "I'm Lucijja, and she's Faluti. Amada assigned us to look after you on the tour. Have you seen Dakchaor?"

"No -- not even in my own time. What's it like?"

Lucijja smiled at Darc, then at Faluti, and replied: "Shouldn't he rather be asking, what is it not like? Dakchaor, the city of the silver spires! The world's biggest open harbor! There's this song -- Pop Shah! Play!"

The minstrel grinned, and started to pluck a rhythm on his strings. The women started clapping hands rhythmically, and sang a simple tune.

"Bissaw is too humid, Noakchott too dry; Banju is too crowded, Konaki too small; Monroia is a beauty, but if you can't afford; Dakchaor you can thrive in, Dakchaor has it all."

Darc did not know what to expect -- another fortified city-state, or just a miserable, overcrowded tropical village? Many things might change in nine centuries. He sat and listened as Lucijja and Faluti kept singing, until the sun sank into the ocean.

"Monroia has the dishes, Noakchott the spice; Konaki the best women, Banju the best men; Bissaw has the riches, but if you are too poor; Dakchaor has the happy, Dakchaor has them all..."

Their journey to Dakchaor took one night, one day, and one night. It proved uneventful, save for some tackle fishing on the way. Avoiding the main streaks of fishermen and traders, Darc's expedition sailed southeast, then north a few miles off the coast, then southeast again and into the port of Dakchaor.

Book Three



City of Dakchaor

Chapter 4

Darc put on his straw hat and checked his crude disguise; Lucijja and Faluti put on some cheap jewelry, necklaces, and armbands. They instructed him harshly.

"Now hear this," Lucijja said, "there are ways of doing things in the coastal cities; break the rules, and you are in danger." She showed Darc a well-worn map of the coast of Awrica, with enlargements of the main city-states. He skimmed the map, while she explained it: "This large, round wall surrounds the Old City. It's heavily defended, and the people inside never go outside for fear of the Plague.

"The outer walls, here and here, are for protecting the harbor area, which we have to cross. Those who use the harbor are fishermen, traveling merchants, minstrels, thieves -- it's a separate city, with its own police force and laws. The Old City trades a lot with the harbor, but Old City people never touch an outsider or eat raw food from the outside -- all exchanges of money and goods are made with their robots acting as agents. Everything that passes into the Old City is sterilized, boiled and irradiated. We know this, because each year people die trying to smuggle themselves inside.

"The harbor people are checked daily -- by their own militia, by each other, by the robot servants of the Old City. But the law stays the same, inside and outside -- to associate with witchdoctors and Lepers means death by burning!"

Darc understood that this social system was more flexible, less crude than that which isolated the inland city-states up north. But the intent remained the same -- keep out the Plague.

He asked the women of the crew: "What do they really know about your Kap Verita, these mainland people?"

Lucijja answered him with a long, sad tale.

"This came to pass many years ago, when the Mechao's grandfather was still alive. A stern man, loved and feared by all. A fisherman lost his way in a storm, and drifted all the way from Dakchaor to our islands. Our lookouts saw him coming and we all went into hiding, but... there was this one girl, who couldn't resist having a closer look at the visitor. And they fell in love. She helped him escape, and they both sailed back to the mainland.

"In some way, the mainland people got the girl to talk. She revealed all about Mechao's family and their genetic engineering. Very bad. But Mechao had her tracked down, and arranged to have them both poisoned -- the sailor and the girl. He made it seem as if they had gotten some kind of disease on Kap Verita; they developed horrible boils all over their skin. So the harbor people, fearing a plague outbreak, burned the couple alive, destroyed everything they had touched, and banished the sailor's family to the Wastelands.

"So today, people on the mainland coast believe there is plague on our islands -- that, plus the legends of monsters and wicked witchdoctors. We are pariahs, but we are left alone. Now do you see why we are so cautious?"

Darc nodded agreement, and promised to follow their instructions. The catamaran would arrive at the port, be checked and cleared by the customs militia; they would buy the necessary goods, then leave at once. Should one of the crew fail to show up at the boat before sundown, she would be abandoned in the harbor at her own risk.

The crew hauled down the sails. The boat's electric motor carried them into the inspection area, where all incoming traffic was checked before being allowed into the main harbor area. It was early morning, and Darc was still sleepy -- when a sobering thought hit him. Mechao's predecessors had used their knowledge to assassinate those who threatened the existence of their people. It had not occurred to Darc before, that this might happen to himself. Witchdoctors were likely to inspire fear and respect -- even among their own. Mechao seemed so mild-mannered, so friendly... was his trust in Darc and his friends as seamless as it appeared? Darc made a last check of the color of his hair -- now coal black and stripy -- and looked ahead of the boat stern. An inspection pram, full of armed black guardsmen, was approaching the catamaran. Their signal-red uniforms were light and with much less metal armor than Castilian soldiers.

"Just act dumb, and say nothing," Faluti whispered to him.

Among the men who boarded the catamaran, came an elderly gnarled fellow in a white robe and hat. While the guard searched through the cargo, the doctor had the crew lined up on the deck for a quick examination. Parts of the procedure were familiar to Darc... but he had to suppress a laugh when he heard the little man repeat certain phrases to each crewmember.

"Stick out your tongue. More. -- Say 'Aaah!'."

The doctor also moved an advanced-looking scanning device over the crew's bodies, not unlike the doctors of Damon City. Such technology was beyond Darc's understanding, but probably this examiner hadn't the faintest idea how his equipment worked either -- for he found nothing to report. Finally the turn came to Darc, who stood last in line on deck. Darc struggled not to appear nervous, looked the short man straight in the eye -- and the old physician raised an eyebrow suspiciously.

"I see your eyes are green," he stated sharply, in the manner of a man used to giving orders. "Where are you from?"

Darc could only respond with a sheepish smile -- his foreign accent would have given him away the moment he spoke.

Lucijja, standing next to Darc, came to his rescue: "He's quite dumb, sir, but there's nothing wrong with him otherwise."

The doctor stepped back and eyed them both: "So? Why is he the only one with green eyes on board?"

It was Faluti who interrupted now, feigning innocent knowingness.

"But sir! Surely you know there are more people with green eyes, or blue eyes, in the harbors down south! Haven't you heard the stories?"

The doctor was unimpressed; he gave the sergeant of the guards a warning glance.

"What stories?"

Faluti rolled up her eyes -- the short, chubby islander was quite an actress -- and leaned forward, lowering her voice: "They say many of the people in the closed cities are decadent and inbred -- everyone being each other's uncle or cousin, you know. And sometimes... some of their kids sneak into the harbor for an adventure. Nine months later, a harbor woman might give birth to a green-eyed baby, who turns out to be an idiot -- you know what I mean?"

The doctor looked about himself, embarrassed -- this lowly customs officer was no better informed than she was. He gave Darc a silent nod, and told the sergeant that the crew was clear. Once the customs boat had departed, Darc shook hands with his two rescuers.

"Faluti, Lucijja -- I swear to repay you for this! But why did he walk away when you told him that silly story?"

Faluti flashed her gold tooth and made a shrug of modesty.

"Well, what if the Old City people would go looking for their lost sons one day? That measly quack can't risk messing with them, or any relatives they might have!"

The crew laughed long and heartily at Faluti's scam -- it would make a popular yarn once they returned home.

The port of Dakchaor lay a few kilometers south of a large volcanic cape, which pointed westward in the direction of the Kap Verita islands. The heat in the sun-drenched bay dazed Darc; he took refuge under the canvas roof which the crew put up over the deck. Darc drank of their water supply, wondering if Mechao shouldn't have vaccinated him against cholera or dysentery before he set his foot in a filthy, overcrowded harbor.

"Rise and shine, paleface!" Faluti told him. "We have a lot of buying and selling to do, and little time."

"I just remembered," he told her with a grin, "how much I hated it when my family forced me along on shopping tours."

At last the catamaran crew cast anchor, and put their feet on one of the many stone-and-concrete piers. Some of the passengers were quite pale with seasickness. Around them, the harbor was already crowding with incoming fishermen, merchants, and travelers. Hundreds of jostling men and women from the ports of Noakchott, Banju, Bissaw, Konaki, and Monroia were there, screaming and scrambling to sell, buy, and get home. Darc thought it an enchanting sight. Compared to the somber isolation of Castilia this was a paradise of life and openness, albeit within very strict limits. Around the teeming bay and harbor stretched two very high, sloping fortress walls down into the sea and seemed to continue into the

depths of the ocean. And in the distance, the behemoth hill of the Old City loomed over the harbor like a visitor from space. Spires and towers glittered above its sloping walls -- a fantasy palace, just out of reach. The walls of the Old City were dotted with narrow slits, from where rows of gun turrets guaranteed law and order. Strangely enough, nobody in the harbor seemed to mind about being threatened with cannons. All political power emanates from the barrel of a gun, thought Darc. Now who said that again?

Just past noon, the expedition party gathered for food and rest under the tent roof of their boat. There was literally no space to sit anywhere else in the harbor.

"I couldn't find the components on my list," Darc complained. "I must have them, or the radio signals cannot reach across the world! Then it's hopeless -- my message can't be spread by paper only, it would take forever."

Lucijja spread her arms helplessly.

"Perhaps we could try another harbor later," she suggested. "Or..." "Or what?" Faluti prodded.

"No, forget it. Too dangerous."

Darc grinned at Lucijja, and said: "Now, don't tell me that you were going to say: 'Let Darc ask the robots from the Old City if they have what he's looking for.' I'm not that crazy!"

They ate in silence, and time seemed to slow down from the sheer air pressure. The monsoon was imminent, which might make any extra sailing trips impossible for a long period. Darc thought on it, slowly. The heat hammered on his brain until he wanted to dive screaming into the sea. And he gave in.

"Okay!" he said. "I'll give it a try."

"I'll go with you," Lucijja said quickly.

I must be mad, Darc thought, as he walked up to the exchange plaza at the edge of the Old City. The plaza was a wide amphitheater lined with remote-controlled laser turrets on steel columns, and a central area where the robot servants of the Old City traded with outsiders. On the wall above the great portals of the Old City hung a gigantic electronic sign-table, made up of hundreds of lamps. The sign-table was flashing an unending stream of messages:

...TODAY WE SELL BATTERIES AT REDUCED PRICES... 1 LIGHT STRIP FOR 30 UNITS SEAFOOD... NO LEPER ACTIVITY IN THE PROVINCE... THE GODDESS WATCHES OVER AND LOVES YOU... THIRTY MINUTES PAST THIRTEEN... PREPARE FOR THE RAIN PERIOD... FEVER PILL PRICES UP 1/10...

Human hands passed on sacks of grain and vegetables, baskets of fish, bars of metal, and left them to be weighed on wide scales, operated by vaguely humanoid metal robots. The goods were examined -- no barter accepted -- and metal hands paid the humans with electronic trinkets, machine components, and bottled chemicals. The robots loaded their purchases onto electric carriages, which rolled in through slots in the big portals and disappeared into the Old City. Everyone involved worked swiftly and deftly, repeating a centuries-old ritual.

Darc watched the busy procedure from a corner, and tried to get a closer look at the electronic goods that the Old City produced and sold at high prices. Could he pay with the supplies they had on the boat -- some fish and Mechao's own medicines, or would they have to buy a larger offer of goods in the harbor? The robots seemed to ignore any shipments smaller than half a ton. While making up his mind, some commotion occurred; Darc and Lucijja looked to one end of the plaza, where a shouting man was causing tension in the crowd.

It was a desperate lone merchant, resembling a black-skinned Bedouin, who tried pleading to the machines: "This is all I have, you must take it! Please! My family needs that medicine!"

An expressionless robot, wearing some kind of official insignia on its forehead, answered blankly: "Your offer is below the trading limit. You have fifteen seconds to leave the exchange."

The man seemed too needy to listen, too despairing to notice the other customers scattering away from him -- and suddenly, without warning, several laser pulses from above struck him down. His charred corpse was dead before it hit the sand. People screamed -- Lucijja muttered a curse under her breath. Then someone dragged away the smoldering corpse, and the commerce resumed as if nothing had happened. Darc could not believe the cruelty he had just witnessed; he covered his mouth to avoid puking or shouting.

"Jesus Christ! Does this happen every day?" he asked his guide.

"No," Lucijja replied bitterly, "but sometimes there are riots, when the crops are sparse and the Old City refuses to pay more. And they always end that way."

She spat on the sand, and urged Darc closer. They had to stand in line for quite a while, until a robot official could deal with them. The robots wore wide, shiny hats covered with gleaming tinfoil – as if the heat bothered their electronic brains.

"Selling or buying?" the robot asked.

"Buying," Lucijja said quickly.

"State the items you wish to buy. You have fifteen seconds."

With a confirming glance at Darc, she stated loudly and clearly: "Large electronic components. They are described in detail on this list."

She held out a bundle of sheets with a trembling hand. The robot official took the list, scanned it, and showed signs of confusion.

"Wait... wait... wait here, until I have consulted my superiors."

The machine rolled away into the shadows, and what felt like bucketloads of sweat ran down Darc's neck.

"What if we run?" he whispered to Lucijja, who stood stiffly looking forward.

Without moving an inch, she hissed back: "Keep still, or we both die. If we act harmless, nothing will happen. The law protects us here, unless we are violent or threatening."

Darc stood as still as he could, given the heat and the jitters in his legs, and cursed himself. His own brazen curiosity had got him into trouble again -- what was it his old biology teacher used to say? "One'o these days, Archibald, your nosiness is going to make you one head shorter!"

Unseen to outsiders, eyes and ears constantly surveyed the harbor from inside the Old City. A minority of them were human. And they noticed the peculiarities of Darc: his appearance, his accent, his behavior -- and his speech. Darc was cursing in a dead language. The robots of the Old City were given new orders.

After twenty agonizing minutes of waiting, during which the others standing in line scattered, the robot official appeared again. It was not carrying the list any longer.

Still as formal as before, the robot pointed a steel finger at Darc: "You are hereby invited into the Old City, where the city lord wishes to discuss your proposed business arrangement. If you accept, follow me. If you refuse the invitation, you and your company must leave Dakchaor before sundown. You have fifteen seconds to reply."

Darc stared at the emotionless machine, then at Lucijja.

Without thinking, he cut off the objection she was about to make: "Just go back to the harbor and wait for me. If I'm not back before nightfall, leave me here. Tell them that he knows what to do."

He winked at her, and patted her shoulder. Lucijja blinked incredulously at him for a moment, then turned on the spot and walked off. When she was safely outside the plaza, she started to run toward the harbor. Darc followed the robot official inside. Once again, he found that his home planet had become an alien world.

Book Three

Chapter 5

A series of thick steel doors rolled shut behind Darc as he entered a large airlock. He walked into what seemed the anteroom of Old Dakchaor: a clean, cool, undecorated machine hall populated by noisy automatons. Dozens of machines -- most of them moving on rails -- were loading, irradiating and processing the incoming goods. Two larger robots seized Darc's arms; panic hit him like a punch in the gut.

"Let go of me!" he protested. "I demand to see your superiors!"

The two sturdy work robots resolutely dragged him toward a wide vat of boiling liquid... and past it. Darc saw where they were heading: into a corridor resembling -- a 20th-century car wash.

The robot official explained: "Please take off your clothes and leave any fragile objects here. Then stand on the conveyor belt, keep your eyes and mouth closed, and let the conveyor belt take you through the tunnel. You will be disinfected and scanned there, before you may meet the city lord."

Arguing was pointless. On shaky legs, Darc undressed and entered the tunnel. He shut his eyes hard, and played the Popeye tune in his head. He felt acrid fluids spraying him, and numerous warm, soft brushes scrub him; he heard the clicking and humming of scanning machines; he felt the uncomfortable radiation of heat-lamps; and finally, minutes later, cold air streamed against his dry, shivering body. Darc opened one eye, and saw that the conveyor belt had stopped at the other end of the tunnel. A robot servant clanked up to him -- a sleek, polished model, decorated with intricate patterns -- and offered him a set of fresh new clothes. He put them on. Sandals, baggy white pants, a long white shirt, and a white fez -- all a perfect fit. Darc found a tall mirror, and cursed. The black dye had been washed off, and his hair and eyebrows matched his dress perfectly in whiteness.

"When in Rome..." Darc said to his mirror image, and let the servant guide him to another entrance.

What Darc found beyond the next airlock seemed disturbingly unreal. He recalled the palace described in Coleridge's poem *Kublai Khan*: an architectural fever dream, devoid of dirt -- or any inhabitants to justify its existence. From here, inside the Old City, the surrounding great wall oppressed the senses; it

was at least twice as high as the wall surrounding Bor Damon's city-state. Though the sunlight reached across, the wall was far too high to show anything of the spectacular view of the bay outside.

What Darc could discern of the Old City made a disappointing impression. The gleaming spires were there all right, towering up into the blue sky -- but now he saw clearly that they shot straight up from the ground. Darc realized, at last: these were not castle spires or minarets -- but airshafts and smokestacks. The city's ground floor consisted of a circular gravel plaza, roughly the size of a soccer field -- completely lifeless.

This was the roof of a bunker, not a town.

There had to be an underground level, where the city-dwellers were hiding... then why did they make themselves the trouble to invite him? The answer came within a short while. At the foot of a nearby metal tower, a hatch opened. In the glass-covered opening a pale human shape appeared, waving him closer. Darc paced up to the window and gazed through it. The figure behind the window was reclining in an armchair construction, a meter or so above Darc's head.

Darc beheld -- the living dead. The figure was deathly pale, its skin so thin that blue veins and capillaries showed; it resembled an overgrown fetus. The yellow hair on its head grew extremely long, but it ran stripy and lackluster, draping the bony shoulders of the figure like a shroud. The human creature squinted at the daylight and shielded its eyes, though that did not help much -- the pupils of its eyes showed through the paper-thin eyelids. It attempted a smile -- and showed its perfect white teeth in a horrid death-grin, the likes of a dried-up mummy.

Zombie! was the only word Darc's horrified mind could think of. He tried to speak, but words failed him. If this was a remnant of the past world he thought gone and forgotten, then he had seen enough. In his imagination, he could picture thousands of similar mole-men below his feet, still waiting for the right time to rise and reclaim the planet -- an alien species, armed with the weapons of past wars. Darc turned and ran to the exit, too frightened to be embarrassed by his own primitive reaction. He could not hear the figure's faint pleas, nor see its despair.

The city lord of Dakchaor gave up and let the visitor escape. The mysterious white-haired stranger had awakened a great deal of excitement and hope; Darc might have been holding the vital news that would release the city lord. But he doubted it. It had always been too late for his kind: the ones who had stayed underground for much too long.

All the city lord could do was to offer a small gesture of support. In a century or two, he thought, only

this glorious city will remain -- still maintained and cleaned by the machines -- and its last citizen will finally disappear.

Two robots literally pushed Darc out of the Old City and out past the exchange plaza, before the astonished eyes of merchants and beggars. He was so dazed by his experience, he hardly saw the crates being dumped at his feet, or heard the robot official's terse farewell.

"Leave Dakchaor before sunset. Goodbye."

Darc noticed the strange looks he was receiving from the crowd -- and his gaze fell on the crates that reached up to his chin. It could be -- it had to be --

"Yes!" he laughed out loud.

He began looking for someone to help him carry the heavy load back to the boat. Before he could reach out and ask, a band of roving thieves came to his aid. They surrounded him in a second, flashing their sticks and knives.

"What's in there, paleface?" a filthy, large man asked anxiously. "You'll share it with us, huh?"

Darc's eyes darted around but found no help in sight; he had left his weapons in the Old City. With several knives pointed at him, he began to bend open the smallest crate -- and stopped.

"I am a messenger from the Old City," he told the largest bandit in a dark tone. "If you so much as touch me, those lasers will burn you to ashes where you stand!" Darc pointed up at the wall of the Old City to emphasize his threat. The bluff worked instantly -- several bandits turned and fled like scared rats. Only two wide-eyed thieves hesitated long enough to hear him out. "Do you know the secret of the Old City? I was inside and talked to the city lord! Do you know what he gave me?" The thieves trembled where they stood. "I'll show you," he said ominously and stepped back to open the tallest crate.

That was enough for the two thugs -- they disappeared behind a corner, before the militia could spot them. Curious onlookers began to move in on Darc and his crates -- then, just in time, Lucijja and Faluti found him and pushed their way through the crowd to him. They were accompanied by several other,

armed crew-women.

"What happened?" Faluti asked, staring at his white clothes.

"Not here, not now," he replied. "Quick! Get a transport, and take this load to the boat."

They rented a passing horse-cart, then changed to a wagon with electric power, and reached the harbor in less than thirty minutes. A growing stream of people was now following their party, and the militia was alerted to the recent events -- loading the crates into the catamaran seemed to take forever, though the harbor personnel was paid off to work at double speed. Darc easily persuaded the captain to sail out immediately. Rifles ready, the crew cast off and moved out to sea. It was already late afternoon, and scores of boats were heading home to their ports of call. As the harbor area emptied out, only a desolate few clusters of clay-and-brick houses stood out in the open space. Where thousands of tents had been erected only hours before, the wind played with abandoned heaps of debris.

Had the experience in the Old City been real or imagined? Darc asked himself. The crates were real enough. And the items, when examined, fitted the specifications quite well. His radio transmitter could be completed after all; he allowed himself to relax. During the trip back home, the women aboard wanted to know Darc what he had seen in the forbidden city.

All he could answer, each time he was asked, was: "Zombie."

Soon, the crew ceased asking. They understood enough.

Book Three

Chapter 6

The monsoon rains began. On the day of the trade expedition's return, after a several days longer

journey with bad winds and feigned courses to confuse potential followers, thunder and lightning shook the air around the islands.

Curtains of water fell on the sea and the Kap Verita archipelago, and whipped all naked ground into a foam. The islanders opened their water cisterns, and put out all available buckets and cups to gather precious freshwater. Hundreds of farmers went to work in the downpour to repair the walls that surrounded their terraced fields, thus saving fertile topsoil from being washed downhill. Still it was a time for rejoicing, for thanks to the rain the peasants could plant the coming harvest; they sang as they worked the fields.

Between rainfalls, the fertilized landscape bloomed an intense green. Dohan and Meijji were forced to spend the days indoor, and found new pastimes. Together with her younger siblings, Meijji played cards and board games with Dohan for hours on end — and she won most of the time. Dohan, in turn, tried to learn Meijji and her siblings the basics of self-defense and combat -- just in case, and to get the chance to impress Meijji. Not only she was impressed; her sisters were as well. Dohan failed to notice this; he only had eyes for one girl.

Darc forced himself into the ancient basics of electronics. Luckily, Mechao's huge library turned out to include a few old volumes on the subject. The mathematics were the worst part of it -- in his former life, numbers had been David Archibald's secret Achille's heel. However, one of Meijji's elder brothers was a mathematical genius, and proved immensely helpful.

Two weeks after the journey to Dakchaor, Darc had completed a blueprint for a powerful radio transmitter -- plus a simple, illustrated step-by-step description of how to build and operate one's own radio receiver. All written in Castilian, Shara helped him out with the language, correcting his gravest misspellings and grammatical errors. Finally, Darc handed the finished manual to Amada. If she could be convinced his scheme might work, the islanders would give him much-needed support.

"Could anyone build this little machine?" she asked with friendly skepticism.

"Anyone who's eager to learn, can," Darc assured her. "The components can be tailored after what means you have. Now I need to get printed as many copies of the description as possible."

"You have my support..."

"Thank --"

"On one condition," she added. "You will influence your young friend to marry into our family. And we expect a dowry of some kind."

"That, my good lady, is the least difficult thing you could ask me to do."

The next part of Darc's scheme demanded the electronic components gathered in Dakchaor, plus some heavy electrical equipment from Mechao's workshop. Mechao's sons and grandsons helped Darc weld, bolt, and screw the mighty transmitter together. Its biggest part -- the antenna -- was simply made by connecting the wire of the cableway to the transmitter output. Another few weeks of hard work and testing resulted in the world's largest, and to Darc's knowledge only remaining, radio station.

Darc stood admiring his makeshift soundstage in Mechao's workshop, when Shara came in to see the result. She was impressed, though it mostly resembled a mess of cables and racks of components.

"Have you done anything like this before in your life? I think there must be a law against it in Castilia," she said.

"Mechao is the law here," Darc replied, dropping back into the central chair. He folded his hands behind his head, and gazed up at the arched stone ceiling. "You know," he mused, "in my time there were radio transmissions day and night, all over the world... even from other planets..."

His voice drifted off, as he was caught in a mesh of old images. So much time wasted, he thought. Shara rocked his shoulder; he started.

"You were saying?" she asked.

"Nothing," he muttered.

Darc rose from his chair and hugged Shara, squeezing her soft bosom against his chest, and took in the

scent of her black hair. Was he about to help the world, or send a curse upon it? And the dangers -- she of all deserved to know. He gave her a look of pleading concern.

"Shara, when I start using this machine, people will be able to locate where the radio signals are coming from. I mean -- we are going to be discovered, eventually. Hiding away from the world like this -- it can't last. You understand what it means, don't you?"

"Yes, Darc," she said solemnly. "More fighting. More death. More speeches. More politics." But then she smiled at him. "You're a hero, don't you know? You're destined for great deeds."

He frowned at her, the way one does at a child who has said something dumb.

"I'm just trying to stay alive, is all. If that's heroic, then you are the greater hero. You've had a hard life, and I don't see you whining. You lived among Lepers, and I see you looking after Eye-Leg like she was your own daughter. Or Dohan -- there's a hero."

Shara blushed at his compliment -- a woman who one might think never blushed. She leaned closer to him; Darc felt his concerns melt away. Of all the women he had loved -- and, sometimes, learned to hate -- Shara was the best one. Knowing him by now, she loved him for who he was.

The very same evening, Dohan and some islanders loaded the cabin of the Sunray with fresh bundles of paper slips. As soon as the rains ceased, Dohan could set off to start a crusade. Several cities on the ship's map were targeted -- one of them his own.

Book Three

Chapter 7

Awonso looked up at the clouded sky. It had finally stopped pouring, and the city's great underground reservoirs were full. The first morning chill of autumn could already be felt. Madrivalo's brief summer retreated before the advancing cold winds of the glaciers in the far north.

The young scholar-to-be sniffled as he splashed through puddles in the street, on his way to the castle -- slightly stooping from ten years spent in a sitting position. Awonso had overslept again, and his master Librian was going to scold him -- again. He considered the excuse that a passing cart had splashed him with dirt, so that he had had to return home for a change of clothes. Or perhaps he ought to ask for his twelve-hour workdays to be shortened, so that he could get more sleep. Awonso crossed a crowded marketplace, and a shout interrupted his thoughts.

"Look! Up in the sky! A ship!"

He stopped in his tracks and joined the other gazing citizens. A jet aircraft was speeding by, at an altitude just out of reach of the city defenses. It looked like a tiny speck drawing a line of smoke. Awonso quickly lost interest, remembered that he was late for work, and hurried onward. He heard more shouts.

"It's coming down! It's an attack!"

"Take cover!"

Awonso ducked down under the edge of a roof, and stared in horror at the ship that screeched down from the clouds. Its shape became visible, and he recognized the Sunray. His first reaction was enthusiastic -- Lord Damon's son was alive! Only he could fly so recklessly. The other onlookers recognized it too, with mixed reactions. The Sunray swept down to just a few hundred meters above Damon City, and dropped a swarm of fluttering paper slips in its wake. They came floating down into the streets.

A passing doctor screamed: "Don't touch them! They might be infected!"

Most people fled indoors when they heard this. Awonso was one of the few who hesitated, despite his fear of the Plague. He saw a paper land in a puddle across the pavement. Without touching the leaflet, he could discern that it held a message and a construction diagram. Awonso swallowed hard, and stepped

closer. His pounding heart nearly skipped a beat when he read the signatures printed at the bottom of the page:

Darc. Doohan Daamon. Kusta 27, 940 AM

Awonso snatched the flyer and tucked it inside his cloak, aware that he might have done something forbidden. Yet he felt certain there was no risk involved in touching the paper; the signatures convinced him of that.

