

THE SWORD OF LORAN

By Robert Compton Miller

Chapter 1- The Captain from Montia

There were those who remembered that Lomae, the great poet of forty generations ago, wrote a poem about the rise of the three orbs into the sky, the two suns and the moon. For reasons of their own, the priests claimed the poem was blasphemous and drove a wooden stake through his heart. But even the passing of so many generations had not stilled certain clandestine whispers. These whisperers claimed the poet was really killed because he had written that the three orbs rose over seven great cities, and not six.

The poet's fate was very much on the mind of Captain Xanfolo as he stood atop a platform at the edge of the gentle glow cast by liguite torches. When a stray breeze lightly creased the mountain dark time and urged the torches to a brighter light, the shadows parted from around his face and revealed dark eyes in a softly-rounded and well-tanned Montian face. The shadows almost masked a certain hardness in the eyes and the set of his chin. His right hand rested comfortably if not gently on the hilt of his sword.

He was dressed in a simple green tunic, short pants, and soft boots, adequate garb for a typical Montian darkness, soft and warm with perfumed odors coming from flower gardens that were to be found everywhere in the city of Montia.

Captain Xanfolo was at the peak of his military career. He had started out as a cadet when he was twelve rainy seasons old. In the fifteen rainy seasons since, he had climbed the ladder of command. Now he controlled the only Montian battle carrier and the Royal Palace Guards Regiment. The royal consort directed all Montian forces, but since he was absent, Captain Xanfolo, as palace commander, assumed control over the army.

With the coming of the two dawns, he would gain another title, one he did not appreciate. He would become an executioner for the League of Cities. Xanfolo considered the irony loitering in his mind. Forty generations ago, the priests had driven a stake through the heart of a poet, and now he was to use a wooden disk to kill a man for much the same crime.

What did it matter whether or not there had once been seven cities instead of six? If there had been a seventh city, it was so long ago that not even the trained chanters of the generations could remember. Why were men willing to die for such silliness? Why were cities so ready to kill for such nonsense?

He smiled as he considered that if his colleagues from the other five cities along the coast knew his thoughts, they would wink and nod knowingly and say, "That's so typical of the Montians. Life is too easy there. Too much heat. Too much rain. Too many perfumed flower gardens, and too much waste of vital manhood in bouts of love with women. Why waste time thinking about orders?"

His colleagues might be correct. But when the League needed a dirty job done, there seemed to be no hesitation to call on the Montians to do it.

An officer, followed by a young torch bearer, approached the platform, saluted, and gave his report.

“The Nara is ready for flight. I’ve reduced the crew to a minimum as ordered. All the diskers have been removed except for the wooden practice diskers.”

Xanfolo acknowledged the report. “Thank you, Makin. What about the bowmen? We should have some aboard just in case there is a problem.”

“We will have ten bowmen aboard. They are to wear short swords so they can double as guards of honor,” Makin replied.

“Very good. Carry on.”

Makin hesitated and then asked, “Captain, what is this matter about? Why are we doing the League’s dirty work?”

“It’s a sorry assignment,” Xanfolo responded. “The League must have good and sufficient reason for coming all the way to Montia just to end some miscreant’s life, but I do not know why. All I know is that when the two suns rise to end this darkness, we will lift off, circle out over the jungle, do the execution, and then return. It should probably take us at least three light times, and that only if the winds are favorable.”

“Three light times aloft with priests and ambassadors complaining constantly about the food, the sky, and the cramped space? That is not a pleasure trip, Captain. Do you remember how our own green-robed priest took to the sky? He squeezed the rails so hard we got a bucket of water out of them.”

The cadet bearing the torch leaned forward, tapped Makin on the shoulder, and pointed. Both Makin and Xanfolo turned.

Coming across the open land toward the sky base was a procession. There were robed priests leading the way, each carrying a liguite torch. Behind the priests were the six ambassadors. Following each ambassador was a cadet carrying a banner. Behind the cadets there was a cart drawn by two gunas, slow-moving beasts, and guarded by a file of pike men on each side. Standing alone in the cart was a solitary figure. The procession halted a short distance from the platform.

There was a shout from the procession, “Behold! The first sun rises!” As the moon was disappearing over the mountains, the people waited patiently and murmured when the older, far away sun appeared. Before the excitement died down, the bright, hot sun rose triumphantly. The sounds from the crowd were those of elation mixed with fear. For a brief time, all three orbs would be in the sky: the moon, the older, smaller sun, and the hot, young sun. It was an event that happened so rarely that the priests used it as a guide for religious observances.

The light coming from the hot sun spilled over the horizon, and overpowered the distant, old sun and the fading light of the moon. The colors of the robes, uniforms, and banners in the procession escaped the obscurity that the dark time had enforced. The ambassador from Kinsa wore a golden cloak, and a golden banner followed him. The ambassador from Ponta wore a black cloak, and the black banner behind him lazily dipped down just above his head.

Xanfolo guessed the Pontan had a short sword hidden under his cloak. That was a violation of League rules, but the Pontans were frequently in violation of laws, except their own. In Ponta or its colony, Little Ponta, penalties for violations were harsh.

There was the purple-cloaked ambassador from Soren and a purple banner. Then followed the green of Montia. The ugliest cloak and banner of them all was the bright red of Clang. The package of colors was completed with the appearance of the unusual colors of Harg. The ambassador from Harg wore a gold and red striped cloak. Behind him, the

Hargian standard echoed the color combination with a red guna's head imposed on a gold field.

Four generations ago when the League was formed after a long and bitter struggle between the cities, it was decreed that each royal house must have a color that all could recognize. Since it was generally believed that the priesthood bore prime responsibility for causing the war, it was decided that there must be six high priests instead of one master priest over all. Each city would have a high priest, and all priests must wear the color of their city.

Out of that time had come a favorite joke still shared by the royal houses: "If you see a rainbow, call the bowmen."

Mistrust of the priests was wide-spread, particularly in the royal houses and their respective armies. However, everyone knew how much the cities now owed the priests for what they had accomplished in the past generation. It was the priests who had discovered liguite, a precious ore found in the mountain. It was the priests who learned how to process the ore so it could be used to provide heat and light. It was also the priests who found a way, still secret, to mix a liquid made from the ore with other ingredients to form a substance that changed the way people lived in the six cities, if not the way they thought.

This substance looked like the foam left behind by the crashing of the wild waves from the deadly ocean against the cliffs. The new substance was so light that it could float in the sky and would do so unless restrained. The priests discovered that cloth, such as that made in Soren, could easily restrain and shape the foam. It was the priests who first went up in a basket beneath a large bag of foam. The first flight was made with a rope prudently linking the basket to the halters of gunas.

Many priests died in attempts to learn how to fly the sky craft, but in time they learned the art. Then men from the armies learned from the priests. For a brief period, the soldiers doubted the value of the sky craft for use in war, but there was no doubting the sense of power an officer felt when standing on the deck of a battle carrier high in the sky.

The priests soon found a way to free the craft from the ignominy of being tied to gunas for controlled movement. In the space between the rims of the two inverted saucers that formed the carrier, a track ran around the carrier's girth. The track had a lower rail and an upper rail. On the bottom rail was a small cabin mounted on metallic wheels that ran on the track. On the top rail, also mounted on wheels, there were three metal hoops connected together.

In the cabin were three cranks. Wrapped around each was a strong rope of great length. These ropes led to the huge kites stored on the side of the carrier. In flight, the kites were lifted above the carrier by small bags of foam. The winds blowing the battle carrier in one direction could be countered by winds going a different direction beating against the giant kite.

Flying the craft was not for the weak. When the system was being developed, priests and men working the cranks on the drums of the ropes were lost when caught by contrary winds.

The battle carriers were enormously expensive. The cloth and ropes alone tested royal treasuries. The making of even one carrier was the same as creating an industry.

Soren had decided not to build a carrier, putting resources into developing trade. Clang had opted to put its share of foam into commercial use also. Bags of foam could be used to lift carts carrying great loads. Just two gunas hitched to such a cart could easily move the load and needed only a cleared, wide pathway for easy travel. Montia had

constructed one battle carrier and Harg had two. Both Kinsa and Ponta had fleets of four and six respectively.

Xanfolo decided that the procession had been sufficiently awed by the Montian battle carrier. It was time for them to board and rise into the sky. He descended from the platform and beckoned to them. "Come, gentlemen. It is time."

The procession split in two, those coming aboard, and those staying behind. The wind was right, and it was time to ascend into the sky. During the lift-off, Sub-captain Makin would hold the passengers in crew quarters off the center tube. Then the passengers could come on top and look over the rim rail to see the ground far below if they so wished. They could also inspect the two diskerpults with their huge, spring-powered arms capable of launching heavy diskers out with great swiftness and power against a target.

It was a long climb up the two ladders inside the center tube. As Xanfolo climbed, he could hear considerable huffing and puffing below him. Being a priest or diplomat was not good training for life on a battle carrier. He increased his rate of climbing and called down, "Faster, gentlemen. The winds neither know nor honor ordinances passed by august assemblies."

The crew members coming up after Xanfolo grinned. They enjoyed their captain's humor, especially when it was at the expense of the priests. Once atop the carrier, Xanfolo took his place on the raised bridge which was a covered walkway around the tube's exit. Beside him was a signal man with flags.

"Signal the rise," Xanfolo ordered.

"Command honored," the signal man replied as he raised his flags. The signals were read by a subaltern and his flagman stationed at the rim railing across the top of the carrier. The signals were repeated for the ground crew. The moorings were released, and the carrier slowly lifted off the ground. The rise was nearly vertical, there being only the slightest ground breeze.

Xanfolo watched the horizon fall away until he could see only the sky. The larger sun was now rising and pursuing the moon. The sky would quickly heat up and cause winds to begin their travels.

"Voice tube signal to the cabin, send up the kites," he ordered.

"Command honored," acknowledged the signal man as he stepped to the speaking tube to relay the orders.

This was a critical moment. As kites lifted upward, men in the wheeled cabin had to be alert. The ropes paid out at a rapid rate. The cabin officer had to watch carefully for the markings on the ropes. When the kites had risen two hundred strides, the brakes would be applied. The winds would work the kites and pull the cabin around the track until alignment was achieved. Then came the game of working the kites. By pulling right or left on the ropes leading out to the edge of the kites, the pressures could be increased or decreased. In this manner, subtle but important changes in direction could be achieved.

Control of direction and course was the responsibility of the subaltern in the cabin. He constantly judged the drift of the carrier against the course desired. The course for this journey was simple enough. The battle carrier would follow as closely as possible the trail from Montia toward Montia II, the colony on the Mon River and close to the jungle. Once over the jungle, the carrier would be outside the most faraway edge of the six realms.

After talking in the sound tube to Makin, who was below comforting the passengers, Xanfolo secured the bridge. The journey had begun with reasonable success. While the

mission was not to his liking, there were some benefits. He wanted to fly as low as possible in order to check the trail for the convoys of gunas and bag-lifted carts filled with raw materials coming from Montia II. The barbarians had been quiet for a long time, but recently there had been an increase in the number of reports signaled by semaphore from Montia II about incidents along the trail. Small parties of barbarians were shadowing convoys.

Xanfolo strolled out to the forward railing where he could see Montia's countryside flowing by beneath the great carrier. His eyes saw the land below, but his mind was on the prisoner and his fate.

Chapter 2

On the third light time of the mission, Xanfolo stood at his favorite point of observation. He leaned against the forward rim rail and wondered how he could keep his crew from throwing the passengers overboard.

The ambassador from Kinsa complained the least. Even so, the gray-haired man, whose eyebrows hid most of his eyes, was not above making gentle suggestions about achieving a swifter pace. The ambassador from Ponta was unbearable as expected. He complained constantly and dropped not very subtle hints that if Ponta could rule Montia for just one rainy season, there would be some interesting changes.

The only passenger who did not complain was the condemned man, and by the orbs, Xanfolo thought, he had good reason. When Xanfolo visited the prisoner in his tiny cell, he refused to speak, but stared hard, almost as if trying to push aside the captain's eyes to see what was behind his face. Xanfolo found himself greatly bothered by the silent prisoner's stare.

There was no hint of either fear or anger in the prisoner's eyes. There was something else. Xanfolo had the uncomfortable feeling that the prisoner somehow knew him. He dismissed the matter when he returned to the top deck. Men have different ways of facing death, he told himself.

He sensed someone coming up behind him. A crewman or subaltern would have discreetly coughed to signal approach. This was a stealthy approach. Xanfolo whirled about, his hand pulling at his sword hilt.

"I'm sorry if I startled you," the Kinsan ambassador said quickly as he stepped back a pace. Xanfolo caught the motion made by the ambassador's right hand as it brushed his left sleeve.

Xanfolo frowned. "You are not supposed to be near the rim of the rail."

"Yes, I know you have rules about the deck. But I happened to slip past the guards while exercising, and besides, I wanted to talk to you when others were not present."

Nodding his head at the ambassador's sleeve, Xanfolo asked, "And the illegal sleeve dagger?"

The ambassador shrugged. "I fear the only one aloft who is not in violation of League rules is the poor unfortunate who goes to meet his fate soon. And as to the dagger, well, the League does permit a certain looking away from rules on occasion."

"This is my carrier and my rules," Xanfolo replied sharply.

"Yes, I know," responded the ambassador. "This is a Montian carrier."

The reply brought the barest hint of a thin-lipped smile briefly across Xanfolo's face.

"Yes, it is a Montian carrier, a fact that must have been on the League's mind when this nasty mission was assigned. Does your wish to talk privately concern League matters?"

The ambassador paused and then answered, "Yes, I supposed it does, after a fashion, though not in the usual ways and means, which I'm sure we can agree on."

"By my sword, sir," Xanfolo exploded. "Come to the point! No more diplomatic guna droppings! What do you want?"

The ambassador nodded assent. "You are quite right, my young friend. It has been a while since I could talk openly, freely with a man who seeks nothing for himself." The ambassador moved to the railing and leaned casually and comfortably against the narrow bars that kept him from falling to his death. "What I want is an assessment on the value of these carriers. Are they worth the cost? Why does Montia only maintain one, and Clang and Soren refuse to build any?"

This was an interesting set of questions. Xanfolo was quick with his reply. "The answer to your first question is that I am not sure, and the answer to your second question is that I do not know. I'm a mere soldier and not usually seen at councils on such matters."

The ambassador smiled as he spoke. "Now, Captain, it is you who are in the business of guna droppings. You are second in command of all Montian forces. One day in the future, you will be consort to the next queen of Montia..."

"How is this?" Xanfolo interrupted.

"There are no secrets among the League's inner circle, believe me, Captain. Your relationship with the Crown Princess Nessa is known throughout the royal houses as well as the League. When you marry the princess, you will be next in line to command all Montian forces. So what you have to say is important."

Xanfolo had known for a long time that he and Nessa would be married. But it had never occurred to him that his love life was a matter of court gossip in other royal houses.

To mask his mix of irritation and puzzlement, Xanfolo replied softly, "Soldiers do not waste time thinking about such matters. Too much dreaming leaves openings for barbarian blades."

"None of us know our end," the ambassador said by way of agreement. "The present is what matters. Again, I ask you the question. Are these great carriers of any real military value? For example, how does the diskerpult we will use soon for a harsh purpose work against the barbarians?"

"Not very well," Xanfolo admitted. "We have used the multipults on them, but only after first dismounting them for use on the ground. Nor are the barbarians particularly afraid of battle carriers overhead. They simply hide."

The ambassador gazed out over the rim rail. "In the jungle below, they need not fear you at all. We are now outside the realms of the six cities, are we not?"

"That is true, sir. The sentence can be carried out. I hope there are no delays. We have favorable winds now that will take us in a circle back to Montia."

“Before we get to the unpleasant task ahead of us, tell me, why do you think the Pontans have built six such great carriers?”

Xanfolo shook his head slowly as he answered, “I am no expert on the Pontans. Much that they do puzzles me. But I wonder if they have discovered something that might make their carriers a deadlier menace. I have an idea, myself, though I’m not a priest.”

“What is your idea?” asked the ambassador.

“Simple. We load baskets of rocks and drop them on the barbarians. After all, rocks are free. It would be no trick to rig baskets with bottoms that open. That would give the barbarians a nasty surprise.”

“Rocks? Yes, why not rocks? Tell me, Captain. What would happen if you dumped a load of rocks on a Clangian regiment mounted on gunas?”

“They wouldn’t like it very much,” Xanfolo answered. Somehow the idea struck him as a fine joke on the Clangians. And then he saw the season for jokes had passed. People were coming on deck. There was the prisoner dressed in his gray shirt and pants. The guards led him to the round wooden disk lying on its side. The prisoner was forced down on the wooden orb. The guards made fast his hands and feet, and then raised the disk upright. The prisoner was not quite tall enough to overlap the edges.

“Our talk is done, sir,” Xanfolo said grimly. “The League’s sentence must be carried out.”

“Yes, Captain. Let us finish with this. We will talk again, and soon, I think.”

When the two men reached the group, the Kinsan ambassador turned to Xanfolo and asked, “Captain, are you prepared to carry out the sentence of the League?”

“I am.”

The ambassador then turned to the Kinsan high priest. “Carry out the functions of the temple.”

The high priest gathered his golden robes about him and stepped forward until he was nearly an arm’s reach from the condemned man. His aide handed him a wand that had a silver saucer at its end.

“By the power of the sacred, pale moon, I pronounce you banished from the lands and realms of the six great cities.”

As the priest lowered the silver saucer until it touched the prisoner’s head, he shouted, “There were seven!”

“Gag him,” ordered the Kinsan ambassador. “He has spoken enough of this matter already.”

Xanfolo motioned, and two guards sprang forward and stuffed a scarf in the man’s mouth. In a soft murmur, Xanfolo ordered Makin to note the soldier’s name and make sure he was paid for the scarf. Makin nodded silently.

Again the priest approached the bound and gagged man. This time he carried a wand tipped with a small yellow saucer. “By the power of the sacred, ancient father sun, I banish you from the lands and realms of the six great cities.” After touching the prisoner’s head with the wand, the priest moved closer so he could look into the gagged man’s eyes. Finding no sign of fear, the priest stepped back, muttering, “Fanatic,” and took the third wand, which was tipped with a large orange saucer.

Once again the priest raised the wand and then let it lower until it touched the bound man’s head. “By the power of the sacred son of the father, I banish you from the lands and

realms of the six great cities.” The priest then turned to Xanfolo and loudly ordered, “Do your duty, Captain.”

Xanfolo ignored the priest and turned to the ambassadors. “What say the gentlemen from the League?” After they nodded assent, he turned back to the priest who was visibly angry at the obvious challenge to his authority. Xanfolo’s eyes were hard, black disks through which hatred shined. A slow, curling smile passed across his face. It was a death smile. The priest shrank back as Xanfolo’s words cut through the sky so all could hear.

“Sub-captain Makin. Note in the command scroll that Captain Xanfolo did follow exactly the written orders issued him by the League of Cities, and concurred in by Queen Nara of Montia. I do not act of my own free will in this matter. Death should serve a better purpose than this.”

The priests immediately huddled and glanced back over their shoulders at Xanfolo as they talked quickly. In a bound, Makin and four sword-armed bowmen flanked Xanfolo. Their hands rested on the hilts of their swords.

The Kinsan ambassador stepped forward, his hand raised as if to ward off a blow. He spoke calmly but firmly. “The captain is right. But matters of state seldom allow such a luxury. What must be done, must be done.” He nodded at Xanfolo and added so all could hear. “Have no fear of priestly babble, young friend. One of the reasons you were picked for this business is that we believed you would not learn to enjoy it.”

Xanfolo saluted and ordered, “Carry out the execution of this unknown fool.”

Guards picked up the wooden disk and its unwilling passenger. They secured the disk in the pult and cranked the windlass which brought the side-arm back until the arm’s release lever caught in the trigger.

Makin and a bowman now armed with a large hammer stood by the loaded diskpult. Makin faced Xanfolo and announced, “Diskpult number one ready, sir.”

Xanfolo nodded.

Makin slapped the bowman on his shoulder and the hammer descended, struck the trigger, and with a rush the arm whipped forward sending the disk out in the sky. They watched as it soared upward before beginning a slow turn and falling away below the rim rail’s horizon.

“The banishment is completed!” shouted the high priest from Kinsa.

Chapter 3

“Why do they pick Xan for these missions? Aren’t there any other captains of royal guards the League can call on?”

Nessa was angry. While her anger seemed to be directed at the League, there was an undercurrent that her mother knew was aimed at her. Nessa still blamed her mother for her father’s long absence from Montia, an absence never really explained, and now her mother willingly agreed to the League’s requests for Xanfolo’s services.

“For most of this season, Xan has been away on assignments given by the League. What of his duties to Montia?”

Queen Nara smiled. “What part of Montia do you think Captain Xanfolo is neglecting?”

Nessa got up from her bench and snapped a flower from a bush.

“He is neglecting me. And I am Montia.”

“Not yet,” cautioned the queen. But as both mother and queen, Nara was pleased by this exhibition of her daughter’s strong will. Montia could not afford to have a weakling for a queen, especially in the harsh times that were to come, if the predictions given to her by the green priests were to be believed. Since the predictions supported her intuitive feelings, she gave them more credence than usual.

Nessa was now seventeen rainy seasons old, a Montian beauty, and the crown princess who would come to the throne and rule Montia. It was time that she married, and there was no doubt about who the next consort would be. After all, these were not matters to be left to casual chance encounters that might jeopardize the city’s future.

Nessa broke into her mother’s thoughts, saying, “I meant no disrespect.”

“None was assumed,” Queen Nara answered.

Nessa moved quickly to her mother’s side and was rewarded by her mother’s hand softly touching her cheek.

They made a splendid mother and daughter portrait, both considered to be among the most beautiful in a city known for its beautiful women. The flower garden setting outside one of the palace halls would have been a delight for a Soren artist. The two women wore soft green gowns with the royal white stitching and looked as much like sisters as mother and daughter. The comparison would not have been a typically false exercise of Kinsan court flattery.

Except for the white stitching, the gowns were similar to those worn by all the women of Montia. They were extremely short and revealed tanned arms and legs. They were loose-fitting, yet flattering. They were comfortable, the perfect garb for Montia’s heat. But in Kinsa, the gowns were considered to lack style. Ponta’s royal house was on record as regarding the way Montian women dressed as scandalous. Pontan opinion was not highly valued in Montia.

The picture that a Soren artist would have gladly painted is what Xanfolo saw as he stepped from the corridor into the garden. There sat the two women who were the most important people in his life; the queen he was bound to serve, and the other, the woman he thought about when on lonely watch atop the realms. On rare occasion during the lonely times, he caught himself thinking about the queen. Those thoughts were quickly shut out. Consana was the queen’s consort, and it was Consana who had guided his own steps up the chain of command. After all, Makin had been a rainy season ahead of him at the cadet academy. If not for Consana’s help, Makin could very easily be standing here in the garden in his place.

The Kinsan ambassador’s words drifted through his mind. He had not thought about marriage, except that it could happen. It was like death, a piece of fate that could not be denied. He would probably die in battle against the barbarians or maybe the Pontans. That was acceptable. So then must marriage be acceptable. His only function in either case was to achieve both with the proper grace and honor. He nodded his head slightly in assent as an inner voice suggested that there was no reason to hurry toward either conclusion.

“By my sword, these women have had their own company long enough,” he muttered aloud as he strode toward the benches. His respectful bow to Queen Nara and his ritual salutation were cut short when Nessa threw herself into his arms. Instead of words, his lips tasted the softness of her neck.

“I missed you,” she whispered.

Queen Nara spoke, a hint of sharpness in her voice. “I trust that whoever is keeping close watch on the Royal House of Montia for the League has noticed this warm reception. Come, Captain, sit with us. We have much to discuss.”

With Nessa on his arm and pressed close, Xanfolo moved to the queen’s bench. They sat with him in the center, and spoke in lowered tones.

“We could postpone this discussion until the dark time meal,” Nessa offered. “I’m sure Xan could use some rest.”

Queen Nara shook her head. “Our captain may be back in the sky by then. There is trouble.”

“Again? You did not tell me of this!” cried Nessa.

“The trouble was not something that I could craft into a convenient schedule,” Queen Nara replied.

“A dark time flight can be very difficult,” Xanfolo said thoughtfully. “What is the destination?”

“You must leave immediately for Kinsa.”

Nessa jumped to her feet. “More League business? What is it this time?”

“It is serious,” Queen Nara answered. “Talisa has been taken, kidnapped. If the Pontans did it, then the cities may well find themselves at war.”

“Who in their right mind would bother to kidnap Talisa?” Nessa was not fond of the taller, red-haired, and pale woman from Clang. Talisa was a rainy season older than Nessa. Both would eventually become queens. Talisa was still a crown princess only because her regent was reluctant to let go of his power.

“There was some gossip,” Xanfolo offered, “among the League ambassadors who accompanied me on this last mission that Ponta is trying to arrange a royal marriage between the Pontan crown prince and Princess Talisa. From what I could learn, the League was opposed.”

Queen Nara nodded assent. “That was our position at the League’s secret meeting. Clang is ten light times hard march from here. Ponta is at least forty, if not more. We do not want a Pontan army combining with the Clangian army. Reports from Montia II are not pleasant. We could be caught between barbarians coming out of the jungle on one side, and the combined forces of Ponta and Clang on the other.”

“What is my mission?” Xanfolo asked.

“My poor captain,” Queen Nara said as she softly touched his cheek and then quickly pulled back her hand. “All you have to do is find Talisa and restore her to Clang and the regent.” She paused and looked away, turning her face from him as she again spoke. “Use your best judgment in bringing about Talisa’s coronation as soon as possible. If she were on the Clangian throne, we feel that this situation would be greatly eased. She wouldn’t look as favorably on the Pontans as her regent does. Do not discuss this possibility with others.”

From the corner of her eye, the queen could see that what she had said troubled Xanfolo. “Is there a problem with this mission?”

Xanfolo quickly replied, “No, it is not the mission, my Queen. It was the words, best judgment. Several light times ago I killed a man whose only crime was that he used his best judgment. There was no honor in that killing.”

“I know,” Queen Nara agreed. She added softly, almost respectfully, “Sometimes honor and duty are not well-paired, but they must pull the same cart. I think my Nessa is also learning that both must be kept in harness.”

“Gunas pull carts,” Nessa said as she got up from the bench to pluck another flower. “I’m beginning to think I’d rather be a flower girl in a public house than be queen. There seems to be a lot more duty than pleasure for those who wear a crown.”

“It can seem that way,” the queen acknowledged. “Now, back to Talissa. Our captain must leave as soon as possible. I have already sent a coded message by semaphore that the League’s request will be honored.”

Much had to be done. The priests must be put on alert to come up with a prophecy on the winds. A palace messenger must find Sub-captain Makin at once. The flight crew would have to be routed out of the public houses and the ground crew would have to be alerted to prepare the Nara for liftoff. Xanfolo tracked these matters through his mind while the mother and daughter talked.

He rose slowly and bowed. “With my queen’s consent, I must leave now to attend to matters. If we fly this darkness, there are preparations that must be made.”

The queen arose. “You are right, of course. But much has already been accomplished. We wait now for the priests to finish their guesswork on the winds, and you’ll find your second-in-command waiting in my briefing chamber. Our love and affection go with you. Now I must attend to other matters. I’ll leave you two so Nessa can say her farewell.”

Nessa was in his arms before the queen could take a step. The queen smiled as she walked away.

“Later!” whispered Nessa.

“Impossible,” answered Xanfolo.

“We shall see,” she said with a laugh after stepping back from him. “Go now. Talk to Makin. That should be exciting. Then come to my quarters.”

Xanfolo bowed elaborately. “My lady commands and I obey, almost. I shall come to your quarters, but only to say farewell.”

“We shall see,” she said again as she turned and walked away, mimicking the strolling style of the flower girls.

Xanfolo watched attentively until she entered a side door. Then remembering his mission, he hurried to the queen’s briefing chamber.

Makin sat at a long table, having chosen a seat to the right of the end chair.

“You’ve heard?” Xanfolo asked as he sat in the empty seat.

Makin nodded. “Kinsa.”

“There are questions about this mission for which I do not have answers,” Xanfolo said. “Why aren’t the Clangians out looking for the kidnappers? Why aren’t the Kinsans or the Hargians turning over rocks as we speak?”

“Politics,” Makin answered. “There’s your answer. I gave up trying to figure out these matters long ago. I suppose that is why you and not I command the Nara. It’s not so much a battle carrier as it is a political carrier. Maybe the priests knew that’s how they would be used. Trust the priests to be full of such tricks.”

Xanfolo laughed. "And the only thing worse than a priest is a League ambassador. How is the crew taking the news that we go up again in this darkness?"

"It's nothing that chains won't solve," Makin replied. "The royal guards took great pains to find everyone in the crew and return them to the carrier. Both sides will nurse a few bruises for a while. The battle diskers have been loaded, all the springs checked, and food and water sufficient for at least ten light times."

There was a knock at the door. "That should be the priest with the winds prophecy," Xanfolo said.

Makin crossed to the door and opened it. The priest entered and walked to the table, but he did not bow. His face remained passive as he recited, "The winds are not favorable for flight now and will become worse by darkness. The chances of ending up in the mountains are most high if flight is attempted."

"That is not what we wanted to hear, Priest," Xanfolo said testily. "When is the soonest we can fly?"

"The high priest himself has studied the prophecy. Flight before midpoint the next light time will endanger the battle carrier."

"And maybe even the crew?" Makin asked.

"Tell me, Priest," Xanfolo ordered. "How do you know what the winds are doing?"

The priest's face reacted for the blink of an eye and then returned to its passive mask. "I believe the captain knows that small bags of foam are released and their flight is charted."

"Indeed, you are correct, Priest. But what I really want to know is how do you see the little bags when they are so high in the sky?"

There was a smile on the priest's face as he answered. "Priests have extraordinary eyes. Now with your permission, I must return to my duties."

"Granted." After the priest closed the door behind him, Xanfolo shook his head slowly. "Extraordinary eyes! He should have said extraordinary lies. I think they have a new tool, something we could use on the Nara. When this mission is finished, we will look into it, Makin."