In the castle library, a little later, Awonso told Librian about the morning's event -- though he kept quiet about his own copy. The old librarian was both exhilarated and deeply worried, but showed little of it. An atmosphere of fear still hung over the city, and he had learned to be careful. Librian quickly dismissed the absurd rumor that the flyers were infected. Shortly thereafter, Bor Damon came down to the library and showed them a few of the leaflets. The city lord was red-eyed -- it was evident that he had been weeping.

"Look at this filth," Bor growled as he slammed the flyers onto a table. "That fiend has falsified my son's signature to give credence to his own devious designs!"

Awonso glanced at the flyers on the table; he now took his first chance to read the message through. If it was indeed part of a "devious design" as Lord Damon claimed, Awonso could not grasp the meaning of the design. One particular word eluded him... "What is 'ra-dio', master Librian?"

Librian looked about himself, groping for a half-buried memory; there were so many fragments of past time stored in the bookshelves, that even he had difficulty sorting out fact from fiction.

Then he brightened up: "Ah! Radio is an ancient invention, used to convey and receive airborne electromagnetic signals. According to Al-Masur, radio went out of fashion during the Great Wars. Radio still remains outlawed today... because such signals can be overheard by our enemies outside... is there not a simple radio device in your necklace there, my lord?"

Bor frowned and looked down at the jeweled electronic bracelet that hung around the base of his neck. It was true that he sometimes used to call on his robots through the short-distance transmitter, but he had always taken it for granted -- he had never asked himself how it worked, or if it might be used otherwise.

"What of it?" he said defensively. "Do you mean that I could receive Darc's radio messages with this...?"

"No, no, my lord. But since the bracelet was assembled in our city, there are people here who know how to build more of these devices."

"You mean...?"

"Yes, my lord. The guilds of the mechanics. It's all in their old books."

"I'll have none of it! I'll confiscate all their literature, I will post guards in their workshops, sentence to death all who use radio --"

Bor's scowling face turned red; he realized that he had just threatened himself. His big fist crashed into the table, so that pens and volumes rattled. He dismissed Awonso from the library, and turned to Librian. Bor's despair was beginning to seep through his face; the lines in it seemed deeper; the mustache he had grown was drooping from his upper lip.

"Help me, Librian," he croaked. "You are my oldest friend and advisor, no man knows more than you. What am I to do? What is Darc up to? Is my son safe?"

Librian took off his glasses and polished them -- less because they were dirty, than because he could not bear to meet Bor's eyes.

"My lord, before you rush ahead and use force, please bear with me for a minute. It is evident that Darc has something important on his mind. So important, that he is taking great risks to communicate with our people. It could be part of an attempt to start an uprising. But I have known him long enough to be certain, that Darc is not interested in wars, or conquest, or power. He is... a philosopher, a dreamer. He only fights when his own survival is at stake. He can be ambitious, but he is not a threat... in terms of war."

Bor shook his head in denial; the target of his fear focused before his inner eye.

"Are you defending him, Librian? Darc is a threat, in terms of politics! Whenever he opens his mouth, people listen. He makes them think strange, dangerous things. All about him reeks contempt of our society, our culture. Flippantly, he mocks our beliefs. He took the old hymns out of the church and sang them in a dead tongue. He deceives our young, he ignores the proper code of conduct between nobility and commoners, he..."

Librian sat down; to deal with his aggravated lord could be a tiresome task.

He asked, in the most neutral voice he could muster: "What about your son, my lord? Before I try guessing Dohan's intentions... what would you think his intentions are?" Bor looked away, unable to answer. This was hard for both of them, but inevitable. Librian grew bolder, and slowly put the words in Bor's mouth: "Is he hiding from your wrath? Is he sad? Bitter? Vindictive? Is he planning a peaceful return... or is he in trouble? Could he be... ill?"

"Silence!" the city lord bellowed.

The walls of books swallowed the echo, making Bor's cry sound muffled and pathetic. He was tempted to lock himself up, get drunk, let the world run its course. The city lord felt old, much too old; things were happening too fast, and he was losing control. And deep down, Bor knew why he felt miserable: it was his decision that had let loose this new force of change. His son might be catching the Plague now, and it would all be his father's fault. Bor stood silent, his brooding like a wall between himself and the world.

After a time, Librian dared to resume: "Our only way to ensure your son's safety, to know Darc's plans... is to listen. We must build our own radio receiver, and hear him out. Perhaps we can even track them down that way." Bor nodded, waiting for Librian to continue; he could think no more. "There is, then, the question of your subjects. They are still loyal, but their patience is wearing thin of late. You know as well as I do, my lord, that many of them believe Darc to be the reincarnated King. As does their high-priestess. Thus, whatever Darc says to them, they will take to their hearts. But if you outlaw radio, they could turn against you. You, my lord, must decide."

The city lord sat down, eyed the leaflets, and said nothing. He looked for some wine, but found only water for his dry throat.

"This pamphlet," he prodded, "speaks of radio waves. Waves, they mean, that can spread across

water?"

Librian shook his head at his master's ignorance.

"Waves through water, through air, even through walls. Unlike lightbeams, radio waves are almost impossible to keep in one place, my lord."

After another long silence, Bor said in a low voice: "Very well, then. You will oversee the construction of that radio receiver -- but only I get to listen. The city guard must be reinforced around the district of the mechanics. If I command so, the guard will crack down on the mechanics and wrest all electronic equipment from them. Is there anything else that might have escaped my attention?" Librian wetted his dry lips. His loyalties were divided, and he still feared that his master might see it. So he had to offer Bor a token of loyalty.

"This library, my lord... it holds one of the biggest collections of writings and pictures from the Golden Age. Unsurpassed by any other city. But there are countless references to radio and radio wave transmissions in these volumes. When the court of nobles read those writings in the old days, they did not think of radio as something important or useful, more like a literary device, a figure of speech... but now those references will carry a new and powerful meaning. They could become inspiring. Especially if they are translated into today's language."

Bor nodded, and rose to his feet with new resolve. Like his son, he was a man of action.

"I see. We close the library today. No one, not even my own family or your assistant, will get access without my presence. Anyone who asks suspicious questions will be reported to me. Is that clear?"

It slightly surprised Librian that Bor had asked that last question -- as if he had begun to doubt his own authority. Indeed, these were turbulent times.

He made a courteous little bow, and answered: "Very well, my lord. And if I may suggest so..."

"Yes?"

"People will talk, and so will your peers. If you met the other lords of the province, made things clear, strengthened the alliance with the other families..."

"The alliance?"

It dawned on Bor that the alliance of the five cities was no more. He had denied it, until now. He had to call for reconciliation, a great gathering, but... somehow he was sapped of the strength to make a real decision. Bor walked off to find something to drink. Librian sat down and took off his glasses, rubbing his eyes. As he sat silent, he mourned for his lord's lost son -- like so many in the city also did.

Awonso overheard some of Lord Damon's reactions to the leaflet. It was rare, seeing the city lord in such a shaken state. To be sure, the city was still under the threat of war from the Paskos -- but could "radio" really be that dangerous? If the Lepers could use it against them, yes... and still...

On his way back home, Awonso was struck by an amazing insight, so astonishing that it must have escaped his mind for the whole morning: They were out there. Sir Darc had been banished to the Wastelands, Sir Dohan had escaped from house arrest, probably to save Darc; and they still lived. They could be Lepers now! They'd be better off dead. Filled with gloom, Awonso returned to his family house and went through a portal into the small square courtyard. He could see his father through a window, talking to a fellow guild-member. Awonso's mother was digging in the garden plot, and looked up to give him a stern look as he passed by.

"Did you forget something? You will lose your apprenticeship if you carry on this way --"

"No, mother. I was sent away by Lord Damon."

The middle-aged woman raised a hand to slap him; he quickly corrected himself, ducking inside the narrow hall.

"I didn't do anything! There were some important talks going on in the library, I wasn't allowed to stay and hear."

Awonso's father and his colleague came up to him; they were clearly concerned.

"What did you say, son? Who was it you heard? Wait -- don't answer yet..."

Before Awonso could reply, the two craftsmen had shoved him into his father's workshop. They took him past workbenches, locked bookcases and cabinets filled with parts, into the sealed assembly chamber. The cramped room was brightly lit, windowless and soundproof. Awonso's father relaxed somewhat, and took him by the shoulders.

"Son: what did you hear?"

Awonso stuttered: "Just Librian and Lord Damon... discussing... things. My oath of silence --"

"Never mind the oath. Haven't you heard what happened this morning?"

"Yes, father... the lord's lost aircraft -- I saw it --"

"And it dropped those leaflets," the other man said. "Goddess help us, Lord Damon is going to stamp down on our guild now! This is all the excuse he needed!"

Awonso's father and his colleague, both middle-aged bespectacled men, were front men of the Guild of Micromechanics. Being sole providers of crystallized circuits for robots, electronic jewelry, and lasers, they could threaten the supremacy of the ruling warrior class, the nobility. Yet, all nobles generally treated craftsmen with indifference, if not disdain. Sir Dohan was one rare exception... and Darc was another. This had been proved during the much talked-about Summer Joust -- which, added to other events, had convinced the craftsmen classes that Darc could become a powerful ally.

When Awonso saw how worried his father was, he could not keep quiet. He told them what little he had heard, which only served to confirm their worst fears. The two craftsmen immediately decided to gather their guild for a secret session. They promptly sneaked away from Awonso's house in order to get ahead of any possible spies -- and left Awonso alone in the assembly chamber. He knew the place well. Awonso sat down and read Darc's leaflet again. As he read, he began to wonder where those lost

heroes might be, and if this miraculous return might prove that Darc was the Incarnation. If he was the reincarnated Singing King nothing could kill him, not even the Plague. There was only one way to find out.

He sneaked out into the workshop, and found the keys where his father used to hide them. Awonso began searching for the parts described in Darc's pamphlet. He had little time to build a receiver -- according to the leaflet, the first transmission was scheduled to begin next month...

Book Three



The war of words begin

Chapter 8

That same morning, the Sunray bombed Fache City, Pasko City, and several other city-states in the province with thousands of leaflets, then escaped south.

Only Tharlos Pasko and Lord Ue Yota ordered the intruder to be shot down -- to no avail. Since the ship wore the familiar Damon insignia, the other city lords sent laser messages to Lord Damon asking if he was responsible for the aggression. He claimed absolute innocence. And when the city lords read the leaflets, they believed him; Bor Damon could not possibly wish to disgrace his family name this way. Some, such as the sons of Lord Bes Orbes, expressed sympathy with the Damons for their plight -- though no noble expected to ever see Dohan Damon again. Being out of the city-states and out of his

father's favor, Dohan's official status resembled that of a person lost in a jet crash: presumed dead.

During the remains of that day, the guilds and noble families held secret meetings in the cities -- trying to sort out what was afoot, and how to respond to it. Most city lords agreed to declare a formal ban on radio receivers as soon as possible -- it took only instinct for a feudal lord to see the danger in unchecked free speech.

Starting with the Doctor's Guild of Damon City, the physicians' class took the most immediate open negative stance: they claimed this to be a plot orchestrated by Lepers, to infiltrate the city-states of Castilia. Conspiracy rumors spread like wildfire.

The guilds of the merchant class, at least initially, played it carefully. They took an official stand against the use of radio, since it threatened stability. Yet many of them secretly admired Darc and his defiance against the might of the nobility -- and the boldest of them started gathering contacts and resources to follow the leaflet instructions.

The guilds of the mechanics held large official meetings that same evening, because they needed to demonstrate their strength and loyalty -- their greatest fear was to be thrown under the direct control of the city lords and their court.

It was the mechanics' meeting in Damon City that revealed the most open frustration with the ruling warrior class. A minority of mechanics said out loud that they ought to be the rightful rulers of the cities, since it was they who kept it running. This minority was quickly silenced and thrown out.

An official statement from the guilds was voted through and delivered to Lord Damon the next day: The guilds assured their continued allegiance to the ruling lord and to the safety of the city above all. Bor Damon seemed content with this. A clash for power between the guilds and the warrior caste had been averted, for the time being. Other cities were less fortunate.

In Pasko City, Sir Tharlos sent his troops searching through the entire metropolis, and burned every leaflet found. Leading members of the guilds who were not enlisted in Tharlos' death-cult -- a handful of brave men -- were arrested and tortured. During the days to come, they would die in the depths of the castle's prison dungeons, without giving any clues to secret intentions.

Still Tharlos did not feel safe. The nemesis of his nightmares was back for certain, now in a form that

could penetrate walls. So the acting city leader went to extremes that shocked even his peers. All equipment and property of the mechanics -- workshops, foundries, tools, funds, spare parts, supplies, libraries -- was forcibly appropriated and put under guard. Tharlos also ordered all nobles and wealthy citizens to deposit their electronic jewels, trinkets, and mobile appliances in the city armory. This absurd order caused outrage and open complaints among the citizenry, even in the face of the armed militia.

The public image of Tharlos began to waver, from the one of a brave warrior to that of an usurping, greedy tyrant.

High-priestess Inu of Damon City did not care to meet with the other high-priestesses of Castilia -- each city had its own religious leader, and they naturally disliked each other's pretensions to divine grace. Instead, she gathered her twenty-odd novices and priestesses in secret, in the city cathedral. Incense was burned and inhaled; smoke sipped into Inu's nostrils like the fingers of spirits. She started to rock back and forth, her eyes gazing blindly into the smoke.

And when Inu had put herself into a trance, the Goddess spoke through her in distant, throaty words: "Wait and listen. The King is yet with us. Wait and listen."

That was all. The other priestesses were confused. When the people of Damon City -- and Librian, acting as Lord Damon's secret ambassador to the church -- asked for the Goddess's opinion of the state of things, Inu's statement was repeated. This annoyed Bor; to challenge the ever-popular church, however, was out of the question. His estranged wife annoyed him even more, by making private visits to the cathedral -- which she did the day after the re-appearance of the Sunray.

Inu could turn away even a noblewoman at a whim -- she was a sacred person, until she resigned at the age of fifty -- but she ordered the city lord's wife to be let inside. Osanna Damon was received into a small study where she found Inu sitting, dressed in a white robe. She kneeled and bowed before the high-priestess, and kissed her cloth. Inu blessed her and asked her to sit in a lower, opposiing chair.

The formalities done away with, Lady Osanna spoke: "There are too many ears in the castle, Your Holiness. I am grateful for the sanctity of the Church, where we can speak freely."

High-priestess Inu gave her a slight smile, and the usual dreamy gaze of a woman not quite in the same sphere of consciousness as other citizens.

"Everywhere," she said, "the Goddess is with us. She is our eyes and ears."

Osanna blinked uncertainly at the light-blond woman, so serene when she herself was a bundle of nerves. It took the power of a goddess to stay confident in such times, she thought.

"Your Holiness, I wish to confess how worried I am for my son Dohan's safety. He is a close friend to the incarnated... to Sir Darc, as you know."

Inu nodded her consent and knowledge.

"Yes, your son has a special destiny. Your lord has, too; your whole family has. The visions are clear in this matter."

Lady Osanna eagerly leaned forward, and said: "Lord Fache's wife had a vision of --"

She stopped. Inu's perfect face hardened somewhat. Osanna understood that the human part of Inu's soul, her personal vanity and pride, had been hurt by that remark. Osanna looked down. Inu smiled a little wider this time, a little colder.

"Yes, I have heard so too. I admit she may have the gift, though she is dark-skinned and cannot be fully possessed by the All-Mother."

Neither of these women questioned the Central Dogma of the church, that the Goddess only took hold in the bodies of women who resembled her first incarnation. Only pale-skinned, fair-haired women could apply for priesthood. The dogma, though unfair, had remained unchanged since before the Great Wars.

"Will my son be safe?" Osanna asked, her voice on the verge of breaking.

Inu sat breathing for a long moment, drifting in and out of the state of meditation like she sometimes did; she had the gift.

And after a time, the high-priestess responded: "Unless he strays from his destiny, Sir Dohan will return safely to his family. That much is clear. In the meantime, be strong and do your best to help your family through the trials that lie ahead of us. Remember, the city lord is also under the blessing of the reincarnated King -- even if he does not see it himself. I can say no more."

Lady Osanna thanked the high-priestess, and the audience was finished. It was a relieved, but puzzled noblewoman who left the cathedral that day.

Book Three



On the air

Chapter 9

Late at night in the month of Septam, Darc's first radio transmission began.

He and Mechao had prepared the ground by sending out a beacon signal -- a recurring beep, nothing more -- at intervals during the day, so that any listeners could find the right frequency in advance. Darc had asked Shara earlier, if the city-dwellers were able to record radio messages directly. She had answered that the idea had not occurred to her. Except for laser, most mail was sent in written form inside the cities. The available technology for storing electronic information was rare and crude, thus unavailable to most people. So even though the coming broadcasts could be transcribed or spread by

word of mouth, Darc's safest bet was to repeat each broadcast several times.

And so, without knowing the size of his potential audience, Darc sat in the soundstage in Mechao's workshop that night. A set of clunky microphones, earphones, and switches hung down on him from cables above; nearby, Mechao and his assistants worked the power-control board and made constant checks of the oversized, humming machinery.

Mechao gave the cue to begin -- Darc took a deep breath -- it was, ironically, his first radio appearance ever. The instant before he began to speak, his friends waved at him from behind the stage perimeter. He grinned back at them and his tense gut softened up, just enough for him to be able to speak into the microphone.

"Hello... I will now make a voice test... one, two, three."

Mechao gave a silent go-ahead, nodding excitedly; the broadcast was working!

"This is the voice of Darc. This is the voice of liberty," Darc said into the microphone.

He had written down a few notes in advance, but as always he went mostly on gut feeling. He chose a tone to fit the archaic age; this was not the 20th century.

"I talk to you from a secret place, though I wish everyone could hear. This is the voice of liberty. In these times, liberty is not defended in the world. People live in fear, and they cannot choose their leaders. Many are poor, and food is scarce. The lands are not safe. I have come from another time, through a long sleep, and I have spent a great deal of time discovering the world again, and I have found out why things are this way.

"A great secret dwells out there, in the Wastelands. I can reveal the secret of the Wastelands to you -- because I have been there and lived to tell it. I address everyone: commoners, lords, even those called witchdoctors, even the people of the Wastelands, if you can hear me. I will tell you all the secret of the Wastelands.

"What secret? I think I hear you say. I think I hear you say: 'There is no secret in the Wastelands,

nothing but wilderness and Plague and ruins and Lepers.' Wrong. The world, our world, is out there! It should belong to all of us -- the people in the cities, the people outside the cities, every one of us. Our ancestors took the world away from us, their descendants. It was our ancestors who started the Great Wars; they created the Plagues; they built the prisons we came to call 'cities'."

Darc took a pause for breath. His heart was beating hard and fast, and already he was dripping with sweat. But he went on, slowly, so as not to mispronounce his words.

"This is the secret, I say: The world that our ancestors took away and hid from our sight. As long as humans hide in cities, or huddle in caves in the Wastelands, we shall never become truly human again. We will starve and wither away -- until one day, when the entire planet is again under some great threat that only the united strength of all peoples could defeat -- then we will be defenseless, because we are scattered and divided. In order for us to become truly free, truly safe, truly human again, there is something I would ask you to do. One single thing..."

Darc dwelled on the last syllables, drew out the tension, and said: "I ask you to open the cities.

"Yes, I know how frightening this may sound. But imagine, just for a moment, that you could. Imagine a world with open cities. People could come and go as they liked, travel freely, see the wonders of the world with their own eyes. Travel would no longer be the privilege of the few rich, who can afford to fly. Boats could go everywhere, up rivers, across the oceans. Men could travel to other planets again, like in the Golden Age.

"And yet, there is one thing that stops us from opening the cities to the world. What is it? There are many words for it. The Unclean Touch. The Plague. Pseudo-Leprosy, as Al-Masur names it. But I say to you: Those are false names. What is the Plague, after all? A divine punishment? A law of nature? No! It was created by humans, and humans should be able to undo it. But fear and ignorance has kept the Plague alive for centuries.

"Therefore I say to you: the real enemy that stops us from opening the world, is fear and ignorance. Thus I have chosen to fight fear and ignorance. This is the purpose of my message, and there shall be more messages soon. If you listen, and learn, you will know the ways of freedom again.

"This is the voice of Darc. This is the voice of liberty."

Darc gestured to Mechao, who switched to the beacon signal.

Darc wiped his sweaty brow. His audience was stunned for a full ten seconds -- then Mechao's family, Dohan, and Shara began to applaud him. Even Eye-Leg was able to listen, sitting in a special chair in the background. She made a gurgling-clicking sound and smiled. Shara hurried over to Darc and hugged him.

"That was fantastic," she said. "How many people do you think heard it?"

"Don't know," Darc said with a shrug. "Ten, a thousand, a million... Damn! I didn't say enough." He added: "Besides, it was a gloomy, sad speech... I should have sounded uplifting instead."

Shara grabbed his shoulders.

"Couldn't you sing?" she asked. "I heard you sing the ancient songs of the King for the Lepers! You... and Pop Shah. Together."

Darc blinked at her, and scratched his head.

"Sing to, what, thousands or millions of listeners? I'm no real singer! They'd think I'm crazy, a foolish minstrel!"

"Are you afraid?"

"No, I'm not! It's just that... I want to use the radio broadcasts for serious matters, not just... entertainment."

Shara almost smiled in her astonishment.

Waving her arms, she exclaimed: "You just don't know, do you? Why do you think people look at you that way when you sing? There's power in that music! The redeeming power of the Sacred Song, the call for heavenly reunion with the All-Mother!"

Once more, Darc was baffled by how religion pervaded all thought of those around him.

"I didn't expect you, a believer in Kristos, to say that."

"I don't give a damn about what I believe now! Ordinary people wouldn't dream of singing those songs outside of a church! But you can! You're not afraid of breaking the rules."

In a matter of minutes, Darc saw the reason of Shara's idea. He chuckled. Why, it would be just like those amateur gigs back in his youth!

"Call for Pop Shah," he said. "Pop'll get a brand new bag!"



Pop Shah & his electric guitar

Awonso failed to complete his radio receiver in time to tune in to Darc's first broadcast. All he managed to take in were atmospheric buzz, and a faint recurring beep. This did not discourage him. Educated as he was, he knew the electromagnetic field from his receiver could be traced -- yet he kept using it every following night, searching for the next broadcast.

"This is the voice of Darc. This is The Voice of Liberty..." Darc gestured to Pop Shah and his group of musicians, who were only too eager to start playing. When Darc continued, his accent changed into the essence of cocky, masculine energy. He shouted: "And the music of liberty is called ROCK'N ROLL!"

On his cue, the band started to play; the drummer struck up a beat; Pop Shah played a dark, rhythmic bass beat. Darc stood up from his seat, grabbed the microphone which hung down from the ceiling, and sang. He had chosen "King Creole", the one song he could recall perfectly. Dohan, Meiji, and the others attended the broadcast from outside the soundstage.

Dohan recognized the music instantly, if not the words, and whispered: "He's doing it again!"

Meiji hushed him down -- she was spellbound by the performance. A just-completed, crude electric guitar made its first star appearance in Darc's band, played by Pop Shah who had never handled anything electric in his life. The guitar crackled and growled in his wrinkled hands, making wonderful noise. The music had touches of calypso and African work songs in it -- and just the right flavor of danger. Darc thought his performance insane, an enchanting madness that he could not help enjoying. The studio audience and the musicians thought they witnessed a strange transformation: Darc seemed to become the "king" of the song they barely understood. Dohan remembered Lord Azuch Fache's words again: Guard him with your life.

The musical number lasted only four minutes. When they had finished, the band members were exhausted; a servant wiped Pop Shah's perspiring face. In the speech that followed, Darc repeated most of the previous broadcast -- only with greater assurance. His friends heard him through, just to experience the power of his voice again. Shara noticed, to her joy, that Eye-Leg moved her misplaced head to the rhythm of Darc's music.

This time, Awonso had his radio receiver working and ready. Hidden in a closet with a set of heavy hand-made earphones on his head, he tuned in to the right frequency. And he got to hear Darc's every word, coming strong through waves of static. But it was the music of "King Creole" that would stay alive in Awonso's memory for the rest of his life. How feeble, how emasculated "Rokenrol" sounded in the hands of lowly musicians and church choirs. Awonso felt energized by the raw, electrically enhanced power of Darc's music. Without that energy, this mild-mannered bookworm would have shrunk before the challenges to come.

Book Three

Chapter 10

The morning after the broadcast, Awonso was attending church Mass -- half asleep as usual -- when a female novice stuck a note into his psalm-book. He hid the note and read it afterward. It asked -- or required, the interpretation depending on one's loyalty to the church -- him to meet high-priestess Inu in the evening. Alone. His first reaction was that someone was playing a joke on him. Rumor had it, only a select minority of influential -- or exceptionally handsome -- male citizens received such calls. Why him? He was a clumsy, awkward youngster with acne, and knew it perfectly well. As he read the note over and over, the round-faced Awonso's hands began to sweat, and his mouth felt dry. The evening was all too far off yet.

Reluctantly, Awonso entered the cathedral, and was led into the inner sanctum by two beautiful novices. Finding himself in a smaller lit chamber, he gasped as the novices shut and locked the door behind him. And before him stood Inu.

The high-priestess was every bit as enchanting as Awonso imagined her, only more so this evening. The young scholar-to-be had washed himself thoroughly and put on his finest set of clothes, all the time fearing that this would reveal his visit to the eyes of the public. He had imagined a thousand eyes following him there; now, alone in Inu's candle-lit study, Awonso's mind went blank. Inu smiled to calm him down -- or was it to enchant him even further? The Goddess Incarnate could be fickle as well as generous.

"I bless you for coming here," she said, then added: "You may kiss my cloth."

Awonso kneeled and kissed the hem of her skirt, blushing deeply. Like a bumbling fool, he had forgotten the proper procedure. Inu made a small gesture at the adolescent to rise up and sit down. He was all too quick to obey.

"I have called you here, Awonso, because I am concerned for the safety of your soul. And other souls. You are a friend of Darc, aren't you?"

Was that an accusation or a compliment in her neutral, throaty voice? Awonso stared at the high-priestess and hesitated, his mouth half-open.

"I... I don't know if I have the right to call myself his friend, Your Holiness... b-but I have certainly spent a long time with him in the castle library, when he learned our language... he told us a great deal of his time and origins."

Inu nodded approvingly; she leaned forward ever so slightly, so that her voluptuous curves stood out in relief against her fine black robes.

"Confess to me, Awonso. What is your opinion of Darc?"

Was that all it was about -- an ordinary confession? Awonso's tension receded somewhat; that kind of question he could answer.

"Darc is... an amazing man, Your Holiness, a miracle worker -- forgive me for using that word, but it's the only appropriate term..." "Yes..."

"He truly is a time traveler as they say, from the Golden Age. Some things we know are unknown to him, because they happened before his time. But other things he knows better than any other man. And then there's his music..."

He ceased talking, when Inu stood up and walked across the small study to the gold-specked altar. She lit a few painted candlesticks, and a heavy scent filled the room. The high-priestess moved behind Awonso's seat; he swallowed, and waited. The incense made his head feel fuzzy and light; despite his nervousness, Awonso gradually felt more talkative. Inu knew this perfectly well.

"The music, yes," she half-whispered behind his back, "that is what you must confess to me about. Tell me about the secret radio wave transmissions that people are listening to at night."

Awonso twitched in his seat, afraid to turn around and let Inu see his guilty face. He was forced to answer truthfully, though -- this was a confession in church, and the Goddess was listening through the high-priestess. Lying guaranteed damnation.

"I... I have sinned, Your Holiness. I have listened to the radio transmissions in secret. Forgive me!" he cried out.

Awonso gasped at a sudden prickling sensation. It was Inu, touching his shoulder with her warm, soft palms -- holding them there, letting them radiate heat through his body. A large bead of sweat trickled down his cheek and landed on Inu's right hand.

"You are forgiven," she whispered. "It may be against the will of the city lord, but he cannot command Monro Our Goddess. On the contrary... she wishes to spread the word of the Singing King. There is one thing, Awonso, that I must ask of you." So close her mouth was now, so close to his ear. Awonso could sense her radiant presence -- or maybe it was just her breath on his neck. He dared neither move nor speak, but wished she would never stop. "Get me one," she hissed. "Get me one of those radio machines, so that I can hear him. No one must know. No one but you and me."

At that moment, Awonso would have agreed on any wish from her. But from somewhere, he got the courage to utter an objection.

"Bring a machine in here? Into the sacred cathedral, against the law? I'll take a great risk --"

Inu's arms enfolded Awonso; his eyesight drowned in her golden tresses.

She whispered, and her lips brushed against his earlobe: "You will be greatly rewarded."

Hours later, a very drowsy Awonso sneaked back into his family house. His mother was waiting behind the door, a candle-lamp in one hand and a big stick in the other. Awonso's father was not around.

"Well?" she sternly asked him. "Where have you been all night? And if you lie to me, boy, you will sorely regret it --"

"Shut up!" he snapped, slurring a little. The harsh woman stared at her young son, stunned by his sudden

new courage. "I cannot under any circumstances tell you where I've been, and you must tell no one I was away. Swear! Tell no one! The peace of the city depends on our silence."

"But..."

"Swear it!" She gave him a promise; Awonso sighed in relief and stumbled to his bed alcove. He sent a silent prayer of gratitude to the higher power that had helped him earn his manhood. "Bless the power of Rokenrol," he mumbled and fell asleep.

Book Three

Chapter 12

The church of Monro had raised its large, very old cathedrals in most city-states -- also in Pasko City. The day after Darc's third broadcast, a small platoon of soldiers escorted the city lord Migam and his son Tharlos to the local cathedral.

Their electric carriage clanked to a halt outside the main portal of the building. Two pages rolled out a carpet onto the church steps. The priestesses alerted the high-priestess, a rather aged woman of noble birth named Monrosa Obispo Al-Fache. Through the complex marriage system of the nobility, Monrosa was distantly related to Lord Azuch of Fache City. Like all other high-priestesses she was blond and beautiful -- if not as inspired as Azuch's second-sighted wife. But she was aware that when the Paskos made one of their rare official visits to the Church, trouble was in the air.

Monrosa did not rush to greet her visitors; she sent a number of priestesses to the gates first. Armed soldiers marched up the steps and placed themselves at the inside of the antechamber.

"My lord," a middle-aged priestess objected, "the Church is sacred ground! No arms, no robots, please!"

The bloated Lord Migam Pasko walked up the steps to the cathedral in a mindless stupor, half supported by his taller son. The priestesses could smell Migam's alcoholic breath, in spite of the heavy perfume he was wearing to cover it up. He did not seem to hear their objections.

"We wish to see Her Holiness now," Tharlos stated urgently. "The guards are here to protect her from our city's enemies."

Without further explanation, Tharlos guided his father into the cathedral. The building was no less splendid than the one in Damon City, and Tharlos had not sacked the church of its gold and jewels -- yet. The high-priestess was reading a sermon to a group of late churchgoers, when Sir Tharlos rudely interupted her. He walked past the aisles and up to the big altar where she stood, leaving his swaying father behind.

With only a slight bow of his head, he said: "Your Holiness, I urge you to clear the cathedral of all listeners. The city lord wishes an audience with you, now."

High-priestess Monrosa looked down at the young intruder without making a face. Once she had been receiving Tharlos's father into her private quarters every month -- but that was long ago. Monrosa knew Tharlos as the unofficial benefactor of covert cult activities, and the hatred between the two was mutual. She finished the reading for the handful of churchgoers, blessed them, and asked them to leave. As they hastily exited, the soldiers pushed the heavy doors shut and locked them. Not having moved from her standing position, Monrosa addressed Lord Migam Pasko. He was sitting slumped in a front aisle.

"My dear lord. What an unexpected visit. Have you come for a confession? The Goddess loves and forgives all sinners who sincerely repent."

The city lord kept staring forward with unseeing, morose eyes.

Tharlos raised a hand in Monrosa's line of sight, and said gravely: "Your Holiness, we have come to ask you declare a ban against the unholy radio transmissions from the fiend named Darc."

"What transmissions, Sir Tharlos? The Church does not concern itself with matters mechanical. Our

sphere is the realm of feminine virtues."

Tharlos gave her an impatient glare -- that last remark of hers was laden with irony.

"I am sure your congregation knows what I talk of. The so-called 'Voice of Liberty'."

Monrosa raised an eyebrow. Yes, she knew. Like all church people, she was enthralled -- not to mention shocked and slightly outraged -- by the statements and songs of the man rumored to be the reborn Singing King. Transcripts of his radio broadcasts had recently reached Monrosa through her spies, before the city's last illegal receiver was destroyed. Unlike high-priestess Inu, however, Monrosa half doubted, half feared Darc. In her older age, Monrosa felt more comfortable in a stable world, where the King's return was always promised but never realized. Had it not been for his reprehensible cult, the high-priestess might even have agreed with Tharlos to ban Darc.

"The Church cannot make a difference in such earthly matters," she said. "Surely the combined forces of the nobility could deal with a single man without our help?"

She smiled serenely, mocking Tharlos without openly showing it.

He snarled: "I'm warning you! Do not try to hide behind your fancy gold and postures! The church shall soon be forced to contribute to our war effort --" Tharlos stopped, afraid that he had revealed too much. He had already lost self-control, and looked around for unwanted observers. Tharlos calmed himself, and faced a very stern gaze from Monrosa.

"Your Holiness," he resumed, lowering his voice, "pardon my outburst. But these are trying times for us all. We need to stand united before the threat of... of a dangerous demagogue like Darc. If he is allowed to continue his foul work, the Church as well as the cities may be threatened by The Ones Whose Very Name Brings Disease. Is it not obvious, that Darc is rallying them into another uprising?"

Monrosa's eyes opened wide for a second; the very mentioning of the Lepers shook her. The primal fear of the unknown great wilderness showed in her features, and she swayed where she stood. Tharlos smiled; he had found her weak spot.

"Maybe an official ban is not necessary after all, Your Holiness," he proposed benignly. "A generous donation to our war chest is a much more practical way to defend the people against you-know-what."

Reluctantly, the high-priestess nodded. A purring sound, amplified by the vast cathedral, caught their attention. It was the sleeping Lord Migam, snoring loudly in the front aisle.

Book Three

Chapter 13

The fourth and fifth broadcast began with Darc and his band performing the ancient number "I'm All Shook Up". The speech he held afterward was calmer, less rebellious than his previous ones, yet it reverberated with conviction. He thought of Shara and Eye-Leg as he spoke.

"This is the Voice of Liberty. I have talked about the liberty of all people before, and I know that my words have confused, even frightened many of you. This can be difficult to hear -- for rich, poor, nobles, and Lepers. This time I wish to talk about how all people must be considered equal in order to be free.

"In my time, in the Golden Age, there was a saying: 'All humans are created equal under God.' And all good people respected and lived by that saying. You may be confused by those words. I think I hear you say: 'How can all humans be created equal? Some are born men, some are born women, some are born gifted, or dumb. Some are born into rich families, some into poverty. And some are born Lepers.'

"So how, you may think, can all people be born equal? Well, when I say 'equal' I do not mean 'exactly alike', or of equal intelligence, or equal lot in life. I mean equal worth. Where is this maxim written down? It was written down on a document more than 1,000 years ago -- and was then sadly forgotten, even in my time. But it is also written into the book of Nature. We are all created from the same stuff -- the same atoms. The laws that govern Nature are the same for all, regardless of class. We all must live brief lives, and then we must face what might lie beyond death -- so must I. This is the universal human condition.

"Since we share the same universe, we are equal. But we are free to live in different ways, within those laws of Nature. We are free to treat each other in different ways as long as we do not aspire to be above nature. Indeed, if a nobleman robs a poor woman of her bread, he is not struck by lightning. Nature does not send Plague upon us because of our sins. How unfair, you may say! Why do not the gods interfere, and correct our ways? Because we are free! If the gods governed our every step, we would be nothing but puppets -- but we are not, unless we choose to be. Likewise, we choose not to let our appetites govern us. If we let greed, anger and lust control our selves, we quickly become as unfree, as helpless as children.

"If the gods and the appetites are not to control our acts, then who will? All of us will. It is our born responsibility to respect the equal worth of all humans, regardless of creed, birth, and gender. This is the only way for humanity to survive and thrive. Say, if you saw a thief beat up a weaker man and walk away with his possessions -- would it be wise of you to just watch it happen, and say 'It is none of my concern?' The thief would then become bold enough to go after you.

"So: Each time a human is in need of help, or suffers injustice, it means the whole of humanity is threatened. Eventually, the sins of one man will affect the wellbeing of another because they share the same world. That is why we must live by the maxim: All humans are created equal.

"Does this include the Lepers too? Yes. These unfortunate millions who live in poverty in the Wastelands, are worth just as much as those living in the wealth of the closed cities. And we must work to cure the Lepers from the Plague, if we are to be truthful to the one maxim: All humans are created equal. My allies and I are steadily working to find that cure, and soon I shall reveal more about our work.

"This is the voice of Darc. This is The Voice of Liberty."

Darc gestured to Mechao, who switched off the transmitter. Another futile cry into open air, Darc thought as he rested his sore throat. Speaking and singing was beginning to put a strain on his vocal cords. How long will I have to keep on doing this? Is it already too late? What the hell is Bor Damon going to do when he hears this? Are the noble-noses already arming up to attack us? Sometimes I wish I had the guts to just give up. Shara ran up to him and hugged him forcefully.

She nearly burst into tears as she said: "Did you mean it? Every word?"

He held her tight, pulling her into his lap.

"Yes. It was a good thing you did for Eye-Leg. I love you, Shara." Her face seemed to radiate with happiness. They soon walked off to look after Eye-Leg together.

After having heard that fifth broadcast speech, Dohan was acting restless and anxious to speak. Meijji was the first to notice.

She stood in the way of the pacing young warrior and faced him: "What's on your mind?"

He looked at her, his face taut with concentration.

"The things Darc said... about being truthful to the maxim. That all humans are created equal. Damn me! Now I understand what's happened to me since he appeared." Meijji scrutinized him for a clue -- she had heard Darc and Dohan recount their adventures, and found them fascinating. However, Dohan's current behavior mystified her completely. Dohan noticed her puzzled face and explained rapidly, gesturing with clenched fists. "All the time, I suspected him to be the reincarnated Singing King! Until he talked me out of it, or almost did, in Amrica that night. But all that happened... it makes sense after this last speech. He has taught me... taught us... how to live by the maxim of human equality. And I haven't got it until now!

"I was brought up to be a member of the self-professed elite, the chosen ones, who would defend our inferiors from even lesser inferiors! I don't deserve to call myself a knight! You were right -- I am a dumb brute."

Meijji shook her head, and stroked Dohan's coarse cheek with her palm.

"You are a great man, Dohan. Don't let a single mistake bring you down. And you're wrong. If you weren't a knight before, you surely are one now. What's on your mind? What are you going to do next?"

He softened at her touch, but his inspiration would not falter.

"First, I will organize a proper defense of this island. Instead of taking over my father's army, I'll settle for

this island's. Darc's work, and the islanders of course, must be protected at all costs!"

"I see. And then?"

"If we live through this, I will work to create a world-spanning brotherhood of knights... that will protect all Lepers, while they are being cured from the Plague! Yes -- that would be the noblest cause."

"And then?"

Her gaze was dropping to the floor, and her hand moved away from his face.

"And then..."

Dohan stopped, and stared at Meijji for a moment. Then he grabbed her slim, brown body and lifted it above his head. She shrieked.

"But first of all, I'll marry you!" he shouted. And they both began to laugh.

A sister of Meijji was eavesdropping on Dohan when he uttered his promise. She immediately ran to her mother and told her.

"And it's about time, too," was Amada's laconic reaction to the news. "Let us get to work."

Chapter 14

In the beginning of the month of Oktam, Tharlos gathered noblemen from all of Castilia for a diplomatic conference in Pasko City.

Lord Azuch Fache sent a lowly robot representative, but refused to fly there in person. Tharlos Pasko surprised his guests by also inviting nobles from outside the Madriavalo province. The perceived threat of Darc's radio campaign must have been great, to convince them to risk such a long jet flight. Laser messages arrived from other parts of the Juro continent, and from the north of Awrica, to confirm the sudden widespread interest in Tharlos's initiative. After all, it was Tharlos Pasko who had first attacked Damon City -- where Darc's career had once began. Tharlos was not late to stress this fact.

After a modest but adequate welcoming ceremony, the visitors were ushered into a sealed hall in the castle. Tharlos took his seat and asked his murmuring guests for silence.

"My beloved peers and guests -- the good Lord Migam Pasko wishes you welcome to our house." He gestured at the empty high seat, where his father had used to sit. "I regret to say that my father the city lord is gravely ill. He has granted me full authority over state affairs though, and I will serve as his representative."

The dozen or so guests, robots excluded, nodded their approval. Lord Fache's robot messenger raised a skeletal metal hand.

"Yes?"

"My master wished to know if Lord Migam Pasko has appointed a successor to his title, Sir Tharlos."

Sir Tharlos. Tharlos was certain that Lord Fache had programmed his ambassador to only use that derogatory title, no matter what Tharlos called himself.

With an effort, he checked his fury and continued: "An heir has not yet been appointed. But the outcome is fairly clear, when you consider the fact that my only brother Andon Pasko is married away in another city... a marriage which I, in hindsight, deeply regret." Tharlos made his best to feign a flash of sorrow;

several guests appeared to buy his act. In reality, Tharlos was only relieved to have his weaker brother out of the way, so that he could pursue his plans undistracted. The robot ambassador made a polite nod, and was still. "Good. As you all know, the safety of our civilization is hanging by a thread. An impostor and demagogue known as Darc is stirring up the lower classes, not to mention The Ones Whose Very Name Brings Disease, against us..."

He looked across the table for a response; there were several.

"I share your concern," the slight Lord Yota said solemnly, and his son Ue nodded in silent agreement.

"Indeed," thundered Lord Orbes, "he is a threat not only to Castilia, but to the world! Imagine what would happen if we let him continue his campaign!"

A representative from Seguda City, the port town otherwise known as Kibralta, added to their self-righteous anger.

"Yes, the filthy Wastelanders would storm our grand old cities and destroy them forever! The Goddess knows we have fought them back before... but that was before one of our own class betrayed us and turned to their help!"

A younger nobleman from West Castilia asked him: "Sir, are you referring to Lord Damon, or his renegade son, or Sir Darc?"

Tharlos raised his hands and gave the guests a suave smile.

"My good men, let us not bicker about details. The crucial matter is that we unite now, before it is too late! We must attack this tumor called Darc, before it spreads to healthy parts of our society!"

Lord Orbes asked: "But where can he be? Even Lord Damon does not know where Darc and his traitorous son might be hiding." Tharlos raised an index finger: "Darc may be a clever fiend, but he is no cleverer than our united might. I have just learned how these 'radio' devices work. To track down and fix his position, we must build our own sets of radio receivers. Together we can use those to pin down the source of the radio waves.

"Our next step would be to organize a strike fleet. Because I already suspect that Darc is located somewhere across the sea. This fleet would be bigger than anything seen in centuries. It badly needs an experienced commander who has met the enemy before..."

His charisma and boldness worked like a charm on the desperate noblemen. Before the end of the day, Tharlos had convinced the guests -- robots not included -- that he was their man. An agreement was signed, and a new military alliance was formed -- perhaps the mightiest alliance in the known world...



Alchaia's run

Chapter 15

The month Oktam passed, and Eye-Leg's replacement body was approaching ripeness. Rumors grew about the Leper Girl in Mechao's household, and the islanders were afflicted by a sense of impending misfortune. Many began to mutter curses over the strange guests who had upset their long peace. The presence of the newcomers had also stirred desires. As the pressure in the hot air rose and sank in the stormy days, a confrontation became inevitable...

Dohan was instructing several hundred islanders on the beach, one cloudy day. He had already organized a 24-hour network of watchtowers and lookouts across the islands. Rows of natives in camouflage clothes -- only a handful of them men, mostly old -- learned to mimic his moves with sword, bayoneted rifle, and shield. Several of his students wore helmets and shields of wood -- their metal arsenal was still being built. Dohan had no previous experience as a combat instructor. Whatever he could recall of his own long training, plus a few more tricks he had acquired during his adventures with Darc, he used. Toward the afternoon, Dohan showed his students of war a flat, polished aluminum shield.

"Mist, rain, glass, mirrors and smoke," he stated, "are often enough to weaken or deflect a laser-beam. Plasma beams, that appear similar to lasers, will burn through all such mediums. The best protection is always a blank, curved metal surface -- aluminum, silver, or gold. If you fire at another man's... shield..."

Dohan stopped, his concentration faltering. Some members of the female audience were crossing and uncrossing their legs in a seductive fashion, and cast telling looks into his eyes.

He cleared his throat, and went on: "If you fire at another shield, the beam can bounce back at you. You must watch the angle -- the way the shield is being held. A flat shield can bounce the beam directly back at you. A curved shield will bounce the beam in another direction, and it might hit someone next to you. Watch this!"

Dohan took the flat shield, and placed it upright in the sand a few meters away from himself. He put on a helmet, shut the facial visor, stepped back and kneeled behind another, curved shield. Next to his position stood a man-sized boulder -- he ambled closer to it, then aimed at the flat shield and fired one pulse. The snap of the laser was heard, and simultaneously came a sharp crack when the reflected pulse hit the boulder next to Dohan. A tiny piece of the impact hole exploded, sending out a puff of smoke. Dohan took off his helmet and grinned at his stunned audience.

"See? The ricochet hit close to me. It happens very often in battle. Remember the shield-wall tactic we trained earlier?" With a stick, Dohan drew a large sketch in the sand to show the group. "If the chain of shields breaks up at one point, the whole line of soldiers is vulnerable to laser ricochets. If one man, uh, soldier in the line falls, you must close the gap --"

Dohan was interrupted. A young messenger woman came running down a path, wearing a short skirt and running-sandals with studded heels.

"Aircraft! Aircraft flying in from the coast!!" she yelled.

The crowd of natives, and a handful of onlookers, scrambled into cover behind rocks, camouflaged sheds, palm-trees, and ruins. Dohan grabbed the shields and followed suit. The messenger girl ran after him, and accompanied him into cover.

"Where is it, girl?" She pointed up east, at a cloud. He saw no sign of aircraft. "I can't see it. Did it pass beyond the hills?" She nodded eagerly. Dohan hesitated a second, then said: "Take me to your lookout point."

He commanded the others to stay in hiding until he had returned, and ordered another messenger to alert Mechao and the village council. The first messenger girl dashed off across the sand, Dohan breathing heavily as he ran after.

After a few minutes, they both reached a small green ledge above the beach. From there, the overview was excellent in all directions. They huddled down in the undergrowth, and Dohan scanned the sky. It still seemed as if the only aircraft in the vicinity was his own, concealed one.

He turned to the girl: "Are you certain you --"

Again she interrupted him -- by embracing him and kissing his face. Dohan was first too confused to react; the next instant, he felt the girl's hand groping at his lower parts. He tossed her aside furiously. The young woman stared back at Dohan with wild, brown eyes -- full of excitement. He was speechless.

"What's wrong?" she asked, sounding accusing and hurt as if they were familiar with each other.

Now Dohan recognized her face: well shaped, with thin lips painted dark red, and her hair set up behind her head into a tail specked with glass beads. She was leaner and her limbs more wiry than Meijji's, but she resembled Meijji in shape and age. It was the younger sister Alchaia, who often kept herself in the vicinity of Dohan.

"There was no aircraft?" he asked, giving her an angry glare.

Alchaia rolled up her eyes and replied: "Of course! How else could I get us any privacy? In a boat?"

"That was a stupid prank, girl," he said as he started to walk away. "If I ever catch you with a false alarm again --"

"What? You wouldn't hurt someone who loves you, no? It's not fair that only she gets to bear your children! This is my island too!" Only a lifelong training in courteousness prevented Dohan from slapping her.

"Enough of this," he muttered and treaded downhill, back toward the beach.

He wished his father -- or Darc -- had taught him what to do when courtesy failed. Running away from any challenge embarrassed him.

Alchaia yelled after him: "I could --"

She was about to utter a threat, but the fear of her older sister's wrath stopped her. Alchaia saw no end to her jealousy. The long-lasting shortage of men on Kap Verita was not always painful to the islanders. Several unmarried women adapted effortlessly to a life with only female companions; and many of the few men married several brief times, thus fathering a great number of children. But when two young women were competing for a desirable man, bloodshed lay close at hand. Alchaia decided to lie low, and wait for another opportunity to get Dohan -- or get rid of Meiji.

When Mechao finally arrived to the beach with the council members and asked Dohan about the alert, Dohan said it had been a false alarm. The alert was called off. The islanders laughed and joked among themselves, happy that the dreaded attack had not come. But Mechao sensed, through experience, that one of his daughters had mischief in mind. Later that day, he advised Amada to watch over Alchaia until the wedding.

"Those children!" Amada exclaimed. "Our prime source of joy and grief!"

Book Three



Wedding day

Chapter 16

Two days later, the weather cleared up long enough for the awaited wedding to take place. The night

just before the ceremony, Dohan confided to his friend what inner torment he was going through.

"Darc, I love her so. She is the loveliest, most beautiful woman I have ever met. Yet -- do I put her in greater peril if I marry her? My parents, my peers -- they are never going to forgive me. She is the daughter of a --"

"Don't say that word in Mechao's house!" Darc snapped. "I've been talking to Meijji's parents. They understand the risks, and they reminded me that I'm involved in this too. Whatever happens, I'll be there to help you and Meijji. I swear."

"You are my best friend, Darc. You're -- the brother I never had."

Dohan had almost said "the father I never had", but changed his mind at the last instant. He was still hoping his father would one day forgive him.

"Good," Darc said. "Now get some sleep, and make Meijji the happiest bride in the world tomorrow. Or else!"

Shara knocked on Meijji's bedroom door.

"Go away!" a high-strung young woman's voice responded from inside.

Shara yawned. Once, in her own youth, she had sworn never to get children until she had fought her way up from the gutter. She was not about to assume responsibility for another daughter just yet.

"Stop whining and let me in," Shara said in a deadpan voice. "Or I kick in the door. Your father asked me to talk to you."

After a minute, Meijji unlocked and opened her door. In the light from the corridor, Shara saw that the brown-skinned girl's face was shiny with tears. Without a moment's doubt, the older woman stepped inside the darkened chamber and lit a candle. The bride-to-be, Shara observed, had left her wedding

dress crumpled on the floor in a pile of clothing.

"I won't do it," Meiji said sulkily, sitting down on the floor, clutching her legs to her chest. "He's a beast. He would force me to leave my home, and take me out into that crazy world with its Lepers and wars and fortress cities, and..."

Shara yawned again, and replied: "I won't stay here and talk all night, you know. I have a crippled child to attend to."

"Fine," Meiji sobbed. "Then please go."

"Not before I've found out what it is you want."

"You don't understand! You're not from here."

"Now listen to me! There are a lot of good people working hard so that you and Dohan will be happy together. Because we all know you're going to face some hard times. But in the end, it depends on you if this is going to last."

Meiji looked up, her eyes wet.

"What do you mean, I love him!"

Shara replied with a shrug: "Falling in love, that's easy. But once the first difficulties begin, will you run home and hide between your father's legs? Or are you woman enough to face the duties of marriage?"

"I'm a grown woman! I can take care of myself!"

Shara was unrelenting: "But can you care for others? Do you have the guts to stand up for Dohan? His

life is much, much harder than yours. I have seen him risk his life, sometimes kill for his family and city. There is some part of his soul that finds glory in bloodshed. You won't be able to change that, no matter how much you try. Would you still love him, if you had seen him fight in a war? Would you wash the blood off his hands?"

"I saved his life once! You --"

Meijji burst into tears again and leapt forward, lunging at Shara with raised fists. The older woman dodged the girl, took a swift step away and held out her arms in a defensive stance.

"Calm down! I was just testing you." Meijji blinked uncertainly; Shara smiled at her. "You did good. Don't worry. The wedding will be just fine. Now get some sleep."

"But --"

Shara let down her guard; then, sensing no danger, she gave Meijji a brief hug.

"Good luck," she said and left the chamber.

The wedding ceremony took place in the largest chapel of the main island. Yet, over a thousand guests from the neighboring islands had to crowd outdoors and try to peek through its windows. Inside, Amada and a large entourage of children and relatives were gathered in the best seats; Meijji's sister Alchaia was absent. Mechao's two oldest sons packed in their families in the rows behind. Pop Shah's musical troupe was also present, playing a classical wedding march that Darc had remembered at the last moment.

Darc himself escorted the bridegroom to the altar in a slow, unrehearsed march. They were both dressed in the nobleman clothes in which they had first arrived, repaired and polished up by an army of seamstresses. The very sword that had killed Mechao's elephant-crocodile hybrid only months earlier now hung from Dohan's belt, polished and sharp. Darc, sweating in his stuffed collar, sent a fleeting thought to his long-lost children. He had imagined seeing them grow up and raise families of their own; he shook off the thought, and was happy for Dohan's sake.

At the altar, Mechao waited with his daughter the bride. Her straight, long dress was of a golden-yellow,

heavy fabric, and golden jewelry glittered on her head and neck. The bridal veil was a wide-meshed net of gold threads, through which Meijji peered at her groom with an expectant smile. When Darc looked forward, he began to doubt his eyesight, then realized that not one but three priests and one priestess were lined up at the altar.

The groom and best man reached the altar -- it was not particularly large or costly, but decorated with painted statues and flowers -- and faced the bride's father. Mechao, resembling a shining mandarin in his blue-black silken clothes, nodded to Darc and grinned childishly. Then he took his daughter's hand, and ceremoniously put it into Dohan's sweaty palm. He gave Dohan's shoulder an encouraging pat. The two older men winked at the young couple, and quietly went to their seats in the front aisle -- Mechao next to his wife, and Darc next to Shara. Shara was holding a symbolic third seat for the only absent guest -- Eye-Leg. It was as yet impossible, for many reasons, to allow her inside a church.

The ceremony proceeded, as a synthesis of the religions brought by all the peoples who had left their mark on Kap Verita during the Great Wars and later. Darc recognized traces of Christian, Buddhist, African, Moslem, and Hindu tradition in the liturgy -- and, of course, the later practices of the Monro faith. One female and three male old priests sang their respective chants, read from their books, and made their signs. Dohan sweated heavily during the rituals -- partly because of the heat in the crowded chapel, partly because of his uneasiness with the mixed rituals. Each priest in turn gave the bride and groom a wedding ring.

After more than half an hour, the oldest priest finally got to the point: "Swear after me: 'I, Dohan Wyan Damon...'"

"I, Dohan Wyan Damon..."

"...take you, Meijji Osanto al-Mechao-dattir..."

"...take you, Meijji Osanto al-Mechao-dattir..."

"...to be my lawful wife in sacred marriage, till death do us part..."

"...to be my lawful wife in sacred marriage, till death do us part."

Dohan let out a sigh; a threshold had been crossed, and at once he felt a different man. Then the priest turned to the bride, and his whole brown, wrinkled face smiled -- he had baptized her as a baby. It struck Darc just then, that the bride and groom had not only grown slightly taller since he first met them... something in their postures was changing even now, their faces becoming more determined, their jaws set firmer. And neither of the two were yet eighteen years old. Adulthood came early in this time, Darc thought, and he envied the young couple.

"Swear after me: 'I, Meijji Osanto al-Mechao-dattir...'"

"I, Meijji Osanto al-Mechao-dattir..."

"...take you, Dohan Wyan Damon..."

"...take you, Dohan Wyan Damon..."

"...to be my lawful husband in sacred marriage, till death do us part."

With the slightest tremble in her voice, so much lower than usual, she said: "To be my lawful husband in sacred marriage, till death do us part."

The priest nodded, raised his arms, and proclaimed: "You are now as one. May the gods bless you and your offspring. Ahmen!"

All four priests linked hands and the remaining three intoned in turn.

"A-akhbar..."

"Auomm..."

"Thee-end," ended the priestess.

Suddenly, the churchgoers burst into loud singing. The band, with Pop Shah and his electric bass-guitar, played a gospel-like tune that Darc had never heard -- and before he knew it, he was singing along in the refrain. Dohan and Meijji stood with their hands tightly locked together, kissing each other's lips without moving an inch, oblivious to the happy uproar among them. The short and stocky Faluti, sitting in the third row from the altar, started to sob. Lucijja jabbed her in the ribs.