"Shall we stand down from alert?"

"Yes, but tell the men that they must be back by second dawn and reasonably sober. Those who are not will be reduced in rank and turned into guna drivers walking the trail from here to Montia II and back again."

"It will be done, Captain," Makin said. "I take your leave now."

Alone in the chamber, Xanfolo noticed that the lack of windows bothered him. He could not see anything by walls. No, he told himself. That wasn't what bothered him. It was the mission. Nothing about the mission made any sense. Deep in his mind was the memory of the strange man in gray who had ridden the wooden disk to oblivion. He shook his head. There were so many questions and so few answers. Then he smiled. He knew where there were answers to questions that need not be asked. He hurried to Nessa's quarters.

While his mind happily considered the pleasures of a dark time spent with Nessa, his eyes checked the corridor guards. He measured each for appearance, alertness, and the look in the eyes that left no doubt about their readiness to fight. He was, after all, still responsible for the palace guards despite his League assignments. He wondered about Sub-captain Chandora to whom he had delegated authority to oversee the guards. What did he really

know about Chandora? If Talisa had been taken from her palace, the Clangian captain of the guards was going to have some interesting questions to answer.

As he rounded a corner, a guard stationed at the intersection came to attention. Xanfolo put a finger to his lips, signaling the guard to keep silent. Then with a sudden move, he tapped a painted flower on the wall, a door-sized panel snapping open to reveal a hidden sentry. The sentry was not surprised. He stopped his sword thrust an inch from Xanfolo's chest.

"Awake are we, cadet?" Xanfolo asked as he gingerly palmed the blade point and moved it to one side.

"Yes sir," replied the cadet.

"Good work."

Xanfolo continued on down the corridor. In the past, the cadet had not been impressed with the scheme of hidden sentries acting as watchers over the hall guards. He had been found asleep in one of the hidden positions. His penalty had been to walk as a convoy escort guard on two round trips from Montia to Montia II. That meant at least sixty light times for each trip. It was an experience not soon forgotten.

The hidden sentry trick was devised by Xanfolo while patrolling against the barbarians at the edge of the jungle. The barbarians were fond of creeping up on guards and cutting their throats. After hidden sentries were added, the barbarians were easily counter-ambushed. What could work at the edge of the jungle could also work in a palace. After, all, did not the jungle and the palace share some of the same attributes?

The guard outside Nessa's quarters came to attention as Xanfolo approached. He waved a salute at the guard and entered a small atrium which had open sky above and jungle flowers growing in large pots. There was a second doorway masked by flowered drapes. When he parted the drapes and entered the main chamber, the change from the sunlit atrium to the darkened chamber clouded his eyes. He called her name while he waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness, but there was no answer.

He knew her lair well enough, but his instincts were so trained that he would not move until he was sure of his footing. Besides, one never knew just what was to be found in Nessa's quarters. The main chamber was like a jungle brought indoors. As his eyes adjusted, he could distinguish the outline of the pool, and the low, cushioned platform behind the pool that served as a sleeping area.

It was not a large pool, the diameter being no more than twice a man's height, and deep enough so that when Nessa stood on the bottom, the water broke around her shoulders like a blouse.

"Nessa? Are you there?"

His answer was a splash of water and a loud gasp made by a person very much in need of air.

"If you had stayed there in the doorway any longer, I might have drowned," Nessa gasped.

"Were you planning to give me a wet farewell?" Xanfolo asked as he walked to the poolside.

"No. You are spending the darkness here. I thought I would surprise you."

He unbuckled his sword belt and asked, "How did you know that I was not going to the rescue of Talisa before the setting of the suns?"

“I guessed. Besides, I could not believe you would go off on some crazy assignment to rescue the Clangian. Do you know how ugly she is? Her skin is utterly white. There is no color to it. Her red hair is stringy and frizzled, and she is all arms and legs. She walks on one leg and one arm.”

Nessa’s description of Talisa was drowned in a great splash as Xanfolo jumped into the pool. They were soon in each other’s arms, their mouths joined. They sank below the water.

Coming up to breathe, Xanfolo’s eyes opened, a sudden realization flooding his mind. Could Nessa have persuaded the priests to...? She pulled him back under the water.

Chapter 4

Xanfolo waited in a small anteroom adjacent to one of the League’s smaller meeting chambers, his hand straying down to where his sword should have been. The League forbade the wearing of swords or possession of any kind of weapons in the League palace.

It was easy enough for the guards at the entrance to see most weapons and request that they be left there, but Xanfolo wondered about the priests and their robes. He suspected that some of the priests had enough weapons hidden under their robes to equip an entire squad of soldiers.

The anteroom’s opening on the main corridor did not have a door, and that bothered him greatly. Sitting unarmed in an unguarded room with an open door in a palace known for intrigue and casual compromises was not at all to his liking.

Upon being shown to the room by a Kinsan priest, he found that the chairs all faced the wall so that he would have to sit with his back to the open door. It didn’t take but the blink of an eye for him to rearrange his chair so he could keep watch on the door. Most of the League’s functionaries were golden-robed Kinsan priests, even though the palace was located in Harg and not across the Kin River in Kinsa. Even that set-up was the result of a compromise. None of the other cities would ever approve of putting the League palace in Kinsa. Harg was approved because it was a small city, and like Kinsa, it was centrally located. But did not Kinsa all but own Harg?

Before being drawn into League assignments, Xanfolo’s sole interest in the League concerned the barbarians and the colonies. The largest of all the colonies was Zorn which was owned by Kinsa. To avert the possibility of war over this rich colony, the League won concessions from Kinsa. The other five cities traded in Zorn and received a share of the liguite mined in the nearby foothills. In exchange, the other cities were required to help protect Zorn from the barbarians.

Kinsa had the most colonies of any city. Besides Zorn, there were also Dorn and Dom, and these last two were old colonies created to grow food. Harg had one colony, a farming operation, called Regan. Ponta had a large colony named Little Ponta. Clang had a growing colony named Clang Colony. Montia had Montia II, a settlement near the jungle

that produced no liguite, but provided the city with ample products that could be traded with profit for the valuable ore.

Xanfolo's thoughts about the colonies vanished when he heard the sound of approaching footsteps. The men filling the boots could not be seen, but he sensed that these were men accustomed to walking very quietly. His muscles tensed as he prepared to meet the unknown.

Two men appeared in the open doorway. One was a priest. He was a Kinsan, if the golden robe meant anything. The other wore the uniform of a Hargian officer.

"The ambassadors are taking their time, aren't they, Captain? With your permission, we will wait with you." The priest's voice was soft, but his manner was not obsequious.

Here is a silk-clothed priest, the kind of cloth that when rolled into a thin rope works well for strangling unwanted persons, thought Xanfolo.

"By my permission, please enter. I am Captain Xanfolo of Montia." He rose from his chair and waved the two men toward the other chairs.

They entered and bowed after his introduction. "I am Hona, a priest of Kinsa. My friend is Dammer, a subaltern in the Hargian army."

The tall, bulky Hargian smiled and extended his right hand with his palm toward Xanfolo, who quickly matched the motion, a military gesture of friendship recognized by the fighting men of all the cities.

"I am Dammer of Harg, and I am a subaltern. In that, the priest spoke the truth. When he claims that I am his friend, he lied, but that is not all bad. After all, a priest who only lies once out of three times, is better than average."

"My friend speaks one way, but usually acts another; nevertheless, he is a cavalryman and not a League ambassador," Hona explained. "He saved my life once when we were on League business near Zorn. He charged the barbarians who were about to take me."

"Ha!" Dammer snorted. "You were riding one of our best gunas. There was no way I was going to lose that animal to the barbarians."

That was truly like a Hargian, Xanfolo thought as he laughed. There was no doubt in his mind that the big Hargian subaltern would be a good man to have in line against the barbarians.

"We are here now on the same matter as you," the priest said. "This kidnapping of the Princess Talisa is serious. I think it might well lead to war between the cities."

The friendly smile disappeared from Xanfolo's face. The priest was raising points best not raised in a room with an open door. Was this some kind of test? Was he being baited?

"We are new-met friends," he replied blandly.

There was a loud burst of laughter from Dammer. "What the captain is saying, Priest, is that he does not trust us. If he wasn't a Montian, his reply might have been sharper."

Hona bowed. "We have not had our orders yet, but there is always gossip enough."

"The gossip the priest mentioned is no gossip at all," Dammer said. "How can it be gossip when the Kinsan ambassador is in the central chair and our priest here is also a Kinsan?"

"What does gossip say about the Clangian palace guard?" asked Xanfolo. "How did the kidnappers succeed against the palace guard? Where is the captain of the guard?"

"He died trying to defend the princess. While there is always the possibility of treachery, it was not a matter involving the soldiers," Hona explained.

“Of course not,” Dammer added.

Hona frowned briefly before continuing, “The second in command of the guards is leading a search party, even though he was hurt in the fighting. However, their search is limited to Clangian territory.”

“It has been many light times now,” Xanfolo mused. “She could be anywhere. From Montia to Ponta is at least a forty to fifty light time march. From Kinsa to Zorn is forty if the pace is quick. We could search forever and not turn up anything.”

“We have narrowed the search,” Hona said. “No battle carriers have crossed Kinsa or Harg. The trail between Kinsa and Zorn is patrolled.”

“And, Captain,” Dammer grinned, “The Kinsan priests are working hard. There’s a batch of them locked up in a room trying to find the princess by doing their mumbo-jumbo priest tricks. I am sure you agree that will be a big help.”

“There are old ways of doing things that should not be ignored,” said Hona with a defensive tone to his voice. The Hargian had scored against the priest’s armor of self-assurance.

“You said there has been no sky travel across Harg and Kinsa, but when we came down at the Hargian base, we saw a Pontan battle carrier anchored there. Is it being watched?” asked Xanfolo.

“Crown Prince Tagge arrived in the carrier before you, Captain,” Hona explained. “He is in the League meeting now, as is his right since he is a ranking member of a royal house. In this case, he also has a right to speak because he is still trying to get the League’s approval for his marriage to the princess.”

“Has anyone suggested that maybe Ponta had the princess kidnapped and is going to force her into marriage?” asked Xanfolo.

“War, Sir. War. If Ponta tried that, there would be a grand war such as we have not seen for generations,” Dammer said with obvious relish at the idea.

“That is why we must succeed in our mission,” Hona said. “War could bring an end to much that will change...”

Dammer caught Hona’s decision to let his speech trail away into nothing. “At last, the priest almost said something of some importance. Were you about to let us in on some of your tricks?”

“We could use a few tricks here,” Xanfolo said. “I have other matters to consider that are of some importance for Montia. I am not happy about the reports of barbarian activity in the jungles near Montia II. I believe they are up to something.”

Hona nodded. “We have sensed the same in the hills and mountains near Zorn. I agree that this activity requires our attention, but this matter of a kidnapped princess is much more urgent. The barbarians can do little more than harry our colonies, but a war between the cities could ruin our society as we know it.”

A side panel creaked open slowly, and a young Kinsan priest stood facing them in the opening. After a nod of deference to Hona, the young priest announced, “The League is now ready to meet with the three of you. Please follow me.”

They trailed behind the priest down a narrow corridor for a short distance. They found themselves facing a blank wall, and once again, a panel slid open revealing the meeting chamber.

Xanfolo carefully scanned the chamber. At the end of the narrow chamber, there was a table made of Montian wood. Behind the table were seven men, all ambassadors. In the

center chair was the same Kinsan ambassador who had been present for the execution, or banishment, as the League was so obviously fond of calling it. On the right of the ambassadors was another table, this one smaller and much less expensive. Four golden-robed priests sat at this table surrounded by neatly stacked pens and scrolls.

There were six chairs facing the ambassadors, and three of these chairs were already occupied by men dressed in the somber black of Ponta. Next to them were three empty seats. The two sets of chairs were separated by at least two sword lengths. *Just wide enough to prevent a quick sword thrust at an opponent*, Xanfolo told himself.

As the young priest ushered them toward the empty seats, Xanfolo glanced at the men from Ponta. He had never seen Prince Tagge before, but he knew instantly which of the three Pontans the prince was. Even though the prince was seated, Xanfolo could see that he was at least as tall as Dammer. The prince posed in draped form on the chair, his legs extended, a royal slump that gave physical form to the insolence exhibited in his face. His hair was black and curly, and he wore facial hair. For nearly a generation, the wearing of facial hair had become increasingly popular in the cold city of Ponta.

When they were seated, the ambassadors stopped their chatter and turned their attention to the new arrivals.

"The League bids you three men welcome," said the Kinsan ambassador in the center chair. "You know your assignment, Captain Xanfolo. You are to find and restore Princess Talisa to her rightful place in Clang. As spoken, it is a simple order. The carrying out of it is, I fear, another matter indeed. The League has chosen to assign two faithful men to aid you: Hona, a respected and resourceful priest from Kinsa, and Subaltern Dammer of the Hargian cavalry. They will join you on this mission."

Xanfolo bowed his head in agreement. "I'm sure they will keep close watch on my well-being."

A shadowy smile appeared on the Kinsan ambassador's face, and then just as quickly disappeared. He understood the double meaning in Xanfolo's statement. Before the Kinsan could continue, the ambassador from Soren raised his hand.

"The Montian captain should know that he has a slim mandate for this assignment. In fact, he is here only because of the moon period and not by any great League enthusiasm."

The Kinsan nodded in agreement. "Yes, yes, I agree. The ambassador from Soren has put forth an important point as he is known to do. I'm sure that he can be found in the vanguard regarding the power of a League resolution, despite the margin by which the resolution carried."

The Pontan ambassador, after a brief nod toward Prince Tagge, leaned back in his chair, and directed his eyes toward the ceiling.

"The central chair may correct me if I'm wrong, but I seem to recall that the vote was three to two with Clang, the injured party in this case, abstaining. That is not a mandate for the kind of action we can anticipate from this hot-blooded Montian captain."

The golden-cloaked Kinsan ambassador glanced at Xanfolo as if to say, *pay close attention*.

"There is never a need for the central chair to correct the honored Pontan ambassador because he is never wrong. In this case, however, I think there is a need for a small notation of some importance. The League has seven chairs, one for each ambassador which makes six, and one for a central arbiter, a chair filled each moon period by a different city. Hence,

the vote was four to two, with one abstention. A two to one vote does, after all, create a strong foundation for a mandate, does it not?"

"Be that as it may," the Pontan ambassador replied. "Before this matter is closed, I ask the League to hear from Crown Prince Tagge, the future ruler of Ponta, and even now, a power among the ruling classes of the six realms."

"Your request is now under consideration," the Kinsan replied. "Under other circumstances, this would require a vote of the League, but since the Crown Prince of Ponta is here, and he is, indeed, a power in his own right, what he has to say about the kidnapping of Princess Talisa should prove to be enlightening. Speak, honored guest from Ponta."

Prince Tagge rose from his chair and wasted no time on diplomatic pleasantries.

"There are words whispered here in the League chambers that are objectionable to Ponta. For every whispered word herein, there are a hundred shouted outside by the Hargian rabble, equally objectionable to Ponta. These slurs against Pontan honor will not go unanswered. Kinsa is responsible for these insults. The League is a Kinsan invention and operated by Kinsans for Kinsa's benefits. Kinsa always has two votes in this chamber, counting the sheep-like Hargians, and then, when the flower girls from Montia are added..."

Xanfolo was on his feet instantly, his right hand grasping vainly for his sword.

"Your death, hairy-faced guna, will barely satisfy Montian honor!"

Prince Tagge did not back away. "A typical Montian gesture of silliness. The captain is well aware that there is no honor in these chambers. Words, yes, honor, no. Later, my little Montian, later. Until that time, remember that in Ponta women ride gunas, but in Montia, the women ride men."

As Prince Tagge spoke, wall panels opened, and golden-robed priests hurried into the chamber and took up position between the prince and Xanfolo.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, order, please," the Kinsan ambassador urged. "We must not let our emotions govern action here. This is neither the time nor the place for trouble, though the emotions and their causes are well-understood. Captain Xanfolo of Montia, you have your mission. Go now with your aides and begin your work. What must be discussed between the League and the Crown Prince of Ponta is of no further concern to you."

The heat under Xanfolo's skin cooled slowly. He felt Hona's hand on his elbow. Reluctantly, he turned and bowed to the ambassadors.

"The mission begins."

Followed by Hona and Dammer, he stalked from the chamber. Outside in the corridor, there was a thin smile on his face.

"I've never killed a crown prince before. This should prove interesting."

"That meeting room needs the kind of cleaning that only good blades can do," Dammer agreed.

Hona shook his head in disagreement. "The League is no longer a matter of concern to us. We have much to do. Preparations must be made. I suggest we meet at the Nara by the first sun's rise."

"Do you think Talisa will be smuggled out in the Pontan battle carrier?" Xanfolo asked.

"If he tries, that will not be our worry," Hona answered. "There are others whose responsibility it is to watch the Pontan carrier."

"Well," snorted Dammer. "Does anyone have any idea of where we should start?"

Hona's reply was quick. "Soren. We have reason to believe that the answer we need can be found in Soren."

"How do we know that, Priest?" asked Xanfolo.

"That I cannot say," Hona replied. "I will have more information by first light. Perhaps by then I will be able to explain."

"This is a secrecy that does not aid our mission," said Xanfolo sharply. "There is already too much wind and sand in the sky. I go now to my carrier. Be careful about the information you bring at first light."

Chapter 5

It was Subaltern Dammer's idea that Xanfolo should ride a guna to the Nara. It would be quicker than walking or riding a foam-lifted box pulled by gunas who were too slow for use as cavalry mount.

Xanfolo was not happy about having Dammar watch him try to ride off on a guna. Most cavalry recruits quickly learned to master the usually docile beasts, but he had always dreaded getting up on the back of a guna.

Despite his reluctance, he could think of no graceful or honorable way to avoid accepting the Hargian cavalryman's kind offer. Fortunately, the Hargian had other matters to attend and could not be on hand to watch the ordeal's beginning.

Virtually all the captains of the royal guards' regiments and captains in charge of colonies and armies rose to the top after long service in cavalry regiments. He was the only captain in all six armies who didn't rise through the ranks by that path. His rapid promotion after only a brief stint of service in the cavalry had not pleased other military leaders at first. He had worked hard and successfully to overcome their early doubts about his ability as a leader of men, if not gunas.

Xanfolo was now regarded as the leading expert on flying. He led the way in transforming the battle carriers into respectable weapons instead of just expensive curiosities. His ability, combat fierceness, and uncompromising honor were respected by the military men in all the cities.

Even though he believed that future battlegrounds were in the sky, he was painfully aware that the cavalry was still considered the most important arm in combat. The Clangian cavalry was particularly admired. Although slow, the gunas were large and heavy, and the Clangians were fond of massing a thousand mounted lancers. When the assembly worked up to a good trot, the force was nearly irresistible. The barbarians refused to stand and receive such a charge. They simply ran away before the cavalry could overrun them.

As he mounted the guna provided by two Hargian cavalymen, Xanfolo sat in the saddle and curtly dismissed the men before attempting to get the guna to move, hopefully in the right direction.

As he feared would happen, the guna had its own pace and no amount of Montian cursing by a veteran with fifteen rainy seasons of military service could change the beast's

mind. However, if he could not get swiftness, he did get direction because the guna happened to approve of the direction Xanfolo wanted.

“Very well, stupid Hargian guna,” Xanfolo growled. “Set your own pace. After all, I’ve spent most of this light time dealing with your kind. The dim light before darkness might just as well be misspent.”

As the guna ambled along, he leaned back in the saddle and let the animal have its head. Using his guna-enforced idleness to consider his mission, Xanfolo found himself questioning its wisdom. From his viewpoint, it didn’t make any sense. For a moment, he even considered the possibility that Princess Talissa was not really kidnapped after all, but then he remembered the dead captain of the Clangian royal guard.

While respectively new to the diplomatic machinations for which the League was all too well known, he was aware that vague instructions often hid a wide variety of dangers. Perhaps the League knew more about the kidnapping than it was willing to share with him. Did the League really want the Clangian princess found? Was this operation simply a staged event so the League could always claim that it tried to save her?

Then there was Queen Nara’s strong suggestion that he should keep close watch on Montia’s interests. The League had mentioned nothing about putting a crown on the head of Princess Talisa, but Queen Nara certainly thought it would be of considerable benefit to Montia.

Xanfolo’s head was growing heavy from the weight of all the possibilities. He smiled and shook the distasteful politics from his mind. *Cold steel would make matters fit the proper patterns*, he thought. He enjoyed the ride on the slow guna in the dimming light, but it was not the romantic experience that flower girls sang about in the old songs of Montia. The situation struck him as absurd, and he laughed aloud, the rare sound startling the peaceful guna. The beast’s head turned and soft eyes glared at him accusingly.

“By my sword, I do believe I’ve offended Harg’s finest!”

The wide avenues in this part of Harg made riding easy. Xanfolo noticed the lack of traffic as the guna wandered along, generally following the avenue. The district was devoted mostly to small workshops which had closed for the coming dark time. Much of Harg was devoted to such manufactories, mostly for the benefit of the Kinsans across the river.

Xanfolo watched as a freighter lifted by a large bag of foam towed by two gunas came his way. The freighter appeared to be nearly empty as it rode at least two long strides above the ground. An old man with a long staff walked beside the gunas. The beasts were not working well as a team, and he was having his problems.

Suddenly, the gunas lunged across Xanfolo’s path, his mount shied, and he was nearly unseated. The side of the freighter dropped open and armed men leaped out. There were eight of them, and they might have made quick work of Xanfolo but for the fact that they did not realize how high the freighter was riding. They fell to their knees, and some rolled on the avenue before regaining their feet.

“Treachery!” screamed Xanfolo as he wheeled the guna to the left and slipped off the opposite side with sword drawn as his feet touched the ground. The frightened guna was between Xanfolo and the assassins. His attackers came around both ends of the guna, but Xanfolo circled to his right and engaged. The first assassin to reach him raised his sword high with a slashing down stroke and quickly paid the penalty for the bad move as Xanfolo’s sword point tickled his throat. The Montian captain continued to circle, taking down a second

assassin who came too close. His circling movements brought him around to the other side of the guna, and the assassins followed in a pack, each daring another to take the lead.

Xanfolo lowered his sword point and laughed. "What we have here is a player's farce and not a true assassination."

The pack made a strong frontal attack which Xanfolo easily beat back. They lunged again, but one of the assassins remained behind and attempted to crawl beneath the guna to attack Xanfolo's legs. The skittish guna unknowingly kicked the assassin in the head. The other assassins, taking no notice of their foolish companion, continued to press Xanfolo and this cost them yet again. The Montian captain's quick sword neatly pierced an assassin's left arm under the shoulder joint. The wounded man fell to the ground and watched as his blood spurted from the wound. The other four dropped back a pace, looking as if they might run.

Xanfolo patted the guna's flank. "Good guna! I've fought with worse at my side. Now listen here, you remaining four, and understand this. You will never see another dawn."

There was a blinding flash before his eyes and a searing pain in the back of his head. As he staggered, trying to shake the pain away, he moaned, "By my sword, I forgot the old man and his staff. Killed by a freighter driver!"

And then all was black.

Chapter 6

There was a low voice coming from a faraway place. At first, the voice was little more than sound without meaning. The sound slowly became words.

"Rest easy, Captain. You are with friends."

Xanfolo slowly decided that he was indeed still alive. "The old man nearly killed me," he groaned. "My cadets will no doubt enjoy this story."

He tried to rise, but a pain in his head pulled him sharply back. "Rest easy, Captain." The voice was connected to a shape, a face peering down at him. It was a mask. The face was hidden by a white mask.

"A mask? What? More treachery here?"

He ignored the pain and sat up, his hand reaching for his sword. His scabbard was empty, and he pulled himself upright. Once on his feet, the shakiness in his legs drained away. He felt the bandage around his head, and as he did so, he saw that three men sat cross-legged on the floor with their backs to the wall. They wore gray work smocks common in Harg. Their faces were all masked.

"Sit down and rest, Captain. You will find water and food on the table by the chair." The voice came from behind the mask on the left.

"Who are you?" Xanfolo demanded.

"In due time, Captain, in due time. Please eat and drink now."

“There is not time for that. I must get to the Nara. We are to fly at first dawn.”

“We know.”

“Do you know my destination as well?”

“Soren.”

Xanfolo turned to the table and picked up the cup of water and sniffed it.

“If we had wanted you dead, Captain, it could have been easily arranged while you were unconscious. The food and water are safe.”

“Of course.” Xanfolo emptied the cup. When he finished, he peered at it. “This cup does a better job of holding water than the League does secrets. How did I get here? The last I remember is waiting for death.”

“You did well against your would-be assassins. You left four dead. We arrived just in time to prevent your untimely end. The remaining assassins fled.”

Xanfolo smiled. “I accounted for three. My guna killed the fourth.”

The three figures on the floor huddled and whispered. The speaker looked up and asked, “Even the gunas follow your lead in battle?”

“It was the guna’s idea, not mine. Now, I owe you much, and I will pay you in goods or favors for saving my life, but I must know who you are, and I must get to the Nara. Oh, and one other matter. My sword! I’m not comfortable without it.”

“The last shall remain last. We will give you your sword when we end our talk. That is for our protection. You owe us nothing. We had motive for saving you; hence, we are repaid by our own account. As to who we are, well, we are the brothers of the man you executed. We are members of the Secret Society of the Seventh City.”

“Then I am yet a dead man!” Xanfolo said as he got to his feet and hefted the chair with his sword hand. “But your secret society will be minus a few members before that happens.”

“Sit down, Captain. We mean you no harm. What you did was necessary. There was no choice for either your or our brother. He died and you lived, both for the same reason which is the restoration of the seventh city and the Loran bloodline, the only blood royal that exists. This will mean the restoration of the true priest-king to the throne of Loran...”

“What is this nonsense?” interrupted Xanfolo. “I have been saved by fools who believe in myths and old tales!”

“Not so,” argued the speaker. “Myths are burial grounds for truth until the time is ripe for resurrection and victory. We believe that time will be soon upon us.”

“And you are willing to die for this belief?” Xanfolo did not pose a question. His voice altered the meaning of his words. He remembered all too well the calmness and lack of fear in the eyes of the man who sailed out of the realms on a wooden disk.

“We would rather live for it,” came the answer. “But if necessary, then death for this belief is an easy choice for us. For what purpose were you willing to die in the street? Why didn’t you try to escape assassins by running away?”

This brought a smile to Xanfolo’s face. He gingerly touched the bandage as the smile caused a twinge of pain.

“It is clear that your movement has a fair number of priests. That I can tell by the devious shifts, the screens put up, and the twists in mind-talk. There is no deep reason why I did not run from the assassins. I didn’t run because I simply do not run. I had hoped to take at least one of the assassins alive. We would have had an interesting talk, at least for as long as he lasted. Then I would have known the face of my true enemy, the one who set the assassins

on me. I thank you for saving my life, but even my cadets would have known the value of taking a prisoner instead of just chasing the enemy away.”

“An oversight on our part, that we admit,” replied the speaker. “But it is not important. We know who hired the assassins and so do you. It was Tagge of Ponta.”

Xanfolo considered the statement and he nodded in agreement. “Probably, but his accomplices? What of the Kinsan and Hargian assigned by the League to help me? It was the Hargian who sent me down this avenue. And the Kinsan is a priest.”

A muffled sound of soft laughter came from the masked figures.

“We know the Hargian. If he wanted you dead, he would first announce his purpose far and wide. He follows the old ways. He would face you in mortal combat. He would not deny himself an act of honor he so enjoys. We agree, the priest is a different matter. Hona would kill you if he thought it was necessary, but he would not use assassins in a public place. It would be a well-aimed arrow out of the dark, or more likely a poisoned drink or food. But do not be concerned with him now. He will not kill you because he needs you for his purposes, just as we need you for ours.”

“And what are your plans? Why am I so valuable to you?”

The masked figure in the center spoke for the first time. “Who are your parents? What do you know of your past?”

“When I entered the cadet academy, my name was given to the chanters. They remembered my mother,” Xanfolo explained. “She was a flower girl, but my father was unknown. I never knew my mother, nor could I ever find her.”

Another of the three spoke, and there was a harshness in his tone. “Thus do great cities make the men to keep them great.”

“My past is past,” Xanfolo bristled. “How I got here is not important to me. I am thankful enough that I am here. I am not a Soren who wallows in the lint of his belly button. Just what is it you wish me to do for your Secret Society?”

“Your acceptance of reality is the mark of a reasonable man,” the first speaker responded. “Very well. You know that which you call myth. More than sixty generations ago, a great leader descended from the sky. Some claimed that he could not die, but for some reason, he disappeared. He left behind a son, and this son’s son built a great city called Loran. This son ruled as a great priest-king as did his son and the next. The house of Loran ruled the great plain from Ponta to your city, Montia, and all the lands between. It was this last priest-king who was overthrown. Out of the ashes of war arose what we know as the six cities. Now it is time for their end, and the rise of the great Loran Empire once more. We believe you will be the great mover of change. Our prophecy is that you will live to crown the true priest-king, a man who still carries the blood royal in his veins.”

Xanfolo stared wide-eyed at the three gray-clad men seated on the floor. “You are insane! You are willing to die for such foolishness? Even though my mind was rattled with a stout club...”

The three masked men arose. The first speaker bowed slightly.

“All parts of the puzzle will fall into place when the time is right. Go now, and do not look back. We will disappear in such a way that you will not find our trace. Return now to Zorn.”

“No, I go to Soren,” Xanfolo replied.

“Then your mission will fail. Go to Zorn and speak to a Soren named Gant. He will deny knowing what you want to know. When he does that, you will say a word to him. The word is *Fonof*. Then he will tell you where to find the Princess Talissa. Go now.”

Chapter 7

Four men were crowded in a small storage building near the Nara’s anchoring point. Three of them were on one side of a table. The fourth stood defiantly, arms folded, on the other side. Outside, armed sentries guarded the building.

Once again, I face three fools, Xanfolo told himself as he relaxed his facial muscles enough to permit a thin smile.

Directly opposite the Montian captain was the Kinsan ambassador. His diplomatic aplomb was gone. He was uncharacteristically angry.

“And so, Captain. You were ambushed. You were knocked unconscious, and you were rescued by persons who wore masks and who questioned you at length about the well-being of the six cities. And then they told you to go to Zorn instead of Soren as we wish. Why do you believe they are right and we are wrong?”

Flanking the ambassador were Hona and Dammer. They waited silently, though watching Xanfolo’s face closely.

“I don’t know whether or not they are any more right or wrong than you are,” replied Xanfolo. “But at least, they didn’t talk in circles. They gave me a contact in Zorn who they believe has information. That is about three barbarian mountains more than the League has given me. They told me who hired my would-be assassins, and if it hadn’t been for these strange people coming to my rescue, you would now be celebrating the promotion of a new captain in Montia. They saved my life. Why would they do that just to tell me lies?”

“I think, Captain,” Hona said slowly, “that it was the Secret Society people who saved you. They are fond of masks. They also operate on lower levels where we still have difficulty. Still, what little information we have does suggest that Soren is the place to look.”

“They call it the Secret Society of the Seventh City,” Xanfolo said, and then added, “The Nara will fly to Zorn. I propose to leave at once, or as soon as this meeting ends, which had better be quick.”

Dammer edged around the table until he stood by Xanfolo. “I don’t know who is right or wrong here, and I don’t care what the secret ones call themselves. But, I’d as soon go to Zorn as Soren. There are Hargians stationed at Zorn, and the reports we get from our officers bother me. There’s too much barbarian activity. I think the League has gotten itself all worked up over the Talisa matter and is losing track of what should have priority. It the barbos attack and carry Zorn while we are looking for some princess, the royal houses might ask some embarrassing questions. And that’s what I think.”

The Kinsan ambassador was caught off guard, and surprise openly paraded across his face. Hona smiled and then hid the smile while pretending to thoughtfully stroke his chin.

The Kinsan ambassador quickly recovered. "In all the time I have worked with you, Subaltern, I do not believe you said as many words as now."

"Well," replied Dammer, "I meant every one of them."

"I'm sure you did," the ambassador nodded. His face hardened as he asked Xanfolo, "If I, the League, give you an order to go to Soren, and you do not go, you could face arrest and charges that could even lead to banishment. You remember what that means?"

"If that were the case," Xanfolo said, "I would only have one regret and that is having to endure all the nonsense of being tapped on the head by some fool priest with his wands. A man's death should be done with honor and not nonsense. What you speak of will never happen. I, and I alone, will die here first with my sword in my hand. You may arrest all you wish, but I will dictate my own end. After I am dead your successors can explain your actions to the Montian army. The war you always seek to avert will be under way and with a vengeance."

The ambassador turned to Hona. "I think you should update your studies on the captain's mind. He does not seem to be what you predicted." The ambassador, his face smoothed into the bland front he wore for League matters, turned to Xanfolo. "Yes, I see your logic, Captain. Your argument raises points that carry weight. Hona, how say you in this matter?"

"Zorn"

"And you, Subaltern?"

"Zorn."

"Then let it be so. Use the code to send me messages via semaphore. I will await each report with no small amount of eagerness. Go now and fly well. Even though I still believe the resolution of the mission is to be found in Soren, this matter is closed forever."

Dammer laughed. "As they say in the League, what just happened never happened, and that is the truth."

As they filed out the door, Xanfolo noticed that his right hand felt as if it had been stuck with pins. He made a fist and then relaxed his fingers. He wondered if the ambassador or the others knew how his right hand had longed to pull the sword from its scabbard. It would be good to get into the sky and away from all of this.

"Hold!" he suddenly shouted. "What is this business?"

Hona, followed by two priests struggling with a large box, stopped.

"We are preparing to fly," Hona said.

"The box. What is in the box?"

"Equipment we may need on the mission," Hona replied.

"How much does your box of magic spells and potions weigh?"

"Not nearly the weight of a child."

"Then you must have two very weak priests trying to carry the box. Well, get it aboard. I suppose Dammer is loading a few cavalry gunas just in case"

As was his custom when carrying passengers, Xanfolo did not allow them to remain on the top deck during liftoff. Therefore, Hona and Dammer remained in a small compartment below the top deck. Flight was still a very young art, and Xanfolo was well aware that panic on the top deck was not something he wanted to face during the critical time of leaving the ground. In the case of Hona and Dammer, there was also a reluctance to allow non-Montians to observe the crew's activities during liftoff. This feeling had been reinforced during the edgy meeting just concluded in the hut. He realized that he did not know the range

of the orders given in private to either Hona or Dammer. As the carrier rose into the sky, he remembered the assessment of his companions given by the secret ones. From what he had seen thus far, they were right on target. Both Dammer and Hona were exactly as described which made him feel that his own decision to fly to Zorn instead of Soren was correct. The secret ones were not to be ignored.

The Nara's course was a circular one, passing toward the mountains and then into Clangian skies. On through the short balance of light time and then the darkness, the Nara moved smoothly. Though Hona and Dammer were allowed to come on the top deck, Xanfolo made a point of ignoring them.

The second light time came, and both suns put out enough heat to make the top deck comfortable, and the winds were helpful. Xanfolo's head was clear, though an occasional twinge reminded him of the lesson taught by the old man back in Harg.

He stood at the forward rim rail, his hands behind his back, his feet balanced against any sudden change that the winds playing against the kites might cause. He stared ahead at the blank sky and occasionally scanned the ground below. He was fascinated by the visual trickery which made it seem as if he was standing still and the ground beneath was moving.

Everything is trickery, he thought as his eyes caught sight of a faraway speck high in the sky to his left. Nothing was as it seemed. Life had been a clear-cut matter in the past. Orders were given that made sense. Life made sense, but the orderly past was disappearing. It was clear that in the future, he could rely only on himself and his sword. Truth was cold steel, and cold steel was truth.

Whatever happened, the League was not going to be of much value. It always seemed to find new problems, or maybe the League created problems. Then his mind took a quirky turn. He was not given to having insight. His insight was sheathed in a scabbard that hung from his belt. Maybe because of the blow to his head something inside opened a door. He tried to shrug off his thoughts. There were places in the mind that were best not explored. Besides, it was too much like the way priests acted. On the other hand, maybe it was insight that made the priests so dangerous.

From his vantage point atop the realms and looking down at the ground below, the words in his mind told him that his way of life was collapsing. The cities were led by weaklings or blustering fools. That assessment did not include Montia, of course.

Ponta was building alliances that must lead to war. The League was desperate, grabbing at raindrops to make a pool. And the priests! Everyone knew that Kinsa really controlled the League, but who controlled Kinsa? The royal house of Kinsa was large, but more interested in wealth and the enjoyment of what wealth could provide than in governing. The Duke of Zorn was a bright, foppish nephew of the Kinsan king. He was considered the most likely to come to the throne, even though third in line. He was supposed to govern the colony at Zorn, but he seldom spent much time there, choosing to remain in Kinsa where life was enjoyable. Instead of the duke, a captain of the household guards was in command at Zorn. It was no wonder that the fools in the Secret Society thought they could come to power soon.

With that thought in mind, Xanfolo grumpily turned and started to pace. There, standing silently not three sword lengths away, were Hona and Dammer.

He was surprised by their presence. *That is the trouble with too much thinking*, he told himself. *A man could get killed that way.*

"Do you see that speck in the sky?" Xanfolo growled.

Both Hona and Dammer seemed relieved, even though the Montian captain's tone was anything but friendly. The question acknowledged their presence as a part of the Nara's crew. Even if the captain was still angry about the scene at the Hargian base, he had obviously decided to accept their presence. Both the priest and the Hargian cavalryman knew that in the small building back at the Hargian base, death had been very close.

"Well?"

Hona squinted. He raised his hand to shield his eyes. "I don't even see a speck."

"I thought as much," Xanfolo said. "How is it that sometimes priests can see in the far distance, and other times only their hand in front of their eyes? How is it that priests can see which direction small bags of foam go when they rise high in the sky?"

Dammer edged closer, his arms folded. "Captain, you think the priests have a trick? A mumbo-jumbo incantation they can recite?"

"Ask Hona," Xanfolo replied sharply.

"Well, priest?" Dammer unfolded his arms. "Keep in mind that it's a long way down to the ground. Then tell the truth."

Xanfolo found Dammer's threat of some interest, though he discounted most of it. Dammer and Hona knew each other and had obviously forged a prickly bond through shared dangerous experience.

"There is a better reason for you to tell the truth, Hona. That speck could turn out to be a problem. Try again to look far off and tell us what you see."

"Could the speck you see interfere with our mission?" Hona asked.

"If my guess is correct," Xanfolo answered, "That speck could mean the end of our mission."

"Then under those circumstances, I can help." Hona turned and hurried across the deck to the bridge and the box below.

"Where's he going?" Dammer asked.

"Remember the large box the priest brought on board?"

"Yes, Captain. Trust civilians to bring baggage on a mission."

Both soldiers studied the sky carefully. Dammer pointed. "I see your speck. Can birds fly that high?"

"Only if they were made in Ponta," replied Xanfolo.

Hona emerged from the bridge and hurried across the deck. He carried a tube that was easily as long as Dammer's cavalry sword and wide enough to require two hands to hold it. The tube looked like two pieces of pipe with one piece stuck into the other.

"Here is your mumbo-jumbo," Hona said. "Look in this end and tell me what you see."

Once the tube was laid across Dammer's shoulder, Xanfolo aimed the tube at the speck. He peered through the tube and then pulled away, a look of disgust screwing up his face.

"Priest, this piece of mumbo-jumbo makes my vision worse. It shows nothing but blurs."

"Look again," Hona said. "Turn the bottom part of the tube slowly."

"Once a fool, twice a fool." Xanfolo muttered the opening line of an old Montian fairy tale as he again put his face to the tube's end and slowly turned the bottom part of the instrument.

"By my sword!"

Xanfolo jumped back from the tube. Dammer turned to see what had happened, and Hona caught the tube just before it fell to the deck.

“What is this? What kind of magic?”

“Just some mumbo-jumbo, Captain,” Hona replied. The Kinsan priest’s face flashed a rare smile. Though he spoke calmly, his eyes betrayed his excitement.

“Can I look through the mumbo-jumbo?” Dammer asked. Both the captain and the priest laughed. The big Hargian sounded like a child wanting to play with a new toy.

The tube was safely anchored on Xanfolo’s shoulder, and Dammer took his look.

“It’s a battle carrier!”

“It’s the Tagge, Ponta’s biggest and best,” Xanfolo said. “I hope Prince Tagge is aboard the carrier named for him. Since he appears to be making a tighter circle than ours, he will catch us by the time the small sun is overhead.”

“Couldn’t we change course and outrun him?” Hona asked.

“Why?” Xanfolo shrugged.

“Yes, Priest,” added Dammer. “This is not a time to run. It’s time to prepare for battle.” He paused and then spat over the rail. “There, now I’m prepared.”

Preparations for the carrier and the crew were a little more complicated. Sub-captain Makin was summoned to join Xanfolo at the rim rail. Some of Xanfolo’s orders amazed the Hargian.

“A skeleton crew on duty?” he roared. “Most of the men sent to eat and rest? This is preparation for battle?”

“We are not going to mount a herd of gunas and make a cavalry charge,” Xanfolo answered. “This is a different kind of battle. It may last a long time. The men must be rested and fed.”

“This will be no battle at all,” Dammer said, his face showing disappointment. “We will be like two birds,” and he demonstrated with his hands, “Diving and playing at each other in the sky.”

“You’ll find out soon enough that these birds have sharp talons,” Xanfolo said. “Now, Priest, what other surprises do you have in your box? Do you have another mumbo-jumbo that might give us the edge in battle against the Tagge?”

“Possibly,” Hona admitted. “But there are problems. I’m not sure what will help and what will not. If I’m wrong, your reliance on the wrong tool could lose us the battle. Until I know more about your battle, I can’t be sure what will be effective. My orders are clear. I am to be very careful to limit the use of our mumbo-jumbo, as you call it, to only that which will ensure the success of our mission.”

“We must be in deeper trouble than I guessed,” Dammer snorted. “I’ve never heard a priest talk so plainly.”

Xanfolo’s eyes caught a signal from the bridge. “Grab the rail and hang on,” he ordered. Both Hona and Dammer responded quickly and without questioning. *Their training has been good*, Xanfolo told himself. That was to be expected from the veteran Hargian. The priest was a different matter. He wondered if Hona had undergone military training.

Dammer held the rail with both hands, his feet well-braced. Hona held on with one hand, the other clutching the tube awkwardly against his body.

The deck suddenly tipped sharply. The carrier was like a saucer lifted from one side.

“We need more height,” Xanfolo said calmly as he braced his legs against the slant. “We don’t want the Pontans to come in on top of us and cut away our guiding kites. That

would make a cheap victory for them. Hang on. We will soon be in level flight again. I'll rejoin you later."

"Where are you going, Captain?" Hona asked. The urgent tone of his voice betrayed an edge of panic.

"Why, to take a nap, of course."

The two men hanging on tightly to the rail turned their heads enough so they could see the Montian captain stroll with a strange gait down the sloping deck to the bridge.

"By the blood of a hundred barbarians, this is a strange way to fight a war!"

"It is the beginning of a new era," Hona said. "I hope we reach a level position soon. Very soon."

Chapter 8

The two ships raced in a great turning maneuver, riding the circles of winds. The Nara was on the inside as the result of maneuvering whose intent Hona quickly grasped.

"You have learned much in a short time from experience, Captain. It took us a great deal of hard study to do no more than guess that the winds travel in such great circles, and in some circles the winds are faster than in others."

"Soldiers who cannot learn from what they see do not live very long," Xanfolo replied while closely watching the Pontan carrier. "Isn't that right, Subaltern Dammer?"

"Absolutely! A dumb soldier is barbarian meat."

Everyone on the Nara was aware that the Tagge was a much larger and more powerful carrier than the Nara. The Tagge's kites were larger, thus giving it a greater swiftness, but a good captain could make all the difference. The Nara's crew had no doubt that they had the best, and Xanfolo's early decisions had given them proof of his ability.

The Nara had the inside circle, and its kites veered to the left. The Pontan's kites also veered to the left. If the Tagge tried to move closer to the Nara, then the Pontan kites would be an easy target as their ropes would pass close enough to the Nara for a volley from the sharp multipults which could sever the control ropes.

Without kites, a carrier was a captive of the winds. It might drift for a long time, but eventually it would end up being dashed against the high mountains or carried out over the tempestuous ocean with its wild storms and high waves. Either way meant certain death for the hapless crew.

The Pontans had only two tactical choices. They could either veer into the Nara regardless of the risk to their kites, or break away and try another circle in an attempt to gain the inside advantage. That could mean a long delay, and the distance traveled in another light time would bring them close to Zorn. Not even Prince Tagge was likely to be happy about destroying a carrier on a League mission while a large number of witnesses on the ground watched the battle.

They stood at the rim rail closest to the Tagge. There were Xanfolo and Makin, a signalman three steps behind, and Hona and Dammer to Xanfolo's left. They studied the Tagge and without the use of the looking tube, they could make out a small group of men on the Pontan carrier staring back at them.

Without taking his eyes off the Tagge, Xanfolo spoke. "Well, Makin. What is your recommendation in this case?"

Makin glanced up at the suns and then at the kites high and to the left.

"The Tagge carries four diskers to our two and at least eighteen multipults to our twelve. There are probably twice as many bowmen on the Tagge. Those are not good odds. But if the Tagge closes on us, it cannot use its two diskers forward for fear of hitting their own kite ropes. I think we have a standoff unless the winds change and give them the advantage. If we can run this way until the suns are set followed by darkness, then we might be able to break off and fly safely to Zorn."

"That is precise and worthy of my agreement," Xanfolo said. "But there is always the possibility that the wind will not remain so favorable. Nor do I look forward to flying in the dark and running head on with the Tagge. With due respect, Makin, I have decided on another course of action. We will attack. We can veer on them without undue risk to our kites, and though we are outnumbered, I do not fear the battle and its outcome."

"By the blood of a thousand barbors, this is a happy idea!" Dammer shouted. "Bring us in, Captain! I have a thirsty sword."

"It might work," Hona said. "They will be expecting us to run. They will be completely surprised when we attack."

Xanfolo smiled. He pointed at the sword belted around Hona's middle. "Do you know how to use that?"

"Priests study many arts," Hona replied.

Men rushed about the deck as Makin issued a steady stream of orders while returning to his post on the bridge. Eight of the multipults were pushed into position along the rail facing the Tagge. Behind shields that gave some protection, though not against the heavy diskers, crewmen serving the multipults loaded their sidearm throwers with twelve small disks.

Each multipult disk was as big as a royal dinner plate. The rims were honed to a desperate sharpness. Once loaded, the side arms were cranked back to the launching position. When launched as a volley, the eight multipults could throw ninety-six man-killing disks into the sky. It was the weapon most feared by the barbarians, but to be effective, the range had to be close.

Back out of the way and prone on the deck lay twenty bowmen. If the carriers came together and the Pontans survived the multipults volley, they could swarm over the Nara's rail before the pults could be reloaded and cranked into launching position. The bowmen would rise and greet the visitors with arrows. If that didn't end the assault, then the bows were to be hastily discarded in favor of swords. Cold steel would be the decisive final weapon. While the priests in each of the six cities had pushed hard for the acceptance of diskers and multipults, the soldiers still preferred to settle matters with the sword.

The diskers were the weapons that could quickly decide a sky battle. The weight of a disk and the powerful throwing arm combined to produce a missile that could skim across the sky and remove from battle any number of the opposing force. The disks could also score a lucky hit on the ropes leading to the kites, or hit the cabin where the ropes were controlled.

The Nara's two diskerpults were mounted on tracks that could be moved into different positions. This was an innovation Xanfolo had demanded over the objections of the Montian priests who designed and built the Nara. All four of the Pontan diskerpults were fixed in position.

Satisfied that all was as ready as it could be, Xanfolo turned to his signalman. "To Sub-captain Makin. Put us alongside the Tagge."

The signal was flashed to the bridge. Makin relayed the order to the tracked cabin where the kites were controlled. The kites were warped into a new position by manipulating the attached control ropes.

Slowly, the Nara edged closer to the Tagge. Prince Tagge and his captain were slow to realize that the Nara was coming in. When they saw the gap narrowing, they understood. A flurry of activity on the Tagge deck followed.

"Signalman! To the diskerpults! Launch one disker," Xanfolo ordered.

A great ripping sound followed instantly. The long arm whipped the disker into the sky between the two carriers. It quickly lost momentum, but still appeared to sail toward the Tagge. The disker hit the bottom part of the Pontan carrier, but no damage could be seen.

"A hit but no damage," Hona noted. "The Tagge has not launched its diskers. Why?"

"They are waiting for us to get closer. We launched at long range because I think it best to get off the first volley even if the range is too great. Now the crew on the Tagge will have fixed in their minds the vision of the disker coming at them."

The distance between the two carriers continued to narrow slowly, but enough of the gap had been closed so that each side could see the other clearly. Tension rose among the multipults' servers along the rim rail, knowing they would be in action soon. The triggermen hovered over their devices.

"Signalman," Xanfolo ordered. "To both diskerpults! Launch one disker each."

There was a repeat of the ripping noise and two diskers shot out across the gap. This time there was no loss of momentum before the diskers slammed into the Tagge. One of the diskers skimmed across the Tagge's deck, and men could be seen going down. The second disker lodged in the side of the Tagge, about the length of two men down from the top deck. Either the force of the blow knocked down men standing on the deck, or when they saw the big disker coming at them, they dropped to the deck in the hope of escaping death.

The two carriers were close enough for the Nara's crew to hear the sounds of the Tagge's diskerpults launching a counterblow. The two diskers coming at the Nara seemed large enough to blot out the two suns.

"Stand firm," Xanfolo ordered.

The first disker sailed across the Nara's top deck a sword's length too high to inflict damage or casualties. The second scored a lucky hit on the bridge. Pieces of the bridge and bodies flew in all directions.

Xanfolo grabbed the subaltern in charge of the multipults.

"Take ten bowmen and go to the bridge. If Sub-captain Makin is dead or hurt, you will take over as bridge officer. Make our signals to the kite cabin clear. Do not fail me!"

"At once, Captain." The young subaltern dashed across the deck, shouting at the first file of bowmen who hastily got up and joined him in the short race to the bridge.

"Signalman! To the diskerpults! Launch and keep launching. Take down the Tagge!"

A cheer went up from the diskerpult crewman when they saw the signal. Their cheers carried across the narrowing gap to the Tagge. Back came battle screams in reply.

The Nara's third volley smashed into the Tagge with good effect. Xanfolo could see that one of the diskers had sliced through at least two of the Tagge's multipult crews, but then came the answering volley. Two bowmen hurrying back from the bridge to their positions on the deck were smashed by one of the diskers. One was cut in half. The other was carried over the other side of the Nara and fell to his death.

"Now this is a battle!" Dammer shouted. He drew his sword and stood tall, daring the Tagge to send one his way.

The signalman touched Xanfolo's shoulder. "Signal from the bridge, Captain. Speaking-tube restored to kite cabin. Makin injured. Subaltern in charge."

Xanfolo acknowledged the message and then turned and shouted to the row of multipults facing the Tagge.

"Now, men, your subaltern has taken command of the bridge. I will give you your orders. And, I remind you, I was not an easy subaltern."

The diskerpults on both battle carriers were launching as fast as they could be reloaded and the arms cranked back. The battle's danger and fury compressed time so that it seemed to those involved that the sky was constantly filled with the large diskers. The distance between the two carriers narrowed once again, and faces contorted by fear and battle-anger were clearly seen.

The order to launch the multipults was given at the same time on both carriers, and the sky was suddenly filled with whizzing death. There were dull thuds as the sharp disks slammed against shields, and screams as multipult disks cut away an arm or leg or buried themselves in bodies.

The range was too close now for the diskerpults to continue their launchings. The crew of the diskerpult closest to the Nara's fighting line drew their swords and rushed forward to join in the close work that was sure to come. The other diskerpult crewmen unblocked their weapon and pushed it to a new position. It was time for an attempt at the Tagge's kite lines.

Before the multipults could be reloaded and cranked for another launching, the two carriers had come within less than three sword lengths. Bowmen on both sides added their missiles of death to the battle.

On the Tagge, there was a swarm of men at the rim, their swords drawn. Other men carried grappling hooks tied to long ropes that were secured to the Tagge's deck.

Seeing the hooks, Xanfolo shouted, "Don't let them grapple on. Cut their ropes!"

The multipult crewmen stopped their reloading efforts and drew their swords while grappling hooks sailed through the sky and pulled tight against the rim rail.

The distance closed by at least another sword length. The more venturesome on the Tagge leaped from their rim rail.

His long cavalry sword point raised, Dammer spitted a boarder. "This is a battle, at last!" the Hargian shouted as he fell over backward with the dead Pontan on top. Throwing the Pontan's body aside, Dammer arose and waved what was left of his sword, a bare stump not two hands long. "This is the end of the cavalry," he moaned as he grabbed a short Montian sword from the deck and rejoined the battle line.

The two carriers bumped while men stood on opposite decks and tried to kill each other. Several more Pontan swordsmen leaped, but just as they came through the sky, the two carriers drifted apart. They waved their swords in vain at the sky as they plummeted to their deaths.

“Don’t let them grapple!” Xanfolo warned again.

The two carriers came together and sword clashed with sword, but the Pontans were no longer eager to leap onto the Nara’s deck. Xanfolo backed out of the hacking and jabbing melee. “Signalman,” he called.

“Present,” the signalman replied from his post a few steps back. When Xanfolo turned, he stared at the signalman who stood at attention despite having been hit in the shoulder by an arrow.

Xanfolo moved closer. “Can you understand what I am saying?”

The signalman nodded.

“Report to the bridge at once. Tell the subaltern that you are to be taken care of by the doctor.”

The signalman nodded, but did not move.

“Go!” Xanfolo ordered.

“My duty is three paces behind the captain during battle,” the signalman said slowly as if methodically going through a training drill.

“You are honored,” Xanfolo said as he turned and then shouted to his multipults men, “If any are ready, stand by to launch on my command.”

The swordsmen on the Tagge also heard his orders. They knew what would happen at that range, and they fled from the rim rail or threw themselves flat on the Pontan deck. Only one man stood to face a possible disk volley.

Prince Tagge, his black tunic and cloak showing the color of the Pontan royal house, stood his ground with raised sword.

“A well-fought battle, for Montians led by a bastard,” Prince Tagge shouted. “Now, fire your multipults. I am ready to face them or your arrows. Do your best, Captain Xanfolo, for if you fail, I will kill you.”

While Dammer stepped back desperately looking for a bow and one last arrow, Xanfolo spoke quietly. “If we have a multipult ready, let it launch now.”

The snapping noise of a multipult’s discharge followed instantly. The sharp disks cut through the sky on both sides and above the prince who stood proudly erect. Not one of the disks touched the nobleman.

“Another time, Montian. Another time, and you will die,” the prince said as he saluted with his sword.

The salute was also a farewell as the Tagge suddenly bore away. The Pontan carrier’s kites had been shifted. The captain of the Tagge had had enough, though the crown prince of Ponta must have been infuriated at the thought of breaking off the battle. Xanfolo instantly understood the prince’s willingness to face death from the multipult. It was his way of telling the realms that he apparently had no choice in the matter, and that the causes for breaking away must be other than his lack of courage. The result also suggested that even though the prince was destined to be a future king, he did not feel confident enough to overrule his captain.

A cheer went up from the men on the Nara when they realized that they had driven off the more powerful carrier. It was a great victory that would be celebrated in public houses across Montia, but the cost was high. Nearly a third of the crew was dead or wounded.

Xanfolo turned to Dammer. “We have seen the future.”

“Yours maybe, Captain,” the Hargian growled, “But not mine.”

Chapter 9

After the Nara landed, a difficult matter this close to the mountains because of uncertain winds, the Kinsan captain in charge of the colony at Zorn hurried his visitors into a closely guarded headquarters.

"This place has the look of a siege about it," Xanfolo said. "Are the barbarians presenting you with problems?"

"More than just problems," the captain responded. "I believe they are going to begin a war such as we have never seen before. We are probed constantly. I've sent back reports but neither the League nor my superiors seem to think there is a problem."

"It is a long way from here to Kinsa," Hona said thoughtfully. "Perhaps there is some misunderstanding in Kinsa. I, we, did not realize you felt so threatened. You have nearly three thousand soldiers out here. You have walls, and you must have at least thirty multipult launchers. You have the Soren Legion and at least four squadrons of cavalry..."

Dammer interrupted, "Including a squadron of fifty of Harg's best. I know, I trained them."

"And if they are all like you," smiled Hona, "The barbarians will have their problems."

"You people back in Kinsa don't have any idea about conditions out here," the Kinsan captain said angrily. "What are fifty sabers worth, or even three thousand men we have under arms here when there are thousands of barbarians in the mountains? It is a long march around our walls, and I have to garrison a post at the mines. This makes for a very thin line of defense. The barbarians are getting ready to come, I tell you, and they are coming in numbers beyond anything we have seen since the colony was founded."

Xanfolo nodded agreement. "We've had reports from Montia II. There have been more sightings of jungle barbarians than any time since I entered cadet academy as a boy. I agree with you, Captain. Something is stirring the barbarians like never before."

The Kinsan captain seemed relieved to finally have someone agree with him. "The arrival of your battle carrier is a gift from the three orbs. He paused and fixed a stony stare on Hona's face. "I do not understand why my own city, the powerful city of Kinsa with its four battle carriers, cannot find a way to get even one of the carriers to visit the mining camps here in Zorn."

"Your point is understood," Hona replied blandly. The priest's face revealed no reaction to the captain's harsh statement.

The captain turned to Xanfolo. "I would like your permission to start a convoy of women and children back to the settlement in Dorn. We could dump the ore and load people on the freighters. I would also like to have reinforcements start forward from Dorn as soon as possible. Even if they started now, it would take twelve light times for them to get here."

"They could get here in eight if they were mounted on gunas," Dammer said. He winked at Hona as he added, "The idea that cavalry are old-fashioned and not worth much is nonsense. If the barbarians break out, you're going to wish you had a thousand lancers to put in the field instead of these fancy battle carriers. No offense, Captain Xanfolo, although I saw first hand how you can dominate the skies. However, people on the ground have no reason to fear your war birds."

“None taken, Subaltern,” Xanfolo replied. “But in time people on the ground may have good reason to fear the appearance of a battle carrier.”

Hona traced small patterns on the table with his finger. “If you do begin evacuation, what will the barbarians think? Won’t that cause them to think we are afraid of them? And what of the convoy? How many men will you need to guard it? You have two hundred cavalry. If they are committed to guarding the convoy, you will have split your force into three parts. All of the parts together are not equal in numbers to the barbarians. In three parts, each will be weak and cannot help each other.”

Xanfolo smiled at his counterpart. “It looks like the priests have been studying something besides their prayers. Come to think of it, Hona, you showed a better than average skill with your blade when we fought the Pontans. These are not qualities for which the priests have become so beloved by the people.”

“He should be good,” Dammer said. “I taught him.”

That piece of information was of interest to Xanfolo. He glanced at the Kinsan captain, but his face betrayed no surprise or concern. Xanfolo knew that the Hargian would never have taught the Kinsan priest how to fight unless he had been ordered to do so by the League. Why was the League interested in teaching priests how to fight? How did such a move escape the attention of the royal houses? He knew of no royal house that did not hold the priests in disdain, if not outright hatred.

Hona pressed the Kinsan captain on matters of defense. “What about the miners? Will they fight?”

“They are eager enough, though not skilled,” the captain replied. “They hate barbarians. They’ve had friends who disappeared to orbs-know-what-fate. That only adds a few more thousand at best. Even with their help, there is no way we can hold the walls. With your battle carrier, and your men, Captain Xanfolo, we at least have a chance. The barbarians will be reluctant to attack while you are overhead.”

“You cannot count on the help of the battle carrier,” Hona said gently. “We are here on a League mission which has priority.”

“Priority?” questioned the captain. “Higher priority than defending Zorn? These must be strange times back in Kinsa.”