"Don't cry!" Lucijja shouted over the noise. "You're making me cry too!"

"I know!" Faluti bawled.

"They make such a wonderful couple! It is so beautiful!"

"I know!" Faluti cried with emphasis, leaning on her taller friend and blowing her nose.

The spectacle lasted for another half-hour, and was followed by dancing and feasting throughout the day. That night, many couples did not get much sleep.

Just before going to bed, Shara and Darc went to look after Eye-Leg. She remained deeply asleep -- helped into sleep by medication, as it were -- and they woke her up briefly. Shara told her about the marriage, and the mutant child seemed to listen intently. Then, as they were about to leave the girl's chamber, something stopped them in their tracks. Eye-Leg stared intensely after them, and held up a crumpled paper note in her single healthy hand. The note read, in clumsy large letters:

DARC EYE-LEG SHARA

Her mouth moved, as she tried to push air through her vocal cords. Like some misplaced reflex, the withered leg on Eye-Leg's shoulders twitched in tune with the movements of her lips. She was attempting to read what she had learned to write.

Darc stared at Shara, and asked: "Did you know?"

Shara was so moved, she burst into tears and kissed Eye-Leg's hands. Suddenly Darc felt his own eyes brimming over too. He held them both in his arms, as they laughed and wept. He would never admit it to anyone, but he knew he had earned a daughter in exchange for the one he had lost 900 years ago.

Book Three

Chapter 17

"It's now or never," Mechao told Darc the following noon, in the lab. "Do you have any experience of surgery?"

"Not really," he confessed. "But I've got a strong stomach and I'll do anything I can to help. How long will it take Eye-Leg to heal afterwards?"

"Anything between a month and a year. It is an extremely difficult operation. Afterward, she will be vulnerable to complications. She may end up a drooling idiot, or die from a blod clot or ruptured artery."

Darc rubbed his scalp nervously; the ultimate decision to go through with this was even harder than he had imagined.

"I know! Either she might die today, or she will die for sure, soon! I told you... we are doing it."

Mechao turned to his two oldest sons, who had already put on sterilized coveralls and facemasks -- they walked away to a sealed chamber further inside the darker recesses of the laboratory, and started

preparing it. From another corner of the cave-like place, Shara rolled in a bed on wheels. Eye-Leg lay on it, sedated. Shara had tied up her own long hair in a shawl over her head, and put on a baggy set of coveralls. She gave Darc a brief, frightened glance, but remained in control of herself. Darc looked at the artificial womb in its glass greenhouse, then to Mechao -- who gravely shook his head.

"No, Shara," Mechao told her. This time you stay outside, until it's over."

Shara's eyes shifted between Darc and Mechao, pleading silently. Mechao wavered, as if some natural force was tugging at his senses. Then, the vigor of the old witchdoctor burst forth in a fit of anger.

"Beware, woman!" Mechao barked; his thin voice echoed through the halls of the laboratory. "I am still the ruler of this island, and my word is law! I am the son of eighteen generations of master surgeons!" Mechao banged his fist at a stone pillar, and paced up to the stunned Shara. He pointed a bony finger to the machinery in the background, and shouted in her face: "My forefathers learned to create life in the machine womb, even before they learned to breed the natural way! How dare you think you can teach me how to save this Leper's life! Go, go help Amada in the house!"

Shara shrank away. For an instant Darc thought she would lose her temper -- but he misjudged her. Shara nodded, and briskly walked off to the exit doors. Mechao wiped his brow and sighed heavily, taking a swill from a small flask of medicine.

He sighed again, and muttered: "I just needed to draw the line." Then he winked playfully at Darc, rubbing his hands -- once more the enthusiastic, childlike wizard he was the first time they met. "Now, let's get the clone out of the womb. It's going to be a messy task."

At dusk it was finally done, and the operating team beheld the result. Eye-Leg was still being kept unconscious as she lay under observation in the sealed operations chamber -- her bald head was resting precariously on top of her new, pale body, wrapped in warm blankets. The girl's original, misshapen limbs were kept frozen in a storage locker, for later study. When Eye-Leg awoke, she would find a perfectly normal body below her chin, and a heavy neck-brace that kept her head firmly clamped against that body until it was safe for her to move. It was first now, that one could truly see the beauty and innocence of that young face. Her gray eyes were still bulging slightly behind her eyelids, as an aftereffect of a life spent upside-down. The DNA-shaped tattoo on her head was still there, as a reminder of her past. Now don't lose your head, girl, Darc prayed. Please don't. The bloodstained operating team left, leaving one member to guard the sleeping Leper during the first night shift.

They were allowed a long, undisturbed sleep. Darc dreamt of his lost children again -- not a nightmare

this time. When he opened his eyes, a surprisingly pleasant memory of the dream was lingering in his mind. A sense of closure, of a destiny made complete filled him. Through the tall mansion windows, he saw the sky with rain and clouds drifting by. Another storm was rising, one that he might not live through. He turned in his bed. Shara was already up and away. He sniffed at the bedclothes, trying to savor her scent in the imprint she had left.

A little later he rose from the wide bed, groaning and yawning as he stretched his limbs. In the mirror on the wall, he saw himself: A tall, lanky man in the prime of his life, with unkempt snow-white hair -- even in his armpits and on various parts of his body. He stared into that undetermined-of-age, yet lined face with its sharp, Caesaresque features. Is that you, David? he pondered. Or is it Darc? Or...

"He is both young man and old man... alive to the night..." His muttering grew into a high-pitched, hoarse cry. "No! I'm not you! I'm me!" He picked up a shoe and flung it at the mirror. It bounced off to the floor. Darc chuckled to himself -- or was it a sob? -- and held up an imaginary microphone to his face: "And now, ladies and gentlemen," he said in rapid American English to the mirror, "for the first and last time in history... the King... back from the dead... possessing the body of a fool! A-one, a-two, a-one-two-three-four..."

In that moment, Shara carefully entered the door, so as not to wake him up. She was fully dressed in a green and blue native skirt and shirt -- Darc wore a pair of baggy long underpants. They looked at each other.

"What did you say?" she asked confusedly. "That sounded like your song."

"I was just trying to remember something," he excused himself. Then it hit him; he cornered Shara and grabbed her shoulders. "The operation! I haven't checked if... have you seen her?"

"I know," she said, flashing a quick grin. "I wanted to let you sleep. She is alive and recovering. Thank you... for everything."

She embraced him, and he mumbled in her ear: "Don't thank me yet."

"Oh, but I will," she half-whispered in his ear, tugging at his pants, and began to kiss her way slowly down his chest.

Book Three

Chapter 18

The bulky carrier aircraft screeched and hissed deafeningly, as it hovered down toward the concrete landing-platform on top of Lord Pasko's castle.

As soon as the carrier touched down on the platform, a huge door rolled shut between it and the dark sky above the castle. The carrier had been flown by robot control from Pasko City, stopped for refueling in an allied city farther north, and had continued northward to its secret destination. It had departed from Pasko City several days earlier, loaded with precious stones and metals -- and several cases of Lord Pasko's finest wine. As the carrier now returned from its clandestine journey, it carried a different cargo.

Tharlos Pasko walked over to the rear port of the carrier, and waited for the doors to open. The doors clankingly swung aside, and sank onto the platform floor. The soldiers and mechanics present seemed to shrink away when they saw what waited inside: twelve new, glistening black spider robots, lined up in perfect rows, now and then rattling their thin legs restlessly, green sensor-eyes flickering on and off to save energy during transport. Tharlos's eyes watered at the sight. His faith in the Black Sun strengthened each time he saw those dead, pseudo-intelligent creatures, ready to obey his every command. Tharlos cleared his throat.

"I am Tharlos Pasko!" he bellowed at the waiting spider robots. At once their green sensor-eyes lit up on their metal stalks; a noise of whining motors, compressed hydraulic gases, and rattling limbs rose from the cargo bay. A unison metallic chirp came from the black machines, confirming that they had recognized the name. "I am your new owner and master. My first order to you is... line up in front of me -- now!" As a well-oiled team the robots marched out, resembling twelve giant black widow spiders lining up before a drill sergeant. Tharlos was satisfied. This batch cooperated much better than the last one. "Soon, you will receive a recharge of power for your batteries. But first, I will perform a test of your loyalty to me, your new master!"

He snapped his fingers at a team of mechanics, who with frightened eyes rolled forth a cart. On the cart

tray, a humanoid-shaped servant robot was writhing helplessly. Its arms and legs had been disassembled, and its remaining head and torso wrestled to get off its chains. The servant's red-glowing sensor slit seemed to flicker faster when it turned to the row of spidery machines.

"Do you see this robot?" Tharlos shouted, pointing at the maimed servant. The black giants twittered and chirped. "Good. On my command, you will tear it apart, without using your lasers, until I order you to stop! On my command -- now!"

Without a pause, two of the spider robots rushed forward with clicking, palpitating mandibles. Tharlos stepped back to give them room.

The crippled servant uttered a calm, metallic objection: "Please do not destroy YIIIII --"

And then the robot servant was no more. Tharlos ordered them to stop. One of the attending mechanics looked away in disgust -- to destroy the lifetime's labor of several guilds, on a whim, was against all his way of life stood for. The other men swallowed, turned pale, but dared not demonstrate what they felt. Tharlos rejoiced: his new warriors showed none of the dangerous solidarity with fellow robots, that had made Bor Damon's own favorite servant a traitor in Tharlos's service. If the courage of his human soldiers might fail him in the coming battle, these robots would never fail -- because they always obeyed.

Or so he believed.

Chapter 19

Bor Damon read the transcribed laser message over and over to himself, as if it contained a hidden meaning that he must decipher.

My Good Friend,

The time has come to choose your destiny.

For some time, I have intercepted radio wave transmissions from D. You know where I stand. Whatever battles I have fought against outside forces in the past, I remain steadfast. "He" is The One. I bow before him, and look forward to the onset of a new Golden Age under his guidance. This I know in my heart, and my beloved wife supports my belief.

Another important development has come to my attention. A distant relative of mine has revealed by way of a secret laser transmitter in Pasko City, that Tharlos Pasko recently met with several high lords. The outcome was secret, but my source fears a military alliance is forming under Pasko. "He" is thus in immediate jeopardy, as is your brave son. Tharlos Pasko's ambitions are not likely to change. Should he succeed in eliminating "him", Tharlos will undoubtedly seek to dominate the whole of Castilia and all of Juro.

Our friendship has suffered from the absence of your son, who shared my opinion of "him". I implore you to set aside our past differences. You must once more become your former self, and act. We can pick up the shards of the once great alliance of five cities, which was betrayed by the Paskos. Many of our own people are divided in spirit, but one decisive move from you will seize their support. But you must act now. Once we were proud lords. This may be our last opportunity to be such men again.

Signed, Lord Azuch Obispo Fache, Fache City, Vemba 2, 940 AM.

Reading Azuch's dense, archaic letter-prose, Bor was in his mind transported to past times -- his violent and intense youth, followed by decades of peace and order, before frozen strangers and turncoat allies had complicated his life. True, the past had been harsh. The roving Leper tribes had pressed on harder than ever before, and only the alliance of the five families had sufficed to break their advance through the heart of Castilia. But even in the darkest moments, Bor had never doubted that he was fighting for a good

cause. This had also been Azuch's set of mind -- and now Azuch, of all people, was clinging to a sudden leap of faith. Risking everything he had fought for, for some airy promise of another Golden Age!

Bor could not comprehend it. He knew beyond all doubt that Darc was just a man, precisely because it was Bor who had awakened him and seen him come to life again. A common illness had very nearly snatched Darc back to the grave. And yet -- this sickly, almost foolish man upset Bor's world to the very core. Bor Damon ceased his heavy thoughts when the thirst seized him. He dropped the letter, and looked around the transmission room for wine. He groped for the nearest bottle -- it was empty. He turned to his servant Vhustank, who was standing in a corner of the room. Vhustank had connected himself to a wall socket next to the laser transmission equipment, and was recharging his batteries. A soft, mute hum was all the noise the servant machine made.

"Vhustank," Bor said hoarsely, "bring me some more wine."

The robot's ornamented head turned to attention with an oily click, and Vhustank responded with total objectivity: "I cannot obey that order now, my lord."

Bor grew angry but added, without shouting: "Obey my order as soon as you think you should, then."

He had not intended those words, but rather a harsher reply. His prolonged bout with heavy drinking had blunted his spirit.

Then all of a sudden, Vhustank got stuck in loop of unresolved choices: "Just a moment... just a moment... just a moment... just a moment..." The mechanical mantra went on and on; these rare malfunctions were triggered by contradictory or certain vague commands. Bor sighed, not even bothering to get angry anymore. He sauntered over to the robot, and squinted into the flickering red slit that was its eyes. "Just a moment... just a moment... just a moment..."

Bor giggled a little, scraping his fingers against his chin -- he had been growing a short beard lately -- pointed a finger to Vhustank's forehead plate, and asked: "Will you make up your mind... or must I bash your head in?"

He giggled again.

The robot kept babbling: "Just a moment... just a moment..."

Right there and then, Bor knew that if he assaulted the helpless machine, he would go insane. Then he saw the lettering on Vhustank's gilded forehead, above the family emblem. The name of the machine's owner:

D A M O N

"Just a moment... just a moment..."

A revelation came. Bor was the one who could not make up his mind. He was acting just like that pathetic machine -- repeating the same pattern over and over, stuck in an unending loop. The insight chilled his spine. He had to break the loop, end the paralysis. On an impulse, Bor reached for the short cable that connected Vhustank's torso to the wall socket. He ought to have used the power switch below Vhustank's head -- but he was inept with electronics and too dazed to think clearly. Bor jerked at the wrong end of the cable, and a wire came loose. The socket responded with a loud snap -- a spark of high-voltage electricity shot out from the wall and into Bor's fist.

The shock tossed him backward -- he hit the floor, twisting spasmodically. The epileptic fit lasted another few seconds, and then he lay still -- thinking that his heart had stopped. Yet strangely enough, it was still beating.

In fact Bor was feeling well, if only a little shaky as he staggered to his feet. He shook his head, stumbled over to the open window and took a breath of fresh air. The lights of his city glittered below, and beyond that -- darkness. One could barely make out the faint shimmer of neighboring city-states on the horizon. The moon and the countless stars lit up the freezing, clear sky. Bor took it all in, as if for the first time, cherishing the sight.

"Yes," he said, mouth steaming with vapor in the cold night air. "I can fight one more battle."

Book Three

Chapter 20

The drowsy captains and lieutenants arrived to the castle's war room, several minutes late; the call from the city lord had surprised them all.

Those who arrived last received a short, but vicious scolding by Lord Damon. Before his officers could express their surprise, Bor proceeded to inform them of Tharlos Pasko's plans for conquest of Castilia. Bor called for an immediate mobilization of Damon City's armed forces, including the inactive reserves. He explained that all their former or remaining allies had to be won back over -- or be declared enemies. The officers soon forgot their drowsiness, and were inspired by Bor's renewed energy. Toward the end of the brief meeting, they were enthusiastic and attentive. Yet, something was on everyone's mind when the question of mobilization came up.

Bor's tone softened down, and he told the assembly: "I know that my son... Sir Dohan... was held in very high esteem by all of you," he said with audible effort. His valor helped save our city during Pasko's first attack." The officers fell mute. This was the first time Bor talked about his son in public since he disappeared. As if speaking for them, Bor said: "Many of us still believe... that he shall return and serve the city again. Until that day... any soldier or officer, who speaks ill of my son is to be reported, and to be discharged from the city forces without trial. Is that clear?"

He scrutinized the tight faces of his officers; they nodded, almost in chorus.

"Very well. Now, we go to the hangar for an immediate inspection of the air force. Alert all hangar personnel for active duty."

Having slept little during his busy night, Bor Damon was awakened by Lachtfot at six-thirty in the morning. With his schedule, Bor barely had time to dress, eat, and clean himself up. But at seven o'clock he stood on the balcony above the main castle gate, in his parade uniform, armor pads, helmet, sword, and all.

He overlooked the front courtyard inside the outer castle wall. A thousand uniformed soldiers were lined

up on the courtyard, rifles and shields gleaming in the cold, clear air. In front of the troops, his officers of the lower nobility stood on a line, attentive and silent. The park was covered by a white sheen of frost, and thin wisps of mist were fuming away before the heat of the rising sun. Bor was just about to address the forces, when he remembered that his collar loudspeaker was out of order. This was going to be hard; his voice was not what it used to be.

He cleared his throat and called out as loudly as he could: "I greet you, soldiers!" It was a coarse, weakened voice -- yet the willpower behind it resounded through, as his words rolled across the open place and over the outer castle wall. The one thousand soldiers were silent. "It is my duty to tell you that Sir Tharlos Pasko, the renegade of our former alliance, is now building a new alliance of cities against us..."

A roar of righteous anger rose from one thousand throats -- and the city heard it too. The entire Damon family was awake now, and flocking to the balcony where Bor stood and addressed the troops. As soon as they heard him at close range, and understood that the roar of the troops were cheers of approval, they were greatly calmed.

Bor finished his address: "And rest assured, soldiers! I promise you this: that I will do all I can to bring Sir Dohan safely back to our city, to serve and protect our people again!"

The troops cheered for several minutes, until Bor left the balcony. First then he noticed that his family had been listening to the speech from behind his back: Osanna, Eveli, Bor's sister Bwynn, and her husband. He blinked uncertainly at them, almost expecting the silent disdain he had been receiving during the last few months. Eveli was the first one to react. She flung herself forward and hugged her father's large frame, smiling a broad, confident smile. Bor smiled, spontaneously, and patted her long, ruddy hair. He looked at his wife. Their eyes met; they did not have to speak words. There was much to get done, but they would do it together.

"This is the voice of Darc. This is the Voice of Liberty."

No musical number preceded this speech. Darc had prepared a written radio speech in advance, for his subject was too complicated for improvisation to take place. Mechao sat next to him in the soundstage, ready to assist if necessary.

Darc took on a calm, clear note: "As I have said before: I have lived among Lepers. Now it is time for you in the cities, who may never have seen a Leper, to learn more about them. What is a Leper? What are they like? Where did they come from? How many are there in the world today? And what do I intend to do for them? These are the questions I will try to answer..."

Darc was too exhausted to speak for a long while afterward. He had put all his effort and sincerity into that speech, and found himself drained of energy. The servants handed Darc water and a towel.

"Never could I have imagined," Mechao said slowly, "that it would take me a lifetime to see the truth." Darc gave the old doctor a puzzled look. "So fiercely proud have I been of my heritage as a practitioner of genetic surgery. Countless times have I told my children, like my father told me, how important our task is, how we must never forget the old knowledge of the DNA."

Then Mechao buried his face in his hands -- at once he seemed as old as his years suggested -- and murmured: "But now I see! What have I made of this great heritage? What did my father do? Nothing! We hid it to ourselves, like selfish children herding glass marbles! All the while, for centuries, millions of people have suffered the Plague because of our unwillingness to help."

Darc had asked himself that question many times by now. Even he had failed to grasp the answer, until now. He shook his head, and comforted his woeful friend.

"No, no, no! It is because you are so proud, that you judge yourself so harshly. Remember! You were born into this world like every other man. Your ancestors took this world for granted too. You never saw a Leper until I brought her here, and how could you? Wouldn't Lepers, too, have killed you if you approached them? You have all suffered from too much isolation -- it is natural to turn secretive, when one is persecuted for such a long time.

"And: before I told you of my adventures in Amrica, there was no way you could know Lepers were

suffering from ocean to ocean. Don't you see how open and friendly you have been to my friends, to me, ever since we arrived here? You could have killed us on the spot, just to secure your people. But you didn't!"

Darc stopped there. He had touched on another sensitive matter. Why hadn't Mechao killed him? Why did he reveal himself in the first place? Mechao took away his hands from his face, and looked into Darc's eyes.

Mechao said: "I thought Pipo, my guardian beast, was going to kill that young knight, or scare him off... he seemed to have no chance, coming to our island all alone. But he fought like a lion to save you... and so I changed my mind. I gave you the chance to prove your worth, and I cured your fever. I grew more curious, and when you told us that you came from another time... I changed my mind. I once considered destroying your aircraft, to hold you prisoners on Kap Verita and force Dohan to marry Meijji. But then I changed my mind again."

"Is that anything to be ashamed of?"

"My shame lies in the fact, that I did not trust you from the very beginning."

"Is that," Darc insisted, "anything to be ashamed of? You were careful, you thought of the safety of your people, as you had been taught."

"Yes... but I was also afraid, when I should have been brave." There was a brief silence. Then, Darc laughed. "What is it?" the old witchdoctor asked him, almost insulted.

Darc wiped something out of the corner of his eye, and answered: "It just hit me. Women. Women are dominant on Kap Verita. Come to think of it, they dominate this world of yours. And the world has remained unchanged for hundreds of years. They have kept the world going, and that's good..."

Darc stood up, helped Mechao up from his chair, and set off to see Eye-Leg.

"But for better or worse," he added as he left, "it takes men to make a change."

Book Three

Chapter 22

"What are you doing here?" Tharlos snapped, angry and anxious at once; he glared at his mother who stood in his doorway, anxious to come inside.

"Are you hiding a radio receiver in there, Tharlos?"

"I don't have to answer you," he said, instantly regressing to a sulking boy, acting ten years below his age.

This always happened, he reflected. And always she got her way, in the end.

"What have you been hearing, that I should not hear?" she demanded.

"The security of the state is threatened," he replied, blocking the doorway. "I must stay informed. It is none of your concern."

She made a face of overwhelming worry, and pleaded in a disturbing, unnatural tone: "But you are my security of state, my concern! I live only for your safety!"

Tharlos felt a growing onrush of panic. He was deprived of sleep; she was drunk again; and he had just heard Darc broadcast an impassioned speech in defense of the Lepers. Tharlos's cult followers were demanding more time and attention than his military endeavors would allow for -- and he had a piercing headache. The last thing he needed was his mother's smothering, lurking presence. Her long-fingered hand darted out to touch him; Tharlos reeled back and tried to shut the door in her face. She hysterically pressed on.

"Don't do this to me, Tharlos! You're all I have left in this world!" she wailed.

"Go back to your useless husband!" he shouted, and thought: What does it take to make you go away? Is there anyone in the world who could help me against you?

Finally, he managed to lock the door; she kept pounding on it, wailing pathetically. Tharlos pressed his palms against his ears, but he could still hear her obsessive litany, still feel the headache. His cranium was on the verge of bursting, and his limbs ached for sleep. Killing her was a tempting option, and all too easily accomplished -- but this was the wrong time. His parents' demise had to be plotted with care, and he was much too busy planning the alliance against Darc. He had to wait; he had to endure this living hell just a little more.

Tharlos sank down with his back to the door, rocking his head from side to side -- descending into a delirium that he mistook for sleep, but was in fact madness. His mother kept wailing for hours on end. The formal ruler of the city, Lord Migam Pasko, was blissful where he slept; he had found another, safer delirium in a bottle.

A baptism of a newborn child was to take place in the cathedral of Damon City, next morning at Mass. The attending families had not yet arrived to the cathedral's front portal, when a verger made a shocking discovery. On the wall of a nearby house, someone had painted a message in huge, mocking letters during the night:

DOES THE GODDESS LOVE LEPERS TOO?

The verger alerted the head verger. The head verger alerted the priestesses, who in turn alerted the high-priestess. Inu took the stairs up to a parapet high above the street, and looked down at the wall painting below. She turned to the head verger.

"Remove it," she said. "At once."

The head verger bowed lightly, and replied: "I took the liberty of ordering that earlier, Your Holiness."

They looked down over the parapet, and saw a crew of vergers and novices rushing across the street,

pulling carts loaded with draperies and canvases. Working at a frenzied pace, they began to nail the sheets over the graffiti. Just as the first crowds of churchgoers began to appear on the plaza before the cathedral, the word LEPERS had been covered from sight. Inu caught a movement in the corner of her eye. She shifted her gaze across the plaza, and glimpsed window shutters slamming shut.

It was too late. The word had been seen, and would spread. Inu pulled her red cloak tighter around her shoulders, shuddering in the icy mist. She thought about Darc, perhaps in a clearer way than she had before: Are you still my Singing King? Is this what you want of me? Will the heavenly reunion end in the desecration of the Church? I don't want ugliness to slink into my beautiful cathedral! I will never let a Leper inside these doors! Never, never. O Goddess, you are not as strong in me as you should be... The high-priestess walked off to the stairs and down, to perform her duties. When faith faltered, there was always ritual to fall back on. And as she had foreseen, the word spread; and spread, and continued to spread. An irreversible tide of change had begun, that would continue long after Darc was gone.

Book Three

Chapter 23

Later in the day, Azuch Fache's private jet landed in Bor Damon's castle hangar, and the old warriors greeted each other again for the first time in months. Azuch embraced Bor like a long-lost son, then kneeled to Lady Osanna and kissed her hand.

"Praised be the Goddess that you could come, Lord Fache," Osanna said.

"I came as soon as my ship was ready for flight," he answered.

Azuch's wounds from the summer's tournament were healed, and he now moved his thick, scarred limbs with his former confidence and stature. The formalities briefly done away with, Bor and Azuch gathered with the lieutenants of both cities, Librian, Bwynn, and Andon Pasko to discuss the situation.

In the short time since Bor had taken action, he and Azuch had beamed invitations to several neighboring city lords. Among those, only two had yet bothered to reply at all: Lord Orbes and an obscure city-state in the Mediterranean region. They studied the documented information long and hard. Food and drink was served, but no wine; Osanna had seen to that.

After a time, Andon Pasko was the one to ask: "How... how far out can we communicate with other city lords? How many potential allies are in within our reach?"

Bor frowned at his stepson's unexpected query. If Andon had shown that kind of interest in state affairs before, he might have earned more than indifference from his new family...

"The laser network between our cities," Bor said without looking Andon in the eye, "is immobile and dates back to the foundation of our cities. Therefore, when a city lord ceases communicating with another city, he also risks cutting off the link to many other cities. Librian, are you finished with that world map?"

The old scholar looked up from the large map sheet he had been drawing on. He laid out the map on the table, for all to see.

"Here," Librian explained, "I have marked out all known laser links between cities. The green lines are open links, such as those between Lord Damon and Lord Fache's castles. Blue lines are links which I do not know about... and red lines are for links recently closed off."

The many red lines, stretching from Fache and Damon City to various other cities in Castilia, made the picture clear. They had, without much noise, been shut out of Espa's community of nobles. Some time was spent discussing which vital links they should negotiate back, so that they could reach friendly cities outside the province. No satisfying conclusion was reached. Their two cities remained outnumbered, surrounded and isolated in the center of the land, against a hostile alliance which stretched from heartland to coast. What intelligence Bor and Azuch's men had gathered, suggested that as many as twenty of the forty known city-states of Castilia were already -- or about to be -- allied to the Paskos.

Azuch brought up the question of their former allies, asking for some weak spot that might open the channels of communication back again. Bor attempted to concentrate -- when again the memory of his lost son flashed through his mind. Something always seemed to reminded Bor of Darc, and Dohan... even a mere sound...

He stood bolt upright; it was Andon who was causing the disturbing, strangely familiar sound.

"You!" he barked, pointing a stubby, accusing finger at the thin young nobleman. Andon stopped whistling, and went pale. Bor's blue eyes were a trifle bloodshot, but steady and stern. "What's that music?" Bor demanded. "Where did you hear it?"

Andon cringed before the hard eyes of the others, looking desperately to his wife for moral support; but Bwynn's eyes were just as unforgiving.

"I-I heard it being sung... by the kitchen staff, when I went there... it's called 'Rokenrol' ballads... popular among the common folk, musicians and minstrels are playing them all over the city."

"It is true," Bwynn confirmed. "There are illegal radio receivers in the city. Have you also been overhearing that music, brother?"

Bwynn's impassive, plain face seemed to soften. Bor blinked -- was Bwynn teasing him for tuning in to Darc's illegal broadcasts?

He grunted: "I have. I do not wish to discuss music -- it is not my field."

"We should be careful not to ignore that music, my lord," Librian fell in. "If Darc's music is spreading, it means his words are spreading too. All because of radio."