Xanfolo was also asking questions, but silently. Hona was assuming a command position that could not be allowed. While the mission was assigned by the League, Xanfolo and the Nara were Montian, and neither Hona nor the League could issue orders that might be contrary to Montian interests or honor. Still, it did seem logical to allow a Kinsan to tell another Kinsan that there would be no help from the Nara, but that did not ease his mind. There was a matter of honor involved. There was, after all, a bond of honor between soldiers of the six realms.

“I command the Nara,” Xanfolo said softly. “We will give Zorn as much help as we can while we are here. I’ll have six of our multipults unloaded and let you use their crews. I cannot do more for you. We lost a third of our crew in the battle with the Tagge. If the barbarians attack while we are still here, we will fight to the end with you. We won’t fly away from honor.”

The Kinsan captain nodded. “I never thought you would, Captain. Your reputation is known among my officers and men. By now, after my men have gossiped with yours, I suspect your victory over the Tagge will cause your fame to grow.”

Xanfolo acknowledged the compliment with a wave as if to deprecate his achievement. “We are here to talk with a Soren named Gant. Where can we find him?”

“Talking to a Soren is your mission? That is what has priority over the defense of Zorn?”

“There are matters you do not know of,” Hona said. “Nor is it necessary for you to know.”

“Well, if it’s a Soren you want, you’ll have to serve at least temporarily as reinforcement for our outpost at the mines. You’ll do us service after all. I put the Soren on outpost duty because they are a treacherous lot. If they try to run away, the barbarians will catch them and kill them. I’ll not let you go among them without an escort.”

“I understand,” Xanfolo answered. “Swiftness is necessary. We need to make this a quick journey.”

“I’ll mount you on gunas and send a cavalry escort. You can make it by darkness if you start now,” said the captain.

“Give me at least ten good Hargian lancers,” Dammer grunted. “I have a bad feeling about this business. If it wouldn’t leave you short of good men, I’d take the whole Hargian cavalry squadron.”

Xanfolo acknowledged the Kinsan captain’s offer. “Let us do it now, and when we return, Captain, we will have a new perspective on matters here. That perspective will be made clear to the League, I promise you.”

Hona listened intently. A slight frown appeared on his face and then passed quickly, but not before Xanfolo’s eyes registered the subtle change.

The Montian captain raised his right hand, a gesture the Kinsan captain quickly matched. As their palms touched, Xanfolo said, “My honor on it.”

“Your soldier’s pledge has more truth than all the League mandates ever issued,” the Kinsan captain replied.

“Now,” Xanfolo continued, “We must leave for the outpost immediately.”

Preparations were quickly made. Before Xanfolo could get accustomed to walking on ground again after the flying journey to Zorn, he found himself uncomfortably seated on the back of a guna. As was too often his fate, Xanfolo’s mount was most uncooperative. The riding style of the flying captain renowned in five realms and hated in one kept a smile working on Dammer’s face.

They rode in a column along the outer edge of the wide, dusty trail. Large wooden freighters lifted by foam and towed by gunas passed them on their way back to Zorn and then the long trip across the plain, first to Dorn, then Dom, and then on to Kinsa and Harg.

Walking alongside the gunas were drivers and soldiers who acted as guards. The freighters were large, their length being at least twelve paces long. Their width was at least four paces. Tied to the freighters with ropes were the huge foam bags that provided the lift for the freighters. The loaded freighters that the small, mounted column passed on the way to the outpost and the mines rode higher in the sky because they were empty or carried light loads of supplies for the miners and Soren garrison.

Xanfolo remembered the cadet whom he had sentenced for falling asleep on duty. Most of the guards were men who had made mistakes and were walking off their punishment. It was a hard punishment that most never forgot. And yet, the punishment was better than the alternative which a captain could order. The alternative was execution.

The Hargian cavalrymen assigned for escort duty were mostly old-timers who knew Subaltern Dammer as both a former leader and good friend in any brawl. The cavalrymen wore their strange helmets made from guna skin and shaped like a guna's head. Their weapons were lance and long cavalry sword. Slung on their backs were shields made of light metal and cast in the shape of a circle. Unlike most of the cavalry and pike men, the Hargians did not use body armor, placing more reliance on their shields for protection from barbarian rocks, arrows, and spears.

Xanfolo saw that two of the troopers had each lost an eye. They rode side by side, and when questioned about it, Dammer replied, "They also fight side by side. Each has one good eye and can protect a flank. Together they have two swords and two eyes. I doubt that there are any four soldiers going who could best them in a sword fight."

Loss of eyes was a common enough hazard for soldiers. The barbarians were fond of stones hurled from slings. It was the stones, launched from sudden ambush that seemed to cause more casualties than either arrows or spears.

Midway in their journey they stopped at a small post manned by a detachment of Kinsan pike men. After a brief rest, they continued their journey.

"Another company of men detached from the main force," Hona noted. "I'm sure it is necessary, but is there no end to the dispersal of soldiers?"

Xanfolo laughed. He had been through the same experience with demands for more soldiers to patrol Montia's jungle frontier and the colony at Montia II.

"You priests are to blame. Every time you want a new mine or a timber source, there must be defenders. The defenders who do the work are fond of eating and drinking. This means more defenders to protect the people providing food and drink. Then when you priests make something new, there go more men. As Dammer can tell you quick enough, the men needed to fly and maintain the Nara could easily equal a small cavalry regiment. Which do you want? Which do you need? Keep in mind that sometimes it is the barbarians who determine that."

"It is complicated," Hona admitted. "It looks different out here compared to back in our libraries. I am learning much on this mission."

"I hope we will benefit from what you learn," Xanfolo said. "I see that your box of secrets has found its way on our little journey."

"I thought you might not notice if I changed the shape from a box to two bags," Hona replied.

"That's not much of a trick for a priest," Dammer laughed. "I hope you have something better in the bags. We may need some handy mumbo-jumbo when we get to the post. My men have told me some interesting stories. There is bad blood between the Soren and the Kinsans. The Kinsans suspect some kind of treachery."

"The barbarians and the Soren?" asked Hona. "That is impossible. Of all the cities, the Soren are the most removed from barbarian contact, and at the same time, the most afraid of barbarians. They could never get close enough to make a conspiracy."

"That's true enough," Dammer admitted. "But the gossip among the miners is that the Pontans are using barbarians to work in their mines. The Pontans are making friends with the barbos."

"The Soren all but belong to the Pontans," Xanfolo added. He had more to say, but decided against it. He could see now how matters were shaping. He could sense that a war was coming and soon, even if he wasn't at all sure who would fight on each side. *Maybe*

there will be more than two sides, he told himself. Whatever happened, he must get back to Montia with the Nara. His loyalty was to Montia, not the League. If war came, would there even be a League?

Xanfolo was lost in his thoughts about the prospects of war, and how Montia's interests had to be protected, but his wandering in his mind did not occur without outside irritations. His body was aware of how long he had been riding the guna.

"The post is ahead, Captain," Dammer said softly. "It is a sorry-looking position, even for the Soren."

Dammer was right. As they closed on the post, Xanfolo could see that the walls were barely chest-high. There were towers, but barbarians would have no trouble reaching the fighting levels. Living quarters for the miners were outside the walls. There were no pens for gunas. No freighters were kept over darkness.

"When is the last time the Duke of Zorn or any other member of the Kinsan royal house made an inspection out here?" Xanfolo wondered aloud.

"This is bad," Hona admitted. "When we return to Kinsa, there will be some changes made."

Dammer turned in his saddle and bellowed at his troops. "Stay with us, and if anything happens to Captain Xanfolo, your heads will answer for it to me personally."

"There is a believable threat," Xanfolo said. "My thanks, but your troopers should look to their own safety, and be mindful of their mounts. The Soren are known to enjoy acquiring a few stray gunas from time to time."

"Almost as bad as the barbos! You men heard the captain. Lose your guna, and you walk back to Zorn."

It was nearing the setting of the second sun when they passed through the gate into the post. There was no challenge from the Soren pike men on duty.

"I'd as soon take my chances with my troopers out on the trail," Dammer muttered angrily, "Than be cooped up here for the darkness."

They presented themselves to the Soren commander, who quickly asked if the party was the advance of a relief. When he was told no, he acted suspicious and wanted to know if it was an inspection, and where the proper credentials were. After a brief exchange of words, the Soren sub-captain finally discovered that there was a Subaltern Gant who led a company of pike men guarding the east wall.

"He is our best subaltern, and thus to him goes the point of honor. I think what he has in mind is taking my place by some piece of treachery. Well, let him try, but first he must survive his present duty," the Soren sub-captain snarled.

When they left the Soren headquarters, Xanfolo saw that much of the Soren legion was taking up positions around the building. "The Soren sub-captain seems determined to defend his own lair to the death," Xanfolo said bitterly.

The east wall was lighted by liguite torches which cast a soft yellow light, a dim glow that made too many shadows for the comfort of men on watch. However, it was better than the dark where barbarians could move without penalty. At intervals along the wall stood the pike men, their long beaked lances resting against the wall. In the towers facing the mountains were bowmen. The command center was a small hut near the wall, and it was there that they found Gant.

After convincing the Soren subaltern that they were there on League business, and after the orderly was all but bodily removed by Dammer, the question was put to Gant.

“Where is Princess Talisa of Clang being held? Who kidnapped her and why?” Xanfolo spoke quickly, his voice racking out the questions in a tone that caused Hona to step back.

The Soren got the message. There was the feel of death in the hut. Gant’s brow broke into a sweat, and yet he answered with a surprising boldness.

“I don’t know what you are talking about. I didn’t even know Princess Talisa had been taken. The orbs know I haven’t been out of here for a full changing of the moon. I know nothing about what you ask. I can’t believe you came all the way out here. This feels more like a quest to cover some kind of League mischief.”

Xanfolo stared at the subaltern. Finally, he turned to Hona and Dammer. “Go. Leave us alone.”

“Impossible,” replied Hona. “I, *we*, must know everything. There can be no secrets, at least not any more than already exist.”

“Go now,” Xanfolo ordered, his hand moving to his sword hilt, “Or stay and die.”

Hona and Dammer stepped back a pace. Dammer’s hand gripped his sword hilt, but Hona restrained him saying, “We choose to go, for now.”

They backed out the door and closed it. Xanfolo moved close to Gant who was seated in a hammock-like chair.

“I have one word to say to you.”

“Say it, then.”

“Fonof,”

“Is that supposed to mean something to me?”

“Yes.”

“It’s a strange word. Where did you hear such a word?”

“In Harg. Three masked men told me the word.”

“Did they die from your torture?”

“No. They spoke of their own free will, and because of them I lived. They saved my life, and they said I should come to Zorn and find a Soren named Gant. They said that when he heard the word, this Gant would tell me what I need to know.”

Gant leaned back against the chair’s cloth. “And if this is a trap?”

“Why would you worry? You have a regiment at your call, and I have but twelve men. It would not be that hard for you to kill me.”

“If you are indeed the one who was to come, then this Soren contingent, or a dozen like it, wouldn’t be able to stop you.”

“If I was that man, why would you want to stop me? I must know where to find Princess Talisa. The masked men said you could help me. Did they dishonor me with lies?”

Gant’s face twisted, and a shock of pain contorted his features, but it was not a pain caused by illness. It came from his mind and the weight of the knowledge held therein.

“They did not lie. You must go to Dom. There you will find a rich Soren merchant. He is in the hold of the Pontans. You will find the princess in the house of this merchant.”

Xanfolo leaned forward. “His name. Give me the name of this Soren traitor!”

“It is Gant!”

Xanfolo drew back, shocked. “A man of your family?”

“My brother.”

Before Xanfolo could ask why the masked men had not told him this information outright instead of making necessary a trip to Zorn, there was a pounding at the door.

Dammer burst into the room with a drawn sword, and noises of panic were heard through the open door.

"Come quickly!" Dammer shouted. "The barbos are working fearful magic. The Soren are ready to bolt!"

The group rushed outside. "There!" Dammer said as he pointed to the wall. Almost at the top of the wall loomed a giant face, a horrible barbarian face made even more grotesque since it was illuminated from behind with a soft, uneven light that played over the towers. This created an image that seemed to move as if alive, each shadow rippling across the face making it even more fearsome.

"By my sword!" Xanfolo muttered. "What kind of trickery is this? Where is Hona? We need a priest's tricks to counter this mumbo-jumbo. Gant, use the flat of your blade. Beat your men back into position. The barbarians will be pouring up from behind that face!"

Dammer shouted at his faithful cavalymen. "Grab a Soren under each arm and rush to the wall. Put your cold steel against this trickery."

Xanfolo's question about Hona was answered by the appearance of the priest as he came hurrying up from the rear, a fat tube in his hands. The tube was similar to the looking tube, except that it was longer and wider.

"Is that our mumbo-jumbo?" Dammer asked. "What's he going to do, *look* at the monster? He ought to be doing some kind of incantations, priestly work, to make the monster disappear."

Hona stopped a few paces from the wall. He put one end of the tube against the ground so that the other end pointed up at the terrible face. He stepped back, and all could see that the tube had suddenly grown legs that looked like spear shafts.

"What is this priest about?" growled Xanfolo.

Hona then knelt down at the tube's bottom. There was a sudden spark of light in his hands. Then he grasped the tube with both hands, and a flaming ball burst forth out of the tube. With a great whooshing sound, the fiery ball streaked into the face which shivered and then sank slowly to the ground where it burned.

"The face is dead!" shouted Xanfolo. "Now to the wall!"

In groups of twos and threes, the Soren pike men moved cautiously to the wall, retrieving their pikes from the ground where they had thrown them. Xanfolo took his place at the wall with Dammer on his right and Hona on his left. About them on both sides were the Hargian cavalymen. Hona drew his sword and laid it on the wall and prepared to climb to the other side. "I will go to the other side of the wall. I must see how the barbarians made their face."

"Not now," Xanfolo said as he pulled the priest back. "We will have all the barbarians you ever wanted to see coming to pay us a visit. After this is over, and *if* we live, *then* you can find answers to your questions. Perhaps now you can answer some of mine. You must tell me about this new piece of priestly magic. What else do you have in your bags? Maybe another tube that spits a flaming ball? After all, that is what's holding the barbarians back now. Another flaming ball sent into their midst and they might break for the mountains and not stop running until the moon changes."

"Regrettably I must say that was the only one of its kind. It was an experiment, and this was its first real test. More important, that face was lifted with foam. Who gave foam to the barbarians?"

"We both know the answer to that. It was the Pontans," replied Xanfolo.

“Listen!” Dammer cautioned.

There was a moaning chant coming out of the darkness beyond the shadowy light cast in front of the wall by the liguite torches.

“They are coming!” Xanfolo shouted. “Subaltern Gant, have your bowmen play their arrows into the dark.”

“At once,” Gant replied.

The men at the wall could hear the twanging of bow strings from the nearest tower. The chanting voices came closer. Shadowy movement could be seen at the edge of the light, and then the sound of birds in flight could be heard. The cavalrymen quickly raised their shields. Barbarian arrows bounced off the shields or hit the wall. Some of the arrows made a soft thunking sound as they found targets more by chance than by aim.

The arrows were quickly followed by screaming men leaping from the shadows. They were still coming out of the shadows when the first wave hit the wall. As fast as they were cut down, more mounted the wall. Once atop the wall, they threw themselves on the defenders without regard for life, their own as well as the defenders.

“The wall is lost,” Xanfolo shouted. “Form the Death Circle on me. We fight to the death, and curses on those who slink back in the dark, or those who do not come forward to help!”

Hona and Dammer and the seven remaining Hargians formed a circle around Xanfolo with their backs facing inward, and their swords facing outward. They were joined by Gant and a dozen Soren.

“We will win,” Gant cried, “for the Montian captain is with us!”

The barbarians quickly surrounded the circle and pressed it inward, though at terrible cost. The defenders also paid a high price. The circle contracted as both Soren and Hargian soldiers were killed or wounded.

Gant was not daunted by their prospects. He bolstered the survivors with his defiant shout, “Sorens, we are only three, but that is enough to teach the barbos a fearful lesson!” His rallying cry seemed to cause the barbarians to pull back. They withdrew several paces, but kept their swords and spears at the ready.

“What is this?” Xanfolo asked. “Why do they hesitate?” While his mind questioned, his body was thankful for a respite from battle.

The barbarians suddenly broke and ran for the wall, and then the defenders in the circle could see why. A mass of screaming men bearing liguite torches ran in their direction.

“At last, the rest of the regiment is coming forward,” Xanfolo announced. “I do not think we will die just yet.”

“No,” said Gant. “It is the miners. They’ve come to save us.”

The miners stormed forward, brandishing an array of picks, shovels, clubs, pikes, and swords picked up off the ground where they had been thrown away by the Soren who fled from the battle.

The miners had no files or ranks. They were a large, howling mob screaming for blood. The barbarians did not wait to engage them, choosing instead to run to the wall and then once across, back into the shadows. Xanfolo and his small command quickly directed the miners to man the wall and prepare for defense in the event the barbarians decided to make another attack.

“I must go out there now,” Hona said. “I must see what’s left of the face.”

“If it must be so, then I will go with you,” Xanfolo said.

“And I, too,” Gant added.

The three men climbed over the wall and dropped the short distance to the ground. They advanced cautiously, carefully stepping over or around the bodies left behind by the barbarians. When they reached the trampled remains of the giant face, they could see that it had been painted on cloth and held aloft by a foam bag.

“When the fiery ball, as you call it, hit the face, it set fire to the cloth holding the foam,” Hona said as he knelt down on his knees to examine the remains. “See, there are puddles of foam everywhere.”

“What of the cloth?” Xanfolo asked. “The barbarians do not make cloth.”

“Yes,” Hona agreed. “This cloth is made in Soren, but it could have come from anywhere. Soren cloth is sold in all the cities.”

As they started back to the wall, Xanfolo saw a sword on the ground. It was a good quality blade, he noticed, as he bent down to pick it up. It was a Pontan sword.

“Look out!” warned Hona.

A wounded barbarian staggered to his feet with a spear in his hand. Xanfolo was not four paces away as the barbarian flung the spear at him, but before the point could find his chest, Gant leaped in front and took the spear. He fell to the ground, the spear sticking out of his chest. Hona quickly killed the barbarian with a sword thrust and hurried to join Xanfolo who was kneeling over the fallen Soren.

Gant stared vacantly upward until his eyes found Xanfolo’s face. “You cannot die,” he gasped, his last words coming as blood spilled out his mouth.

Hona rose. His eyes were opened wide, his bland face registering amazement. “Now you even make the Soren brave!”

Xanfolo stood up. He angrily pulled the spear out of the dead Soren’s chest and threw it away. Then he knelt down, gently lifted Gant’s body, and marched toward the wall. Hona followed with his sword out and at the ready in case there were more barbarians not quite dead.

When he reached the wall, Xanfolo laid the dead Soren on the top, and then climbed over, followed by Hona. Dammer started to question Xanfolo, but even in the dim light, he could see an anger in the Montian captain’s face that was greater than any he had ever seen in his long career as a soldier. He watched silently as Xanfolo picked up Gant’s body and continued his march.

Dammer fell in beside Hona. “Where is he going? What happened?”

Without breaking step Hona answered, “The Soren jumped in front of Captain Xanfolo and took a spear meant for him. He sacrificed his life, and now I think our Montian leader is going to mete out a harsh judgment. Death walking is carrying the dead.”

They followed Xanfolo whose pace never slackened, even though the distance was long enough for someone carrying a dead body. They marched resolutely toward the post headquarters. They passed the unused multipults, and the crews watched uneasily as the grim procession passed. Then they passed through the ranks of Soren pike men drawn up to defend the headquarters.

The Soren sub-captain and his two guards rose from their chairs. “What’s this? What’s this?” he asked. His voice rattled with fear.

“I’ve brought back the body of the only brave Soren in this regiment,” Xanfolo said. “I wanted you to see a brave man.”

“What happened?” The sup-captain asked again, his eyes giving only a cursory glance at the dead man now resting on a table. “Have the barbarians been stopped? It was just a probe, wasn’t it? Not really a serious attack, I’m sure. Let’s have a drink.”

Xanfolo was splattered with blood. His cloak was ripped by at least a dozen sword and spear slashes that barely missed skin. He stood at attention.

“By the right granted to a captain, I now render a judgment of war on an act of cowardice for which there is only one penalty.”

The Soren nodded. “It is your right, of course, but remember that my men were never cut out to be soldiers. This is a hard place, and we are alone out here. Don’t be too harsh in judging my men.”

“I’m not judging your men,” replied Xanfolo. “I pronounce that the sub-captain in command of this regiment is a coward and must pay the penalty as prescribed by the six cities.”

The sub-captain acted as if he couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “You’re crazy! No, I didn’t mean that. You are still excited by the fighting. I did my duty. I remained here at headquarters. It is my duty!”

“You left us at the wall to die,” Xanfolo charged.

“Priest! Subaltern! Do something. Help me!” whined the Soren.

Hona spoke softly. “The League and Kinsa agree with the charges brought by the captain from Montia. You must now die. Either fall on your sword or we will kill you.”

“Guards!” shrieked the sub-captain.

Dammer took a step toward the two guards. His sword was drawn. “If you move, you die also.”

The Soren’s hand edged toward the hilt of his sword. He shuddered and jerked his hand back. “I cannot do it,” he sobbed.

Xanfolo drew his sword and stabbed the Soren in the belly. “My sentence is that you die as miserably as you lived.” He twisted the sword and pulled it clear of the Soren who doubled up and screamed for his mother.

“Justice is done,” Xanfolo said as the first sunrise brought an end to a long darkness. “We leave now.”

“Did the brave Soren named Gant tell you anything that could help us?” Hona asked. “Where are we going next?”

“Dom.”

Chapter 10

Hona and Dammer were well-rested after a long sleep aboard the Nara. They followed Xanfolo as he climbed to the top deck and closely inspected the diskerpults and crews. When he was completely satisfied, Xanfolo strolled to the rim rail leading the battle carrier toward Dom. The looking tube was set up and ready for his use. As the captain peered through the tube, Hona finally broke the long silence.

“Please explain your plan again, especially the part where you fly through the darkness at the end of a rope and drop to the ground.”

“There is no alternative,” Xanfolo replied gruffly as he looked up from the tube. “If we land in Dom, the people holding Princess Talisa will try to move her to a safer place before we can rescue her. If they change the place where they are hiding her, we are then blinded again. By coming in low and in the dark and outside of Dom, the Nara can proceed slowly, and I will be able to leap from the rope to the ground.”

Dammer shook his head. “I’m glad I’m a cavalryman. What happens if you land in a well? What then?”

Xanfolo eyed him sardonically. “Then I will get wet.”

Hona leaned casually against the rail, but his face carried a frown that suggested he was not as relaxed as he seemed.

“Already the drivers and guards on the trail from Zorn are talking to other drivers and guards about the great battle and the captain from Montia who fought in the Death Circle, and how even a Soren was willing to die for him. Oh, and let’s not forget the battle in the sky. How these stories will magnify with each telling! And now, you propose to fly through the sky in the dark like some kind of supernatural being. What do you suppose the people will make of that?”

“A well-planned and carried out rescue,” Xanfolo answered.

“Oh, no! The people will make much more of it than that,” Hona said quickly. “and so will the Secret Society.”

“They are fools who are lost in their own myths.”

“True, but it is the talk of fools that so fascinates the people. Beware, Xanfolo! You are or will be the major item of discussion in all the royal houses. They are not without means to remedy at least some problems.”

“Assassins,” Dammer sneered. “Like I said before, I’m glad I’m a cavalryman. I go where I’m ordered. I fight when I’m ordered, and I will die when I’m ordered. But between times, I eat and drink and enjoy the company of women. It is a good life. There are no politics.”

“I agree,” laughed Xanfolo. “I never asked for more in life. My goals are simple. I only wanted to be a good soldier.”

“But it hasn’t worked out that way for you, Captain, has it?” Hona asked and then went on to answer his own question. “Since you were a cadet, you have been groomed carefully to become consort to the next queen of Montia. That was the design laid out for you long ago. Even now, from humble beginnings, you have risen to second in command of the Montian army; you are captain of the royal guards; you are one of few men in all the six realms who commands a battle carrier; and all soldiers of the realms believe you are the best of that few.”

Hona paused and waved off replies from both Xanfolo and Dammer. “I know, I know. You have simply followed orders, but somehow, when you follow orders the results are larger than the orders. There is another matter that must not escape scrutiny from where we stand. And neither of you must repeat what I now say.”

Hona paused once more, this time so he could carefully frame his words. “I believe that Gant was a member of the Secret Society, the Society that is now helping us. No, not us; they are helping *you*, Captain. It is almost as if they and not the League were managing this operation. Have I spoken the truth?”

“In part, yes,” Xanfolo replied bluntly. “I do not know if Gant was a member of the Secret Society, though his bravery suggests as much. Thus far, what I have learned from those who claim they are members has proven to be true.”

“It is as I thought,” Hona said. “The people who saved your life in Harg were members of the Society.”

“So they claimed. Now, enough of this political chatter! It’s getting closer to the time of some honest work with cold steel. Therefore, I must make my usual preparation,” said Xanfolo.

Dammer’s laughter roared out across the open sky. “Feed and rest the troops, and then take a nap. I remember it well.”

Xanfolo threw a friendly salute and ambled across the deck toward the bridge. He overheard part of their conversation as Hona’s words followed him.

“There goes either an emperor of the six realms or a dead man.”

Xanfolo knew he was supposed to hear the words. They were a warning, and he mulled over their meaning as he prepared to rest. The Kinsan priest was shrewd, and Hona’s warning was not to be taken lightly. He wondered just what rank the priest actually held in the League or the Kinsan priesthood.

If there were still too many complications, at least Xanfolo knew where the princess was being held, but was that not a complication itself? How had an almost impossible mission become so simple? Was he being handled like a puppet in a bawdy public house puppet show?

For that matter, while the end seemed straight forward, there were a few necessary steps that had to be taken to reach that simple end. Xanfolo smiled as he considered the word *simple*. He checked over his plan which called for him to drop to the ground in the darkness and then proceed to the merchant’s house.

Once there, he would enter and kill the people holding the princess captive. Then Xanfolo would go up to the roof of the house and put down large panels of colored cloth that could be seen from the sky using the looking-tube, of course. Once spotted, the Nara would then swoop down as quickly as the winds permitted and pluck Xanfolo and the princess off the roof in a net.

Xanfolo smiled briefly as he waited for sleep. There were a few gaps in his plan. While he had not considered the possibility of falling down into a well as Dammer suggested, he did have other problems to consider that had been there from the start. How quickly could he find the merchant’s house? How many guards would he face? He knew that the houses in Dom had flat roofs, but the merchant was wealthy. What if he had decided to clutter his roof with ornaments as was the custom among the rich in Kinsa? How long would it take the Nara to find them? Would the winds be favorable?

His eyes closed slowly and he was near sleep despite the presence of so many questions when Hona’s words about how people would view his efforts as being magical drifted through his mind. It was like the priest to see some kind of silly magic in the matter at hand. It was hard military logic backed up by cold steel, not magic, that got results.

When Xanfolo awakened, his first thought was still on the last, reinforced by Hona’s warning about being an emperor or a dead man. There was a third alternative, he thought, as he prepared for his mission. He could fall down a well and disappear forever. Later, he was still smiling at Dammer’s suggestion as he climbed down the tube to the entry hatch at the bottom and the beginning of his mission.

The first part of the plan was ready to be put into operation. The entry hatch was open, and the crew members and Xanfolo could see darkness passing by outside. On the narrow pathway that circled the bottom of the tube, a crank and drum of rope had been rigged. Several lengths of rope had been paid out on the narrow platform. At the end was a loop which was about the same length as a short sword.

Xanfolo was ready. The lights of Dom appeared up ahead and the Nara was on course. He touched palms with Dammer and Hona. He put his hand on Makin's shoulder, careful not to press against the sub-captain's bandages.

"Brave Makin! The Nara is in your hands. You will do well."

Makin's eyes glistened in the yellow light cast by the torches. "I'll die before I fail you."

His pledge was heard by Hona who frowned.

"Until the next light time or life time, as the orbs will it," Xanfolo said as he stepped through the hatch. He was dressed as a civilian, his captain's cloak replaced by a rough jacket. His sword was attached to a pack which he secured to his back. He picked up the rope and placed the toe of his boot in it. There had been some discussion about the loop. Hona had insisted that a harness be used, but Xanfolo simply asked, "How do I get out of a harness?"

The crewmen lifted Xanfolo over the rail. He gripped the rope with one hand and checked a cord that was tied to the rope which would be released along with the rope. If he wanted to come back up, he was to pull on the cord three times. The signal to go lower was two tugs, and farewell, one way or the other, was one tug.

Xanfolo gripped the rope with both hands. His foot was secure in the loop, and he smiled and nodded at the crew. A mixture of fear and awe kept their mouths open and eyes reflecting a near panic. No man had ever walked through the sky. They manned the ropes as Xanfolo slowly disappeared. For the crew, this was an act of magic beyond anything the priests had ever attempted.

"It is madness!" Dammer muttered.

"Perhaps," Hona said softly. "We shall see."

Xanfolo descended into the darkness and discovered two unexpected complications. Even though the Nara was proceeding forward as slowly as the kites could allow and still maintain steerage, there was wind in his eyes which caused them to water and blur what little vision he could maintain in the darkness. The second was that he began turning, slowly at first, then faster, his stomach registering a strong protest with each spin. As he descended and the town came closer, he discovered a third problem. His foot in the loop was sending strong signals of pain. His Montian boots were not made for sky walking.

The darker ground seemed to rise up to meet him, but he was still too far from Dom and too high in the sky to drop. How far from the ground was he? How could he tell? This was yet another problem he had not considered.

Then he passed over a country villa with numerous liguite torches and his perspective returned. He tugged the line two times. He was at least twenty lengths of a tall man over the ground. Down he came, lower and lower. He could hear the soft moaning of a guna in love. He was passing over a stable, or so his ears and nose claimed. The rope continued to pay out above, but he still could not find the ground with his feet. He tugged the rope two times, but there was no response. Had the rope run out? Was the crank drum empty?