Bor grunted, sat down again; and suddenly, he exclaimed: "Radio! That could be the answer. It is madness, but..." Bor put his hands on the map, pointing as he explained. "Why should we bother to use the ancient laser network to reach the cities, when we could send radio wave signals -- to all the secret receivers that are being used to hear that fiend?"

One captain objected: "But -- radio has been forbidden ever since the Great Wars! Think of the risks, my lord -- the outrage, the chaos that will ensue."

Librian said, cautiously: "We could build a device to send such radio signals, but... it would leave our communications open. Any commoner, and all our enemies, could overhear us. And... they might..."

Bor was about to break one of the most long-standing taboos of society. What about the Lepers? Then again, he thought, who was he fooling? Darc had already broken that taboo. When Bor remembered Darc's previous speech about Lepers, a chill went down his spine. The shamelessness of that man... still, there was no other way.

He asked the others: "Can anyone find an alternative, in such a short time?" Everyone fell silent; the decision lay in Bor's hands. His face hardened. "So be it then. Librian! Get me the guild leaders now, and I mean now."

Meanwhile on Kap Verita, Mechao's two oldest sons were busy cleaning the tank of the artificial womb. All residues of unwanted genes had to be scrubbed off, and the tank thoroughly sterilized.

"What are you up to?" Darc asked them.

"Father will grow new guardians, to replace Pipo," one of them said.

"Good," Darc commented. "And please do it quickly."

The weeks passed. The autumn month of Vemba was already deep into an early winter, when Tharlos Pasko received good news from his southern allies: their search for Darc's secret radio transmitter was finished, its location pinpointed. Tharlos went to his father's study, where a painted world map covered one entire wall. There it was, slightly west of Northern Awrica -- a puny ring of volcanic islands, so insignificant one might never notice it... all defenseless, without allies.

But before Tharlos could attack, he thought he should pave the ground; this territory lay beyond his family's established trade routes. According to the map and the court geographer, the biggest city-state near Kap Verita was Dakchaor: a savage place, where rogue merchants and commoners were allowed to travel by sea along the coast. Lepers had the habit of avoiding sea and coast, so the region was safe for a fleet strike.

When he considered it, Tharlos thought he might make it all easier on himself. If the city lords of West Awrica were properly informed, they might agree to provide a necessary beachhead. Heartened by the idea, Tharlos called for his agents and communications officers. His ally in South Castilia would provide the laser link to Dakchaor, and then...

Hiding his radio receiver in his own tiny bedchamber, Awonso was tuning in to hear Darc's latest broadcast -- when a much stronger, clearer signal broke in, and sent another familiar voice crackling through his headphones.

"This is the voice of Lord Bor Wyan Damon the Third, lawful ruler of Damon City. I address all free, honest, pious men in the land of Castilia..."

Awonso could not believe his ears. How was he going to tell the high-priestess this? And on top of that, the whole city was talking about the mysterious message painted outside the church. Inu had asked him about several times, but Awonso had truthfully denied any knowledge of who was guilty. Exhilaration and frustration filled him. These were times of action, and perhaps he should have been that wall scribbler -- doing something to help the tide of change. His loyalty to the ruling family, to the Church, was still strong... yet he felt that greater causes were calling. Above all he wanted to break free. And Darc, in his latest speech, had given him the words to express that desire for a world without walls. It seemed now, that even Lord Damon was taking this message to his hardened heart.

"A world without walls," Awonso repeated in a whisper as he hid the radio set in the locked chest under his bed.

He was already thinking of where to find some paint, and a suitable wall to write on. Then it struck him: the biggest wall of all -- what else?

In the day that followed, throughout the fortified city-states of Castilia, secret receivers took in Bor Damon's new strong signal. He was the first nobleman in centuries to address others than his own class in matters concerning government. At first, the noble families were shocked to hear what was being broadcast to their subjects, without their permission. Tharlos's allies called it an insidious attack and requested Tharlos to assault Damon City again, without delay. Their reaction came far too late. Darc's messages had paved the ground, and Bor's broadcasts -- though the two had no direct connection at all -- were taken as public calls for immediate change. The citizenry began to look for new leaders, who were more prepared to take on the changing times.

But Tharlos, now commander of his father's 1,500 men and jet fleet, heading a new military alliance capable of sending out scores of armored knights and soldiers, reacted with indifference to the pleas of his allies. He was strangely reluctant to attack Damon City again, for reasons he failed to clearly explain.

In his own deluded mind, though, the reasons seemed clear: Fools! Running around like scared children, when someone shouts from your window! I have no need for Bor Damon's head. It is that voice of Darc I must silence, he is the real threat! I must see him dead, before I can feel safe. I will have my revenge on Dohan, too. He will be begging for death, when I'm finished with him. When Dohan is out of his city, his luck will end. His luck lies in the city.

Behind Tharlos's outward resolution hid a deeper fear, his terror of the city where he had been defeated three times -- twice in tournaments, and once in his first great battle. Of course, Tharlos denied this fear even to himself. And thus, in his madness, he gave Bor Damon the respite he sorely needed by ignoring him.

An envoy from the high-priestess visited Bor's castle that same day. Bor was preoccupied with the mobilization, and not really interested -- but he accepted the messenger.

The envoy, a distinguished priestess in her mid-thirties, asked him: "Have you heard of the blasphemy that was written on the inside of the outer city wall last night, my lord?" Bor shook his head; complaints about wall scribblings had poured in during the week, but he had left the matter in the city guard's jurisdiction. "There have been messages offending the Church, and now this..."

The priestess handed Bor a note. He read the transcript: "'A world without walls.' What does it mean?"

"It can only be a call for destruction, for chaos, my lord!" The priestess, a class of person who rarely raised her voice or showed fear, betrayed deep anxiety. "'A world without walls.' It means: Destroy the city walls! It means: Let in the Unclean, allow the wild beasts, the winds of the Wastelands! Her Holiness is not pleased."

Bor held up his hands and smiled reassuringly, almost amusedly, at the panicking priestess.

"I implore you, Your Graciousness -- be calm. As long as I protect this city, there is going to be an outer wall. The Paskos managed to cause a breach in the wall, and what happened? Our people rebuilt it, stronger and better, in no time at all. This -- this crude jest, it means nothing." He looked to Azuch Fache, who just happened to enter the room. "Lord Fache!" Bor asked confidently. "Is it not true, that our cities are going to remain safe and guarded by our outer walls, until the end of time?"

Azuch made a bow to the priestess, and hesitated a little too long.

"'The end of time'," he said in his deep, thoughtful voice, "is an expression I would not use too lightly."

Azuch excused himself, suddenly concerned, his reply hanging in their minds like a foreboding omen.

Book Three

Chapter 25

Night fell, and most citizens of Damon City stayed inside. The city guard was out searching for vandals, and no one wanted to risk arrest: the punishment was a huge fine, or five years of prison labor. Almost no one...

Awonso sneaked out of the house through his father's trapdoor, carrying a bucket of paint under his hooded cloak. An early, dense snowfall suffused the night -- it was just the cover he needed to dare a second raid on the city wall. As he stalked the silent streets, he nearly stumbled into a patrol of guards -- their steps muffled by the fresh snow, like his own, he hadn't noticed their approach. He darted into an unlit alley, and stumbled onto something. The noise alerted the militia.

"Halt! Who goes there?" a guard shouted.

Awonso panicked, slipped on the snow, and ran into more debris. The urgent noise of soldier's boots approached the alley. The fleeing youngster saw no escape, when -- at his feet, something clicked open. Unseen hands snatched his feet and he slid down, tumbling along a smooth surface. He bumped into someone, who groaned at the impact -- there were shuffles in the dark, and a passage clicked shut. A candle was lit.

Awonso glimpsed three faces in the flickering light. They were in a windowless cellar; he had entered through a chute. Before Awonso could open his mouth, a man put his firm hand over his lips. Above their heads, they heard the muffled steps of the city guard, rummaging through the alley. A very long minute passed. The guards found no trapdoor; they walked away to continue the search elsewhere. The man let go of Awonso's jaw.

"Thank you, sir," he gasped. "Who are you?"

"It's unwise of you to ask too many questions, Awonso," the man replied.

He seemed to be a well-fed, bearded man of nondescript age. Under his rough coat, a fine silken collar was partly visible -- but the sparse lighting made it hard to distinguish much about Awonso's three saviors.

"You know me?" Awonso asked in a low voice.

The man grinned; the candlelight made his grin resemble a ghostly leer.

"A small world, this city, is it not? Everyone knows everyone. Let's just say you have friends who wish

to remain anonymous for now."

Awonso calmed down, but not much.

"Are you with the Guild?" he asked suspiciously.

"Your father's guild? I cannot answer that."

"You're from the Merchants' Lodge, then. You talk the way they do -- like the saying goes. 'If you see two merchants standing together...'"

"...they are plotting a cartel," the bearded man filled in. "You're bright, boy. And influential, too. Got a radio somewhere, they say. Received a blessing... the highest kind, they say... from Her Holiness herself."

The other two men smiled knowingly; Awonso felt himself blushing, though they could hardly see it.

The man continued in a business-minded tone: "You are destined to become a man to whom important doors get opened, know what I mean? Now, what are your plans for the future? Before we decide whether to back you or boot you, we'd like a statement of sorts... a defining of loyalties. Who are you with? The nobility, or the guilds?"

Awonso felt a reflex pulling at his brain -- the feudal impulse to obey, to surrender to raw power. Something else happened. Let's Rokenrol, he thought. He laughed at the conspirators, and they seemed taken by surprise.

"Ha ha... plans?" he laughed, raising his voice. "What plans? Who said I have a plan? My plan is... to live and learn. Yes, that's it -- live and learn. How's that for a statement -- you money-grubbing weasels?"

The man grabbed Awonso's collar and raised his fist, but his friends pulled him back. They retreated toward a door, glaring at Awonso where he stood trembling with fear, cold, and excitement.

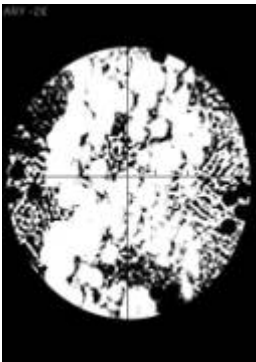
"We'll get back to you, upstart," the man threatened. "And when we do, you had better made up your mind -- this city shall belong to us!" They disappeared out through the door, and locked it. He was alone in the dark, and could hear the slow dripping of water nearby.

I am in the ancient catacombs, Awonso thought. We took shelter down here when the Paskos attacked. Now the Merchants' Lodge is using them for secret meetings and plots. They're scheming to seize power from the city lord. How long has this been going on? Maybe the man was right -- I ought to make up my mind soon.

He managed to pry open the trapdoor, climbed back up to the street, and found his way home to safety.

Tharlos's ally in Kibralta sent a laser-borne reply to his request for contact with the Awrican cities. The reply stated that communications with Awrica had mainly been shut off for the last two hundred years -- for reasons of feuds and mutual hostility, which no one bothered to rationalize. The city lord of Kibralta suggested, with a veiled threat, that his own city remained the safest takeoff-point for the planned attack; no alliances with Awricans were necessary.

Tharlos could not risk losing the beachhead in Kibralta; and so he buried all further attempts to contact the Awrican city lords. Kap Verita was to be attacked directly from the mainland of Espa, in one coordinated move across the sea. He had made yet another critical strategic mistake; it would not be his last.



DNA in microscope

Book Three

Chapter 26

It was the beginning of Tsemba, the last month of the year 940 AM. Windowpanes were fitted and reinforced in the front wall of Mechao's mountain mansion.

Mechao had daughters from two earlier short marriages, who were spread about the islands of Kap Verita, in keeping with the tradition of upholding a reduced male population. But it was Amada who had given him his four sons, who in turn had given him grandsons, appointed inheritors of his estate. Thus, through the ties of mutual obligations, Amada alone remained his lawful wife. The two oldest sons were his full-time apprentices in the laboratory; they were to keep the ancient knowledge when he was gone. Neither of the two matched their father in intelligence, but they possessed the kind of endless patience that could carry them through their education. When Mechao gave them the task of locating Virus B, it meant long, focused, repetitive work.

Ancient books, hundreds of catalogs covering the basic structure of human genes, had to be searched for the control genes which governed the processes that Virus B had distorted in the Lepers. Nobody knew exactly which control genes to look for, so the search went by trial and error. Samples of Eye-Leg's DNA were then examined, and each control gene was scanned for some small mutation which might be the hidden virus. When no fault was found in one control gene, Mechao's sons proceeded to check the next one. By this time, the year 940 AM approaching its end, they had spent countless hours searching the old catalogs of human DNA. Then it happened: among thousands and thousands of musty pages, they found a control gene that appeared malformed in the Leper girl's cells. Using a simple, ancient chemical procedure, they separated this control gene from the cell sample, isolated it and duplicated it several thousand times.

The white-clad young men hurried to tell their father and Darc. The two scientists were not overly enthusiastic at first, until they could see the evidence with their own eyes. They went to a powerful, large microscope and magnified a crystallized sample of the DNA segments. Darc scanned the scattering of duplicated molecules, seeing only a pile of genetic stumps, when --

"There!" Darc whispered as he peered with one eye at the black-and-white image on the small viewplate. He urged Mechao forward to have a look. "See that tiny lump in the chain, Mechao?" he said eagerly. "I feel it in my bones, it has to be Virus B! It's the smallest damned virus I've ever seen! It's so small, that the cells must mistake it for a part of the normal DNA. When the cell divides, the virus is duplicated together with the rest of the cell."

Mechao replied, without looking up from the microscope: "I was not certain all this time whether it was located there, in the actual core DNA of the cell. The gene chains are constantly being repaired and corrected by the inner mechanisms of the cell. How could the gene stick to the DNA in the first place, without being discovered and erased through natural repair?"

Darc thought hard, even as he spoke: "Perhaps... perhaps Virus B has an accomplice somewhere in the cell. Another virus, that keeps the cell's defenses in check. I don't know. But we'll find out sooner or later." Darc was exhilarated; he hugged Mechao's two sons, grinning at them as they nearly choked in his embrace. "You boys have saved the world! Saved the world, I say!"

"It would never have happened without you, Master Darc," one of them mumbled. "We were just doing the procedures."

"He's right," Mechao confirmed, looking up. "Should we act now? I think I can repair those infected genes in Eye-Leg -- right now, the way I altered your immune system when you were sick, Darc. It would only take a few weeks at most, and then she should be clean of the virus. But --"

Both Darc and Mechao recognized each other's hesitation. A mistake now might prove fatal to the Leper girl, as she was recovering from the body transplantation. But her head cells still contained the dreaded Plague Virus B, and if they did not remove the virus -- then it could very likely spread to her new body. If the new body transplant came to suffer Plague mutations and deformities, the strain would surely end her life.

"If only I could buy more time," Darc muttered.

He had done that once, when he froze himself -- this, however, was another time. Even if they by some miracle could freeze Eye-Leg alive, that would make her no safer from other threats. After some debate, Mechao and Darc decided to begin the gene therapy immediately. They promised solemnly that before the end of the year, Eye-Leg would be a completely healthy human being, and no longer a Leper. A sample of normal control genes were extracted and duplicated in the laboratory, to be transferred to Eye-Leg's cells.

Book Three

Chapter 27

Eye-Leg, now bed-ridden and under the constant care of Shara, understood very little of how she had changed. All she knew was that during a long sleep, her old twisted body had been transformed into a normal, beautiful one. The thick veins in her face were beginning to shrink as the blood pressure changed, and Mechao gave her skin a treatment that would reduce the veins even more.

Her thoughts were affected by vague stirrings, bursts of unfamiliar sensations, all induced by the new body, its fresh chemistry and unused muscles. The brace which held her head steadily to her neck was a nuisance, but hardly more so than the lifelong strain of her previous deformed existence. Her mind, stimulated by Shara's reading lessons, used ever more words to think with -- experiences and objects were named and given meaning, where there had previously been only mystery and fear. Eye-Leg's mind began to grow with the new challenges. Such as eating with her mouth -- she hated having to wear the false teeth...

The day after the breakthrough with Virus B, Eye-Leg was approached again by Mechao and Darc. She expressed no fear, when Mechao sat down by her bed and examined her health.

Once he had finished his examination, Mechao told them: "She is recovering well, so far. There is no sign of Plague symptoms in her new body... yet. The virus exists in every cell of her head, from since she was born, but it simply never expressed itself there. Maybe it never will. We could yet choose to postpone the final cure."

Darc looked to Shara, who took hold of Eye-Leg's hand. The girl responded by clasping Shara's palm -- she was quickly learning to use her new limbs, and might soon be able to walk again. Eye-Leg smiled hopefully at them both. Her new false teeth, though too white to be entirely credible, made her smile look more mature.

"Ask her," Shara said gravely. "She understands."

Darc looked into the Leper girl's gray eyes. They seemed much brighter, more comprehending now; she

met his gaze with an almost frightening intensity. He also noticed that her head had not been shaved for a long time -- her scalp hair was growing back, pale and beautiful, but yet very short as it sprouted between the clamps and braces that fixed head to body.

Gently, he explained to her: "Eye-Leg... don't move your head. I just want to ask an important question. Blink with one eye for 'yes', and blink with both eyes for 'no'. Do you understand?"

She blinked one eye -- hard.

"Do you know who this man is?" He pointed to Mechao.

She blinked a resolute "Yes".

"Good girl. Mechao has helped us make you better. Has Shara told you about the Plague, and why the Plague caused you to be sick?"

Eye-Leg hesitated, then blinked with one eye again.

"But you are not completely free of this Plague yet. We must make a final change in you. When that is done, you will never be sick with the Plague again. Then anyone can touch you and not be afraid."

The girl frowned suddenly; the DNA tattoo on her forehead seemed to writhe with tension.

"Claaww!" she shouted in loud alarm, stunning everyone.

Eye-Leg's hand shot out and clutched Darc's arm hard. The fingers of her other hand bent inward, cringing as if in pain.

"Claww," she wailed, turning her eyes to her claw-like gesture. She was trying to create an impression

the Leper chief's deformed hand. Then, a few moments later, she let the hand fan out, fingers straight and normal again. "Claaw," she added in a calmer tone.

And she stared demandingly at Darc, not losing her grip of his wrist. He understood, and nodded.

"Yes, Eye-Leg. We will help Claw get better too. I swear. We can give him a new hand."

She released him and sank back on her bed, exhausted. Shara pushed the others away from the girl.

"But she didn't answer my question," Darc said, rubbing his sore wrist.

"Yes she did, and you know it," replied Shara. "You heard her, Mechao. Do it."

And Mechao began the treatment that would replace and renew all control genes in Eye-Leg's body -- every last one, until there was no doubt.

Meijji's and Dohan's honeymoon had been undisturbed so far; the dreaded attack from Castilia had not yet happened. The stone pavillion at the top of the mansion was their home, where they spent their nights in private, making plans for the future and making love.

That night, as they had just put out the candlelights and lay together in bed, Dohan suddenly asked his wife: "Are you with child, Meijji?"

Meijji stirred in the darkness, and her reply sounded insecure: "No... no. Not yet." She moved over and put her hand on his chest. "Do you think we should have a child yet?" she asked.

After a minute's hesitation, he said: "I would want a son, and a daughter... and I want them to grow up without living in fear. These are not the best times."

Meijji remembered the ancient stories of sailors abandoning pregnant mothers on the islands. The thought frightened her, and she tried to hide it.

"We don't have to form a family right now, Dohan. We are young, we can wait a year or two. Besides... my parents told us once, that if a woman gets pregnant during a war, is frightened or in ill health before giving birth, her children will be born weak and sickly."

"They may be right... I think I heard similar warnings when I grew up."

Dohan recalled Andon Pasko, the almost invisible member of his family; a persistent rumor had it that he was born after some terrible troubles within the Pasko clan. It had never occurred to Dohan until now, that Andon was now a member of Dohan's own family by right of marriage. Would he claim the rule in Dohan's absence, in spite of his feeble character?

"What's wrong?" Meijji asked, nudging closer to her husband.

"I was thinking of home." He fell silent again, then added with suppressed emotion: "I must go back and face them. And I want you to come with me."

"One day we shall. But in triumph, not with our heads bent down. Darc and my father will see to that. They can work miracles together, just you wait and see."

"I know. What they did with that Leper girl... I have never seen a doctor do such wonders before. Imagine, that they could change the entire world. One day, there will be no Lepers. Perhaps no closed cities... perhaps even no more wars."

Meijji giggled, and asked: "If we saw an end to all wars, what would you do for a living?"

The young warrior tried to imagine a world of total peace for a few moments. He failed. Then, he kissed Meijji's face to make her forget the question. She returned his kisses with increasing passion, and they embraced. The two never seemed to grow tired in each other's company.

Book Three

Chapter 28

As Tharlos Pasko continued to deteriorate, so did his rule. He repeatedly postponed the meetings of his Koban-Jem cult, while burying himself in the plans for the attack on Kap Verita. He had even allowed himself not to dye his long hair in several weeks -- and it was rapidly darkening to its natural stripy, black nature. The control of Pasko City itself was left to the city guard and its corrupt, underpaid militia; extortion rackets and kidnappings became their routine. The previously bustling city began to resemble a ghost-town, its streets increasingly abandoned and filthy. The once prosperous ghetto of the city's religious minority, now ransacked and burnt down, still remained in ruins, where a few desperate survivors fought starvation. On one wall of the ghetto ruins was scribbled a message in large black letters, that captured the general mood:

NO LAW NO FAITH NO HOPE

Lord Migam Pasko could sometimes be seen staggering through the rooms and halls of his spacious castle, always with a bottle in hand -- a derelict in his own home, his hair and beard long and unkempt, eyes dull and red. The castle staff ignored him as much as they could. As for Tresa Pasko, she was falling into a state resembling her husband's dementia since autumn. But she upheld a shrill and hollow facade of normalcy whenever she showed herself in public. In this state of affairs, Tharlos found himself spending every free moment fantasizing about murdering his parents. Countless plots played in his rotting mind, each more intricate than the last. He suffered no pangs of ill conscience, only the fear of failure and defeat.

One evening in the beginning of Tsemba, Tharlos tuned to in another of Bor Damon's radio speeches. The gaunt, tall young warrior paced back and forth on the tiled floor, his head aching dully with hate and loathing. Then he had an idea.

A little later, Tharlos gave his two best spies, Rosen Craz and Goldy Stierne, a new assignment. They exited the castle disguised as soldiers, and sneaked into the parts of the city where the growing opposition to the Pasko family gathered. In a dark back alley, the spies shed their disguises and entered an illicit tavern, where cutthroats and dissidents gathered to plot. They began to talk loudly, so that people could overhear, of what ought be done with the ruling family.

The spies had not been sitting in their dark corner for very long, when a cloaked figure approached them. His face was in shadow; his hands, supporting a large beer mug, were pale and well manicured -- the spies noticed a heavy ring glistening on one of his fingers. Nobleman fingers, they thought, belonging to one of the lower nobility. Rosen and Goldy exchanged knowing glances.

"I heard you are here in business matters?" the cloaked man asked -- attempting to sound tough, but not quite succeeding.

"Who's asking?" Rosen probed suspiciously.

"No questions, no lies," came the man's reply. The cloaked man looked about himself, then slid down on a stool facing them. He leaned forward, and said in a lower voice: "The word gets around. You want to get rid of... a troublesome itch, and you are prepared to pay for it."

Stierne nodded slightly, not moving closer.

"Have you heard of the goings-on in Castilia?" he asked.

"Who hasn't?"

"What do you think of the... situation?"

"What do you think?" the man retorted.

The agents smiled.

"Relax, we hate that tyrant Pasko as much any man," Rosen Craz said reassuringly. Yeah, I think Lord Bor Damon is right. Sir Tharlos is a bad, bad man. You know what they say about him?"

Relieved to be among friends, the cloaked nobleman replied: "Yes, he robs young women and sacrifices them to an evil idol. There is a secret cult around Koban-Jem. He leads it." And added bitterly: "That is, he used to lead it before he started this futile war with our allies the Damons. He will be the end of us all, mark my words."

Goldy Stierne nodded thoughtfully, took a sip of his drink, and said: "But isn't the old city lord the truly guilty one? He's a raving drunk. Someone ought to put an end to his misrule, so that the succession could be arranged, before Sir Tharlos snatches the throne with the support of the law -- wouldn't you say?"

The cloaked man said nothing, but nodded to them, drinking in heavy swigs. The spies ordered another round, and bought the man more drinks. Two rounds later, they decided he was ripe for the picking.

"Could you keep a secret?" Rosen asked casually.

"For a hundred in gold, I'd keep any secret," the cloaked man whispered with ill-concealed greed.

He was an easy victim.

Rosen explained, not lowering his voice significantly: "We represent a friend in another city. An important man, our friend, who thinks the Paskos have outlived their rule. Our friend wishes to liberate this city from Lord Migam's tyranny..."

Book Three

Chapter 29

In the following morning, as Darc was preparing the radio soundstage for a new broadcast, he spotted something in a dark corner. It was a working model of a radio receiver, built into a wooden frame, the size of a knapsack -- the type they had been spreading blueprints for, before sending any actual messages. Darc blinked at the frame of tubes and circuits that was gathering dust under a sheet, and hesitated... then it dawned on him.

"Damn!" he shouted, and slapped his forehead. "What was I thinking?"

Darc rushed over and carried the radio receiver into the lamplight. He walked across the laboratory to the central table that held the power switchboard. From here, the electrical current from the transformer station far below was directed to various parts of the mansion and the local villages. He found an adjustable power socket, tuned down the voltage enough to fit the tiny receiver, and connected it. He put on the earphones, and switched on the radio box.

Slowly, he turned the radio's crude tuning dial across the spectrum of frequencies, and listened carefully for voices. For several minutes, he heard nothing but white noise and random static. He realized that the rock catacombs were blocking most signals coming from the outside. So he moved the receiver over to the soundstage, and connected it to the broadcasting antenna -- it should work just as well for taking in signals. As he tuned in this time, Darc stumbled on a loud voice, surprisingly undisturbed and clear.

"Jesus," Darc whispered to himself. "Of all the people in the world, it had to be you..."

It was Bor Damon's authoritative voice he heard, coming in from Castilia.

"And it should be obvious even to my enemies," the voice explained with painstaking slowness, "that this military alliance should not, in any event, be led by Sir Tharlos Pasko. He is far too young for such a responsibility. His book of merits show nothing but one failure after another. Sir Tharlos's attempt to take my city with force failed, though his forces were larger and armed with new weapons.

"It has come to my knowledge, that an unknown third party in the north is supplying Sir Tharlos's forces with a new type of robots -- war robots. These failed to help him take Damon City, but they caused a great loss of lives and should be considered highly dangerous. If these robots are used in his crusade against Darc, they will be a source of widespread death and injury.

"I wish to emphasize, as I have done before, that I do not support any side in this coming conflict. It is

merely my earnest wish, to avoid the dangerous concentration of power under a dishonest tyrant such as Tharlos Pasko. His family was once allied with my own, but he betrayed that alliance most shamefully. This should be a lesson to all his present allies..."

Darc sat transfixed by what he heard, and dared not miss anything of Bor's winding speech. It was at least an hour long, and rather wooden -- but a godsend. When Bor finally ceased his speech, Darc knew a great deal more of what was about to happen. His worst suspicions were confirmed, and he hurried to find Dohan and tell him.

"You heard my father? And he is well?" Dohan asked eagerly.

Darc nodded impatiently: "Yes, yes, your city is safe so far. But we are not. Tharlos and his new alliance will attack the main island anytime soon. We must move all the islanders away from here, now!"

They were pacing toward the central dining hall as they talked, to discuss the matter with Mechao and Amada. Meijji was already alerted and on her way.

Dohan grinned cynically, and said: "Where could they escape -- to the mainland? All of them at once? No, they must hide or fight."

"They are good at hiding, sure, but Tharlos know we're here and he won't stop searching until he finds something."

"So it is to fight, then. I've taught the islanders. Their weapons and defenses are nearly ready. Most of them are women, but... "

Darc chose to ignore that last foolish remark, and they entered the mansion's large dining hall. When Amada and Mechao had arrived, Meijji came, in the company of her brothers. They listened in tense silence as Darc explained about Bor Damon's radio speech.

Later in the day, Darc summarized the situation: "Tharlos Pasko is preparing to attack this island now. Dohan's father is reinforcing his own forces back in Castilia, in order to stand against Tharlos's new alliance. And we have nowhere to turn to for help."

Amada spoke, grave and cool in the face of danger: "Your radio campaign... and Dohan's father's radio messages... they must have been heard by many city people. This is something new to us, that one or two men can be heard across the entire world. Could this not be of some help?"

Dohan was the first one to come up with a response to her query, while scratching his ruddy beard with a quizzical expression on his face.

"I was thinking the same. This radio device can be used to mobilize people against Tharlos, and it will... but it will not make an army race to our rescue. That simply won't happen."

He looked to Darc.

Darc asked Mechao and Amada, as he studied a map of the region: "How do you reckon the mainland cities here in Awrica will react to the radio broadcasts? Will they join Tharlos? I have no information about their intentions, and they are the closest to us."

Mechao shook his head, frowning.

"No one knows. You were inside the Old City of Dakchaor yourself -- what did you learn about the city-dwellers and their intentions?"

Everyone in the dining hall looked to Darc for an answer.

He shrugged uncertainly, and replied: "Nothing, really. They are so different from the city-folks up north -- I can't explain them."

Mechao stepped forth, folding his arms behind his back. A stern, hard appearance was about him -- as if the crisis had brought out a harsher version of the old witchdoctor.

"This is the main island; most of our population lives here. They can hide on the other, smaller islands, or on the northern volcanic island, Fogo... unless Fogo erupts soon." He turned to his wife -- they were not so different in height, but Amada's thicker build and higher shoes made him look slight in her presence. "My dear," he asked gravely, "what does the sea tell you?"

Darc blinked, confused by Mechao's question. Amada moved to a tall window, gazed outside and said nothing for a while. The seabirds outside made little noise; even the sounds of insects and the sea appeared to settle down.

Then she spoke, in a voice that sounded distant: "Fogo is awakening. Within the next few days, the volcano shall erupt again. All islands to the north are in danger. It shall last for many days. An earthquake comes too, bringing storms and giant waves in its wake. The air shall be filled with ash and fire."

Amada's heavy eyelids fluttered a little -- had she been in a brief trance?

She resumed in her normal voice: "I will spread the word. We must prepare to leave the islands for the mainland, until the eruption is over."

Darc asked: "When was the last time Fogo had a major eruption?"

"Four, maybe five hundred years ago," Amada said quickly.

Darc shut his eyes, letting the news sink in. A major volcanic eruption was the last thing a reasonable person would want to stay near.

"We must move Eye-Leg out of the laboratory and into the village. We cannot risk her getting buried if the mansion caves in."

Later, the meeting broke up. Everyone went to work, eager to finish what could be finished while there was still time...

Book Three

Chapter 30

In the meantime, Tharlos Pasko was receiving more daily complaints from his allies. Most of these consisted of pleas to attack Damon City first, and bother about Kap Verita later. He promptly ignored the advice, and sent vague promises to deal with Bor Damon after Darc had been killed.

His spies Craz and Stierne returned from their nightly expedition in the city, and reported that an assassin had been selected, a man they identified as a member of the Koban-Jem cult. They added, proud of themselves, that the assassin would never realize he was doing the dirty work of Tharlos himself. The young nobleman looked about the room where they stood -- only he and the two agents were in sight.

"You are absolutely sure," he asked them, "that none but us three knows about the plot?"

The faithful agents smiled.

"May Koban-Jem strike us down and throw our bodies to the Black Sun if the word reaches outside these walls, my lord and revered high-priest!" Goldy replied.

Tharlos nodded, turned away from them a moment -- then drew the laser-pistol from his shoulder holster and shot the two spies. Three red pulses in rapid succession pierced their heads, and they dropped to the floor. Tharlos called for the guards.

"Rosen Craz and Goldy Stierne are dead," he told them in a flat, emotionless voice.



Fogo awakens

A rumble like distant thunder crashed through the sky and shook Darc and Shara out of their sleep. It was in the middle of the darkest night; the thunder came from the north. Drowsily, they wondered why there was no lightning. Then they understood, and rushed out of bed. The stone floor wobbled under their feet, and they groped for each other's support. Pots and small items shook and crashed onto the floor.

In a few seconds, the earthquake had ceased -- but the distant rumble increased in strength and rhythm, as if some vast creature was breathing the atmosphere with massive force. Darc and Shara grabbed their clothes and footwear. They rushed out into the mansion's central corridor and hurried toward the entrance hall. Around them, the entire household was in frenzied motion -- the electric lamps flickered on and off, and an air of nightmare lay over the scene.

"Eye-Leg!" shouted Shara, dashing off to the Leper girl's sleeping quarters. Her room lay at the other side of the central dining hall, nearby the entrance to the inner catacombs of the rock mansion. Darc followed after and the couple found Eye-Leg, writhing in panic on her bed, dangerously close to falling off. They lifted the frightened girl into a wheelchair, and helped her outside the mansion.

A wide stone staircase led out onto the winding path below the mansion's rocky front, down toward the forest, the terraced fields, and the nearest village. The members of Mechao's household hurried down the path, lighting the way with candle-lamps as they went. The dark clouds above began to boil with tension. Suddenly, a crackling explosion drowned out all thunder. An orange light illuminated the cloudy sky from the north, and the whole main island vibrated. Darc thought of atomic explosions -- but the detonation was of another class, more powerful still. Miraculously, the elevated cable-line remained intact and working. The population of the nearby village joined Mechao's household at the upper end of the line, ready to head downward for the harbor and escape in the hidden boats.

Darc defied all warning calls, and climbed a hill to see past the mountain ridge. The illuminated orange sky lit up everything; he could see the terrain quite well. Dohan hesitated, then separated from the group

and quickly followed after him. After a couple of minutes, Darc came to a hill peak and could gaze across the sea to the north. He gasped at the sight.

One could barely make out the string of smaller islands at the horizon, that surrounded Fogo on both sides. The volcano was but a distant, bright top of fire, from which a blazing column of lava and smoke shot up into the night. A hot gust of wind swept over the landscape; the smell of sulfur increased, and Darc's eyes watered from the stinging dust that blew in his eyes and nose. The sea inside the ring of islands was in an uproar -- the waves crashed against the shores with greater force each time.

Dohan came climbing up next to him, and stared in horror at the eruption. The sight stirred up memories of the stories from his childhood. Those ancient tales recreated the earliest memories of a cataclysm -- the time just before the coming of the Eternal Ice, when the earth and sky unleashed its wrath on a corrupted mankind:

The wrath of the Goddess was merciless. From her body opened a vast crack, and fire and ashes burst forth. The lord of the skies saw this, and roared in rage, and the sky ruptured. And he shook the heavens, so that a white-hot star fell down from the sky. And when the star hit the ocean, the entire earth rustled in its path. And the cities crumbled, and each day became like blackest night.

"Goddess," he whispered, "have mercy upon us."

Then Darc noticed Dohan, and said to him: "I hope there aren't many people over there. It's not safe for them to cross over, with these storms blowing up."

Dohan stared incredulously at his friend, who seemed quite composed in comparison to his own fear. Could not even the All-Mother's wrath shake Darc's confidence?

"What do we do now?"

"What can we do? It's safer to stay here. Perhaps..." Darc swallowed, ashamed that he did. "Perhaps the Goddess is trying to protect us. Or she's arguing with the Singing King over our fate. Looks like she's winning."

The moment he finished his quip, a mighty crackling thunderbolt struck down at another peak, no more than a half kilometer away, and sent a sharp echo rolling over the hills.

Darc flinched, just a little.

"Great Goddess and King, Darc!" Dohan exclaimed, his young face full of frightful reproach.

And for once, Darc kept his mouth shut.



Blood on the castle floor

Book Three

Chapter 31

At the very same moment as Dohan was scolding his flippant friend, a nervous nobleman left his quarters in Lord Pasko's court and sought out Lady Tresa for a late-night audience. He had announced his visit earlier, with a note delivered in confidence; it told her of a secret admirer with important news. Her vanity thus stimulated, she let him inside her wing of the castle.

In the light of her nighttime candle-lamps, she saw a familiar lower nobleman, an undistinguished knight

of a local clan in the service of the ruling family. Through marriage, he was distantly related to the Paskos; Tresa could no longer remember the details.

"So," she smiled at him, "is it love that brings you here?"

A little affair was not at all an unpleasant offer to her; her husband had long since failed to satisfy her.

The man leaned closer to her, and whispered: "My fear is almost as great as the passion that drove me to your sweet bosom. Where is the good city lord?"

The city lord's wife made a harsh laugh and said: "Have no fear -- he's good asleep in his room next door, as usual. I could hit him over the head, and he would not move an inch."

The nobleman blinked nervously at her, grasping her outstretched hand, kissed it fervently but quickly, and asked: "Do you have entrance to his room?"

"Why, certainly I have a key to my own husband's bedroom. Why do you ask?"

From the inside of his mantel, his arm shot out, holding a dagger. He stabbed her in the chest. With a look of quiet, intense surprise on her pale face, Tresa Pasko sank down onto the floor and died; as she sank into her wide green dress it seemed to envelop her, like some giant fly-trap plant. The trembling nobleman frantically searched her pockets and found the keys. He quickly unlocked the door to the adjacent bedroom; he could hear a muffled snoring inside. Having sneaked up to the sleeping Lord Pasko, he felt across the bed for his face. His hand clasped the lord's mouth shut.

Raising his dagger, the man whispered: "Tyrant!"

He stabbed his victim several times; Lord Pasko twitched in his bed, and lay still. The blood-drenched nobleman hurriedly returned to Tresa's chamber, and out into the corridor. He had a small chance of sneaking past the guards and out through a nearby high window, where a climbing rope was waiting to take him down.

The assassin froze in surprise, when he found what was waiting for him at the escape window. Not a human guard, and not a robot servant -- the Pasko family normally abhorred those. A huge black, bulbous, long-legged robot, as quiet and patient as a spider awaiting its prey, stood in his path. Its multiple green sensor-eyes flickered, registering the human presence. Frozen in fear for a moment, the nobleman stood there -- five meters from the gleaming metal creature. Then he turned and fled.

A short burst of laser-pulses smattered from the spider robot, and hit the fleeing assassin in the back. He screamed, collapsed, and his mantel caught fire. A moment later, a passing guard came running to the place and smothered the smoking mantel-cloth. The robot stepped forth and placed its forelegs across the corpse, as if to claim it. The guard backed away.

Upset voices cried from the city lord's quarters: "Murder! Murder!"

Tharlos was dozing off in his own bedroom when, a minute later, he was informed that his parents had been slain. It surprised him how little he actually felt then. Nevertheless he managed to show a face of concern, and went to see the murder scene with his own eyes. It turned out to look just the way he had planned it -- Migam and Tresa firmly dead, and the assassin himself assassinated by a trusty spider robot, just as it had been told. Tharlos dismissed the robot to its storage room, and took to examine the pockets of the dead assassin. He found a note, given to the assassin by Craz and Stierne, which "proved" that he was hired by Darc. Tharlos held up the falsified evidence to the crowd of onlookers.

"See!" he shouted hoarsely. "Proof that Darc was behind it! He ordered the murder of my father and mother! I swear to you all, that Darc of Damon City shall die by my hand! Prepare the airforce for immediate flight! Alert all forces!"

A guard in the crowd was the first one to confirm the new order: "Yes, Lord Pasko!"

Tharlos was now, without ceremony or official verdict, the undisputed ruler. With all the commotion and panic stirred up by his own scheme, Tharlos failed to notice the red signal lamps blinking in the rooms of the former city lord and himself. The signal indicated that an urgent laser message was coming in to the receiving disk in the communications room.

Not until next morning, the new lord of Pasko City took the read the recent laser message. His drowsiness all but vanished when he transcribed and read the first part:

From: Lord Ahmes Seguda, Seguda City of Kibralta

To: Sir Tharlos Pasko, Deputy Commander, Pasko City, Madrivalo, Castilia

One of our scout ships has just approached Kap Verita and returned. It reported a massive volcanic eruption in the northern part of the archipelago. Heavy storms make seaborne transport from Kibralta impossible. The sea attack must be postponed...

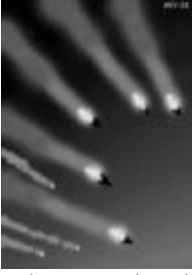
Tharlos stopped transcribing the punch-card tape. He tore it to shreds, his gaunt face contorted by fury.

"Worthless cowards!" he hissed, his eyes wide with insane rage. "They betray me at the first opportunity!"

His grand plan was in peril, and he blamed Lord Seguda. Then Tharlos, abruptly, changed his mind. He was going to make it without the help of Kibralta, he decided. His airborne allies in Castilia would do -- they, and his faithful new robot army. Tharlos knew well that volcanic eruptions were bad omens, believed to be manifestations of an angry Goddess. This only increased his defiance.

"Koban-Jem spits upon your puny wrath," he muttered. Tharlos seemed to have already forgotten that only moments ago, his faith in Koban-Jem was badly weakened. Now his lunacy sprang into full bloom, and his personality changed effortlessly. He was briefly seized by the delusion that he was one of his black robots: hard, infallible, unfeeling. Fantasies of grandeur and bloody triumph swirled through his brain. He whispered to himself -- because he thought a spy might overhear him: "If there is no Koban-Jem to guide me... well, then I shall simply have to become Koban-Jem... I shall become death itself. No one can stop me now. No... one... can st..."

Tharlos slumped down and fell asleep.



The armada takes off

Book Three

Chapter 32

Bor Damon was sitting at the dinner table with his family -- an empty chair signified the prodigal son -- when a messenger entered. He delivered a sealed letter to the city lord; Bor opened and read it.

"May Setan-Klaws take him!" he cursed out loud.

"What is it, dear?" Osanna asked anxiously.

"Our scout crafts have sighted massive gatherings of troops and armaments in Pasko City and down south in Kibralta. Any moment now, they may be ready to attack Kap Verita -- or this city, whichever comes first. Damn that Tharlos Pasko, damn him to everlasting oblivion!"

Andon, who sat by the other end of the table, revealed no reaction to Bor's tirade. Eveli looked curiously at him, trying to spot any hidden loyalties toward his brother. Andon's thin, swarthy features were calm -- as calm as that frail man managed to be -- and he chatted indifferently with his wife. Another messenger then entered the hall, panting. The table-guests looked up; it was Librian.

He stopped, and exclaimed breathlessly: "My lord -- this just came in via the laser link! Lord Migam and his wife Tresa are dead! Murdered last night! Tharlos is the city lord now!"

They were all shocked into silence. Andon gasped, stood bolt upright, mouth quivering to express something -- and finally blurted out: "I knew he would do it one day. I knew it!"

Everyone understood, intuitively, who he was talking about.

"He's evil -- he always was! He told me many times, that he would eliminate me if I got in the way of his destiny -- I welcomed the chance to escape him and those wicked parents of ours!" His parents gone, Andon seemed to explode with suppressed anguish. "They are all sick! Twisted! They have done... things... you wouldn't believe! The Goddess may damn me, but I'm glad they're dead. But he, he's even worse than they were. He started a cult in Koban-Jem's name -- kidnapped and killed people just to gain followers and control them. There's nothing he won't do to for the sake of power!"

Andon had turned pale, his otherwise dull eyes were as intense as his brother's.

He strode across to Bor and grasped his hand, pleading in a thin, high-pitched voice: "I know you distrust me, my lord. And I deserve it. I am sullied by the bloodlines to those people. I'm a weak man. Bwynn, she helped me! Her care saved me from becoming as evil as my brother. I beseech you: You must put an end to Tharlos! If not for me... then for your son."

Mute with fear and revulsion, Bor pulled away his hand. Andon retreated to Bwynn, who caught hold of him. For a while there was no sound in the hall except Andon's low sobbing into his wife's heavy shoulder.

After a time, Bor said: "My word stands. I shall have Dohan returned, whatever the cost."

He finished eating; Librian joined him to the communications room. They prepared and sent a simple message to their remaining allies: WE CONTINUE TO MONITOR ENEMY ACTIVITIES. STAY READY.

Later that day, Lord Tharlos Pasko awakened from his slumber. He was still in his private communications chamber, with the laser equipment by the open window; the cold winds were howling in, and he was shivering. Tharlos sneezed, and remembered his changed attack plans. An airborne expedition ought to reach Kap Verita in just a few hours. He thought of making a speech to his people and soldiers, but immediately discarded the idea; his great deeds would speak for him.

Tharlos went, a little stiffly, to the war room, and gathered his officers and remaining knights. A funeral ceremony for the dead city lord would take days to prepare and perform -- so it had to be postponed. Tharlos ordered that the bodies should be put to lie in state outside the castle, while the attack was carried out. This macabre decision deeply unnerved his underlings, but no protests were voiced. Next, Tharlos put the naval attack fleet that was still waiting in Kibralta on hold, and told the assembled warriors about his latest change of plans. Again, no protests were put up. A broad strategy was decided upon, and transmitted to the other allied cities in Castilia. The alliance was to take off at night, reaching Kap Verita by dawn, with just enough fuel to return.

Had Tharlos mentioned the scout report about a volcanic eruption near their target, his warriors would have been terrified. So he said nothing; in fact he had somehow forgotten that detail himself.

The allies of Castilia were reached by Tharlos's call to arms the same evening. Several of them promptly refused to answer the call -- his sudden change of plans was in their view too absurd to be taken seriously. Lord Seguda in Kibralta, outraged by Tharlos's arrogance, immediately declared their alliance broken. He warned other city lords in the province. And in a few hours, the potential size of Tharlos's forces shrank by the thousands. Only the allies of his own province, Madrivalo, responded positively to the call to arms -- and perhaps more for their own reasons, than out of great trust in Tharlos as commander-in-chief.

From Orbes City, Lord Orbes launched a small fleet of heavy transporter jets. His two sons and a few lower knights joined Lord Orbes, with a force of one hundred armed footsoldiers.

From Yota City, Lord Ue Yota first launched a slower squadron of transporter jets; an hour later, his two fastest fighter craft took off and speeded after. Foremost among those flew The Roaring Wind, piloted by his champion Kamo.

And finally, Tharlos's own forces lifted off. Six heavy transporters, carrying two hundred footsoldiers and twelve war robots, joined by three brand-new jetfighters. The new city lord himself sat at the controls of the flagship fighter, assisted by a senior nobleman of a lower family.

A few tiny, patrolling scout ships from Damon and Fache City were the first victims of the winged armada. The one-man ships spotted the passing squadrons, and were relentlessly pursued and gunned down before they might reach and warn their masters.

The tension was great among all classes of soldiers on board the armada, because this was also an expedition into the unknown -- crossing those Wastelands which many of them had rarely seen with their own eyes. When the footsoldiers got their first glimpse out through the portholes of the carriers, they were filled with fright and awe. In the moonlit winter night, the great walled cities of Castilia were specks of light. The vast stretches of desolation and ruins in between seemed like a frozen void. This, many of them thought, was what the world really looked like. Tharlos's soldiers begun to realize how insignificant their previous expedition had been; crossing a few miles of wilderness to attack Damon City was nothing, compared to leaving their home country.

Whispered speculations and legends passed between the waiting infantrymen; some drank whatever alcohol they had managed to smuggle with them. And those few who could, wrote a last letter to the ones at home...

Book Three

Chapter 33

When Fogo erupted, most of the population of the Kap Verita Islands fled south during the night and following day.

Hundreds of northern islanders attempted to cross the sea to safer ground; several boats perished in the ongoing storms. And the volcano persisted in its fury, spewing ash and fire throughout the second night. A thin film of gray dust covered everything; the ground, the plants, the people. The otherwise so fresh, salty air grew thick with the stench of sulfur. Yet, the population counted itself lucky; most of the ash-falls blew eastward, sparing them from disaster. Mechao's household returned to his mansion, coughing, grimy, and red-eyed.

As a red-tinted dawn came, Shara discovered that Eye-Leg had fallen seriously ill. She called for Darc and Mechao. A quick examination confirmed Shara's worries: Eye-Leg had developed an allergic reaction, unfamiliar as she was with volcanic air pollution. She coughed and snored, and with each cough she winced and moaned -- the laser-welded scar tissue between her neck and body was not perfectly healed yet, even though the straps on her head had been removed. Her wrists, face and neck were partly covered with bandage-plasters, soaked with potions that made the scars grow away.

"Please make her calm down, while I find the right remedy," Mechao asked Shara.

The witchdoctor rummaged in his bag, where he kept a portable cabinet of homemade medicines. Shara suppressed a horrible thought, that Eye-Leg might cough so hard her head fell off. As gently as she could, she tried to calm and soothe the girl. At last, Mechao produced a pump spray-flask.

"Open your mouth, girl... this won't hurt a bit."

He sprayed the liquid into the girl's mouth, and she drew for breath -- but the coughing stopped, and she could breathe freely again. Shara relaxed somewhat, and stroked the tattoo on Eye-Leg's forehead.

The girl smiled faintly.

"She's in a fever," Shara gasped. "She's getting worse again. Why?" "I-I don't know," Mechao stuttered. "It could be anything..."

Darc caught hold of Shara, and encouraged her: "Don't lose faith now. He has worked long and hard to save her. If we just --"

A woman came running into the room.

"Ships in the sky! The outposts have sighted ships in the sky! Coming from the north, sweeping around the islands!"

Dohan came in almost immediately after the messenger; he had already been informed, and was putting on his chest armor as he came up to Darc. Immediately, the young warrior started barking orders.

"Hide the women and children! Mechao, where are those new guardian beasts? Every one who's got shields and rifles -- come with me!"

Darc took a shield and rifle from the wall, where a row of weapons hung waiting. Dohan, now wearing a helmet and chest armor, put a gloved hand in his way.

"Stay behind, Darc. You're much too important to go into battle."

"I'll just send one last message on the radio, then I'll join you. Mechao – the greenhouse! Come quickly!"

Steadying himself on a walking stick, Mechao joined Darc through the passing crowds of frightened people. Hundreds upon hundreds of villagers flocked up the pathways and stairs along the mountainside, into the refuge of the rock mansion. But there was still not room for all. Thousands scurried into crevices and camouflaged caves, huddling there in anticipation of the coming attack.

Nearly three hundred women and men joined Dohan and armed themselves with new shields, rifles, spears, crossbows, and machetes. Their new commander was acting on ingrained instincts, forgetting all civility. He shouted and ordered, quenching all hesitation and indecision among his inexperienced fighters with a steely resolve. First when Dohan had led them down toward the shore, he began to notice familiar faces in the mass of volunteers. He spotted Lucijja and Faluti, hard-faced and determined. He saw Meijji's sister Alchaia, glancing at him from behind her polished shield. An army dominated by women. And... Meijji, hiding far off in the crowd.

"Meijji!" he shouted. "Come over here!"

Up close, he lowered his voice and said to her: "What are you doing here? Get back into the mansion, and help your parents! You're not a trained soldier like me!"

She was about to reply -- when a noise from the sky drowned all voices, even the distant rumble of the smoking volcano. They all looked to the clouded sky. From the northwest, the sky was suddenly scattered with formations of gnat-sized shapes -- an armada of jet aircraft, thousands of meters above the islands, approaching fast. There were many prayers being said among the islanders just then.

In Mechao's rock laboratory, the old witchdoctor and his two eldest sons hastily loaded dozens of small bamboo cages onto carts and wagons. In the cages, little creatures fluttered and hissed in protest against the brutal move. Darc heard and glimpsed the cages being wheeled outside -- not knowing what they

were, and in no position to bother about it. He hurried across to the soundstage at the opposite end of the catacombs, and started up the radio transmitter. Perhaps it was too late already -- this early in the morning, his broadcast might pass unheard. He switched on the clunky microphone piece that hung from the ceiling, and started his address.

"This is the voice of Darc," he said. "This is the Voice of Liberty.

"Can you hear the thunder outside? It is a flying army approaching my position. An army composed of the enemies of liberty. They wish to silence me, before I can bring you the message that will liberate the world. At last I can tell you: We have now found the secret of the Plague. There is a cure! With this cure, any Leper can be treated and live, without being harmful to others. Thanks to this cure, Lepers will be able to give birth to healthy, normal children. The cities can be opened to the world again..."

As he spoke with increasing urgency, Darc was attacked by a nagging, persistent thought: What is Shara doing? Where is our... daughter?

Book Three

Chapter 34

Bor Damon's private radio receiver remained activated, 24 hours a day -- he dared not risk missing any vital information. At dawn, Lachtfot approached him in a corridor.

"Why have you left your post?" Bor snapped as he saw the robot coming toward him.

The machine stopped the clicking movement of its legs, and replied: "Urgent news, my lord. I registered a voice from the radio receiver, my lord."

Bor hurried into the radio room, and put on his earphones. He heard Darc's distress call -- and Bor was

still waiting for the report from his missing scout ships.

"I order full alert from now," Bor told Lachtfot. "Tell Librian to meet me. All officers to the hangar bay, ready for flight according to the plan. All hangar personnel to their posts. And -- put yourself and the other robots to guard my family."

"Yes, my lord."

The city lord proceeded to transmit by radio the attack order to his allies.

Darc finished his radio speech without any musical number, and switched to the homing beacon. He hurried over to the central switchboard and found the correct lever -- as he pressed it, the elevated cable-line began to sink down into the island's thick undergrowth. He grabbed his rifle and ran off to the exit. On the way he called out for Shara and Eye-Leg, but heard no response. Were they already at the Sunray, as he was hoping?

No radio communication took place between the ships of Tharlos's armada, or with their home bases. At close range, a primitive system of multicolored searchlight-signals was used to convey urgent orders between ships.

The signalman in Tharlos's personal ship, watching the other ships from an observation window, called out in the cockpit: "My lord, the troops are afraid!" Then, after he had signaled with his own searchlight: "The weather is unchanging, but the winds are unpredictable.

"Fuel levels are critical. The troop carriers must land soon!

"Engine failure on three, no, five ships! The Golden Wing has lost both engines! She's going to crash!"

Tharlos turned in his seat from the cockpit of his flagship. He gazed down at the main island below, with its harbor ruins -- no sign of artillery or people, and only some small, deserted terraced fields visible on the hillsides. But he could not understand what was disturbing the aircraft engines. He searched the dark, gray skies for attacking aircraft -- but there was nothing there, except a haze of volcanic ashes spreading from the burning mountain up north. Tharlos barely heard the explosion of The Golden Wing plummeting

into the ocean a thousand meters below.

"Sir Devis!" he barked at the senior nobleman next to him. "Read engine status."

A graying nobleman, wearing pilot's goggles and lightweight armor, surveyed the dials and gauges of the panel above his head.

"Fuel pressure stable, engine temp high, burn cycle eleven points below normal... My lord, it's the volcanic ashes and sulphur in the air. Our jet tubes are not built to take in all that pollution."

"Prepare for immediate landing at the southernmost island!" Tharlos shouted at the signalman and the officers. "The foremost flank follows me down to strafe the island -- the carriers start descending now! Mark the ruined harbor for landing."

The flagship screeched down from the sky, flanked by other diving fighters. Mechao's island had no means of shooting down aircraft.

Dohan and his small army lay down flat in trenches, behind rocks and palm-trees, covering their shields so that no reflexes might reveal their positions. Their line was not very wide, but they stood between the invaders and the trail leading up to the nearest village and the hidden cable-line. Tharlos's ships roared past the southern harbor, firing a barrage of pulses at the site and the surrounding vegetation. The bushes and palm-trees instantly burst into flames, and some of the armed islanders were forced to move closer to the beach. The enemy jetfighters followed up with a fast scout sweep across the hills -- and spotted Mechao's rock mansion in the mountainside. One ship made a second turn, and its rear gunners pounded on the mansion as it whizzed by.

The mansion's front wall disappeared in a series of explosions and sparks -- but when the smoke lifted, it still stood almost untouched. The volcanic rock was far too hard to be penetrated from the air. Darc was just crouching down behind a front window, when the laser pulses hit. The air cracked like a thousand whips -- he lost his hearing for a few moments, and stone fragments flew like bullets through the room. He opened his eyes as the ships roared away outside -- and he realized that he had been hit.