There was a dark shadow ahead. Was it a building?

Xanfolo lifted his weight with his hands, kicked his foot free of the loop, and dropped. He hit the ground and rolled, but before he landed, he heard the rope crack like a guna driver's whip as it hit the solid object.

He pulled himself up on his hands and knees. For a few eye blinks, he had trouble breathing, but that passed. Slowly, he rose to his feet and stood still until the shakiness in his legs drained away.

It had worked! He was on the ground and alive. If he could do it, so could a party of armed men, if they could be persuaded to step out into the darkness. He filed this strategy in his mind for future consideration. He moved to check out the dark shadow that he almost hit. It was an abandoned building made of rock. Another breath while riding the rope, and it would have been his last. He shrugged at his luck and walked toward Dom.

There was still much of the darkness left when Xanfolo entered the town. The gates were open and unguarded, the barbarians having never penetrated this deep into the Kinsan realm. Like their cousins in Kinsa, pleasures came before sterner practices such as security.

He soon came upon a public house and entered. His garb told the owner that Xanfolo was a poor man. He was about to tell the traveling poor man of another public house that would be more suitable for his purse when Xanfolo stopped him.

"Where can I find the house of the merchant Gant?"

"Gant, the merchant from Soren? What would you have to do with a rich man like Gant? Well, these are strange times. You have a good walk ahead, workman. Gant lives on the other side of Dom. It is on this avenue, but a richer part, as you could guess."

Xanfolo fumbled under his jacket and produced a gold Kinsan coin. "I need a guna."

The keeper of the house took the coin and held it up to the light. Then he produced a small dagger from inside his shirt and scratched the coin.

"Strange times, indeed! Wait here."

Gold makes for a short wait, Xanfolo told himself as the man quickly returned with the beast. Once again, he found himself astride a guna. He urged it forward, but the animal, like its entire species, had its own idea of swiftness. Still, it was at least faster than walking.

Soon he found himself traveling between large homes with windows and well-lit yards. It was by this light that he saw a detail of four Kinsan pike men, a street patrol.

He halted his mount and swung off, both feet hitting the ground at the same time. He ambled up to the patrol, the guna more or less following behind. "Where can I find the house of Gant the merchant?"

"Who wants to know?"

"A poor working man who barely lives by making freighters to haul riches for the rich."

One of the pike men snickered. "More likely a cavalry deserter, I'd guess. He dismounted like a cavalryman."

A mistake! Xanfolo told himself. "I've ridden gunas on the convoys in the past," he said while rubbing his backside. "That's why I decided it was easier to make the freighters than to walk or ride alongside them."

The soldiers laughed, and one of them said, "I agree. I did a punishment tour once. Never again!"

"How are we to know who you are?" asked the leader of the patrol. "Do you have a scroll?"

Xanfolo smiled as he reached under his jacket. "I cannot read, and I doubt that you can, but I have a piece of identification here we all understand."

He produced a gold coin and gave it to the soldier. After carefully checking the coin, the soldier grinned. "Truly, this is a language we can all understand."

The oldest of the soldiers took the coin from his leader and rubbed it with his thumb. Like the public house owner, he put it to a scratch test. Then nodding his satisfaction, he pointed down the avenue.

"The merchant Gant lives but two houses away, on the right, but beware. There are guards there. If you mean mischief for the Soren, it is well enough by us. He is a Soren and a rich one, but we are not paid to die for them."

"This is a matter of the heart," Xanfolo said. "Not trade or business."

"One's as deadly as the other," the older pike man said, much to the amusement of the others. "But you are not come as an amorous poor man; indeed, you are not a poor man at all. Your bribe is enough to buy a squadron of men. There is more here that we must know about. After all, I do not propose to die for a Soren, and neither do I wish to die as the result of a Soren's anger. Who are you, poor man, who has so easily produced gold?"

Xanfolo filed in his mind yet another mistake. He began to have a new respect for those who practice the craft of deceit and treachery. He slipped out of his pack and rough jacket. He pulled his green cloak from the pack. Before their eyes, he changed from a workman to a captain. The portrait was completed when he took his sword and scabbard and belt from the pack and buckled the weapon around his waist. With the symbols of authority in place, Xanfolo's demeanor also changed. He stood before the pike men as an officer, and no mere subaltern, either.

"Montian colors? He's a Montian officer!"

"Or he has robbed some Montian."

"No, this is no imposter. I know this one." The older soldier presented his pike in salute. "At your service, Captain Xanfolo."

Xanfolo raised his hand in a return salute. "If so, then I have enough of an army here. In the merchant's house, there is a woman being held against her will. I have come to rescue her, not for myself, but for the League. This is a mission for the League."

"Better for yourself than the League," one soldier said as he spat.

"Were you going to try it by yourself, Captain?" asked the older pike man. "And if you succeeded, how did you figure to escape? That guna of yours is not exactly fast with one rider. With two, one-legged men could run you down."

"I never planned to assault the house by myself. I knew there would be good men to assist me. What I didn't know was that I'd be so lucky as to have those from the Fourth Regiment of Pike men, though."

The men smiled. One of them looked at his badge and then asked, "You know our regiment?"

"Of course! One of the responsibilities of a captain is to know every regiment in all of the six realms."

"Well, now that you have an army of four, how do you plan to escape with the woman? For us, escape is easy enough. We can claim we were somewhere else."

Xanfolo laughed. "When the time comes, the lady and I will leap into the sky and be gone."

“If the stories they tell about you, Captain, are half again true, then such an escape might be possible. Come, sir. Lead us against the house of Gant.”

They marched up to the front gate of the house of Gant. Two guards with drawn swords barred their way.

“Kill them,” Xanfolo ordered.

The swordsmen were quickly chopped down. They squealed, but not loud enough to raise an alarm. They had just gossiped with the patrol a short time before and never expected death from the pike men.

There was another guard at the door. He also died quickly, but not before screaming for help. The help came running. In the main hallway, two bowmen and two swordsmen took up a defensive position. Xanfolo’s little army was reduced by two as the bowmen released their arrows, but the dead Kinsan pike men were avenged. The remaining two pike men fell upon the swordsmen with a great fury. Xanfolo put a sharp end to the two bowmen.

“A hard business, Captain,” panted one of the pike men as he straddled his dead opponent.

“So it is,” Xanfolo agreed. “Since we take this house by storm, I, as captain, authorize you to sack the place when we are done. Make sure the families of our fallen friends receive a share.”

“Fairly said, Captain, and fairly done.”

They continued down the hall. Xanfolo now counted seven dead guards in total. There couldn’t be many more. Even for a rich man, a large number of guards would draw unwanted attention.

At the end of the hall there were double doors which yielded quickly when stout shoulders hammered them. Inside was a large, ornately decorated chamber that served as Gant’s private office. In one corner a carved wooden spiral staircase led to a room above.

With his finger to his lips signaling silence, Xanfolo slowly mounted the stairs, his sword point leading the way. Each step brought a loud squeaking noise. He could guess what might await him when his head and shoulders rose above the level of the floor above. He crouched low and leaped upward. He grabbed a support pole with one hand and vaulted up through the opening, hit the floor, and rolled before springing upright, sword ready for a fight.

“Very nicely done, Captain. I would applaud, but as you can see, my hands are busy.”

Against the wall and behind a richly decorated table, a thin man with one eye covered by a patch held Princess Talisa by her long, red hair. Her head was back and her white throat exposed to the knife wielded by the man.

Princess Talisa cast her eyes downward without moving her head so she could see the stranger with a sword in his hand. Anger flashed out of her eyes, and she spoke despite the knife point at her throat.

“It’s about time!”

“That is the way it goes,” said the thin man in amusement. “I’d judge by the blood still dripping from your sword that you did not have an easy journey to my quarters. But to the royal lady, your adventures were those of the slow and lazy.”

“Let her go, and I might let you live.”

“Oh, no, I think not. Hold her and I live. We are in a situation where neither of us wins. If you try to kill me, I’ll surely kill her first. Unfortunately, I am in no position to kill you. So we wait. Soon it will be light with the first sun’s arrival, and not long after, there will

be a great number of people here as our princess was due to leave by convoy. She was to take the trail to Soren, and so she shall, but dead or alive depends on you. In short, Captain, leave and I may allow both of you live."

"You are Gant the merchant?"

"I am."

"I knew your brother, the subaltern."

"Knew?"

"He is dead?"

The Soren's one eye blinked several times. "Well, he always was a fool. He could have stayed with me, but he had to be a soldier."

"He saved my life by sacrificing his."

"Then he was a greater fool than I already suspected," Gant said bitterly.

"Are you going to kill this one-eyed guna, or are you two going to talk until all three of us die of old age?" Princess Talisa fumed.

Xanfolo laughed. Even Gant managed a smile. "I can wait," Xanfolo said as he casually leaned against a chair. "Are there any refreshments here? It's been quite a tiring affair."

"I'll get you for this," she rasped. "A thousand gold Kinsan coins for the assassin who kills you – from the waist down!"

"A fortune awaits some lucky assassin," Gant said, "But he won't get it because my people will be here soon and they will kill the Captain and that all over, from top to bottom. He says he can wait. Well, he waits for death."

"Not so, Gant. My people are here now, and more are on the way. Not a pack of assassins but trained soldiers. This is League business, you Soren fool, not some squalid little transaction for a few pieces of gold."

"You are bluffing."

"Do you think so?" Xanfolo strode over to the stairway and shouted, "Fourth Regiment of Pike men! Up the stairs, on the double!" As he shouted the order, he wondered if the two had already filled their pockets and left.

"At once, sir," came the response. The two pike men charged up the stairs and stood in the room with their pikes at the ready.

"Put your points at his throat," Xanfolo ordered. "It is time he made a choice about his life."

The pike men leaped to do his bidding. The sharp edges of their pikes pressed hard against Gant's throat, drawing a small drop of blood.

"Let him feel just a little of the sharpness of your pikes. A little blood, but not death." As he spoke, Xanfolo strolled across the room and peered down into Gant's frightened face. "You are bleeding, Gant."

"Stop or I'll kill the princess!"

Xanfolo's hand moved with blurring swiftness. He had Gant's knife hand gripped in his. Slowly, the knife came away from Princess Talisa's throat.

"Kill him."

When the pike men struck, Gant let go of the princess's hair and fell to the floor. Xanfolo reached for the princess, but she eluded his hand. She stood and shook her head in an effort to remove the pain of Gant's prolonged grip.

Xanfolo turned to the pike men. "Take what you want because you've earned it. Take it with my gratitude. I'll not forget the Fourth Regiment of Pike men. Your work here has earned the regiment guard honors and the extra pay that goes with those honors. This I will make happen."

The pike men saluted. "Ask, and we will follow you to death, my Lord," said the older of the two. They hurried down the stairs.

The princess studied the captain standing before her. "My Lord? Oh, I think not," she said disdainfully. "If the uniform is truly yours, and with your brown-tanned skin, then you are at best a Montian captain."

Xanfolo tossed back his cloak, knelt on one knee, and announced, "Your Highness, I am Xanfolo, a captain from Montia, here to rescue you by the order of the League."

She smiled, but there was little warmth in the smile. She approached him, standing barely a dagger's length away. Her gown was floor length, but had an opening in the front which could be revealed or hidden as the wearer wished. She wore the strange shoes now in fashion in Kinsa. The heels were higher and thinner than a cavalryman's boot. He felt the inside of her knee brushing the side of his face and fought an urge to look up.

"So, you are the famous Captain Xanfolo! You are Nessa's toy. Is she still dumpy-looking, or has she finally begun to lose some of that baby fat?"

"The Princess Nessa speaks well of you," Xanfolo said. "She told me your skin was moonlight pale and that you were very tall. But she was wrong about your red hair."

"Oh, and how was she wrong?"

He smirked. "Your hair is long and curled, not short and frizzy."

"That Montian slut! She has spread that lie throughout the six realms." She paused and stepped back. "And you, Captain, have a clever tongue that stings. Rise, fool. Your knee will grow to the floor if you hold that pose much longer."

He rose, bowed again, and said, "Your Highness, I am..."

"Oh, stop that nonsense," she said sharply. "While we are alone, address me the same as you do Nessa."

"Talisa?"

"That's better. Now, my Montian pet, you have not exactly completed your mission. Men will be here when the second sun rises, if not earlier. What then? Shouldn't we leave now?"

"Not yet. We have time. My plans have changed, though. The Nara was supposed to come overhead and lift us off the roof, but the carrier can't be here before well after the second dawn."

"Did you say lift us off the roof?"

"Yes."

"Not me!"

"It's safe. I proved that earlier."

"How?"

"I dropped from the battle carrier by rope and then jumped clear. It's a simple matter, though some of the techniques require more thought."

"Madness! I am not going to be whisked away like chaff. Besides, what if Nessa or one of her assassins was on the Nara? There would be a cut rope for certain. Let us slip out now. We can go to the Kinsan headquarters. We'll be safe there."

“Maybe, but I doubt it. There are too many strange circumstances. I’ll not feel safe, nor will the mission be completed until you are returned to Clang. Once there, I think you should be made queen at once.” Xanfolo did not add that a coronation was perhaps more important to Montia’s interests than the League’s.

“Can you do all of this?” Talisa questioned, her disbelief causing her brows to rise. “Oh, Montian, you do not lack for self confidence. You would even risk the life of the crown princess with a knife at her throat. How did you know the Soren wouldn’t slit my throat?”

“I didn’t,” Xanfolo admitted. He unsnapped his cloak and spread it on the floor.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m going to sleep. It has been a hard darkness and light will bring an equally hard time.”

“You can sleep? You can sleep with danger everywhere? There’s a dead man in the corner, you know. What about that?”

“He won’t make much noise.” Xanfolo eased his body down on the cloak. He grimaced as his shoulder touched the floor. That must be a soreness that happened when he jumped from the rope, he thought. He shrugged and closed his eyes.

“You are hurt?”

“I think I bruised my shoulder. It is nothing.”

Talisa sank to the floor beside him. Her long white fingers gently probed his shoulder. There was a smell of flowers, but not those of the jungle. As she massaged his shoulder, her lips brushed his forehead.

Xanfolo opened his eyes. Her dress had fallen open. He reached up and touched her long red hair, and her blue eyes came closer.

Chapter 11

The two priests clad in golden Kinsan robes made their way through the streets of the city, keeping to the shadows as much as possible. The heat of the planet’s two suns made such movement appear normal, but if anyone had been watching, they might have been curious about why the priests kept their cowls so tightly wrapped around their heads and faces when it was so hot. Still, priests were generally accepted as being different, and most people were not interested in meddling in priestly matters. That kind of trouble was not needed if it could be avoided.

The two priests approached the stables near the edge of Dom. The shrill shouts of men and the disgruntled protests of unhappy gunas could be heard. Convoys were being readied for shipment of farm produce to both Kinsa and Soren.

"Is this part of your plan?" Talisa asked, peering out from beneath her disguise. "Are we going to hide among the gunas?"

"Gant was going to smuggle you out in a freighter," Xanfolo explained. "It wasn't a bad idea. Maybe as two priests, we can join a convoy heading to Kinsa instead of the one Gant was sending to Soren. Now, keep silent. It will not go well for us if a woman is found to be impersonating a priest."

"I am a crown princess."

"In Clang, yes, but we are in Dom. Keep silent!"

Xanfolo's mind carefully singled out the main parts of his problem. Thus far, the rescue of the princess had been successful, but seldom according to his plan. The Nara had not passed over the city, and under the circumstances, it was just as well. There was no way that he and the princess could have stayed on top of Gant's house. If rescue could not be achieved by the Nara, then they must find their own way out. That meant either one of two courses had to be attempted. The first was to proceed as Talisa had suggested and report to the Kinsan headquarters. He didn't like that option because there was no way to prevent the inevitable treachery. He didn't trust either the League or Kinsa and even less the governing people in Dom which had a large and reasonably powerful Soren population. Turning the princess over to the authorities could be the same as turning her over to Ponta. That would not serve Montia's interests.

The second option was equally unappealing. How could he possibly maintain her disguise for the next ten to twelve light times while they were part of a convoy? He smiled as he glanced at the priest walking beside him. She was tall, even in sandals that had replaced her Kinsan shoes. He did not believe it would be her long red hair, now safely hidden, or her tall slender figure that would give them away. It would be her mouth! She had done very well, thus far. She had not called anyone a guna, himself excepted, since they left Gant's house, but in all likelihood that would not continue for much longer.

"Over here." Xanfolo steered the tall priest toward an empty freighter that rode higher than their heads. It was apparent that it was prepared to carry an immense load due to the fact that it had larger than normal foam bags to provide lift for its cargo. Also the freighter was hitched to two teams of gunas instead of the usual one beast. He looked around to see if anyone was curious about why two priests were in the stables, but everyone's effort and attention was devoted to the convoy being formed.

"Can you climb up the rope from the gunas to the side of the freighter?" he asked.

"Why?"

"Answer. Can you do it?"

"Absolutely not."

"Nessa could, easily."

"Guna, stinking guna!" She snarled as she grabbed the rope and climbed quickly up and over the side of the freighter. As she climbed, her white legs flashed and her red hair burst out from the cowl.

An immediate outcry arose from some of the workers in the yard. One screamed that a woman was dressed as a priest. Others yelled for the guards. The owner of the freighter and his men approached on the run.

Xanfolo knew that the decision had been made for him. There could be no hiding in the freighter. He drew his sword and slashed the ropes that tied the freighter to the gunas. The freighter shot up into the sky with Xanfolo hanging underneath by one hand to one of the ropes.

They rose higher and higher. Xanfolo, sword in mouth, climbed hand over hand up the rope. He finally hauled himself over the side of the freighter and fell in a heap on the floor.

"Have you done what I think you have? Are we up in the sky?" Talisa stood with her hands over her eyes.

"Look over the edge," he gasped, his breath short after the frantic climb up the rope.

"No. You've signed our death warrants, Montian. I know that when men are lifted like this, they are never seen again."

"At least we are safe for now," Xanfolo said as he rose to his feet and sheathed his sword.

"No food, no water, and we will drift until we die or crash into the mountains." Talisa slowly lowered her hands, but stayed in the center of the freighter.

"There is another possibility, Princess. We will drift, but not for long. The Nara will find us, and once on board, we will be safe," Xanfolo replied.

"Guna talk! We are a speck in the sky. How can your Nara find us?"

"Wait and see. Now, keep silent. I have work to do."

Talisa crawled on her hands and knees to the side of the freighter where she sat with her back to the wall and watched curiously as Xanfolo pulled off the golden Kinsan robe. Then he removed his green cloak, and using his sword, he cut two holes in one edge. Then he pulled up the rope he had grabbed when on the ground, cut pieces from the rope, and looped them through the cloak.

"What are you doing?"

Xanfolo did not reply. He climbed up one of the taut ropes that bound the freighter to the foam bags overhead. He climbed half the distance and stopped, tied the knots from the ropes on the cloak, and then slid down.

Talisa clapped her hands. "How splendid! Now we have a flag!" she said sarcastically. "Worse yet, it's a Montian banner. Montia has a new battle carrier! I suppose you'll name it *The Nessa*. After all, this is a fat little freighter, despite the banner."

Xanfolo glared at her angrily. She bowed her head and mumbled, "I'm sorry. I know I owe you much, maybe even my life if we somehow survive." She glanced up at him and smiled. "If we are to die, there is much we can do before then."

"Your apology is gladly accepted," he replied. After a brief, thoughtful pause, he continued, "What you said about a new Montian carrier gave me an idea."

"What?"

"If freighters have no weight, how many could the Nara pull through the sky?"

"Yes, I see what you mean. Ore shipments from Clang Colony could be made in much less time than when towed by gunas."

"I had in mind freighters filled with bowmen."

"That would be so like you."

"May I ask a personal question, Princess?"

"Under the circumstances," she laughed, "that is a bit formal. Ask what you want."

"Why haven't you been made the Queen of Clang? You are of age."

“That’s a bold enough question. I wish I had an easy answer, but you would have to understand our situation in Clang. Our royal house was once a great power, but no more. I was a small child when my parents were assassinated. Duke Ajon was declared my regent. He is only an assumed duke, you know. He married my mother’s cousin, but he is still rich and powerful. He doesn’t dare proclaim himself king, but there is no opposition to his continuing to be regent. I fear that our royal house will fall and the merchants or priests will take over. Together, they form a powerful union in Clang. What prosperity we have is due to their efforts. Now, Duke Ajon wants to join with Ponta. He claims that such an alliance will be good for Clang.”

“What about Prince Tagge?”

“Oh, him! Duke Ajon seeks to marry me to Tagge, and Tagge is all for it, I suppose. However, the League forbids it because an alliance between Clang and Ponta might mean an end to the League itself.”

“It would mean war,” Xanfolo agreed, remembering Queen Nara’s words.

“I suppose so. Can you imagine the two of us at war? You and I opposing each other on the battlefield?”

“Yes, but not on a battlefield.”

“You are a wicked Montian,” she laughed. “Much too good to end up as a mere consort for Nessa. Just think. In a few years, she will be as fat and dumpy as her mother.”

“You haven’t seen Queen Nara, have you?”

“Not since I was a child.”

“Believe me, she is a beautiful woman, a queen that men find easy to follow and obey.”

“I don’t want to hear any more about the Montian royal women. I’m cold and you made a flag of our only cloak. I am surprised that you kept it hidden under these thin golden robes. It must have been unbearably hot.”

“My cloak is a symbol of authority and I would never cast it aside if I could help it. Come close, and I’ll keep you warm.”

She shifted her body so that they were together. He took her in his arms, and then their lips came together as the darkness slowly conquered the sky.

Later, Xanfolo closed his eyes and the image of Queen Nara came into his mind. She was smiling and talking to him, but he could not hear her words. Her hand reached out to touch his face. He felt himself leaning forward to receive her touch when the image was drowned in brilliant white light.

Xanfolo leaped to his feet fully awake, his sword at the ready as a great light from above nearly blinded him. Talisa was up almost as quickly.

“I’ve heard of men baying at the moon,” she said, barely able to suppress a smile, “but I have never seen one who thought he could challenge the moon with a sword.”

The moon! He had forgotten that the moon would rise late and fill the eastern sky. He was about to censure himself for the lapse of soldierly awareness when he saw a dark shape pass across the face of the great orb.

“Look there!”

“What is it, a bird?”

“No, I believe it is the Nara. We shall be rescued soon.”

“How? Even if the spot you saw was your battle carrier, they couldn’t possibly see us in the dark.”

“They are making circles. When they come on the other side of us, we will be the bird across the moon.”

Xanfolo never doubted that Makin would have sharp-eyed lookouts posted. Once the freighter was spotted against the moon, Makin would maneuver the Nara ever closer. Makin would check even the smallest dot in the sky for that was his nature. There had been occasions in the past when Makin’s sticky dedication to small matters had caused Xanfolo to grind his teeth. *Our combined strengths overcome our combined weaknesses*, he thought.

However, a long time passed before the darker shape of the Nara appeared nearby, and even then Xanfolo was not certain until liguite torches suddenly burst into light. Makin had obviously ordered the crew to hang torches from the rim rail. Xanfolo had never seen the Nara lit in the dark. He wondered what anyone on the ground below would think about the sudden appearance of lights in the sky. There would be some excited talk in the public houses about the lights.

“Why are you smiling?” Talisa asked. She had moved from his side, and for the first time was looking over the edge of the freighter.

“I was wondering what kind of myths the people below will make out of the lights in the sky.”

“You are a strange man, Xanfolo, even for a Montian. Surely the people below are asleep at this late hour.”

“Think so? Sometimes there are people who are busy while others sleep.” Xanfolo continued, “Do you have people in Clang who belong to the Secret Society?”

“The seven cities nonsense? I suppose so. Every city has its crazy people. They are harmless.”

“Like the Pontans?”

“That is a different matter,” Talisa sighed. “The irony is that I will probably end up marrying Tagge after all.”

“What? Impossible!”

“No, my little Montian captain. Not impossible at all. Who else should I marry? For me, there isn’t a lot of choice. There is the Duke of Zorn who is a silly Kinsan, and Tagge who is a boring Pontan. None of the others can even come close to presenting a proper bloodline.”

“What about the League’s vote against your marriage to Tagge?”

“The League will find some kind of compromise,” she said softly. “It always does. They’ll probably work out some arrangement, trade interests in Soren to Kinsa in exchange for Pontan interests in Clang.”

“And what of Montia? How do you think we would feel about a marriage that put together Ponta, Soren, Kinsa, Harg, and Clang?”

“Simple enough,” she laughed. “We’ll give you to the barbarians.”

It was said in jest, a passing remark, but Xanfolo felt as if someone had just opened a door in his mind. Yet, when he peered through the door, all he saw were mists, and in those mists, he saw treacherous designs.

“You will not marry Tagge,” Xanfolo announced firmly.

“And why not? He is strong and brave. Not a bad catch. Are you jealous, Montian?”

“You will not marry Tagge because I am going to kill him. It is a matter of honor.”

“Over me?”

“No, I said this is a matter of honor.”

“Sharp-tongued Montian guna!”

A voice drifted in from the closing Nara. “What ship are you?”

“A lost ship captained by a Montian guna!” Talisa screamed in reply.

Sounds of laughter came back from the Nara.

The rescue was not easily accomplished because Makin had to carefully calculate the freighter’s drift and his own ship’s swiftness. Grappling hooks thrown from the boarding platform at the bottom of the carrier caught the rope web that bound the freighter and its foam bag together. From that point, it was a matter of heaving and tugging to bring the freighter close enough so Xanfolo and Talisa could make the transfer.

After making the long climb up the ladder to quarters just under the top deck, Talisa was grateful for even the tiny compartment she was shown. She was fast asleep by the time Xanfolo began explaining what had happened.

“And then I cut the ropes holding the freighter, and we leaped into the sky where I was certain the Nara would eventually find us, and I was not wrong.”

Hona and Dammer stared at Xanfolo. The moon’s light allowed them to see his face. They stood again at the rim rail, but this time at the back instead of the front.

“If anyone else tried to tell me such a story, drunk or sober, I would not believe it!” said Dammer, “but I saw you walk in the dark sky, and I saw where you were when we found you. You must have leaped into the sky, one way or another, to escape from Dom.”

Hona glanced quickly at Dammer as he spoke. “You are learning to believe in myths?”

“What I see with my own eyes is no myth!” Dammer replied.

Hona turned to Xanfolo. “Why do we tow the freighter behind us? And why the lights?”

“While we were floating in the sky, I had an idea,” Xanfolo replied. “Why couldn’t the Nara tow a freighter or maybe two or three and all filled with bowmen?”

“And float around in the sky?” Dammer asked. “I think even you, Captain, would have trouble getting men to serve on the freighters. I suppose you would also want them to join you in walking in the dark sky?”

“The thought did occur,” Xanfolo replied. “See, the lights remain steady. The freighter follows obediently.”

Dammer winked broadly at Hona. “Not bad for a man that the priests thought was just a simple soldier. Next thing you know, the Captain will have his own magic bag and filled with useful tricks.”

“I think not,” Xanfolo replied quickly. “I don’t want to end up being Lomae the soldier.”

“Much has been learned in forty generations,” Hona said softly. He paused to allow the words to have their full impact on Xanfolo. Then he continued, his voice lighter and a look of great satisfaction on his face. “Soon this mission will be finished, and you will return to Montia and a well-earned rest and rewards. Though I suspect life will not be quite as exciting when you return to your Montian duties.”

An end to the mission? There was a thought for Xanfolo to consider. He had been so caught up in the rescue that he had not really given thought to a possible end. Somehow he suspected that the end sought by the League might well turn out to work against Montia’s interests. He had not forgotten Queen Nara’s curiously guarded advice regarding what would benefit Montia: *if possible, put Crown Princess Talisa on the Clangian throne.*

“We have good winds, and we will be in Clang soon,” he said.

“And there,” Hona said firmly, “we will deliver the princess to her guardian, and the League’s business will be finished.”

Xanfolo stared at the priest. “Deliver her to Duke Ajon? Why not set the kites for Ponta and save Prince Tagge the trouble of going through this again? He won’t stop just because we are successful.”

“I thought you hated the prince! Why are you making him sound so resolute?” Hona asked. “Why do you think he would continue to challenge the League’s authority?”

“You are wrong, Priest. I do not hate the Pontan. What is between us is a matter of honor. I will kill him the first chance I can, but I do not hate him. That would be foolish. He is a brave man. Do you not remember how he faced the multi-pult and did not flinch?”

“Well-spoken, Captain,” Dammer said with much relish. “But don’t expect the priests to understand the thinking of a good soldier. Their ways are darker and more devious.”

“Do you serve the League or the Montian?” Hona asked Dammer.

The cavalryman did not retreat from the pointed and dangerous question. He slammed his hand down on his sword hilt as he replied.

“I serve honor first, Harg always, and my sword as long as I breathe.”

“And Kinsa?” Xanfolo asked as his hand dropped to his sword.

“What of Kinsa?” The priest actually seemed surprised at Xanfolo’s question.

“The truth, as I have seen it,” Xanfolo said deliberately, “is that Kinsa all but owns Harg as a colony, and Kinsa owns the League. Prince Tagge and I agree on this point. In this matter of the Clangian princess, do we act for the League or Kinsa?”

Dammer pointed at the priest and bellowed, “He’s got you there, Priest! Let’s see you crawl out of this box.”

“How many men will follow the true blood who walks above the ground through darkness?” Hona murmured. Then he smiled. It was an open-faced smile with no trace of guile or sarcasm. “Here now, we are old friends. We stood together in the Death Circle at Zorn. We have been true to each other, even when our cities might wish otherwise. Tell me, Xanfolo, what do you propose?”

“By the orbs above,” Dammer blasphemed. “I think the priest has found a rat hole out of the box.”

Chapter 12

The Nara had landed successfully in Clang, taking everyone by surprise, including Makin. The landing had to be achieved by moonlight and without the benefit of a ground crew. Talisa, overcoming her fear of being high in the sky, pointed out an open field near the royal palace. At the edge of the field, there were lights marking several dwellings. When the inhabitants of the dwellings heard the grappling hooks strike their stone buildings, they hurried outside and saw the great monster descending through the moonlight. They ran for their lives.