A splinter of volcanic or coral rock had ripped up his left shirt arm and opened a long red wound. The pain in his arm rose rapidly, with each frantic heartbeat. Darc tore off his shirt-arm and wrapped it around the bleeding injury, wincing as he did so. Crouching down, he advanced below the windows and

headed for the front entrance. He had to reach their only ship, and see that it was safe. Outside, the island was ablaze with fire and smoke -- and the distant volcano was still erupting.

Book Three

Chapter 35

The citizens of Damon City turned their heads up to look into the sky, and what they saw made their skin crawl with fear. Above, a squadron of Lord Damon's jet fleet roared past and away from the city; from afar, one could just make out the shape of another squadron. The two ship formations joined, ascended into the clouds, and disappeared from sight.

The noise awakened all citizens; among them was young Awonso. He was still asleep in his home, after a particularly lengthy nightly visit to high-priestess Inu. The outside noise receded, and Awonso identified its source. Suddenly alert, he rushed outside and gazed into the gray winter sky. He could see nothing.

Awonso returned indoors and asked his mother: "The noise, mother -- was it...?"

"Lord Damon's air fleet, and another fleet I think. They headed down south a moment ago. Shouldn't you hurry to the castle and ask Librian what is going on?"

"Goddess!" he exclaimed with a frightened realization. "The lord is away... the city! The merchant plot... I must warn Librian!"

Awonso got into his clothes and rushed out into the slush-covered street. His steps were swifter, his body not as plump as it once had been. He had not reached far, when a figure separated itself from the crowd and caught his attention. The man stood in his way, with a mocking sneer on his bearded face. Awonso spun around, and saw another man closing in on him -- fumbling with something inside his cloak. The conspirators from the Merchants' Lodge! The apprentice librarian saw a roofed electric carriage

whirring past, loaded with soldiers. He leapt into the cobblestone road, reached for the open end of the wagon and held on to the hatch.

A sitting sergeant barked at him: "Go away, brat! No free rides!"

One of Awonso's pursuers made a desperate last attempt to stop him, and dashed for the passing vehicle; a knife-blade gleamed in his hand. Awonso glimpsed him coming, swung one foot up and heaved himself into the back wagon of the carriage. The man ceased his pursuit, and disappeared back into the street crowd. Awonso crawled to his feet, and faced two rows of armed soldiers sitting on each side of the wagon -- sixteen men all in all.

The sergeant asked: "Who are you?"

"Awonso, deputy librarian at Lord Damon's castle. I must get into the castle and see Librian!"

The sergeant gave him a shrewd look, and said in a slightly less intimidating manner: "I remember... you're not allowed in there now. Library's closed to outsiders."

He made a move toward Awonso, who refused to leave.

"Please, it's important! I have urgent news! I have proof of a conspiracy against Lord Damon! I must warn him!"

The sergeant halted, and looked about himself.

"The city lord is away, and Lady Bwynn is in charge now. If you want to meet Librian, you must go through her. Right?"

Awonso agreed, and he was not thrown off the wagon. The ride he had hitched was heading toward the castle, and he could see the city guard marching throughout the city. Maybe, he thought, the Paskos were going to attack the city again. Then he understood -- or thought he understood. Lord Damon was

heading south; he was going after Darc and Sir Dohan first.

Book Three

Chapter 36

As the fires were spreading uphill across the area north of the harbor, Tharlos's troop carriers came down to land -- firing wildly at the ground. As their thruster jets cushioned the touchdown, huge clouds of dust covered them from sight.

From his hiding position just a few hundred meters away, Dohan turned over several plans in his mind. Should they charge forward, while the dust covered from laser fire, and engage in hand-to-hand? No, the islanders would be slaughtered. Their only hope was a scorched-earth tactic: to keep the distance, burn the ground between them and the advancing enemy, and try shooting as many soldiers as possible. His only aircraft, the Sunray, was still safely hidden uphill; it had to remain as a last escape route. Then there was Mechao's secret weapon, in the cages the islander army was carrying, which Dohan put little faith in...

Dohan said a hasty prayer, and gave his troops their new orders. The dust quickly drifted away; the noise of opening steel hatches and the trample of soldier's boots echoed across the open place. The first row of enemy troops came into sight, advancing slowly on a wide line, aluminum shields held side by side... a gleaming, walking metal wall, a hundred meters wide. Overhead, a remaining part of the armada was circling -- many of those ships were already moving west and east toward the other nearby islands. Dohan turned to one of Mechao's oldest sons, who sat huddled down next to Meijji.

"Spread the word: cover your shields and let loose the animals!" Dohan whispered.

The word was passed, and islanders in hiding opened scores of small cages. There came a great flutter of wings across the area, when Mechao's latest creations took to the sky. Tharlos's soldiers gasped, then laughed in relief. It was only a flock of scared birds, they thought. But the birds seemed to be attracted to the advancing line of gleaming shields. They flew closer, flapping their wings frantically. The marching soldiers saw what the birds looked like -- and panic ensued.

Each bird was a brown-feathered little monster, with a hissing cobra's flat head and long, saw-toothed claws on its feet. The foremost line of soldiers broke up, as the birds attacked their own reflections in the shields. Laser rifles were fired at random; a few birds fell dead to the ground. The other bird-mutants dove on the soldiers' necks and faces, and sank their poisonous fangs and claws into any exposed flesh. Horrifying screams rose from the beach; poisoned soldiers died in spasms, with the flying cobras locked to their throats. These monsters were not built to last, but they served their purpose. The attackers retreated, yelling "Witchcraft! The island is cursed!" -- scaring up their comrades.

Tharlos witnessed the scene from inside his parked flagship, surrounded by the bulk of other vessels.

"No, you fools!" he shouted in furious frustration, "don't break the chain!"

Tharlos went over to the back of his flagship and stepped into his own mechanized battle armor -- and ordered his own two lower knights to do the same. Then he lumbered out down the ramp, and headed for another parked aircraft.

At that moment, Dohan ordered his volunteers to open fire. A flickering display of laser-beams danced across the beach, felling dozens of Tharlos's panicking footsoldiers. Most of them were hit in the legs -- the islanders were placed at level with the enemy's feet, and aimed with relentless precision. The surviving attackers rapidly put up their shields, but Dohan had already spotted the parked ships in his binoculars.

He shouted to the twelve female snipers in his line: "Sniper battalion! Aim at the foremost, blue ship! On my command... fire!"

A supply ship belonging to Lord Orbes -- it stood out from the cluster, being the only blue-colored ship in the front -- took twenty hits in two seconds. In a flash of light, heat and cascading metal fragments, its fuel tank and cargo exploded. A full platoon of riflemen was blown sky high; burning jet fuel rained down over the area. Soldiers caught fire and ran screaming toward the shore. Above the beach, the circling fighters tried taking potshots at the unseen defenders, but their fire missed -- with a few exceptions. Three female villagers were hit by burning splinter and screamed for help. Their comrades continued firing, and more enemies fell. Their advance had been halted, but would no be for long.

Down on the beach, while the fire fight went on, a pneumatic launch-tube was unloaded and erected behind the cover of the aircraft. The first charge was launched -- it missed Dohan's line of people and exploded on the burning hillside. He looked up, and saw that the raging fires were approaching his

camouflaged aircraft on the plateau above. He ordered Meijji and her brothers to come with him, and they began retreating uphill. Lasers flickered and bombs exploded everywhere around them.

As the party made their way upward, another person left her post and sneaked after them, unseen: Alchaia. She ducked behind a shrubbery, and took aim with her rifle. One hit in the back, she thought, and everyone would believe the invaders had killed Meijji. With his wife gone, Alchaia imagined, the grieving Dohan would seek comfort in her sister...

The opportunity vanished in a moment; Meijji disappeared from view, moving too fast for Alchaia to lock onto her target. She turned around, stood up and peered through the smoke -- and an enemy lookout spotted the movement. A grenade was launched at her position; Alchaia glimpsed a projectile whizzing through the air. The girl was gripped by panic, ran away -- and the bomb detonated next to her. Meijji's group heard the explosion, without knowing that she was dead.

Dohan glanced back down at the smoking beach, where black, rounded spiderlike shapes were emerging from the circle of enemy ships. He ducked down when projectile whistled down nearby; the ensuing blast made him forget what he had seen. A drop of fire hit Meijji's skirt. It spouted smoke; she panicked and screamed. Dohan threw himself forward, grabbed the burning skirt and tore it off her. She had only a minor burn, and moved on without a of complaint. The group continued climbing uphill through the shrubbery; meanwhile, the shootout at the beach intensified.



Spider charge

Book Three

Chapter 37

The Sunray, to Dohan's great relief, turned out to be undamaged. His beloved jet aircraft lay covered by protective canvases and camouflage nets; but the fires were rapidly creeping up the hillside and would reach the ship any minute. It had to lift off. At the foot of the ship Dohan's group ran into Darc, who had been waiting for them.

"Have you seen Shara?" Darc asked, but got no answer.

Dohan entered the ship and started up the engines. None of the people present had seen Shara or Eye-Leg since they left the mansion. It was assumed Shara was still hiding inside with Eye-Leg and Amada's family. Mechao was not to be seen, and Darc asked the witchdoctor's sons where he was. They answered that Mechao had gone off somewhere, carrying a pouch with unknown content. Darc pondered the possibility to assist Dohan as rear gunner -- but then he recalled that the rear cannon had been dismantled before the Sunray left the Leper tribe in Amrica, months ago. His best way to help Dohan was on the ground, by guarding Meijji for him.

Then, the Sunray's jet tubes whistled into action. From the cockpit window above their heads, Dohan waved to the others to help. They pulled away the camouflage nets and blankets, and cleared away from the area. The craft rose on its thrusters, clearly exposed as it ascended from the hillside plateau. Darc, Meijji, and the others looked first downhill to the flickering battlefield on the beach, then to the dark, ashy sky. A black, very sleek enemy craft emerged from the northeast, and closed in on Dohan's ship: it was Kamo Yota in his Roaring Wind. It suddenly occurred to Darc, that his own side might rapidly be losing the battle...

On the southern beach, Tharlos's twelve spider robots were advancing on a wide line. Their heat-seeking sensors spotted the hidden snipers within seconds, and fired rapid green bursts of laser light. Several of Dohan's volunteers were burned, blinded, or killed. Their homemade metal shields stopped most of the pulses, but the islanders were too few and too far apart to form an effective shield wall.

And yet the islanders kept firing, until their rifles were overheated and depleted of energy. One, then three, then four of the twelve war robots were destroyed. The remaining robots marched on -- and panic broke out in the island's defense line. Those volunteers who could stand, retreated back to the hills. Some were trapped between enemy fire and raging bush fires, and died fighting. The sixty-plus unharmed volunteers helped the wounded and blinded retreat. Lucijja and Faluti, miraculously unharmed, covered the retreat with their shields and rifles -- only much later did they allow themselves to weep for those friends who died in the trenches.

Tharlos saw the tide of battle turn, and caught the opportunity. He took a jet-induced leap through the air, landing heavily on his armored boots before his footmen. The black-orange-yellow Pasko flag was tied to the blade of his broadsword, which he waved toward the hill.

"Follow me!" he urged at the soldiers who were still standing -- most of them his own. The forces of the other families were scattering across the surrounding islands. "Did you see the Damon ship flee away? Our flying forces are taking him out as we watch! Now we find the witchdoctor's lair and smoke him out. No monsters of his creation can pass through me!"

He banged the chest of his armor with his metal fist. The soldiers roared a hoarse cry of support, and their officers ordered the remaining companies into formation. Tharlos hurried to catch up with the spider robots, afraid that they would get lost without his guidance, and commanded the troops.

"Launch the flag ship to escort the Yota fighter! Knights in armor! Companies two, three and four! Behind me and -- CHARGE!"

His electronically boosted voice signaled a screaming onslaught. Ninety soldiers and two knights ran across the beach on a wide front, joining the spider robots up the smoldering hillside. The flagship took to the skies, piloted by Sir Devis.



Kamo Yota

Book Three

Chapter 38

Dohan put the Sunray on a low, sweeping course along the circle of islands. He had no plan but to keep fighting until he ran out of fuel, firepower or hope. First, he had to deal with the fastest of the enemy fighters. The Roaring Wind came into his sight, several kilometers away, and swept down against him from the opposite direction -- very fast.

Kamo Yota, piloting his needle-nosed craft alone, had dreamt of this kind of duel for years; he had not yet gotten the chance of fighting the Damons in tournament, in spite of his great talent. This would be his final test of supremacy, to ensure his status as the youngest knight-champion of Castilia. So confident was he of his superior skill that he now indulged in a game of chicken. Kamo forgot his fear of the new and alien environment; his fear of failure was much greater.

The Sunray and The Roaring Wind flew head-on toward each other; either pilot had a few seconds' time to alter course. Only moments before impact, Dohan reflexively banked off. They zoomed past each other -- and a backdraft from The Roaring Wind hit the slower Sunray and tossed it into a spin. Dohan fought with the controls, and pulled up the plane just before it hit the peak of an island. His conscious mind now shut off, Dohan obeyed his gut feeling and set course straight for Fogo.

In the rearview periscope, Dohan could spot the distant shape of The Roaring Wind -- plus another, slower craft closing in from the south. He accelerated up into the clouds, G-forces pressed him into the padded seat and his vision blurred. This was as far as his father's ship had ever been pushed -- until it reached cloud level. The clouds consisted not only of water, but also of poisonous gas and dust from the ongoing eruption. Even as the Sunray skimmed the lowest haze of gray, its engines started to make grinding noises. In a blink, Dohan saw engine temperature rise and exhaust effect fall. He let the craft drop down, and the engine noise receded to a less threatening level.

Then suddenly Kamo Yota was behind him, firing his cannons. Red lines blinked past the windshield -- Dohan put his ship into a downward-spinning roll, then leveled out just in time to avoid diving into the dark sea. Kamo circled a hundred meters above him, waiting for a new opening. Both knew that The Roaring Wind had an Achilles' heel -- its greater speed gave it a very large turning radius. Dohan saw the volcanic inferno rapidly grow in size and fill up the windshield before him. From the crater billowed cascades of molten slag, a hundred meters high or more, and a constant, opaque torrent of smoke was reaching up to the clouds. The smoking crater was much larger than he had imagined -- perhaps three hundred meters across, almost engulfing the little island in blackish, smoking lava streams. The surrounding sea boiled and steamed, and the Sunray abruptly passed through thick veils of mist. The rising mist gave only moments of cover from Kamo's laser fire -- moments to think. Dohan banked his craft, circled the crater in passing -- and he knew what to do.

A short figure came staggering through the shrubbery, into the clearing where the plateau lay; Darc and the others had not heard him approach, due to the noise of the advancing Pasko troops. They took aim at the figure; in the next moment, they saw that it was Mechao. His once white clothes were grimy with dust and, and he wheezed asthmatically. Meijji rushed forward and caught her exhausted father in her arms.

"Where have you been?" they asked.

Mechao was too breathless to speak; he merely waved in an eastward direction.

"The village? You ran all the way here from the village?" his children asked incredulously -- the trail was at least half a kilometer long. He grinned faintly, then gestured for Darc to come closer.

Mechao wheezed into his ear, barely audible: "Took drug to make the run... I planted... old forbidden weapon... in village... make the enemies go there -- don't touch doors... then run away... from invisible gas."

The old doctor fainted. His two oldest sons tended to him, while Darc ran off toward the village. He left his helmet and shield behind to make the effort; his injured arm was enough of a bother already. Skipping over rocks and logs, avoiding burning grass, coughing from the acrid air, Darc sensed what Mechao had been talking about. The old man had recreated one of the weapons that had been used in the Great Wars.

Book Three

Chapter 39

Sir Devis became livid with terror when he witnessed the volcanic eruption at close range. Himself a lower nobleman-warrior in service to the Paskos, he habitually avoided risks and clung to what little privilege he still had. So he left Kamo and Dohan circling the crater while he turned the flagship around, and steered the flagship back south.

The village lay half-concealed in a narrow valley, covered by a patchwork of camouflage-nets on poles. Darc stumbled into a clearing just outside and found the village abandoned. He saw no sign of Mechao's secret weapon -- and he dared not risk a closer look. But something was needed to attract the approaching enemies -- something Mechao had not managed to do on his own. With grim determination, Darc set his rifle on low effect, and squeezed the trigger. He swept a continuous beam over the camouflage nets; they were burned off and collapsed over the huts. A second laser-beam flickered from behind him. Darc ducked down, spun around -- and saw Meijji, dreadlocks spreading in all directions from her oval brown face. She shot down the remaining camouflage nets in a few seconds -- and urged him along with her, away from the deserted village.

"The others are moving away from the plateau," she explained while they breathlessly hurried through the terrain, further upward. "The invaders are closing in."

She was faster and less exerted than he was. Darc pushed himself to the edge, on the verge of collapse. By some miracle of will, he made it far enough from the village to avoid being spotted by Pasko's forces, as they mounted the smoking hillside. The enemy caught sight of the now exposed, abandoned village.

Tharlos ordered his signalman to flash a message to his flagship as it came into sight above -- the ship was a surprise, but a welcome one. Another signalman aboard the flagship saw the message flash from the ground, and conveyed the order to the ship crew. Presently, the flagship flew over the abandoned village and strafed it with a blazing fusillade. The dry huts and houses exploded into fire. Tharlos sent the spider robots ahead of him, to scout the village for traps.

The black robots clattered into the burning village, scanning for life signs. A few stray chicken, dogs, and cattle were blasted dead as they tried to escape. The robots registered nothing they were programmed to

avoid, and stopped -- awaiting further orders from Lord Tharlos. Tharlos marched into the clearing with his knights and soldiers, looking out for more mutated monsters like the flying reptiles on the beach. The troops relaxed somewhat, when they saw the deserted houses. Tharlos ordered them to proceed upward along the path, to the cliff mansion which loomed thirty meters above the valley.

But as the troops marched onward, a footsoldier began to cough -- hard. A sergeant yelled at him to stop coughing -- and gasped, clawing at his own throat. Without warning, the hindmost troops were toppling over like rows of dominoes. A hidden gas canister had been triggered when the village was bombed, with a delayed effect. All humans and animals that had breathed Mechao's invisible gas, now died horribly. Soldiers gargled, tore off their helmets in confused agony -- and their brains instantly dissolved. Bleeding from eyes, ears, and noses, two companies were wiped out before they could outrun the unseen death-shroud.

Tharlos and his decimated troops escaped uphill, cursing the dumb robots that had walked through the poison gas unscathed. His soldiers were in disarray, shooting randomly at the distant mansion, at the landscape, at imagined horrors emerging from their feverish imagination. Short on stamina and ammunition, Tharlos's troops were now also running out of courage. His rallying cries were ignored, even scorned.

A panicking footsoldier shouted to his sweat-soaked comrades: "We're all doomed! Tharlos led us into a forbidden place, and now the Goddess has awakened to swallow us all!"

One of the knights ignited his backpack jets, took a flying leap through the air, and shot down the soldier with a powerful blast of his gun.

"Quiet and fight!" he barked. "Winning or losing, we stand by our commander -- till the end!"

Laser fire hit the knight from behind, and his backpack exploded. He spun up through the air, and tumbled down the mountainside like a burning, twitching tin doll. Someone among Tharlos's own troops had fired the shot. Soldiers scattered recklessly into the burning, smoking terrain -- heading for nowhere in an alien terrain. And despite the hopeless situation, Tharlos refused to retreat. He summoned his sole knight at hand, a handful of officers and soldiers, plus his war robot. They proceeded up the winding trails toward the vertical cliff face that lay ahead.

Book Three

Chapter 40

Kamo Yota glanced momentarily at the gauges on his control panel. His fuel supply depleted rapidly during the duel, and was now below a critical point -- he could not make it back to Castilia in The Roaring Wind. So he pushed the ship even harder, making a last effort to destroy his rival once and for all.

Dohan's fuel supply was better -- but he had no safe place to land, each island now being invaded by cohorts of Tharlos's allies. He flew the Sunray round and round the volcano's column of smoke, nudging closer by each turn. He had attempted, in vain, to get behind Kamo and score a hit -- but it was hopeless. His only chance was to let Kamo chase him, until...

Dohan heard another spray of lasers hit the rear of his craft. A fuse blew on his control panel, and smoke filled the cockpit. He reached for the fire extinguisher under his pilot-seat, and quenched the small fire with chemical foam. This is very bad, he thought. He could literally feel the Sunray buckle and creak in the pushing heat waves from the volcano, and hear the discord of the engines. Invisible hands forced the craft up, then down; turbulence was heavy. The cockpit was too hot, as if the ship was crowded with people; Dohan's hands were so sweaty they could barely hold the controls.

"Do not desert me now, engines..."

Suddenly, some miniscule rock fragment from the eruption hit the ship's nose. The craft shook by the tremendous impact -- the wide windshield, one of the hardest objects Dohan knew, once salvaged from the Wasteland ruins and used to build the Sunray, cracked in the middle. The cabin's air pressure began to drop. Dohan whispered a prayer between clenched lips, that Meijji would be spared from the enemy.

Kamo, likewise, noticed that his own ship was being damaged by pollution. The sensitive burn cycle of the jet engines was rapidly declining; his speed was by the second approaching that of his rival. Kamo knew that he would have to rise higher to gain speed -- but the air above was even worse. The Sunray still managed to elude him, ducking and rolling just a few hundred meters in front of The Roaring Wind.

Then the volcano changed. The cascading eruptions dropped off, the smoke column drifted off -- and the inside of the crater suddenly became visible to the circling aircraft. A strong air current pulled the Sunray inward. Without thinking, Dohan banked left and dived into the inferno. He glimpsed a boiling lake of red smoke, whizzing past just below his ship -- and in his periscope, a small shape was following him. Kamo had swallowed the bait. As he crossed the huge crater, Dohan banked again and throttled the engines, making the crossing last as long as possible -- three seconds, instead of one at most. In that brief passage of time, Dohan felt as if he was falling into a red-hot fireplace.

Kamo's faster aircraft zipped past the crater in no time, then turned and came back after Dohan. When The Roaring Wind made its second turn across the crater, the Sunray was accelerating out of it. Kamo squeezed the triggers of his cannons, and fired an uninterrupted volley. This, he thought, is glorious victory -- and his next thought was his last.

Turbulence!

An unseen force pulled Kamo's powerful but light craft up -- then sucked it down. In the shadow of an instant, The Roaring Wind speeded straight into the inside of the smoking crater wall. The fighter exploded like a giant aluminum firecracker. Burning debris scattered over the lava streams and vaporized. Nothing remained of The Roaring Wind and its aspiring young pilot, but smoke and an unfulfilled promise of greatness. Dohan took his ship away from the volcano -- it was starting to erupt again. The tension across his chest lessened, and he drew a long breath.

"Thank you, great Goddess," he breathed out, and added: "Be not too harsh on my opponent, for he was brave."

The damaged windshield was scraped and dirtied by ash; it was hard for Dohan to get a clear view, but the skies seemed even darker. He checked the clock, then the barometer; it was falling. Dohan had to put the craft down, before it was hit by stray lightning. He set course for the north side of the main island. Red warning lights were beginning to flash on the control panels. The Sunray had not been properly overhauled in a long time; it was not going to last much longer.

Lord Ue Yota could glimpse the distant air battle around Fogo through his binoculars. His forces had landed on one of the minor islands of the archipelago. Ue Yota could not see which ship left the vicinity of the volcano -- but the sea carried the sound of its engines across to his ears. It was not the sound of The Roaring Wind.

And Lord Yota knew in his hardened heart, that his favorite son was dead. He showed no sorrow -- and even if he would have, his face was covered by armor and reflective glass.

Lumbering along the beach in his mechanized suit of armor, Lord Yota was desperately trying to lead his soldiers into a proper charge. From the moment their carrier craft had touched down on that particular island, no human enemy had appeared. Instead, an older breed of Mechao's guardian beasts had attacked the noisy newcomers. Scaly baboon-lizard chimeras came screeching at them from the palm-trees, chilling the hearts of the soldiers. The furry creatures leapt like frogs onto the riflemen, clawing and biting with fangs and claws. Their screeches sounded strangely half-human, and that was the worst part of it -- soon, the rumor spread that these animals were Lepers, deformed humans. Panic spread out of control; the forces were paralyzed and confused.

One of Yota's captains, a pale, gray-haired man with many successful Summer Jousts to his credit, fired at the creatures, missed, and cried out: "Somebody! Show me an enemy I can fight!"

Lord Yota's innate phobia of anything even remotely like Lepers was beginning to win over his sense of honor. He, too, dared not come close to the screeching beasts, but kept his distance and fired from afar. If there had been a human foe nearby, the prospect of surrender would have been acceptable to him -- but in the absence of human enemies, surrender was unthinkable.

A suffocating sense of futility came over the aging, wiry commander. What in the name of the Goddess, of his home province, was this crusade being fought for? Pride kept Lord Yota there, fighting his own fear, waiting for a chance to retreat with honor.



The Orbes Brothers

Book Three

Chapter 41

The gloomy afternoon began to change into a night without a visible sunset. Lord Bes Orbes had his troops and knights scattered over three neighboring islands. These forces encountered much the same opposition as Yota's men: mutated, hostile beasts and no humans. Dispatches and light-signals had been frequently used in the charge, as well as some air support -- and eventually, the incoming reports convinced Lord Orbes that the islands were abandoned. He ordered a wide-scale retreat to the southern main island, where he was to join their commander Lord Pasko. His soldiers and knight-sons were grateful to leave the frightening, cursed islands -- yet the prospect of entering another witchdoctor's island frightened them more.

Saburé and Kensaburé Orbes were sitting in the same ship as they approached the smoking, large main island. Both of them brooded over the same question. Was Dohan Damon, Lord Damon's renegade son, present somewhere down there? Could they fight a former trusted friend and ally? Something occurred to the younger brother Kensaburé -- a notion that had been growing in his archaic imagination since before the war. He cupped his hands around his mouth to be heard over the engine noise, and spoke in his older brother's ear.

"Saburé! You must not tell our father -- but I think this is wrong, what we are doing today." Saburé glared at his brother over the shoulder pad of his armor, too bewildered and tired to say anything. The younger brother persisted: "You know as well as I, that Tharlos is a scheming, no-good traitor, ever since the Summer Joust! Why are we taking orders from him, against good and noble people such as Dohan? Why?"

Saburé took off one armored glove -- with an effort, since his heavy, motorized armor was switched off for recharging -- and slapped Kensaburé's forehead.

"You fool!" he snapped tersely, anxiously checking that nobody heard them. "Are you asking to be shot for desertion? Or have you just soiled your underpants?"

Kensaburé blushed, and felt a strong urge to punch his brother -- neither of them were clever with words, and they easily took to anger.

"I'm not a little brat any longer, Saburé! I'm a real knight now -- I've been in battle, and I'm not putting up with your bullying." Saburé merely grunted at this, and turned away to watch the steadily approaching main island. "Besides," Kensaburé added, "the signs are against us. What if Darc really is the Singing King -- what if the Goddess is trying to warn us not to attack! That burning mountain..."

Saburé stiffened with fright, but kept his indifferent stance. Infuriated, Kensaburé blurted out a secret that would make his older brother take notice.

"I've been listening to Darc's radio transmissions! And I think he's making sense --"

Before Kensaburé finished, Saburé slammed his bare hand over his brother's mouth.

"Be quiet!" hissed the white-faced Saburé.

The soldiers, who were strapped to their seats beside them, saw the quarreling knights and drew their own conclusions. The fighting morale was dropping like a rock. The Orbes jet fleet landed on the beach. The knights screwed on their helmets and gloves, and switched on their armor motors. Lord Orbes stepped out first, leading his troops over to the parked fleet of Lord Tharlos. He was quickly briefed on the present situation.

Orbes raised his broadsword, switched on the loudspeaker in his suit, and bellowed: "Red company stays behind to guard the ships! Behind me, sons... for the greater good of Castilia... we join the main force! Attack the enemy stronghold! CHARGE!"

Bes and his sons ignited their jetpacks. As they soared above the beach and speeded up across the burning, blackened hillside, their footsoldiers paced after them.



Awonso flees

Book Three

Chapter 42

Awonso was, after a brief hassle, allowed into Lord Damon's castle. Heavily armed soldiers were posted all over the fortress, and the tense atmosphere was evident among the household staff. Awonso was ordered to wait until the busy Lady Bwynn and Librian had time to meet him. He sat down on a stool outside the entrance to the war room, seeing people pass by.

After an agonizing wait, a guard Awonso did not recognize came up to him.

"Young Awonso?" the guard asked casually. "Follow me to the library. Librian will see you there."

The man escorted him down the stairs. They walked into the library -- and the soldier bolted the main door, shutting them both in. Awonso could see no sign of Librian in the dusty halls. He turned and saw the sword gleam in the soldier's hand.

The soldier stepped closer, more business-minded than exalted.

"You should've listened to our offer while you still had the chance, brat," he stated. "The Merchants' Lodge can't afford you to stand in our way."

The apprentice librarian darted away with a speed the man had not expected. He ran for the door to Librian's private office, slammed the door shut behind him, and knocked over a bookshelf from the narrow wall, blocking the door.

The man threw his weight at the door, and Awonso heard him shout: "You can't escape! There's no way out!"

Awonso saw the thin door creak and bulge as the assassin battered it. In the course of a few seconds, he would get through -- and the only weapon Awonso carried was a tiny pen-knife. He searched frantically among the high bookshelves for some concealed weapon or escape route. Naturally, there were no laser-weapons stored in the highly flammable library. The soldier kept ramming the door, teasing him with blasphemous words; some merchants still revered the old god of greed.

"Ho-ho-ho, brat! Setan-Klaws is coming to put you in his big sack!"

Awonso spotted a thick power cable that ran along a far corner, disappearing behind a stack of books. He brushed aside the books and found a tall metal locker with a signplate:

-DANGER- RESERVED BY CITY LAW FOR THE GUILD OF ELECTROMECHANICS

This cubbyhole was not built for storing books, Awonso thought absent-mindedly. He wedged open the locker door with his penknife. Inside, he found a humming nest of brightly colored wires, levers, and fuses -- all bearing obscure code letters which only proper guild-members could decipher.

Behind Awonso, just four meters away, the door finally broke off its hinges with a crash. The assassin stumbled in, pushing and groping at the overturned shelf that lay in his way. With a grunt, he made a forceful heave that shoved the shelf to the floor. The frightened, bright eyes of the apprentice scholar met the man's ruthless butcher's eyes. The man stretched out his sword, the tip less than a meter away. Awonso gasped and simultaneously pulled all the levers in the locker.

The light strips in the library and the single lamp in the room died; all went pitch black. The soldier cursed; his boots made noises as he stumbled along the dark space. Awonso, his back to the wall, tried to hold his breath though his racing heart protested. His hand found a large, heavy volume -- Awonso recognized it as "Sir Zoni's Book of Golden Age Findings" by the mere texture against his fingertips -- and he held it up as a shield. Then he gasped again -- the soldier's blade shot out and pierced the sleeve

of his robe. He heard the breathing soldier grunt before him. The sword made another stab, hitting the volume in front of Awonso's chest -- and it withdrew again.

On an impulse, Awonso stepped to the side. The assassin thrust after the sound -- and the narrow room was illuminated, as the blade missed Awonso and was shoved into the fuse box. The man screamed in agony -- flickering blue light enhanced his spasmodic convulsions as 2,000 volts went through the sword and into his chain-mail shirt. To Awonso, those three seconds seemed to last minutes. Abruptly, the dead assassin crumpled to the floor -- the fuse box sent out a few sparkles and went dark again. Awonso nudged away from the locker, carefully avoiding the sword that was still stuck into it, and fumbled his way back into the main library hall.

Dull afternoon light was seeping through a few narrow light shafts. He managed to make his way to the main doors and lift the bolts, open them and dart outside. And he ran into the surprised figure of Librian, who had just arrived.

Awonso immediately began to talk, quivering: "Librian... Merchants' Lodge plotted against the house of Damon... the whole family in peril... an assassin tried to kill me before I could warn..."

The old librarian grasped Awonso's shoulders with blunt force, shaking him calm. Awonso told Librian the whole story in brief sentences, and he understood.

"The ruling family is safely guarded," Librian assured. "We shall track down the conspirators, and Lord Damon will deal with them when he returns."

Awonso blurted out, blushing at his own frankness: "If he returns."

Book Three

Chapter 43

Was it evening or afternoon?

Darc had lost track of time, and the dark, gray skies weren't much of a help. He, Meijji, Mechao and Mechao's sons had been let inside the rock mansion. The main portal was bolted and barricaded with heavy concrete beams. Lucijja and Faluti had posted armed villagers at all the front windows, just in time to see Tharlos's remaining army approach the path leading up to the entrance.

The rooms and catacombs of the mansion were crammed with people: more than two thousand frightened women, children and men. Several thousands more were in hiding across the archipelago, waiting for the battle to end. As Darc sat resting by a window, rifle and shield by his feet, Faluti went over to him with a wine sack. He took several gulps, relishing every drop.

"Thank you," he wheezed.

"You ought to let me examine that arm of yours," said Faluti, fingering at the bloody bandage around Darc's upper arm.

It surprised him that he did not even think of how much it ought to hurt, and he said: "Thanks, but no -- I've got some of Mechao's medicine. I'll be fine."

He mustered a brave grin at the chubby, grimy, black woman. She wore a captured enemy helmet and a homemade chest plate, blackened with soot and burns. Faluti grinned back, flashing her gold tooth -- even it was sooted.

"How is our side doing, Faluti?"

She shook her head sadly, yet she was grinning.

"You see me smile now, but I'll cry when this is over."

The rattle of the approaching enemy grew more audible, as their boots and robot limbs treaded onto volcanic rock.

Darc began to speak: "Faluti, I'm sorry for all this --"

"Now you be quiet, paleface!" she snapped. "Have the priests read a mass for your soul, and be done with it."

"I never was a strong believer, Faluti."

"Then at least behave like you believed!" she said -- and added, in a voice that almost broke: "Because there's a lot of people here who still believe in you. I wish to be one of them, until the end of this day."

Darc -- or if it was David Archibald -- blinked, rose groaning to his feet, and looked at the people's army surrounding him. He wished Dohan had been present -- Darc was hopelessly inadequate in military matters.

But nevertheless he opened his mouth, and addressed them in a harsh, loud voice: "Listen to me! I have not traveled through nine centuries just to end like this! We can still win this battle! I have called for support through the radio, and Sir Dohan's friends will come to our rescue! Stay calm, aim carefully, and fire as soon as you see the enemy --"

The enemy's war robots fired, all at once. The long hall was suddenly filled with flickering green lines, hitting the ceiling and the window edges. Plaster and rock splinters rained down, and Darc took cover. The fifty armed villagers took position, aimed, and fired at the enemy. Several enemy soldiers fell screaming, holding onto their legs and faces. But the undaunted robots fired another round. One male and three female villagers were hit by hot splinter and laser light; screaming, they crumpled. One of them was dead as she hit the floor.

Then --

A crackling thunder from the sky drowned out the screams and the distant rumbling volcano. An overdue rainstorm, mixed with volcanic ash and fueled by its heat, fell over the islands. Mechao's mutated

beasts scurried into hiding, leaving Lord Tharlos's allies alone. And the rain hammered down on them.

Almost simultaneously, Tharlos's spider robots began to malfunction. Polluted water seeped into their joints and seams, causing massive short-circuiting. Shock and terror choked Tharlos's throat -- he could only watch, as his once so terrifying servants turned into sputtering, limp-legged jokes.

It could have been a great opportunity for Darc's side -- if only the rain was not making their laser-weapons useless. Tharlos's battle armor, well insulated and built to withstand moist, was unaffected. He waved his sword and rallied his men forward one more time. They were just a few steps away from the main portal, and they drew their swords. Darc glimpsed outside, and saw a new contingent of soldiers ascending the ridge -- all wearing blue and black. Lord Orbes and sons, no doubt.

Briefly -- in the objective sense -- Darc considered a last, desperate attempt to talk to the enemy. He knew nothing to say that could stop them. Dohan might be dead; Shara and Eye-Leg had not shown up; Mechao was down, and might not live through the day. With each breath, there was pain -- not his own but the pain of dead and injured people around him, heartbroken sobs and wails of people whose lives were suddenly ruptured, destroyed by the intruders. Could he give himself up? Yes, but it would not save the others.

Time seemed to slacken its pace, the seconds resembling minutes -- the rain appeared, to him, to slow down. How many times had he stared death in the eye this year? He had lost count. Had he finally grown tired of staying alive, ceased to fight and escape? No, not really. The drive that kept him going -- blind instinct, maybe -- was still beating in his veins. What attacked him from inside, was something else.

He felt tired of living through so much history.

To hell with trying to talk them over, he thought as the clamoring army moved closer. To hell with playing savior. They'll never change. Even if they manage to rebuild civilization as it was, it'll go the same way all over again. Build up, tear down. Two steps forward, one step backward. Nothing has changed.

But for the sake of the others present, Darc hid his melancholy. Selfishness, for all its practicality, had lost its meaning to him. He unclasped the alligator clips from his rifle batteries, and handed the clips to the next person waiting to recharge her weapon. Allowing himself one last searching look through the crowd for Shara, he approached the battered front windows again. As soon as the rain ceased, the enemy would resume firing. He aimed with one eye at the closest line of gleaming shield-walls.

At least, Darc noticed wryly, the rain was putting out the fires —

The muddled, gray skies rumbled louder -- and louder still. Damn this rain, Darc thought. Get it over with, Goddess. I've waited 900 years too many for this moment. The rumble grew sharper, its pitch changing from a roar to a screech. Darc and the villagers looked up at the rainy sky. Then he saw them. A new fleet of jet aircraft came spiraling down toward the main island -- not as large and imposing as the fleet Tharlos had commanded, but fresh and new. A one-man scout craft swooped past Mechao's mansion -- it had the blue-red-black colors of Lord Damon's fleet. Darc was filled with glee. A goddamn miracle!

"A flag, a banner!" he heard himself shout to the others. "Bring me a banner! Hurry!"

A couple of blankets were quickly tied together; with a piece of coal, the besieged wrote "DOHAN DARC ALIVE" on it in large letters. They carefully held the makeshift banner out through the windows, so that the message was clearly legible.

The scout craft, having rounded the island, whizzed past the mansion once more. The pilot saw the banner, and responded: he ignited a signal flare. A trail of red smoke drew after the small ship as it went down to land. The main fleet spotted the signal. Lord Damon's ship went down first, followed by his troop carriers; further behind and on his flank, Lord Fache and his fleet came after.

As they descended through the pouring rain, the parked fleets of Orbes and Pasko were surrounded on the beach.



A clash of knights

Book Three

Chapter 44

Tharlos heard no explosions from the beach, and his position made it too risky for him to fly up and get a better view. He sent down a messenger to find out what was happening, and waited.

Then a rising jet-engine noise climbed up the hillside. Two large troop carriers flew past -- one bearing the blue-red-black Damon insignia on its flat belly, the other painted green and white. Tharlos's men ran for cover; charges dropped from the ships and detonated among them. The ground shook when explosions blasted geysers of dirt and death into the air.

The peasant army cheered at their would-be saviors, and Darc headed for the mansion's barricaded entrance. The troop carriers hovered down uneasily into the rocky, sloping clearing, and the troops inside started to drop off into the terrain. Almost without hesitation, Tharlos ordered his men to attack the newcomers. The rain seemed to cease, but the air was damp and misty yet. Opposing forces clashed in hand-to-hand combat. The fighting proved quick and brutal; yet, both sides were almost relieved to find a recognizable enemy. Tharlos also fought, with the fury of a desperate man who knew the end was near.

Lord Fache, the most confident of all soldiers present, moved his riflemen in a pinch-formation that cut off Bes Orbes and his men. With shield-walls and flickering laser-fire closing in on all sides, Lord Orbes and his force crowded together for a last stand.

"We must surrender!" Kensaburé pleaded to his father.

"Never!" Bes Orbes replied hoarsely.

In response to that, Kensaburé tossed away his sword and flew up on his jets, toward the gate of the mansion.

Some of the battle clamor receded, as he called out: "Lord Damon! I surrender! Spare us, and we shall

stand by your side again!"

Someone fired a shot at Kensaburé, but it missed. Bor Damon made a jet leap, flew across the sloping field and landed close to him.

"Hold your fire!" he ordered. "Lord Orbes -- surrender yourself now, and I promise you and your sons are to be brought back to your city unharmed!"

Bes Orbes, gazing across the sloping battlefield with the small telescopic sight mounted to his visor, saw his youngest son bow in surrender to his enemy. What then took place in Bes Orbes's frightened mind cannot adequately be described. A few moments later, Bes waved the flag of surrender, and ordered his embattled troops to lay down their arms.

And Lord Tharlos saw his alliance shrink -- again. In the next minute, he stood alone with a single injured knight, a handful of exhausted riflemen, and some useless, malfunctioning black robots. Azuch Fache lined up his men around Tharlos, and there was no question which side was winning. Azuch spoke across the battle lines, a grim voice that commanded every listener's attention.

"Tharlos! You and your brother are the last ones of your line. Yield now! Or there will be just one Pasko left!"

Wild-eyed with fear and hatred, Tharlos stared up into the clearing sky, begging for some last-minute air rescue -- but Lord Yota's fleet was absent. Tharlos had worked hard for it to come true, but the result was undeniable: he had not a single friend left in the world.

"Everyone has betrayed me!" he cried hysterically, blaming the world for his failure. "He did it too, with those no-good war robots I was tricked into buying. And he will come for you when I'm gone! You'll see! Pan Krator is coming!"

In the moment of silence that followed, Tharlos spotted a familiar shape up high, gazing down from behind the mansion barricade. A tall, white-haired man... his nemesis.

"You!" cried Tharlos, firing a round of laser-beams at the mansion. "This is all your doing!"

Darc ducked down, but the pulses were too weak to cause any serious impact on the barricade. Tharlos ignited his jetpack and rose above his men, signaling a last attack. They charged outward with their swords and shields high... and the surrounding circle of Fache's soldiers hacked them to pieces. The last one of Tharlos's knights also flew up after his master -- but he was too slow, and passed unguarded just above a line of riflemen. A close-range volley hit his face, and his visor was penetrated. Blinded beyond all help, he sank to the ground and crumpled down.

The confusion on the battlefield allowed Tharlos to fly past the battlefield, the hundred meters up the slope, toward the front of the rock mansion. It took him just seconds, and he was heading straight for the barricade -- just tall enough an opening to allow him inside. His single goal was to reach and kill Darc; all other ambitions were forgotten. Another jetpack sounded from just below him, and a shape flew in his way, too fast for Tharlos to shy away, even if he had wanted to.

Then, just before the end, he could make out the shape: Lord Damon, rising on powerful jet streams, thrusting his broadsword with both arms, straight toward Tharlos's armored chest. Tharlos could even see Bor's face: In the city-lord's face his mouth roared something, and his eyes were open wide, set firmly on his target.

The eyes so much resembled Dohan's when he was about to cut off a knight's head in the Summer Joust...



Bor Damon's last sight

Everyone present witnessed the momentous collision between the two airborne knights: Lord Orbes and his sons, Lord Fache, Darc, and the villagers inside the mansion.

Tharlos was instantly impaled on Bor Damon's broadsword. The two men collided with a resounding crash, and both were tossed apart -- tumbling to the ground ten meters below. Tharlos landed hard, and lay dead, his facial visor shattered; blood welled up from his head and filled his helmet. Soon, the pale, long face disappeared in a bowl of blood. A few bubbles of air floated up on the surface and burst with muted pops.

Lord Damon landed hard too, lost his gyroscopic balance and fell on his back. His jetpack shut down automatically, and he lay still. Several men rushed to his aid -- among them was Darc. But Bor still lived. He coughed up some blood, and found he could not move more than an inch. His dazed eyes gazed forward, and saw the blue sky appearing from a crack in his visor. He could not feel his legs; he sensed people crowding around his fallen shape -- and a white-haired man moving closer.

Someone removed Bor's damaged helmet for him, so that he could see.

"Darc," he croaked. "Is that you?"

"Yes."

"Is Dohan here?"

"Please hold on. He will be here soon."

Darc leaned closer to the dying man, and asked: "Why did you come? What were you going to do?"

Bor let out a laugh, as faint as whisper.

"You called for help... you remember? I understood... this was my last chance to make good. To choose the right future."

He sighed, and his breathing sounded not quite right.

Azuch wanted to move Lord Damon to a ship, but Darc broke in: "No! We have the best physician in the world here. Lord Fache! Please trust me."

Azuch Fache, still encased in his fearsome armor, unscrewed his helmet and stared down at Darc with intense anger. But he nodded consent.

"Go then, get your damned witchdoctor," he growled.

Darc went back up into the mansion, and returned with a pale Mechao, supported by his white-clad assistants. They were led to the battlefield, and the whisper went among the troops: "Witchdoctor!" The ranks of soldiers parted, and let the slight old man move through. With the help of his assistants, Mechao made a quick examination of Bor Damon. He looked up at Darc, who saw the verdict in the doctor's grave eyes.

"Broken legs, broken spine, massive internal bleedings. He may live for another hour, if he isn't moved."

Mechao gave Bor something to ease his pains and lessen the bleedings; but all it gave him was an extra, short spate of life. Then they noticed a rising uproar among the surrounding troops. Someone was coming. There was confusion, then wild cheering -- then mute silence, as the soldiers let the newcomer pass through.

Dohan appeared, slightly burned and sooty, but well alive. He stumbled forward to his father. Bor, unmoving, moved his eyes and fixed them on the young man who kneeled over him. Dohan clutched his gloved hand.

"My son," Bor mumbled, without anger or fear.

"Father. Can you forgive me?"

"I came here so that you could live, and forgive me."

"Is everything well with the city? Our family?"

"Yes... Is it true, what Darc said... a cure for the Plague?"

Darc could feel everyone's eyes on him. They could not fully believe it; they had to see with their own eyes. He turned his head upward, to the open portal of the mansion. Cautious villagers were lining up at the barricade, rifles and shields ready. Azuch and Mechao called for calm; there would be no more killing, everyone who could would return home. And Darc heard Shara's voice. She appeared in the entrance, propping up the young girl who staggered downhill beside her.

As the two women entered the remains of the battlefield, the Castilian troops backed off; the mark of the Leper, tattooed on the girl's forehead, was enough to frighten them. The soldiers were too stunned to speak – the Leper girl was too beautiful, so utterly different from the monsters they had feared all their lives. Her slim, very pale body was wrapped in half-torn bandages and a shoddy dress, but it seemed flawless. Her walk was clumsy, like that of a child taking her first steps, but with each step she grinned with joy and pride. Her face had changed too, and the facial plasters had come off. The thick, ugly facial veins were virtually all removed or withered away; her youthful features were soft and rounded, full of life and energy. Even the eyes were, though slightly bulging, of a healthy color. Shara looked at Darc; she was too happy for words. She led Eye-Leg all the way down to the dying Bor, so that he could see.

Bor's half-shut eyes met the bright, curious eyes of the Leper girl, and he felt redemption. In his final impression, the blond girl became a vision of the Goddess reborn, rising from the rejects of mankind to bring new life to the world. Dohan saw, with great joy through his sorrow, that his father closed his eyes with a peaceful, contented face.

The Dark Ages had come to an end.



A stone for the past

Book Three

Chapter 45

It was the end of Febre, the second month of the following year.

The Sunray, restored with great care after its recent ordeal, stood landed next to a larger carrier jet in the cover of a jutting rock. The surrounding landscape was an endless, flat desert of white ice and snow; the winds blew biting cold. At least, Darc thought, there were no gruesome remains of people sticking up from the ice, as in his dream. The real land, hundreds of meters below this sea of ice, was virtually impossible to reach.

He had recently encountered a local group of natives -- the traditional Eskimo tribes who called themselves Inuit, living just like their ancestors in these barren wastes. This was their land now, where only they could live. The Inuit called this land "Jukei", a name carried down from the last remaining people who perished in it.

Jukei... U.K. ... United Kingdom... England... Britain... Albion. Many names for one land.

Darc shuddered, chattering his teeth. He was heavily dressed in fur coats and thick boots; the chill came from within. How many times before had the ice claimed his homeland; how many times before had its name changed? One day, he thought, England shall be green again -- but not in my lifetime.

A metallic robot voice interrupted his thoughts: "Where do you want me to put this, Sir Darc?"

Lachtfot came marching up from the Sunray, dragging a loaded sled. The robot wore snowshoes on its heavy feet, just like Darc did; and after Lachtfot trudged Shara, mouth steaming, fur-clad arms folded together.

"Just put the stone down, here," Darc said, pointing at a spot of naked rock.

They were walking on the peak of the Pennine Chain, the only part of England that was not completely covered by ice. The robot pushed the thick stone slab off the sled, overturned it, and rested it upright on the spot. It had been cut out of the nearby rock the very same day. On the slab, which was two meters tall, Darc had inscribed with a laser-knife:

EILEEN ARCHIBALD (1993 - ?)

POWERS ARCHIBALD (1991 - ?)

KEPT IN LOVING MEMORY BY THEIR FATHER, DAVID ARCHIBALD (1963 -)

The slab was thicker at the base; it might stand upright for centuries, until it too became covered with ice. Darc walked over to the slab, pulled away his fur hood, and let his white, thick hair flutter in his face. He stood looking down at the naked rock below the slab, trying to picture his children's faces, picture those years of their lives he had seen.

But he could barely remember what they had looked like.

Then he started to weep, silent and unmoving. He did not feel the wind, the tears that nearly froze on his cheeks, or Shara embracing his waist. After a time, he sensed her presence.

"I can't forget them, Shara," he said. "It's as if they went away just last year. But I keep forgetting all the important things about them... and worst of all..." Shara held tighter onto him, stroking his face with one

glove, until he could finish: "I cannot stop hoping for the impossible. I lived; perhaps they also did. Maybe, somewhere in the world, there are other frozen people, waiting to be found..."

He turned to face her up close. She was weeping too, but there was anger in those black, deep eyes of hers.

"Why can't you stop torturing yourself?" she pleaded. "The past is gone and buried! Even if you found them one day, and brought them back to life, they would have aged... you have changed... you would be strangers to each other. You should think of us, you and me, and Eye-Leg, and Dohan, and Meijji, and Claw, and the Lepers -- the people here, now! We all need you! I need you!"

"I need you," he replied.

They stood there for a while, slowly rekindling the fire between them, letting the world run its course. Mourning, after all, could only last so long, only claim so much attention.

And so they walked back toward the waiting ships, and the world. Darc was already dreaming of their destination, Amreca, and his plan to form a union of city-states over there. This would be the best way to ensure stability during the long process of curing all Lepers and making them full-worthy citizens again. An Amreca federation of city-states it would be -- with a constitution, a flag... and an anthem.

Darc had all the time in the world to pick a suitable piece of music, but already he was down to a few choices. The King was still the King, but in his youth Darc had slightly preferred the bombast of the singer Meat Loaf; he could still remember almost every word of his best songs.

What would it be -- "Bat Out Of Hell", "Dead Ringer For Love", or why not "Modern Girl"?

This time, Darc told himself, this time we are going to do it right.

FROM THE YEAR 941 AFTER MONRO, OUR WORLD BEGAN THE REBIRTH THAT IS STILL IN PROGRESS.

At times, even I must ask myself whether these recent decades were but a dream. So much change, so many discoveries made, so many fantastic events. A majestic greatness has crowned this war-torn, battered planet, and is just now reaching beyond it. As I write these pages and look out into the nightly sky, I do not always know whether to believe my own two eyes.

Yet, in these times of flux, the following legacies of Darc's great work can be counted...

The Amrean Federation of City-States he founded remains to this day, and grows stronger by each year. The old Leper chief Claw is reported to still be alive and well in Exa, where he has retired from his long service in the Senate Court. Visitors to Hesus City may behold the site where Chief Claw struck the first blow of the dismantling of its outer wall, or even hear him tell his story.

Democracy thrives in Juro, since the revered Lord Dohan of Damon City initiated the contract of public elections. Most states in Juro have now signed the Contract, and the world-spanning Conference of Knights is still a vigilant guardian of its principles. Without the Amrean Constitution that Darc wrote, the Contract would not have become reality. Never again shall Castilia succumb to tyrants and usurpers such as Tharlos Pasko.

Lepers all over the known world, once the feared scourge of the Wastelands, are slowly gaining stature in society with varying degrees of success. Since when most cities were opened to the outside and inoculated against the Plague, agriculture has benefited beyond belief. The specter of starvation is now a thing of the past. Many nomadic Leper tribes, stubbornly wary of the city life, now roam the plains of Amreca on horseback, herding huge hordes of bison cattle. But all their children, even as the traditional double-helix tattoo remains on their foreheads, are strong and healthily shaped.

The islands of Kap Verita are currently in dispute with the mainland states over fishing rights; but the King Chosen of Kap Verita, the honorable Mechao the Twentieth, is a shrewd political player whose University of the Sciences gathers the best and noblest minds of the world. The University stands as a guarantee of scientific growth and cultural exchange, which bridges most disputes between states. The Mansion of Mechao has been restored, and is still in use.

The Church of Monro has undergone several upheavals ever since the arrival of Darc -- upheavals that are unlikely to end soon. The Central Dogma has been lifted, and high-priestesses are no longer required to have blond hair and blue eyes. The music now named Rokenrol is no longer controlled by the priestesses, and the art of Rokenrol has become more like a creed in and of itself. As a consequence of this, the older generations often lament that today's youth has no respect for the Goddess. Some like to

call this era the King's Age or the Singing King's Reign. They may be right, but I think not. The ways of the Goddess are countless.

Furthermore, a new faith has been founded around Darc's awaited return from his exile. Many believe him to still be alive in the southern continent Awstrala, or claim to have seen him. Your humble narrator is not prone to speculate in matters of faith. Yet I firmly believe, like my mentor the previous Librian, that Darc came to us for a purpose -- a purpose unknown perhaps even to himself.

We shall now in detail chronicle the most recent era, commonly known as the Age of Miracles --

Excerpt from Librian's "Chronicles" (translated from the original language)

AFTERWORD to DARC AGES Book One, Two, and Three

DARC AGES began as an idea for a comic-strip back in the early 1990s, believe it or not; the illustrations can be traced back to sketches done for that early version. The plotline was written down as a detailed, illustrated synopsis in 1993, and the finished books I-III contain the exact same plot -- with some scenes written almost word for word as they appeared in early storyboards and scripts.

However, before this story was plotted, I had made a detailed and illustrated outline of ANOTHER, separate story set in the same "universe" as DARC AGES BOOK I-III. This "prequel" took place immediately before the events depicted in the current 3 parts (sounds familiar, eh?), and will be included in Book IV to VI.

So Book I-III are but fragments of a much larger sequence of events I dreamed up, in more spectacular settings, with characters even more vivid, and even greater conflicts. Do you want to hear more? All right, sit down and I'll tell you a story...

A.R. Yngve March 20, 2000

APPENDIX: Inspirations and References

First, a clarification: A "travesty" of a paragraph from Alfred Bester's novel THE STARS MY DESTINATION appears intentionally in Book One, Chapter 6. Please note that this "swipe" is not meant to simply steal Bester's thunder, but to imply that a piece of his book was mistaken and quoted as "real" history by a future chronicler!

Second, many references to existing rock'n roll songs occur in the text, with their original titles correctly given, but are not quoted in any great length. This was to avoid thorny copyright issues, which indeed risked poisoning the whole project. It became for me a matter of quoting respectfully, and I have tried to do so throughout DARC AGES.

Third, listening to music while writing DARC AGES was of great inspirational importance. Here is a listing of musical inspiration, which you may listen to while reading the book... and for fun, try to guess which pieces of music inspired specific passages in the text!

CLASSICAL: Maurice Ravel: Daphne & Cloe Igor Stravinsky: The Fire Bird Otto Respighi: The Pines of Rome, Roman Festivals

Carl Orff: Carmina Burana Edward Elgar: The Enigma Variations

FILM SCORES: John Williams: The STAR WARS Trilogy Joseph LoDuca & Danny Elfman: Army of Darkness - The Medieval Dead Maurice Jarre: Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome Patrick Doyle: Henry V

ROCK/BLUES ARTISTS: Elvis Presley Jerry Lee Lewis BB King Meat Loaf

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