Some of the hooks gripped metal bars on windows or dug through straw roofing to snatch at heavy crossbeams. If the ground winds had not been calm, the Nara probably would have torn free, making the landing a dismal failure. With favorable conditions, however, the Nara was cranked down until it drifted out from its many tethers about a man's height above the ground. Crew men jumped from the bottom platform of the airship to the ground. Then anchors were dropped which had to be dug into the ground. Once the anchors were secured, ropes linked the Nara and the anchors.

The bond between the Nara and the ground did not please Makin. He insisted calmly but with firm conviction that he could not spare a large landing party for a mission in Clang.

Xanfolo agreed. Under no circumstances could the Nara be endangered. If the winds picked up and posed problems, then the Nara was to lift off immediately. Concern for the Nara's safety did not create a problem for Xanfolo. He had only briefly considered using a large part of the crew for his mission in Clang. The disadvantages were clear to him. A large landing party could achieve nothing, except perhaps its own destruction. His plan called for only three men to leave the Nara with Princess Talisa: himself, Hona and Dammer. By limiting the party to just three men, all operating under the banner of the League, then whatever happened would bear the footprints of the League and not Montia.

Hona approved of his plan, and while Xanfolo was glad to have the priest's approval, somewhere in the back of his mind was a tiny voice telling him that he was becoming just like the Kinsan priest.

Hona had finally agreed to change the mission from simply restoring the princess to her rightful place to a dangerous attempt to put her on the throne as Queen of Clang. Hona drove a hard bargain, insisting that he would go along with the plan only if the queen was crowned in the temple and not the royal palace. His arguments were shrewd and all but impossible to counter. Hona claimed that the only place in all of Clang where it was safe to hold a coronation was the temple, and Xanfolo knew the priest spoke the truth, well, almost the truth.

Duke Ajon, the Clangian regent, could be expected to use all his powers to block any coronation. However, if the job could be done before Duke Ajon moved, then a Queen Talisa could rally her supporters and the army. Xanfolo knew he faced a situation that was extremely unstable. Even a small mistake could trigger a civil war. If Hona could sway the support of the Clangian priests, the combination of the priests and the army might force Duke Ajon out of the picture.

Once on the ground, the three men spirited the princess into the royal palace. Talisa's staff happily greeted her, but the royal guards seemed confused about their duty. Xanfolo's drawn sword kept them respectful if uncertain. The Clangians seemed surprised by the arrival of the princess, and Xanfolo wondered if Duke Ajon had also been surprised. The semaphore must have passed a message to Clang about the rescue of the princess. Maybe Duke Ajon counted on the League to return the princess to his keeping.

The quick arrival of Captain Igorn, the new commander of the royal guards, steadied the soldiers. They appeared ready to obey their captain.

There was no doubt about Captain Igorn's loyalty to the princess. Xanfolo knew the truth of the matter when he saw the way Igorn looked at her. He had that peculiar guna-like expression that men exhibit when hopelessly in love. There really didn't seem to be much hope for the captain. Xanfolo remembered Talisa saying that there were only two men with

royal blood suitable for her to marry. If the Clangian captain been a Montian, then he could become a consort, but this was Clang, not Montia.

By the rise of the suns, Hona had gone to the temple to make arrangements with the Clangian priests. He returned from his mission and reported that the priests would cooperate. Xanfolo was uneasy about Hona's reluctance to go into detail about his negotiations with his fellow priests. He wondered what the priest had given away in return for the support of the Clangian priesthood.

The temple was across a wide park from the palace. As the suns reached mid-point, the coronation party set forth. The escort formed two files, one on either side of the princess. Both the Clangian and the Montian captains led the way with drawn swords. They would be joined outside the palace by Dammer and Hona who were keeping watch on the park and the temple.

When they reached the gates in front of the palace, they met a red-faced Dammer.

"Captain, I have a report that I would rather not give. There may be treachery here."

"All Clang has the smell of treachery about," replied Xanfolo. "What is this new odor?"

"Hona has disappeared. He said nothing about leaving or gave any hint of where he might be going," Dammer said. "I know he and the League did not mean for the princess to become a queen, at least not yet, but I didn't think he would desert us when we needed every sword."

"Do you think he means to stop us?" Xanfolo asked. "He is taking a great risk if he tries. If I am not killed, I will carry out my mission. If I am dead, the priests in all six cities will face hard times. It is not like them to play such games for win-all, lose-all stakes."

"Hona is a strange man," Dammer said. "I have never understood what he thinks, and only about half of what he says, but this I can promise. He is up to something, and he will try to surprise us."

"Where do you stand?" asked Xanfolo.

"A fair question and put bluntly like a good soldier," Dammer responded. "I'll not side with priests against soldiers and royal houses. My sword and my life are at your service."

"Then we are a powerful army," Xanfolo said. "We shall now give destiny a shake."

As they marched toward the temple, Xanfolo wondered what kind of surprise Hona had contrived. He would be waiting for them in the temple. That was the place where a priest could stand on his own ground, a battlefield of his own choosing.

Captain Igorn broke in on his thoughts, explaining that he had posted most of a regiment of soldiers in front of the temple, but he was not sure of their loyalty. Xanfolo could understand the position in which the soldiers found themselves. If they picked the wrong side, they could lose their heads.

The Clangian priests had gained considerable power through clever use of their inventions and devices. They did not share their secrets with Clangian merchants, but did work hard to help the merchants make a tidy profit from what the priests could create. Over the past generation, obedience to the royal house had become almost a matter of convenience instead of an absolute requirement.

The change was immense. There were old people in the city who could remember back when it seemed that the priests might be forced out of existence altogether. The people had grown weary of magic at its best, and frightened of it at its worst. Old people still

believed, if secretly so, that the priests had the power to destroy crops and herds, make gunas walk on their hind legs, visit people in their sleep, and in general cause all sorts of dire things to happen.

Despite the whispers of the elderly, the Clangian temple, like those in the other five cities, had grown prosperous and influential. Many of the families connected with the liguite trade sent their brightest sons to become priests or to study under the direction of the priests.

As Xanfolo marched toward whatever surprise Hona had devised, he shifted his thoughts to a sudden wish that he had become a convoy guard walking alongside patient gunas. The passing of the thought was marked on his face. A cold smile appeared. His sword point danced briefly, a warning that cold steel was, after all, a powerful answer to trickery.

Chapter 13

When Talisa reached the back entrance to the temple she stopped suddenly, her long red hair waving like the thunderclouds now forming over the wild ocean waves.

“Absolutely not!” she shrieked. “My coronation must take place in the palace, and I must be crowned by a royal hand.”

“I don’t believe we’ll have much luck getting Duke Ajon to crown you Queen of Clang,” replied Xanfolo.

“Then since I am the only royal person present, I’ll crown myself!”

Xanfolo shook his head. “No king or queen has ever done that without a civil war following. You must be crowned by other hands that the people believe represent them as well.”

“Then what do you propose? Given your Montian arrogance, I suppose you think you can do it?”

“Yes,” replied Xanfolo.

“How is this?” questioned Igorn. “With all due respect for your accomplishments, you are still no higher ranked than I, and I would never presume such a royal prerogative.”

“There is one way that is lawful and goes far back into the chanted histories of earlier generations,” said Xanfolo. “Now, we must hurry!”

Xanfolo took Talisa by the arm and moved forward. Both the princess and Captain Igorn were puzzled, but before they could question the Montian further, they found themselves in the temple. The soldiers and the small coronation party closed up as they scanned the darkened and seemingly deserted temple. Several liguite torches flickered here and there on the walls of the chamber, but their light did nothing to dispel the sense of mystery that the ancient building created in the minds of the visitors.

Xanfolo's eyes adjusted to the dim light. He noticed that the temple ceiling was at least the height of four men from the floor. He could make out the outline of what appeared to be a balcony on both long sides of the hall.

Suddenly, as if by magic, a blinding light emerged from behind a panel that seemed to be a part of the wall. The brilliant light was joined by a second, a third, and then a procession of lights far brighter than anything Xanfolo had ever seen, except for the suns themselves.

"The first of Hona's surprises," Dammer muttered softly.

"Circle on the princess," Xanfolo ordered as he shielded his face from the lights while his eyes adjusted to the sudden change.

"The Death Circle!" said Dammer.

"What kind of treachery is this?" shouted Igorn.

Once their eyes adjusted to the brightness, they could see that the lights were a new priestly trick. Each light was a large liguite torch in a socket and behind each was an orb made of a silvery metal. The lights were so large that they were carried by four priests and arranged in a semi-circle on a slightly elevated platform.

Then the soft sounds of bells were heard, followed by a loud banging of cymbals. Coming out from behind the lights was a procession of Clangian priests clad in red robes who formed a semi-circle in front of the lights.

From behind the priests stepped three men. One carried a tray of royal emblems and the royal crown. The second was the high priest of Clang. The third and last to make his appearance was Hona clad in golden robes which shimmered brightly from reflected light. Instead of being cowed or bareheaded, he wore a band that supported three orbs in the back.

"By my sword!" Xanfolo was as surprised as the others in the royal party. "Hona has made himself high priest of all priests. He could die for this, League or no League."

"We must get the princess out of here," Igorn said. "This cannot be!"

Dammer urged caution. "Wait. Let's see what game he plans to play. Hona wouldn't do something like this without reason."

Hona raised both arms and spoke. "In the ancient traditions of our forefathers, we are here to crown Princess Talisa queen and ruler of the realm of Clang. Will the princess and her escort step forward to receive the crown and be anointed as a defender of the ancient beliefs of Clang?"

Her long red hair and white gown shimmered in the light as Talisa stepped forward and raised her arm and pointed at Hona.

"You are claiming a right that priests lost generations ago. This is treason! You have no right to crown anyone."

She turned to Xanfolo. "Was this part of your plan, Montian? Are you part of this plot by the priests to take power away from the royal house?"

"My honor on it, Princess Talisa. I did not know of this business," Xanfolo replied. "My sword stands ready at your command to remedy the problem."

"And you, Igorn? What of my royal guard? Is there anyone here whom I can trust?"

"I stand ready to die for my princess," Igorn said softly.

There was a loud clamor of cymbals. As the sound died, Hona stepped forward and spoke in a low tone, his words directed to the coronation party.

"This must be. There is neither choice nor treason, my Lady. Your captain of the royal guards is loyal, but he cannot guarantee the regiment's loyalty. Even now, Duke Ajon is on his way here with armed men to prevent your being crowned."

"Does the priest speak the truth?" Talisa asked her friends.

Igorn did not answer. His face was flushed and his eyes sought the floor. Xanfolo shrugged. "It is always possible, but we have loyal men here to give the Duke a long day he won't forget."

"Your brave, long day, Montian, will do little for us except make a dark time from which we will never awaken," the Princess replied. "I see only one alternative open to me as the last of the royal house of Clang. Igorn, are you truly loyal to the royal house?"

"I am, my Lady."

"Then if you are loyal, prove it. Take out your sword and kill me now. Do not let me suffer this shame."

"My Lady, please. I cannot..."

"Do it! I command you!"

Igorn's hand slowly raised his sword. His eyes were wide, his face contorted. His mind wrestled with his conflicting duties. Whole pillars of carefully structured codes of honor collided.

Xanfolo stepped forward, his bare hand pushing down Igorn's blade.

"This is a problem of my making," he said softly to Igorn, "and I must solve it."

He moved between Princess Talisa and the priests on the platform. "By what right do priests crown royalty?"

"It is an ancient law," Hona replied. "When there are no other laws except that of the sword, then the ancient ways must prevail once more."

Dammer stepped forward and took a broad stance, his feet balanced for action and his hand resting on the hilt of his heavy cavalry sword.

"By my sword, Hona! You are speaking treason ten times over. How is this? Do you serve the League here? Or is this a priestly conspiracy? Have you used me and the League to further some design that well deserves the edge of my sword?"

Hona replied sharply. "If you serve the League, you serve the priests. If you serve the priests, you serve the League."

"The League? And the priests?" Talisa asked angrily. "Why, this is nothing less than a revolution against the royal houses of the six cities! If I am crowned queen by the priests, I will rule nothing!"

"No, my Lady," Hona answered. "You will rule as others have before, but you owe your crown to the League."

"And Montia?" Xanfolo challenged. "Will you tell Princess Nessa that she will owe her future crown to the League? Do you think Queen Nara will bend her knee to the League or the priests? Not while I live!"

Before Hona could answer, there were shouts and sounds of fighting outside the temple. Xanfolo, Dammer, and Igorn quickly closed ranks around Talisa, their swords at the ready. Hona glanced upward and nodded his head.

Duke Ajon, sword drawn and followed by men armed with pikes and swords, strode angrily to the center of the temple. Caught by surprise and uncertain about their duty, the Clangian royal guards were cowed by the cold steel at their throats and were quickly disarmed.

“I arrived none too soon,” Duke Ajon said as he bowed to Princess Talisa. “Obviously, my Lady, these rebels planned to use you as a means of gaining control of Clang. It is a Kinsan plot to gain control over all the cities, but it won’t succeed. Ponta, Soren, and Clang will see to that. Now you three should put down your swords and step away from the Princess. I order it as regent of Clang.”

“If you are so eager to bring an end to rebellion, cousin-by-marriage,” Princess Talisa said derisively, “then crown me queen here and now! It is your right, your duty. I am ready to become the Queen of Clang!”

“You will become queen, my Princess, but in due time. You will rule over two kingdoms, Ponta and Clang, and perhaps more. As the seasons pass, you will thank me for this.”

Igorn stepped up to the Duke. His sword point was respectfully lowered, but he was not completely off guard.

“Crown my Lady the queen now, or I will kill you as you stand. Live for the queen or die for the princess.”

Duke Ajon stared in disbelief at Igorn. Then he smiled and thrust his sword into the captain’s chest, pushing hard until the point came out his back.

“That was a pretty speech for a soldier,” the Duke said as he tugged his blade free.

A stunned silence followed as Igorn slumped to the floor. Hona glanced up and nodded. Xanfolo saw the priest’s motion and instantly understood. He pulled the princess close to protect her as best he could while muttering to Dammer, “Follow my lead.”

As he gave his order to Dammer, there was a feathery whistle of death. Arrows let loose from the balcony found their mark.

Duke Ajon died with his smile on his face when three arrows struck him in the chest. His men went down just as quickly. Some of the priest bowmen hidden on the balcony targeted royal guards as well.

While bodies were slumping to the floor, Xanfolo cried, “Now!” He leaped forward, and his sword point quivered at Hona’s throat.

Dammer followed close behind. His cavalry sword rested lightly at the back of Hona’s neck. “Tell the bowmen to hold, or you will be the next to die, Hona.”

“Would you really kill me, Dammer?” Hona asked calmly. “Do you choose to follow the man who walks in the dark sky?”

“The Montian has honor, and you do not,” Dammer replied. “If one bowstring sings, I’ll have your head before the arrow finds my heart.”

Hona looked up at the balconies and shook his head. “They will not loose their arrows. Now what?”

“That’s clear enough,” Xanfolo said as he grabbed the crown from Hona’s hand and leaped from the platform to Talisa’s side.

She smiled, but it was a cold smile. “I am to owe my crown to Montia’s good favor?”

“No, my Lady. I crown you Queen of Clang, sovereign over all, indebted to none.”

“By what right?” Hona demanded to know. His usual calm demeanor was gone.

“Not as a Montian, or priest, or League, but as the Lady’s champion, a point of honor from the ancient past more valid than your own, Priest.”

“Yes, the most ancient of rituals,” Talisa said. “That I can accept.” She bowed her head to receive the crown.

Xanfolo placed the crown firmly on her head. “By my sword, I make it so,” he proclaimed.

“By the sword!” Hona echoed, his voice tinged with disgust at the idea.

“It’s a sharp enough reason,” Xanfolo laughed. “Now you men of the royal guard, swear your allegiance to Queen Talisa or pick your burial place. We must go from here to the palace and rally the soldiers of Clang. We must make certain that the queen has a secure throne.”

The royal guards were quick to retrieve their weapons and swear their loyalty. They served as an escort for the royal party during the cautious exit from the temple. Hona’s neck was still hostage to Dammer’s sword, and they were the last two to leave the temple. Dammer made sure that Hona’s body covered as much of the departing party as possible in case the priests with bows decided to loose their arrows despite Hona’s orders.

As soon as they reached the palace, messengers were dispatched to the subalterns of the Clangian regiments. Hona was deposited in a small room where he was to be kept under armed guard.

Xanfolo, Dammer, and Queen Talisa waited for destiny on a balcony overlooking the inner courtyard of the palace. The gates to the courtyard were open but guarded by a loyal detachment of bowmen and royal guards.

“So, Champion, the suns are setting now. With the coming of darkness, will my reign as Queen of Clang be just beginning or just ending?”

For the first time since meeting her, Xanfolo sensed a weakness in Queen Talisa’s carefully constructed and maintained armor. Her blunt ways, which bordered on arrogance, had gone. Her voice was soft, almost apologetic. He thought her use of the word *champion* was meant to be a wounding arrow, but then decided it was not. Her words were now burdened by the crown she had gained from his hands.

“We have not won yet, Queen Talisa, but neither have we lost. As long as we have Hona, the priests will be slow to act against us. It will be a matter of who can rally the most swords.”

“Yes,” Dammer growled. “And just how many swords do the priests have? How long have they been training for war? That was a pretty exhibition of bow work back in the temple. I’ve never thought of priests as being soldiers.”

“You knew that Hona was well-trained. In fact you trained him,” said Xanfolo.

“That’s true enough, but I only trained one priest and that at the request of the League,” Dammer replied.

“The League!” Queen Talisa exclaimed angrily. “The League, the priests, and Kinsa. My first move as queen will be to have our ambassador to the League killed!”

“That sounds like a good idea, Your Highness,” Dammer said. “We should do the same bloody kind of housekeeping in Harg as well.”

A voice from the double doors behind them said, “And how would you get your liguite for heat and light? How would you build new battle carriers or freighters?”

They spun around, not believing their eyes. It was Hona!

Chapter 14

“How did you escape the room?” Xanfolo asked as he instinctively reached for his sword.

“Your sword will not be needed,” Hona answered with a smile. “The lock on the door was no problem, and the guards will sleep for a while longer.”

“They’ll pay with their lives for this sleep!” muttered Dammer.

“I trust not. Sleep was not their idea.”

“Priestly tricks again!” Dammer swore.

“We still remember the old ways, though the new ideas and methods are usually better.”

“Then why didn’t you complete your escape?” asked Xanfolo.

“Because I wanted to watch you, Captain. You’ve set yourself an interesting problem here. We have a civil war about to start in Clang that could cause everything to fall: royal houses, League, and priests. Did you know that about half of all the coded messages on the semaphore from Zorn to Kinsa and from Ponta to Montia are about you?”

“Do the priests read secret codes so easily?” Xanfolo asked, his mind working quickly to assess what this meant for Montia.

“What is signaled over the semaphore is never a secret for very long.” Hona paused and then added, “Perhaps the only secrets in all the realms are those kept by your friends, the Secret Society.”

“They are not my friends.”

“They saved your life.”

“And I took one of theirs, remember?”

“What is this talk of the Secret Society?” Queen Talisa asked. “Do those crazy people play a part in this?”

“Indeed, Your Highness.” Hona bowed his head slightly in her direction as he spoke. “It was the Secret Society that told your champion where the Soren were holding you.” Turning to Xanfolo he asked, “She knows nothing of this?”

“No,” replied Xanfolo. “And I wonder just how much you know, and how you know it?”

“Silence!” ordered Dammer. “Listen and you will hear the best kind of music.”

They listened, but it wasn’t music they heard. It was the sound of hooves on the avenue in front of the gate. From the sounds, it was apparent that gunas in great numbers were approaching.

“The Clangian cavalry has arrived,” Dammer pronounced happily. “In the nick of time, too.”

Hona smiled. “Riding gunas does lead to strange ways of speaking. Well, Queen Talisa, I think you can rest easy. After darkness the suns will come again, and you will still be Queen of Clang.”

“You heard that too? Well, if I remain queen, it will be no thanks to you, Priest,” she replied.

“Oh, no, your Highness. You would have been made a queen by my hand. After that, whether you or I would have ruled this city is an interesting question, but one that will not be

of importance now that the brave Captain Xanfolo has decided to determine the destinies of the six cities.”

“My Lady, behold your faithful cavalry!” Dammer said proudly as he gestured toward the courtyard below.

The cavalry rode through the open gates by twos; officers mounted on gunas, and after them came ten more riders, each carrying a standard. The riders wheeled into two lines, a front of ten officers, and in the second rank, a standard bearer behind each officer. To the front of the two lines rode three men. One carried the royal banner of Clang, and a second carried the battle standard of the Clangian cavalry.

The third was a grizzled, heavy-set man who sat on his guna with an ease that came from long service. He fronted the banner and the standard. He drew his cavalry sword, and as he did so, the officers behind him drew their swords. As they came to a salute the banner and standards were dipped. With his sword still at salute, the old cavalry veteran spoke, his voice low and gravelly from spending most of his life in the open and eating dust raised by the gunas.

“The Clangian cavalry salutes the new Queen of Clang! We pledge the loyalty of one thousand sabers here, and two hundred more in Clang Colony to the Queen. Tell us where to go to die for you, and we obey.”

Queen Talisa stepped forward onto the balcony. The two suns slanted their last rays of light, catching her red hair and seeming to set it afire. Xanfolo thought that she was somehow taller, more assured, a woman possessing a regal bearing. Then he realized that she had been trained from birth for moments such as this. *Is it the blood or the training that makes a queen or king?* He was startled out of his thoughts by the sound of her voice. It was strong, clear, and full of command, but lacking in the arrogant overtones he knew so well.

“I accept your oath of loyalty, Captain Egan. I know it to be true. It was you who taught me how to ride. I have not forgotten that when I was a child, you were a faithful friend. As Queen of Clang, I now pronounce that from this time on you will be captain over all of my soldiers, both here and in Clang Colony. My champion has crowned me queen, but it is you who will determine for how long I wear the crown.”

Captain Egan’s sword swept upward, then downward, and finally back into its scabbard. The other officers followed his lead.

“I accept the command, Your Highness. I pledge that the companies of bowmen and pike men will also give their loyalty. Those who do not will be dead before the two suns rise again. I now await the orders of your champion.”

“Do you follow my champion?” Queen Talisa asked.

“Only so long as he is your champion,” the captain replied. “He is your champion, and he is the man who walks in the dark sky.”

“Interesting,” Hona said softly.

Talisa turned to Xanfolo. “Am I only half a queen? Who will rule in Clang, you or I?”

“You will rule, Your Highness. I leave as soon as possible for Montia. This ‘dark sky’ silliness will be forgotten.”

“You are leaving? So soon?” she asked. Her surprise faded quickly into bitterness. “Back to Nessa? Go then, but first, give your orders to your followers.” She turned and swept through the doors.

“Now, there’s a royal pout if ever I’ve seen one, and I’ve seen plenty since being assigned to the League, I’ll tell you!” Dammer exclaimed.

“Your army awaits your command, mystical one,” Hona reminded in a voice laced with sharp teeth.

“Dammer, take our talkative priest inside. Find some place where he can be held and beware his tricks,” Xanfolo said. “Then send a messenger to tell me where you are holding him.”

The Hargian cavalryman nodded and took Hona by the arm.

“Come with me, Priest. We need to wake up your guards. I’m sure they will be pleased to see you again.”

As they left the balcony, Xanfolo vaulted lightly over the rail and landed on his feet on the pavement below. He strode up to the captain’s guna and smiled. “I’ve never been able to make a guna go as swiftly as I wished,” he said modestly.

The mounted captain bowed his head in salute as he replied, “And I do not walk through the dark sky, my Lord.”

“You know, do you not, that I am a Montian captain serving as a champion for your queen? When the suns are at midpoint in the sky after this darkness, I will fly away to my home in Montia. Then you and your thousand swords will be the queen’s champions.”

“That is so, my Lord, until your return,” he replied.

Xanfolo could see that the Clangian captain’s mind was well-fixed on this point. *Better to let time work against his mind*, he told himself. He then issued orders. The cavalry and other reliable units were ordered to seal the city, maintain patrols, and arm trustworthy citizens, if necessary. The palace was to be securely guarded at all costs.

“And the priests?” asked the cavalry captain.

“Round up the leaders and hold them under guard in the temple. Watch out for the balconies. Your Clangian priests have somehow become very good bowmen. I must find an answer to the question of who is going to rule Clang: Queen Talisa or the priests.”

“We could kill them,” the captain growled.

“That was my first thought, also,” Xanfolo admitted, “but there are at least five thousand of them in Clang, and maybe more. Then there are the merchants and others who work for the priests. What of them? No, we must find a better solution.”

“By your command, my Lord.”

Xanfolo returned the commander’s salute. He had considered another attempt at correcting the old cavalryman about his use of the *lord* title and then decided against it. There was another more pressing matter. He would have to consult with Hona, and since the talk would be of intrigue and conspiracies, he knew the priest would have the advantage. For a wink of the eye, he hoped that Dammer had killed the priest, and then he regretted the thought. He had a fondness for the priest sometimes. After all, Hona had faced the Pontan battle carrier without flinching, and he stood firm in the Death Circle on the outpost. There must be some honor in him.

Hona was also correct about the coronation. Talisa could be crowned and guarded by soldiers, but for how long? The army was like a rock, but the priests were like water. Water was slow but ever so certain. In time, the rock might be washed away.

After the formalities with the cavalry leaders ended, a guard led Xanfolo to a small room where Dammer held Hona prisoner. The priest was lying flat on his back on the floor, his hands folded over his chest. Dammer knelt close by, both hands on a short sword held with its point at Hona’s unguarded belly.

“Ho, Captain. I’m glad you’re here,” Dammer said. “I was beginning to get sleepy. If I fall asleep, I’ll fall forward, and my good friend, the priest, will have a sore belly.”

“You may rest your arms,” Xanfolo said. “And you, Hona, may sit upright. We must talk, but I warn you, no circles of words, and no hidden meanings. You must come as close to truth as your craft permits.”

“This will be about as close as a guna can come to flying,” Dammer laughed.

Hona nodded at Xanfolo. “Your mythmaker here will teach gunas to fly. He will put gunas in freighters and carry both up into the sky.”

“Enough about gunas,” Xanfolo said sharply. “Queen Talisa must stay on the throne. There must not be a civil war in Clang. Why do the priests oppose her?”

“You are mistaken, and you have been mistaken all along,” Hona answered. “The priesthood does not oppose the queen. We have more to lose in a civil war than the royal houses. A civil war in Clang would not be a Clangian affair for long. It would lead to a general war between the cities. If that happened, the barbarians would sweep over our colonies. We would lose our liguite and the rocks that contain so much of value.”

“Only a strong and united priesthood,” he continued, “Can prevent the loss of knowledge that would occur if the cities bled themselves with war and the barbarians took control. You know of the tube that throws a fireball, and of the tube that allows us to see great distances. There is much more that is possible, but only if there is time and stability can we make these instruments, these marvels.”

“All well and good,” Xanfolo interrupted. “But what should I expect from the priests on the royal question? Will the priests support Queen Talisa?”

Hona hesitated before answering. “There is a high price to pay. She must agree, a secret agreement if necessary, not to interfere with the priesthood. She must agree to allow the priests to form a council of the six high priests of the cities, just as there is a league of ambassadors now who represent the royal houses.”

“And you, Hona. Are you to be the master of the council? Are you to be the seventh priest who sits in honor above the other six? The royal houses cannot even control their own ambassadors. How could they control your council?”

“You are a clever Montian,” Hona smiled. “We had no idea you were so clever.”

“As I said before,” Dammer growled, “The priests believe that soldiers are blind fools. They thought you to be the same, Captain, but you’ve proved to be their equal and more.”

“So it would seem,” Hona admitted. “As to your questions about the highest priest, I don’t know for certain, but yes, there is a strong possibility that I will be the master of the council. As to control by the royal houses, they are nearly gone, except for Montia where you have an interesting system for renewal of the line of succession. The rest are disappearing, and bloodlines are thin. They are so weak that more often than not, we get fools laced with the cousin’s disease of insanity for royal leaders.”

“What bloodlines do priests have to offer?” Xanfolo asked.

“More often than not, the same as yours, Captain,” Hona replied. “I suspect that had you become a priest instead of a soldier, you, and not I, would be the leader of the council of priests.”

Xanfolo grimaced. “There’s a thought that turns my stomach. The queen will never agree to allow priests to form such a council. I think she would sooner die first, but I can give you a pledge. The Clangian army will grant me a favor...”

Dammer interrupted. "They, like the Hargian army, would follow you unarmed into the arms of the barbarians if you asked it of them."

"Yes," agreed Hona. "All but the Pontans would serve him. There are even Soren whose hands touch their foreheads when saying the captain's name."

"Enough madness!" Xanfolo ordered. "This matter must be settled before the two suns rise. My pledge is that for the present, if the priests support Queen Talisa, then I will ask the Clangian army not to interfere with the priests in Clang. As for your treason, Hona, that must be judged by the League and not by us. I would not be surprised to find that the League is really little more than a mask for the priesthood."

"That is interesting," Hona replied. "The Pontans are convinced that the League is little more than a mask for Kinsa."

"It's a sorry mess," said Dammer. "We ought to take them all, except for the royal houses, out to an open field for cavalry sword and lance practice."

"That is an alternative," Xanfolo said softly. "I'll not leave Queen Talisa's reign to be nibbled away by mice making intrigues. Better an outright slaughter beginning with the rise of the two suns."

"That will not be necessary," Hona said quickly. "What you offer is a truce that protects Queen Talisa. I agree, but I cannot always predict what either the League or the Kinsans will do. However, I can guarantee that in exchange for your pledge, I will order the Clangian priests not to make an intrigue against her."

"And you will not cause the League to come against her? Pledge that, and we are done."

"I agree," Hona said with a sigh of relief, and then after a brief pause, he made one small exception. "Keep in mind that the League must still approve of this coronation. Ponta, Soren, and Clang will be sure to oppose any approval, and there is nothing I can do about it. Also, the Soren will be in the central chair and thus have two votes. Approval will have to wait for the next moon period, at least."

"I don't understand," Xanfolo replied. "Why would the Clangian ambassador not approve of the coronation?"

"I said you were clever," Hona answered with the edge of a smirk on his lips. "You still have a lot to learn about the ways of governing. The Clangian ambassador was appointed by Duke Ajon, and Queen Talisa cannot replace him until her coronation is approved."

"Maybe the Clangian ambassador will have an accident?" Dammer suggested with a wink.

"I hope not," Hona said quickly. "That could lead to other accidents. I can truly say that I will not have any part of bringing the League against her. If you accept that, then I can sleep this darkness without fear of assassins."

"Make the priest swear it, Captain," Dammer urged. "Make him swear it on something that will bind his pledge."

Hona flashed an angry glance at Dammer. "Very well, I swear on the honor of the Kinsan priesthood. I swear it so."

"Bah! Guna droppings!" Dammer snorted. "Kinsans know no honor, priest or king. Swear on the captain's sword. Then if you betray your pledge, every soldier in the six realms, even the Pontans, will make it a point of honor to kill you! Swear it! Swear to the truth of your pledge!"

Xanfolo drew his sword. "Dammer is right. Put your hand on cold steel, Priest. Then swear that your pledge is good and true."

Hona reached out, almost gingerly, in order to touch the blade. "On Montian steel, I swear I will honor my pledge. May Queen Talisa's reign be long and without trouble caused by me. So I swear it." Hona paused. "Is that enough? Do you believe me?"

"Not really," laughed Dammer.

"I do," Xanfolo said. "What had to be done was done. Now, let us go find food and drink."

In the corridor, they were stopped by a guard. "The queen commands the presence of her champion. Follow me, sir."

"You two will have to find your own way," Xanfolo said.

"We will talk again," Hona replied, "before you leave for Montia."

As he followed the guard, Xanfolo gave an inward groan. The priest would have a long time to think up new mischief. The thought of tangling again with Hona in a new round of mind games cast his spirits downward. Xanfolo realized that he was weary, and he wanted food and drink. Most of all, he wanted to be back on the Nara once again, high above the ground and away from all the intrigues and conspiracies. He suddenly longed for a time in the past as told by the chanters when all was in order. It was generations ago when people lived quietly in their cities under good kings and queens. *Well, Montia is still like that*, he thought. The Montians were a different people, unlike those in the other five cities.

"My lord, we are here. The Queen's chambers are through this door."

Xanfolo was startled. He stared at his guide and then at the two pike men guarding the door. He had seen nothing during his walk through the palace corridor. He didn't know if the guards were properly placed or were alert and ready for action. "Thank you," he mumbled as he saluted and entered the queen's chambers. He was promptly met by a lady-in-waiting, and together they passed through two rooms, one a library filled with scrolls which surprised him. Clangians were not noted for being a learned people. The second room was more formal, a small receiving room where the king or queen could meet privately, but in state, with small groups.

The lady-in-waiting bowed him into the queen's inner chamber, and he was surprised again. The chamber was large but plainly furnished. Except for a few feminine touches, the chamber might have been occupied by a captain of the royal guard. The only wall decoration was a large map of the six realms, the most detailed map he had ever seen. Even the semaphore stations along the trails to the colonies were noted on the map. *I should have such a map for my battle carrier*, he thought.

His eyes caught the darting motion of a red-robed priest leaving by a panel in the back wall of the second room. Queen Talisa sat at a small table. A small, empty vial lay on the table.

"You are here at last?" Talisa asked as she rose and extended her hands. "Come to me, my Montian champion."

"What of the priest? Why was he here? Did he bring the vial that is on the table?" Xanfolo asked.

She reached for his hand. "The priest brought me a potion to restore my mind. These events have been very exhausting. According to the priest, the potion will make my fondest wish come true."

He took both her hands and looked at her eyes. "What is your fondest wish now? I would have thought that becoming queen was your greatest wish."

"My greatest wish, yes," she smiled, "but not my fondest. There is a difference. You are a man, and worse yet a soldier, and you would not know about such matters."

"Being a soldier has become a lot harder than I ever imagined," Xanfolo answered.

"You look weary," she said hastily. "And no wonder. It has been ten sunrises since you rescued me; barely, I might add. You made me a queen and shook the League and the priests down to their roots. Now come with me. There is food and drink. You must rest."

She led him onto a platform at the end of the room. There was a sunken tub easily the length and width of a tall man. On the floor by the tub was a platter of food and a large vase which he guessed was filled with drink. She knelt down in front of him and pulled off the soft Montian boots, then rising, she unfastened his cloak. Slowly and silently, she removed his clothes.

She motioned for him to get into the water. He stepped into the tub and was startled. The water was not warm.

"A soldier's bath?" he questioned with a smile. "I would have thought a princess..."

"Princess?"

"My apologies. A queen should have a warm bath."

Slowly, he sank down into the tub. His skin tingled from the coolness of the water. He felt revived, and his stomach urged attention to the food and drink.

Queen Talisa slipped out of her gown and joined him in the tub, moving her body between his legs and resting her head on his chest. As he ate and drank, she dodged crumbs. Once he spilled drink on her shoulder and neck. His lips and tongue allowed the spilled liquid to go no further.

"You have the manners of a barbarian," she laughed. "I would enjoy watching you at a formal Kinsan banquet."

When he had finished the meal, she turned and looked up at him. "Marry me!" she ordered.

His eyes widened, and then he smiled as he thought she was teasing him. "That would be another event in a light time that has seen enough events, My Lady."

"I am serious," she insisted. "You could become my consort. There is no law that says the Queen of Clang cannot have a consort,"

"I'm not even remotely of royal blood, Your Highness."

"That doesn't seem to be a problem in Montia. If you don't marry me, you will marry Nessa and become her consort. You have a choice to make, as I see it. Be my consort, or be the consort of fat Nessa."

"Nessa is not fat."

"She is short, very, very short. She has short fat legs, not like mine." Talisa slowly lifted a long, white leg out of the water and pointed her toes toward the ceiling.

Then she laughed. "The Montian has drawn his sword!"

Xanfolo buried both hands in her hair and pulled her face to his. The water no longer felt cool to his skin. He gathered her in his arms, rose from the sunken tub, and carried her across the room to the royal bed. They made love until excitement overcame his senses, and he emptied the last measure of his strength. She held him tightly, even when he sought to roll over. Gradually his muscles relaxed, and he sighed softly, the last small breeze of the last

storm of the rainy season. He was not aware of drifting off into a deep sleep until he felt something pressing against his closed eyes.

He opened his eyes, and found himself in Talisa's arms, though they had somehow rolled over onto their sides. She kissed his eyes again, forcing the lids shut.

"It is past the first sun's rising," she said softly. "It is time for you to go, if you must. Or, it is time we made plans for a royal marriage."

"You are really serious?" he mumbled as he unwrapped from her embrace.

"Yes."

They did not discuss it again until Xanfolo had jumped into the tub, splashed water, dried, and put on his clothes which had been washed and repaired during the darkness.

As he hurriedly wolfed down fresh food and drink, Talisa asked again, "Marry me?"

"It cannot be," Xanfolo replied. "The League would never give its permission."

"You made me a queen without the League's consent. Why can't I make you a consort without the League's consent?"

He smiled at that. "I may still have to face judgment for that action."

"The League wouldn't dare," she argued. "That would bring Clang and Montia into battle against the League."

"Perhaps, but even so you are of Clang, and I am of Montia. Besides, I am promised. I am to be Nessa's consort. Queen Nara would never agree to my marrying you instead of Nessa."

"You think not? What if I tell Nara that if she approves of our marriage, I will make you commander of all the Clangian soldiers? Furthermore, I will agree to make a new trail from Clang Colony to Montia II, and at the halfway point, we will build another colony together. Think of it! Montia would get a much larger amount of liguite, and finally, I would make our son, a half-Montian, my crown prince of Clang."

Xanfolo was stunned. "You would do all of that just to marry me? Why?"

"There are some areas of life you probably will never understand, Montian guna!" She smiled as she said the words.

"I don't doubt it," he replied. "Now, my Queen, I must go. It is not good for a captain to leave his men waiting."

"Nor his women," she said softly. "Think about what I have spoken here. Until we meet again." She kissed him lightly on the forehead.

Xanfolo heard her parting words as he passed through the drape-hidden entrance, but his mind was already on the Nara and up in the sky. Talisa had said something about his having to return because of the future he had left behind. *She is right*, he told himself. There was much about women he would never understand. How in the name of all three orbs could he have left the future behind?

Chapter 15

It felt good to be up in the sky above the constant uproar of League business, queens, and priests. There was also a welcome surprise. The crew had devised a clamp for the rim rail and a holding arm for the looking tube which Hona had left behind. While Xanfolo wondered what the priest would ask as a return favor, he was pleased to have the strange piece of equipment. With the crew's device, the looking tube could be swiveled up or down and in either direction. When the winds changed and a new direction was set, the looking tube could be unclamped and moved to what was then the forward rim.

The Nara was only four rainy seasons old. No one really knew for certain what the battle carriers could accomplish. What other changes were coming? The looking tube greatly extended the eyes of the carrier and its crew. What other new ideas would extend the power of the carrier? His mind followed a broad path which led him to the priests and what they really knew about the winds. Did they know of better ways to harness the winds?

He checked himself, halting the progress of the thought as a new idea danced at the edge of his mind's recognition. He pulled the new idea into a sharper definition. What really mattered was how they learned. The growing power of the priests was a matter of their learning, and the word how was a lever that could move more power to them. For too long the priests had monopolized knowledge, learning always leading to more knowledge, and more knowledge leading to more learning. That interlocking process had to be changed, somehow. Otherwise, the priests would eventually control everything.

He realized that his mind was working in circles like a battle carrier seeking favorable winds. There were other matters of more importance to be considered. He eyed the looking tube. If the tube could be mounted for looking, could Hona's fire tube also be mounted? What if there were ten such tubes? At close quarters, the fire tubes could stop any boarders before they reached the Nara's rim rail. However, remembering the Kinsan ambassador's questions about the value of battle carriers, he wondered if the firing tubes were really better than bowmen and multipults.

Xanfolo had been wary of sharing too much information with the Kinsan ambassador. Were Hona and his priests equally reluctant to share the secrets of the looking tube and fire tube with priests in other cities? What did the high priest of Montia know of these matters? Indeed, was the high priest part of Hona's conspiracy, or was Montia somehow safe from the intrigues common in the other cities?

Makin joined him at the rail. "Is the looking tube arrangement satisfactory?"

"You have done well!" Xanfolo replied. "The Nara was in good hands while I was busy. Repairs have been made, and the Nara seems in fine trim. I am puzzled about the crew, though."

"The crew?"

"Yes. Since I've returned, they seem to be keeping their distance. I catch glimpses of them watching me and then talking quickly among themselves. What does this mean? Have we been away from Montia too long?"

"No, my Lord. The crew is in awe of you. While we guarded and repaired the Nara in Clang, we received frequent reports about what was happening at the royal palace and temple. The crew knows that you crowned a queen. That was bold, my Lord, even for you."

Xanfolo frowned. "Why have you promoted me from captain to lord? I am not a lord."

"I meant only respect," Makin stammered. "The crew thinks of you as a lord. No one of their station or class or their officers could crown a queen. That and your walking through the dark sky have had its effect on them."

"No more of this lord talk, Makin. I much prefer to be a captain, thank you."

"As you wish, Captain. However, you should know that the Clangian soldiers who stood guard with us, always referred to you as lord. Some said that you will command their army."

"Now there is something to look forward to," Xanfolo grimaced. "Commanding twelve hundred gunas? No, I only seek to command one carrier, the Nara."

"That is a worthy goal for any man," Makin said softly.

Xanfolo put his hand on Makin's shoulder. "You are my equal in command ability. I hope to have another battle carrier in the sky flying Montian green."

"A second carrier?"

"Yes, and soon. We will need another if we are to keep our neighbors from getting greedy thoughts about Montia."

"We are one against many, my Lo---Captain."

Xanfolo ignored the near slip, his mind following well practiced lines of thought on the line up of forces. "Yes, the Pontans have five more like the one we chased away. The Kinsans have four, and the Hargians, two. Since the Kinsans control the Hargian battle carriers, they are matched evenly with the Pontans. As it is now, Makin, we fly between the two fleets as a balance."

"Let us hope we never get caught in the middle! We would be squashed like a bug," Makin replied.

"But not if we had one or two more carriers the size of the Nara and with good crews and captains," Xanfolo smiled. "If we had a better stinger, then we would be a very hard bug to crush."

Makin squinted up at the kites. "We are getting unfavorable winds. At this rate, we will be another two or three sunrises away from Montia. I had better go see what I can do."

Xanfolo raised his hand in an answering salute and Makin hurried across the deck to the bridge. The winds were sometimes uncooperative, carrying the Nara in circles until the kites found a friendly breeze against which to work. However, the winds had never tried his patience. The winds were the winds, and he could not fight them. The winds were like life, he mused, and then ended his brief philosophical fling as more practical matters crowded back into his mind.

First, Xanfolo considered the matter with Queen Talisa and her offer. An alliance with Clang would unhinge the Pontan efforts and give the rest of the League a chance to gain new respect for Montia and Clang. Instead of Kinsa and Ponta seeking control over the League and then the rest of the realms, a third element would be added. No, not an element, Xanfolo reflected, but a bug that could not be easily squashed.

Next, Xanfolo considered how Queen Nara would react to the offer of alliance with Clang. When he was in Talisa's chamber, he had discounted the offer, but now he wasn't so sure. He remembered when Talisa had all but glumly accepted the idea that she would eventually be married off to Tagge instead of following her own heart. It was the way of royal houses, but he was not of a royal house. His mother had been a flower girl, and the sons of flower girls did not become lords.

However, Montia was an exception to the rule because the son a flower girl could become a consort to the queen. That raised another matter. Nessa was a princess who was old enough to be married. One way or another, he was destined to be married to a queen or a princess who would become a queen.

He glanced up at the kites off in the distance and could see that Makin was still having problems with the winds. "There is no hurry," he murmured aloud.

The winds seemed to share Xanfolo's reluctance to rush forward toward his fate. It took a sunrise longer than Makin had predicted for the Nara to reach Montia. The winds were contrary to the last, causing them to circle the city for most of the sun time. Finally, the crew of the Nara was able to release the ropes and hooks for the ground crew to catch and hold tight.

As Xanfolo stepped down to the ground from the entry port at the bottom of the tube, he was met by an honor troop composed of the royal guard.

"Why the honor troop, Sub-captain Chandora?" Xanfolo asked.

Chandora saluted as he answered, "Princess Nessa's orders and confirmed by Queen Nara. We are to escort you to the royal palace and directly to Princess Nessa's quarters." He paused and then added, "The princess also ordered us to cut down any one we meet who has red hair."

"Lead on, Chandora! I don't believe we will meet anyone with red hair in Montia," Xanfolo laughed.

"Yes, sir! And with the Captain's permission?"

"Go on, Sub-captain."

"Yes, sir! The Royal Guard wishes to congratulate the Captain for his actions in Zorn, Dom, and in Clang. You have brought great honor to us all."

"I hope there is not too great a price to pay for that honor," Xanfolo replied as he fell in at the head of the troop and began the march to the palace.

They marched at a quick pace down the busiest avenue in Montia. As they passed the public houses, men and flower girls stepped out in the twilight and cheered. Xanfolo found himself raising his hand in a return salute to the applause. He wondered how much information had come to Montia by way of the semaphore. He remembered Hona's claim that most of the coded messages were easily read by the priests. He also wondered about the accuracy of the semaphore. He knew that sometimes a message starting in Ponta could be quite different by the time it reached Montia.

At the palace gates, the guards snapped to attention with a vigor that surpassed even Xanfolo's demands. As they marched through the corridors, the response of the guards was uniformly first level. When they reached a junction of the corridors, Xanfolo waved his escort to a halt. He silently approached a panel and suddenly pulled it open. Inside, the young cadet stationed there as a hidden sentinel held his sword at ready. There was a wide grin on his face which quickly disappeared as Xanfolo growled, "Good to see you awake."

As they proceeded on, Xanfolo complimented his sub-captain. "You've done a good job while I was gone. The royal guards are alert. If the Clangian palace guards had been this alert, there wouldn't have been a royal kidnapping."

"Thank you, my Lord. Your compliment will be passed on to the guards."

There it was again, the title of lord. Something would have to be done about this matter and soon, Xanfolo realized. It wouldn't make the League ambassadors rest easy to know, and they would soon know that soldiers were calling him a lord.

The honor troop stopped at the entrance to Nessa's quarters. Chandora saluted. "Our mission is accomplished."

"Your heads will remain on your shoulders," Xanfolo smiled. "Thankfully, we met no redheads on the way."

Xanfolo entered the atrium and then passed on into Nessa's favorite room, the room that was as much like the outdoors as she could make it. The lighting was subdued, almost shadowy, an effect that Nessa had worked hard to achieve through the use of properly placed small liguite torches.

She stood waiting for him in front of the circular pool. She wore a short, white dress decorated with the royal green stitching. The dress was cut in a vee in front from the shoulders down to a narrow belt at her waist. Her black hair fell down around her shoulders. Her throat and barely covered breasts glistened, a soft golden-brown contrast to the white dress.

She seemed taller than he remembered. Then he saw that she was wearing the strange Kinsan shoes.

"Xan, at last!" she said huskily. She opened her arms and stepped toward him and stumbled.

He laughed as he moved to catch her, but on hearing his laughter, she pulled herself upright and kicked off the shoes, angrily aiming each shoe at his head.

"I wore them for you, flower girl master. Montia's own flower girl master who makes queens, and oh, how he makes queens! I'm surprised that you bothered to return to Montia, or did you finally tire of that frizzled redhead who is too skinny to be a real queen?"

"I don't understand..."

"Oh, I believe that is the truth. You are too dumb to understand. The simplest flower girl could wrap you around her little finger, and you'd never know why. All you know is how to fly away on that awful carrier of yours," she paused, her eyes narrowing. "Why is your battle carrier called the Nara? Why isn't it called the Nessa?"

"Because you are not yet the queen of Montia."

"Well, there will come a day when I am queen. Then what will you be?"

"At the queen's command," Xanfolo replied as he bowed deeply.

"You have changed," she said, her mood shifting quickly from anger to puzzlement. "You are quicker with your tongue than I remember."

"The mission was not easily accomplished," he answered. "In Kinsa, nothing is as it seems. Truth is like water or sand, easily shifted into new forms. I found myself longing for the simpler life in Montia, but..."

"Xan!" she cried as she threw herself into his arms, her lips attacking his face again and again.

Her body shuddered as emotions roiled through her mind, and then she stopped, her head arched back. She struck his ears with her hands and through clenched teeth, hissed, "I should kill you!"

He grabbed her wrists and forced her hands down and behind her back where he held them. He bent his head toward her lips, but she jerked her face away. He did not stop. His teeth fastened on the cloth of her dress. He crushed her to his chest and held her pinned. She leaned forward and kissed him lightly, the tip of her tongue dancing across his lips.

"Be my champion now!" she ordered softly.

Later they jumped into the pool and let the warm water caress their bodies. Xanfolo realized that he had missed Nessa and the Montian way of life, the warm weather, and the familiar foods. He was truly a Montian, body and heart, through and through.

"We received messages throughout each of the light times you were gone," Nessa said as she softly touched his face. "Your actions have amazed the people. You are as popular in Montia as my mother. Did you really form a Death Circle? Or walk through the dark sky? And did you really leap up into the sky with Talisa under your arm like a bag of guna food? Such stories! Are they true?"

"Not quite the way you put it," Xanfolo answered with a grin. "I did not leap into the air with Talisa. We escaped in a freighter which I cut loose from its guna. We floated in the sky for most of a dark time until the Nara found us, and then we flew to Clang where she became queen."

"Thanks to her champion!" Nessa said bitterly.

"I did it for Montia," he replied while saluting. "It was my duty."

That got him a splash of water in the face as she raised both hands, jumped up, and smacked them down on the water. Fearing for his ears, Xanfolo dove under the waters, came up between her legs, and tossed her up and out of the water. She twisted and dropped back into the water. He dove after her, and this time it wasn't his ears he sought to protect. They dove and surfaced again, Nessa's brief surge of anger quickly spiking and then turning to play.

For the first time in more than a moon's journey from a sliver to full glory, his mind was free of the thorny cares that had invaded his life. He did not want to think of futures left behind.

Chapter 16

By the rising of the second sun, Nessa and Xanfolo presented themselves for the first meal with Queen Nara under a shaded patio off her private quarters.

"Come, sit at the table with me. Eat, drink. We have much to discuss. I want to hear your report, Captain, but first tell me about this fierce battle carrier that bears my name."

"A pleasure, my Queen," answered Xanfolo as they sat on the benches, Xanfolo on one side of the queen and Nessa on the other. "Although the Nara is smaller than the other battle carriers, especially the Pontans' carrier, she is fast and handles well. We beat the Pontans because we were able to out-maneuver them, and our crew performed better."

Queen Nara glanced at Nessa. "Now you see that it is not the Clangian queen you must fear. It is my namesake. Men are strange. They fall in love with objects or power, and more often than not, the objects they love most are those that lead to power."

She paused and then looked closely at Xanfolo's face. "Have the cheers of the people and the praise of the soldiers planted the love of power in your heart?"

“No, Your Highness. When I was a young boy in cadet school, my ambition was to become a captain. I never asked for more, nor do I want more. To be the captain from Montia is my life.”

“I believe you,” Queen Nara said. “But you have changed. I can see it in your eyes. Your exploits have put age in your face, too much knowledge in your eyes. Be careful not to become too old too soon.”

“He needs a long stay in Montia,” Nessa said hopefully. “We don’t want him to become like the Kinsans, another Duke of Zorn.”

The Duke is a soft man, I think,” Xanfolo added. “During the trouble at Zorn, he never left Kinsa, even though the colony at Zorn is his responsibility.”

“He didn’t need to,” Nessa sniffed. “He had the Captain from Montia do his dirty work for him.”

“No,” Xanfolo said thoughtfully. What I did, I did for Montia, not the Duke or the League.”

“How so?” Queen Nara asked.

“Because,” Xanfolo continued, “If the barbarians had captured the outpost, word of that victory would have spread through the hills and mountains. The barbarians in the jungle near Montia II might think our small colony there could also be over-run.”

“Your battle in the sky against Prince Tagge brought us very close to war with Ponta,” Queen Nara said, her voice not giving a hint as to whether or not she approved of the action. “Are the Pontans making some kind of alliance with the barbarians against Kinsa?”

Her last question caught Xanfolo off guard. He had not explained his feelings on the subject, but she was able to anticipate what he was thinking. He always felt a little ill at ease when in the presence of Queen Nara, but he never understood why.

He shook his head slowly. “The battle was nothing more than an incident. The Pontans were testing us and the League, but the barbarians at the Zorn outpost had some Pontan swords. They also had foam bags which they used to frighten the Soren soldiers. However, they could have gotten both swords and foam from raids on convoys.”

Xanfolo continued to relate in considerable detail the confusion that seemed to exist among the ambassadors to the League, the growing power of the priests, and the mystery about the secret society. As he talked, Nessa stood up and strolled over to a flowering plant. She plucked a flower and slowly destroyed it, one petal at a time.

Queen Nara listened closely. Xanfolo became aware that her large, dark eyes were peering through him, probing his face. For the first time, he saw her not as a ruler who could send him anywhere to die on her command, but as a woman. Her eyes were her most striking feature, he thought, but they seldom revealed what she was thinking. Her face wasn’t quite as round as Nessa’s. She wore her black hair in the Montian style, falling loosely down onto her shoulders, parted in the middle and pulled back from her face by flowered clasps on each side. He had always thought of her as a large, dominating woman, but she was not tall. Nor did she seem physically strong like Nessa. Her hands, which she kept folded atop the table, were almost delicate. There was a fragility about her that he had never noticed before. How different she was from her daughter, Nessa.

Xanfolo stammered as he tried to explain the need for another battle carrier.

Nessa returned and stood behind him. She wrapped her arms about his neck. “You have talked yourself silly. Enough of this! There are better things to do.”

“There are certain matters of state,” Queen Nara sighed, “That must be considered, even in Montia. You must learn that being a queen has more to do with duty than pleasure.”

Nessa stared defiantly at her mother. “When I am queen, I will know my duty, but while I wait, I’ll not waste my life worrying about the League or the Pontans or even the Clangian queen who now sits on her throne courtesy of a Certain Montian champion.”

Queen Nara smiled at Xanfolo. “When I am gone, I fear that the two queens will be at constant war. Will you be the commander of both armies?”

“Your Highness has a point,” Xanfolo acknowledged. “There is something that I have been reluctant to bring up, but you must know of it.”

“Go on.”

“It is a sensitive matter. It might be best that you alone know,” Xanfolo said carefully.

“No. My daughter must know what I know. Sometimes we disagree strongly, but she will be the queen some day. We have few secrets between us.”

“This has to do with the Clangian queen, doesn’t it?” Nessa asked. Her voice was even, but her eyes glanced away so Xanfolo could not read their inner content.

“Yes,” he answered. “She is interested in an alliance with Montia. She offers to help build a trail between Clang Colony and Montia II. Midway between the two colonies she will build another colony to be jointly shared with Montia. The alliance would also be military. If either Clang or Montia is attacked, both will make war on the attacker.”

“I know of the Clangian proposal,” Queen Nara said softly. “A scroll from her was brought to us by messenger. Evidently the moment you left Clang she started the scroll down the trail. Riders must have ridden both sun and dark times to arrive before our battle carrier.”

“You have both known of the proposal?” Xanfolo asked. There was more than a little hint of surprise in his voice. His mind quickly assessed the possible meanings of Talisa’s action. Then he continued, “Do you know of all that’s involved in the proposal?”

“That is a problem,” Nessa said. “Talisa never was too bright. Somehow she forgot to make clear what she was to get in return for our agreement. I think she wants more than just a colony or a military alliance.”

“I am to be the consideration she forgot to mention,” Xanfolo said. He was quite sure that the two women facing him had already guessed as much. “She has offered to marry me and make me her consort. I am to be in command of all Clangian troops. If there is a son, he will be made crown prince and one day rule over Clang as king.”

“A half-Montian on the Clangian throne,” said Queen Nara as if she was tasting each word.

Nessa’s mouth was open, but she was so angry that her words were blocked in her throat. When she regained control, the words poured out.

“There will be no Montian on the Clangian throne, I swear it! At least not one by a union between Talisa and a Montian. There is work for assassins in this. Now listen carefully, Captain from Montia. You will never have a son by her because dead women do not bear children. Talisa is now dead even though she might not know it! She will die if I have to hire every assassin in the six cities. I swear it! By the orbs, I swear it!”

“No!” cried Queen Nara as she rose from the table. “There must be no assassins. I forbid it! That is why the six royal houses are so weak now. That is why we gave the ambassadors so much power. We will not be the royal house that starts another bloody war by assassination.”

Xanfolo thought longingly of his battle carrier and wished he was on it far, far away. He had seen Nessa's little fits of anger in the past, and he had dismissed them as what might be expected from a head-strong princess accustomed to having her own way and very sure of her future. However, this was a different kind of outburst, a show of deep feeling, of an ability to hate, to pursue an objective to whatever bitter end might be found and at whatever cost. He was shaken by it, but at the same time he saw her power and began to understand that she could indeed become a powerful queen.

Nessa stared at her mother. Neither woman seemed ready to back down. Just as Xanfolo was considering what he could say to ease the impasse, Nessa softened the anger showing on her face, moved back to the table, and sat down.

"There will be no assassinations," she said, her voice barely heard by Nara and Xanfolo. "I agree that the bloody trial by assassination must not be started again. But Talisa shall not have Xanfolo. He is mine! This was your promise, Mother, that I would not have to accept a marriage of state arranged by you. I could pick my own consort."

"That is true," Queen Nara replied. "But what of Montia? What of the city and its needs?"

"When I am queen, I shall be Montia. My needs are Montia's needs," Nessa replied quickly.

Queen Nara stepped away from the table. "I must think about this matter. I will tell you later what I have decided." She extended her hands. Xanfolo quickly knelt and touched his forehead against her hand. Nessa did not move. Then slowly she approached her mother and knelt down. She allowed her forehead to sink against the queen's hand. She reached up with both her hands and gently took her mother's hand in her own.

They stared briefly at each other, but with no emotion showing on their faces. Xanfolo thought Nessa's act of devotion was somehow more a matter of form instead of feeling. He was aware that there was much he did not understand about the relationship between the two women. Queen Nara withdrew her hand from Nessa's grasp, turned, and walked away without another word.

After Nara had retired to her quarters, Nessa touched Xanfolo's cheek. "I want you to be my consort," she said softly. "Ever since I was a small child, I have watched you in the parades. I told my mother that I would pick you to be my consort when I was old enough. That was when my father still lived here instead of governing Montia II. He said that if you were going to become consort, he had better make you into a good soldier."

"Your father was a hard taskmaster, but I'm beginning to see that learning to become a queen isn't easy, either."

Nessa laughed. "You'll never know how many times I've wanted to be a flower girl instead of a princess. Now come with me. I have a gift for you."

"A gift? What is it?"

"Come with me. You'll like it. I was going to give it to you at moonrise, but now is just as good a time. Come!"

They hurried to Nessa's quarters. Xanfolo smiled as they passed the hidden sentry. And a muffled voice called out, "I'm awake."

After they entered Nessa's quarters, Xanfolo waited for his eyes to adjust to the dim, shadowy light. Nessa rummaged in a chest until she pulled out a long object wrapped in cloth. She carried the object in one hand and a small liguite torch in the other.

“Open it,” she said as she handed the object to him. He grasped it and knew it was a sword. He carefully took it out of the cloth wrappings.

“It’s a beauty!” he said softly. It had a blade as long as his fighting sword, but was slightly wider and heavier. The blade seemed strong and unblemished as far as he could see in the poor light. The hilt was of a red substance that he had never seen before, but it felt good in his hand. It was as if the red hilt somehow fused his hand to the sword. He cut at imagined foes.

“It’s perfectly balanced! Open your curtains so I can truly see this beauty. Let some light into this jungle lair of yours.”

“My mother was right about men falling in love with objects,” Nessa said as she pulled the reed curtains open to let in light from the suns.

“An inscription –L-O-...LORAN! Where did you get this sword? Tell me. I must know!”

“What’s wrong?”

“This sword! Where did you get it?”

“At the bazaar. An old man dressed in dirty gray clothes showed it to me and said I should buy it for my true love. His price was so low I thought he must have stolen it, but he claimed it was a family relic. Then I told him that if it was an old relic, it might break in your hand, and...”

She was interrupted by a soft but firm voice coming out of a still shadowy corner of the chamber.

“The sword will be true to you. Fear it not. It will serve those who serve Loran.”

“What? Assassins!” Xanfolo shouted. He pulled Nessa behind him and raised his point. “Come out here in the light, or die in the shadows!”

An old man dressed in a gray tunic stepped into the light and spoke. “The sword is your heritage and your future. It will not betray you for it was made of metal not found in the realms, nor the mountains, the jungles, or the seas.”

“Who are you?” demanded Nessa as she stepped from behind Xanfolo, a slender dagger in her hand.

“He is a member of the Secret Society,” Xanfolo answered. “Why is this sword my heritage and future?” His eyes never left the old man facing him. The point of his new sword remained ready.

“I cannot tell you, but I do have a message for you. You are to leave at once for Montia II.”

“Why?”

“That I cannot tell you, but more will be revealed when you get there. I must go now.” He stepped back into the shadows.

“Quick, the torch!” ordered Xanfolo as he leaped into the shadows. Nessa followed with the torch, but there was nothing to be seen except a large chest. Xanfolo opened its doors. Inside were clothes and nothing else. There was no other way out of the chest.

“Not even the priests can make themselves disappear,” Nessa said. “What does this mean? How are you involved?”

“You know as much as I know,” Xanfolo replied. “Somehow I have become a part of this Secret Society’s myths and prophecies.”

“Is this the seventh-city silliness you were talking about?” Nessa asked.

“Yes, only sometimes it is not so silly. They knew where Talisa was being held prisoner. They sent me to Zorn to find out where she was being held. Did they want me to go to Zorn because they knew the barbarians were going to attack the outpost? I must go prepare the Nara for a voyage to Montia II. Our colony there might be in great danger.”

“If you are going to Montia II, then I am coming along,” Nessa declared.

“You are going to fly on the Nara?”

“It seems that is a requirement now if a princess wants to become a queen. Besides, I have not seen my father since I was a child.”

“There might be danger,” said Xanfolo. “And the space on the Nara is cramped despite its great size. You would find it very uncomfortable.”

“Did Talisa find it uncomfortable?”

“She did not complain.”

“Nor will I. It is settled. Now go prepare the Nara. I command it.”

Xanfolo bowed. “I will honor your command, but the queen must know of this. She must give her approval.”

“I’ll take care of that,” said Nessa. “Now, quit wasting time. Go!”

His sword in one hand, he reached out with the other and pulled her close. She kissed him gently on the lips. When they parted, he smiled. “Thank you for the sword. It’s a work of art, but it may prove to be a deadly beauty.”

“If you fear it,” said Nessa, “We can throw it from the Nara and let it fall where it will.”

“No, it’s in my hands now, and I must keep it, even though I do not really understand why. Perhaps the sword is a good omen.”

In contrast to his words, Xanfolo also sensed that this ancient sword of Loran might well be the instrument of his own destruction.

Chapter 17

In the dimming light of the second sunset, Xanfolo and Makin made one last inspection of the Nara. The battle carrier was ready for flight. Provisions had been loaded, kites and ropes made ready, diskers and disks loaded, and new multipults brought on board to replace those left behind at Zorn. New crewmen had been selected to replace those who had died or were badly wounded in the battle with the Tagge.

“You have done well, Makin,” said Xanfolo as they stood on the narrow platform at the bottom of the long tube that formed the carrier’s center.

“Thank you. What is our new mission?”

“We fly to Montia II as I said before.”

“And when we arrive?”

"A good question," Xanfolo replied. "We will fly in a wide circle over the jungle. Maybe with the looking tube we can learn if there is any trouble coming from that direction."

"The jungle hides much," said Makin. "And it is close to both Montia and Montia II. Maybe we should have outposts near the jungle the way the Kinsans have an outpost in the hills near Zorn."

Xanfolo grinned, but shook his head. "The barbarians could use the outpost as a lever to gain control of Zorn."

"How?" Makin questioned.

"An army could pass by the outpost without anyone knowing it, and stage an attack designed to draw out the garrison at Zorn to reinforce the outpost. Then the undetected column could hit Zorn itself with a flanking attack. If it were planned correctly, the attack against Zorn would occur while the garrison can help neither Zorn nor the outpost."

"That might happen," agreed Makin as he cast a sideways glance at his captain, "But only if they had someone who had spent a large part of his life studying tactics."

"Speaking of tactics," Xanfolo said, "There are two problems that I want solved by moonrise. We may have a passenger, Princess Nessa. Prepare my quarters for her, and I will take yours."

"The other is a little more difficult to solve. I want two nets rigged, each on an opposing side of the Nara. One net is to be filled with rocks the size of a man's head. Fill the other net with smaller stones such as the barbarians use for their slings. Make the weight of the two bags as nearly equal as possible, and rig the nets so that all the rocks or stones can be released with a single slash of a sword. Do you understand?"

"Yes," replied Makin with a straight face. "Are we going to throw rocks at the barbarians?"

"That is possible. The next time we meet the Tagge, we will fly over the Pontans and give them a hard rain on their battle deck."

The approach of a hurrying cadet drew their attention away from the subject of rocks and stones much to Makin's relief. Xanfolo recognized the young cadet as the one assigned duty as a hidden sentry, and who once walked the convoy trails as punishment for going to sleep on duty. The cadet saluted and said, "I have a message from the queen, sir."

"Very well, cadet. Deliver your message," replied Xanfolo.

"Sir, the queen requests the presence of the Captain in her quarters as quickly as possible. I am ordered to escort the Captain."

Xanfolo smiled at Makin. "This will be a noble procession, I'd judge."

"Your orders will be carried out," Makin said as he saluted. "Including the rocks and stones."

"We fly as soon as I return," Xanfolo replied as he waved a salute in return. "Now, cadet. Forward! I await your escort."

As they marched back to the palace, Xanfolo was weighted with concerns that belied his surface good humor. Queen Nara had reached a decision, and he might find himself a bridegroom leaving for Clang instead of Montia II. He might also find himself caught in the middle of a battle royal between Queen Nara and Nessa.

He realized that there were underlying currents in that battle which he did not understand. Nessa had mentioned her father twice since the rising of the two suns, and now she wanted to see him. Why did the consort, Queen Nara's husband and Nessa's father, never return to Montia? The consort had been his benefactor after he had finished cadet school and

joined the ranks. Xanfolo had not known that it was a little girl named Nessa who played such an important part in his career.

“Sir, may I speak?” asked the cadet.

“Uh, oh yes, of course. Speak.”

“I have a personal request, sir.”

“Well, out with it.”

“I request permission to transfer to the crew of the Nara, sir,”

“How old are you?”

“This will be my seventeenth rainy season, sir. I have been through cadet school and have served two years in the ranks, even though some still think I’m a cadet.”

“And you spent one season walking, as I recall,” Xanfolo replied as he remembered that he had been sixteen seasons old when he was assigned from cadet school to the regiment of pikemen. This young man, even with his punishment tour of duty, must have impressed someone to stay in the palace guards.

After a pause while Xanfolo stared hard at the young man’s face in an effort to find even a hint of bad character, he asked, “Who are you parents? What is your name?”

“My mother is a flower girl, and I do not know my father. My name is Danomo.”

Although Xanfolo did not feel old, he was struck by the comparisons between himself and this young man just getting started in life as a soldier.

“Very well Danomo. If you wish to serve on the Nara, I will make it so. You will pack a light kit, and report to Sub-captain Makin to serve in training under his direction. You may regret this decision before Makin is done with you, but stick to it. You can never tell what you might become.”

“Yes, sir!” Danomo’s excitement was obvious as he struggled to blurt acknowledgement and add something about drawing which Xanfolo could not understand.

“Well, what are you trying to say?”

“Sir, I, uh, wanted to know if I could bring my pens and some blank scrolls.”

“Why do you need pens and scrolls?”

“I draw pictures, sir, and I thought that if I ever have some free time I could draw what I see on the ground below the carrier.”

“A maker of pictures? That’s an unusual talent for a soldier. Very well, bring your tools along. Maybe we can find some use for your talent.”

“Thank you, sir.”

They resumed their march to the palace, but now the pace was fast. Xanfolo smiled briefly at the thought of how Makin would react when he learned that he had a maker of pictures on the Nara, but he also remembered the detailed map in Talisa’s quarters. By first light Danomo would be mapping the land below the Nara. Makin could add the picture-making aspect to his doubts about the rock experiment.

Soon they were in the corridors of the palace. Xanfolo had never been received in the queen’s inner quarters. Queen Nara was an extremely private woman, who, unlike Nessa, would never go to the bazaar. Everyone knew her as queen, but none, except maybe Nessa, knew her as a person. He suddenly found himself very nervous at the prospect of meeting her in private.

The eager new member of the carrier crew left Xanfolo in a hurry to get his kit and return to the Nara. The escort duty was taken over at the door of a narrow and dimly lit

corridor by a lady-in-waiting. She was clad in a green cloak not unlike his own. He could see the tip of a scabbard hidden under the cloak.

He was shown through a door and into a small room with no windows. Torches provided ample light for him to see that the room was surprisingly untidy. There was a narrow cot in a corner, and a long table occupying the center of the room. There were two chairs, but they were straight-backed and without cushions. These were sparse furnishings for a royal person. The table was littered with scrolls, and more scrolls were piled high on shelves along one wall.

Xanfolo noticed another door covered with drapes, which reminded him of Talisa's quarters. The drapes parted, and Queen Nara entered the room. Her hair was without clasps, and she continued to brush her hair as Xanfolo bowed.

"Have you eaten?" she asked as she placed the brush on the table.

"Yes, your Highness."

She glanced about the room. "Were you surprised by my little workroom? The few others who have seen it have been surprised. They expected a grand hall instead of a room with a low ceiling. The disorder is obvious, but this is where I come when there is important work to be done. Here, sit by me on the cot. It is softer than the chairs, and I understand that you have had a busy day."

"True, your Highness," he answered as he quickly moved to the cot.

"You are very formal with me, yet you call the crown princess by her name. I understand that you even call her Nessa."

"You are the queen," he mumbled. "It wouldn't be proper to call you by name."

"Nessa will be queen in the future. How will you address her then?"

"I have not thought about that, your Highness," he answered truthfully while wondering what point the queen was going to make of this seemingly idle chatter.

She smiled as she said, "There is so much we don't consider before the moment. I understand you are leaving for Montia II by the rise of the first sun and that the princess is going with you."

"Yes, but only with your permission, your Highness."

"Granted." She hesitated and then said, "Now, let me see the sword that Nessa gave you. I would also like to know how an old man dressed in gray could have gotten into the palace and then escaped."

Xanfolo silently drew the sword from its new scabbard and handed it to Queen Nara.

"This is the second time I have seen this sword," she said as she examined it and traced the etched word in the blade with her finger. "What does it mean to you?"

"I don't know exactly," he replied. "The Secret Society somehow believes that I am someone who fits into their myths. It is obvious that they seek to use me to further their own ends but thus far I have used them more than they have used me. In point of fact, I really do not know how they plan to use me."

Queen Nara nodded as she said, "I remember you telling us how they rescued you and sent you to Zorn, and now they want you to go to Montia II. Why? What is happening at Montia II that so concerns them? Their network of spies must be greater than even the priests or the League."

"They are a hard people to understand. How do they recruit their spies? What drives men into such a hopeless cause?" Xanfolo asked as he remembered the man who rode the disk into oblivion.

“Men have that in them, I think,” replied Queen Nara, “And many are destroyed. Now tell me, how did the intruder enter our palace?”

Xanfolo stood and began pacing back and forth in the cramped space between the cot and the table. “I don’t know. I checked the shadows myself and that in the wink of an eye after his disappearance. There are no doors or windows on that side of Nessa’s quarters. My men searched the palace and the grounds, but there was no trace of him. We checked the walls for hidden passages, but there were none. It was impossible, but he did it.”

“There are tales of secret passages built generations ago,” Queen Nara mused, “And this Secret Society goes far back into our past.”

“I have increased the guards,” Xanfolo said as he returned to his seat on the cot by the queen.

“That is a wise precaution,” she agreed, “Although I don’t think the secret ones mean us harm. If they did, they would not be cultivating your favor. These are uncertain times regarding the League, the priests, and Ponta. Prince Tagge will have his revenge for your actions.”

“I didn’t mean to jeopardize you or Montia,” Xanfolo replied quickly.

“Of course not. What you did was correct, but,” she sighed, “Sometimes even correct actions can cause problems. You were caught between serving the interests of Montia and the League. You gained time for us to consider how we are going to protect Montia. If possible, I want to remain outside the intrigues and alliances.”

“Why not withdraw from the League?” he offered.

“We can’t because that action would bring all five cities against us. When the league was started, each ambassador represented the interests of his own city, but as the seasons passed, the League became much more than anyone intended. The League’s staff became more powerful than any of the individual ambassadors. You were part of that apparatus, and so was the Kinsan priest, Hona. Your mission was to restore Talisa to Clang, but you made her a queen. Missions are altered, usually for the best of reasons, but then the ambassadors have lost control. The League acts beyond the intent of the ambassadors.”

“Then was my action wrong?” a puzzled Xanfolo asked.

“Yes and no. From Montia’s point of view you blocked a marriage that would have united Ponta and Clang, and that alliance would greatly threaten us. We must find ways to keep such an alliance from coming into power.”

Xanfolo felt his spirit sag as she talked. “Then you have decided that I should become Talisa’s consort? That would block a Pontan alliance with Clang.”

“No,” she replied with a smile. Nara reached out and stroked his cheek. “I could not bring myself to send you away to Clang even though there might be advantages in doing so. The Secret Society believes you are the most important man in the six realms. The League uses you as a force to work its will. Why should I give up such a valuable person to Talisa?”

Xanfolo instantly knelt before her, holding her slender hand to his forehead. “I will never betray your trust in me.”

As he knelt, his hair brushed her gown. His face touched her bare leg, and she stiffened. He attempted to jump back, but her hand held his head. He looked up into her eyes. She stared back at him, her eyes wide, and then a sad smile crossed her face. She stood and gently pulled him up, their eyes locked in an embrace. She put her arms around him, and he pulled her tight against his chest. He kissed her hair and felt her shudder.

She gently pushed him back, and the same sad smile reappeared.

“Go now,” she whispered. “Go to Montia II, my champion.”
“Until my death,” he vowed as she touched his cheek in parting.

Chapter 18

Xanfolo watched as the first sun’s light brought the men to the top deck for drills. The bulky diskerpults were loaded and pushed about the deck. When in position to launch, they were then manhandled with much heaving and grunting across the deck to yet another position. Multipults, smaller and easier to handle, were set up ready to launch, and then rushed to another point along the rim rail to set be up again. Makin was a hard man when it came to drill and training. Xanfolo knew that his sub-captain’s training had as much to do with their success against the Pontans as his own sense of battle leadership. It was Makin who had forged the instrument of war, the Nara’s crew, that he knew so well how to use, a knowledge that was partly due to his own training and an instinct for battle that is a matter of birth and not training.

Xanfolo thought of the new sword at his side. That, too, was a powerful weapon. Queen Nara said she had seen it before, and now he regretted that he hadn’t pressed her to say when and where. The sight of it seemed to disturb her. He glanced in the direction of his sword arm and gratefully concentrated his attention on the lashings that held a bag of head-sized rocks suspended below the airship. He closed the door in his mind that led to the queen’s chamber, choosing instead to focus on the rocks. One of the ropes was flagged with a red strip of cloth. When cut, this would cause the bottom to drop out of the bag and allow all the rocks to fall at the same time.

Makin, followed three respectful steps behind Danomo, sauntered out from the bridge. Saluting, he asked, “Does the Nara meet your approval?”

“Well done, Makin. The new men seem to be active enough, but will they make good fighters in the sky?”

“If we meet the Pontans again, we will be ready. I’m going to assign the artist to a disker team. He can make drawings after he learns what it is he’s supposed to do on a battle carrier.”

Xanfolo smiled. While he wanted the young soldier to begin work on making maps, he understood Makin’s situation as well. Everyone serving on the Nara had to be prepared to perform a wide range of tasks. A wrong move could mean the death of others.

“If he is to become a real crewman, he should know how a man’s back feels after a drill with the diskers,” Xanfolo agreed.

“When do you want to drop the rocks and stones?” asked Makin. “The men are very curious about this latest addition.”

“Soon,” Xanfolo answered. “And I’m just as curious as the men.”

All activity on the deck ceased as Nessa stepped out of the bridge and marched confidently across the deck. Xanfolo wondered if she really felt at ease up in the sky, or if

she was just putting on a brave show. She wore the same soft hide boots as the rest of the crew. She was dressed in a crewman's simple outfit, green short pants and a white shirt that hung down almost to her thighs. Like the rest of the crew, she also wore a belt and sword.

Unlike most beginners, she walked easily, her hand resting lightly on the hilt of her sword. From a distance, she might have been mistaken for a crew member, though none of the Nara's crew was likely to make that mistake. They had been carefully briefed by Makin regarding the royal passenger. No one wanted to risk angering the sub-captain.

Nessa smiled as she approached the men at the rail, waved a hand in salute, walked to the very edge of the deck, and with both hands on the rail she leaned forward. Both Xanfolo and Makin started to restrain her, but stopped when she remarked, "The view is beautiful. It is a wonder that you ever come back down to the ground."

Makin quickly saluted and started back to the bridge when he noticed that his aide was standing perfectly still and staring at the princess. Makin grabbed the young man by the arm and quickly escorted him toward the nearest diskerpult.

"Did you sleep well? Have you eaten?" Xanfolo asked.

"Enough of both to get by," she answered. "You were right. The quarters are not what a princess expects, but the experience of flying in the airship makes up for it. When I am queen, I will rule from the sky and not from hidden rooms like my mother."

"I saw one of those rooms before we began our present journey," he said carefully.

Nessa nodded. "I know. She told me before I left the palace to join you. Mother would never admit it, but she is fond of you. I don't think she could ever send you away to Clang. We both need you, though I need you for both myself and Montia."

Their talk was drifting into an area that Xanfolo did not want to discuss. He pointed at the sword she wore. "Can you use that weapon?" As he said the words, he remembered how quickly she had found a dagger and stepped by his side when the old man appeared out of the shadows in her quarters.

"Come, I'll show you." She backed away and drew the sword. "Well, come on. Test me. Come on!"

"A mock duel?"

"Yes, I need the practice," she laughed.

He drew the sword of Loran. As before, the red hilt seemed to meld with his hand. He playfully jabbed at the sky and then faced Nessa. She advanced cautiously, circling toward his empty hand. He was about to compliment her for her opening moves when she rushed at him with blurring speed, her point constructing deadly combinations. He quickly found himself backed against the rim rail, his point barely able to fend off her repeated combinations.

"A mock duel, remember?" he cautioned.

"With no better sword work than I've seen here, how did you ever stand off so many assassins in Harg? Or were they old men, or maybe it was just a story told by old men. Defend yourself!"

Nessa's strength and swiftness came as no surprise to Xanfolo, and her skills were honed to the same level of sharpness as her sword. Who had taught her these skills? Then he smiled. Her teacher, at least when she was small, was the same man who had taught him: the Consort, her father, and once his mentor.

"Your smile will soon change to tears," Nessa taunted. Her sword flashed in the light as she began a classic sequence: feint, thrust, cut, and feigned cut followed by a lethal thrust

when the opponent raised his blade to ward off the feigned attack. He knew the sequence as well as she did, but her swiftness and execution robbed him of a defense. He dodged the last thrust, but just barely. He felt a sting at his chest as he drew back.

Nessa's point dropped. Her face showed fearful dismay. "Xan!" she cried.

Several of the crew started forward to assist their captain, but Makin waved them back.

Xanfolo stood looking down at the small but slowly growing red splotch on his shirt. "It appears that I have been stung by a queen-to-be."

Her eyes widened and then she laughed. The wound was only a nick that would heal quickly. "For your play on words, I should skewer you."

He bowed elaborately. "The duel is over. Blood has been shed and honor is satisfied."

Nessa hurried to his side. "Let me help you."

It was his turn to laugh now. "No kissing in front of the crew," he whispered. "It would set a bad example, and the crew doesn't need more bad examples. However, maybe we will have less nonsense about my walking in the dark sky after your victory here."

A doctor hurried out from the bridge with a bag in his hand. He was a volunteer on his first journey in the sky. His eyes showed clearly that he desperately wished he was back on the ground. The crew watched as the doctor cut away Xanfolo's shirt. The wound was indeed just a nick.

"A sword point made this," the doctor muttered as he opened his bag and pulled out a small pot. He gently rubbed a paste-like substance on and around the wound.

Xanfolo could feel a stinging sensation. "The cure is a worse bite than the cause."

The doctor ignored his captain's comment. He unfolded a long, narrow strip of white cloth and wrapped it around Xanfolo's chest and over an arm like a harness. "This cloth is as much to prevent the salve from rubbing off on your shirt as it is to protect the wound. I will look at it again after the next darkness ends."

The doctor hurried to the illusory safety of his compartment. Xanfolo, now bare to the waist and decorated with the white cloth, took Nessa's hand and stepped toward the watching crew.

"Behold!" Xanfolo shouted so all could hear. "The new champion of the Nara!" Then in a lower tone, "Sub-captain Makin, have the men give our champion a cheer."

Makin, who was not fond of unplanned displays, turned to the crew and tersely ordered, "Cheer."

The command was brief, but it was enough. The pent-up excitement caused by the strange duel produced a bellowing cheer that sounded spontaneous even though ordered by command.

"Enough," Makin ordered bluntly. "We have lost much time in training, and now we will have to work at least twice as hard to catch up."

The crew responded quickly with good will. Even though they new their sub-captain meant his words about twice as much work, the excitement of the mock duel that produced blood was worth the cost to be paid.

Danomo hurried across the deck from the bridge with a fresh shirt in his hands. As he helped Xanfolo put on the clean shirt, Nessa noted, "Your sub-captain is a serious man. I don't think he approved of our exhibition."

"True enough, but he is a good man and well worthy of commanding his own battle carrier. Even now, he commands the Nara in most situations."

"Then what is your function?" Nessa asked.

"I bleed for the crew," he said with a wink.

"Well, let us hope you aren't supposed to be the best swordsman in all of Montia. If so, we are in grave danger. How long do you think it will take us to reach the colony?"

Xanfolo squinted up at the kites far off in the sky and then looked down at the passing ground below. "Maybe four sun-times. Maybe five if the winds are favorable. We are on a circle that will take us over the jungle most of the way."

"And if we have to land in the jungle? What about the barbarians?"

He shrugged. "That is not worth thinking about. What happens, happens. We would try to escape, but if that was not possible, then we form a Death Circle."

"I understand," Nessa replied softly. "If it must die, better that it comes in a Death Circle than by an assassin's dagger, or in bed of some disease the doctors cannot cure."

"You will make a good queen of Montia," said Xanfolo. "You have a soldier's instincts."

"You should never doubt that," she replied. "I will not be my mother's image. My ways are different, but no less effective."

"Sharp swords are useful," Xanfolo said with a smile, "But you need to remember that shrewdness is helpful, too."

"My mother is shrewd," admitted Nessa. "Sometimes I think she foresees much before it happens. Even the priests dread a conference with her."

"And she has a gentle quality," Xanfolo said. He started to say more and then kept his silence. Nessa was staring at his face, trying, he believed, to gauge his words.

"Do you think she is a soft woman?" Nessa asked. "Gentle? Incapable of hurting someone? If so, you are wrong. She has a will of the hardest metal."

Xanfolo sensed the bitterness in her words and wondered what the words masked.

"She could order your execution," Nessa continued, "Or condemn you to exile forever. She would cry in her sleep and remain in seclusion for a long period to hide her sadness, but you would die or go into exile. Her sadness should not be taken as softness. She has much of the first and none of the last."

Nessa gripped the rail with both hands and stared off across the sky. Xanfolo thought he saw tears in her eyes, but guessed that it was probably the wind. He kept silent watch with her while his mind grappled with images of Nessa and Nara that were entirely counter to what he thought he knew to be the truth. Finally he broke the silence.

"Are you all right?"

She turned to him, smiled, and touched his cheek. "Yes, but I do have a question."

"Ask, and I'll answer as best I can."

"Why do we carry loads of rocks and stones? Are you going to make the Nara into a great freighter?"

"That time might come," laughed Xanfolo, "But for now, we are going to test an idea I have been studying. Our diskers have little impact on the barbarians, though they can skim across a Pontan deck and leave little standing."

"But rocks?"

"If we could fly over the heads of barbarians out in the open and drop these rocks on them," Xanfolo said, "I think they might find good reason to return to their hills or the jungle."

“You are getting into the priest business? You are devising new ways to create change?” she asked.

“No, but sometimes I wish I knew what the priests have learned. Come over here. See this tube? Look through it.”

Nessa cautiously approached the tube. “Where do I look?”

“In the end.”

She fitted her eye to the end and peered into the tube. She leaped back exclaiming, “It is magic!”

“Not exactly,” Xanfolo replied, “but it was made by the priests.”

“How does it work?” Nessa asked as she edged back to the tube and peered in the end once more.

“I don’t know,” Xanfolo admitted, “but the priests do. They have another tube that can launch a ball of fire. It is swifter than an arrow. I want those tubes on the Nara. What a surprise the Pontans will get if we had the fire tubes! We could battle all six of their carriers at the same time and maybe even win!”

“With all their knowledge and strange devices, it is only a matter of time before the priests bid for power,” Nessa commented.

The looking-tube was manned constantly from that point on, and Danomo was able to get Makin’s permission for the occasional work on maps. The young maker of pictures sketched quick impressions of what he saw below. The scrolls were noted with information regarding the location of the two suns and the feature on the ground being depicted. This could all be put together later as the basis of a map. Xanfolo was pleased with the young man’s work, and quite impressed by Danomo’s idea of using the positions of the two suns to pinpoint the various location. He made room in his mind for a new idea that would require much thought. The royal houses would have to find young men such as Danomo and make them into priests who were not priests.

Xanfolo explained the map project to Nessa who was much amazed at this idea.

“Do you mean that I can look at a picture on a wall and see all the realm of Montia at one time? What a wonderful idea! You are truly becoming more priest than captain.”

He made a spitting motion at the thought of being like a priest. He also carefully refrained from mentioning that he had seen such a map in Talisa’s private quarters.

Then a jarring thought whipped through his mind. How did the Clangians get such a map as the one he saw? They had no battle carriers, and therefore, no way to look down on the ground and all six realms as depicted on Talisa’s map. Perhaps the map was a gift? A Pontan gift? Had the Pontans flown over Montia?

“You are staring ahead, but seeing nothing. What are you thinking about?” inquired Nessa.

“Maps,” he replied, “and how useful they could be.”

“Oh, they are pretty, but it’s hard to see how they can have any other value.”

“If I have a map and Makin has a copy of that map, we could meet ten light-times’ march away at the same point even if we came from opposite directions.”

“It seems a large amount of effort just so two men can meet in the middle of nowhere.”

“Then think of two regiments of Clangian cavalry coming from different directions in order to meet at a point on our trail to Montia II.”

“Oh, now I begin to see. When I am queen, I shall rule over a different realm than my mother or grandmother. Distance was once a friend, but now it has become a trail for my enemies.”

Chapter 19

Xanfolo had ordered a course that would bring the Nara in a circle over the jungle and then south of Montia II. This meant a passage parallel to the mountains, but since the colony was not as close to the mountains as Zorn, there was a much lower level of danger. There was space for maneuver and course corrections to avoid being cast up against the craggy mountains.

The purpose of this course was to allow Xanfolo to study the vast plain on the east side of the colony. He suspected that the jungle barbarians might be hiding on the plain. The small Montian force defending the colony might be too committed to an attack from the jungle and not pay close enough attention to an attack from the plain. After all, it was the way he would attack the colony.

There was no sign of the barbarians in their own jungle lair, but he knew that even though the Nara flew low over the green jungle, the barbarians had only to duck beneath bushes to avoid being seen. He considered the effort worth attempting because there was the possibility of a lucky surprise that could not be foreseen even by the most astute leader.

Xanfolo had two more reasons for the course he had ordered. He knew the general outline of the colony's location, but he had never really surveyed the land around it. This course would give Danomo a chance to accurately depict the land on a map.

The second reason was based on his wish to test what he hoped would be a major new weapon for the Nara. He wanted a place to drop the rocks. It would have to be a place where he could study their fall and impact. As the Nara finally worked its way around to the east, the distance back to Montia II closed. This was the moment he had been waiting for since the journey began.

The Nara was forced downward as low as Makin dared to go. The ground seemed to move swiftly below them, and they could see gullies and clumps of brush. Xanfolo spied three clumps ahead that formed an easily recognizable triangle which was at least as large as the top deck. Their course would take the battle carrier directly over the triangle.

Crewmen with drawn swords stood by each of the release ropes. When Xanfolo judged that he was over the target, he waved his arm and the ropes were cut. He and Makin raced across the deck to the rear rim rail in an effort to watch the rocks hit. They saw shadows of dust where the larger rocks landed. Xanfolo was disappointed because the rocks hit well outside the triangle.

“Why didn't they hit the target?” he wondered aloud.

“Maybe it's like shooting an arrow a long distance,” Makin suggested. “Maybe the wind carried the rocks.”

Xanfolo shook his head. “Rocks are not feathers.” This was a problem that had not been covered in the cadet academy. The experiment had failed, but only he and Makin actually realized that an experiment had been conducted. The crew simply accepted the effort as an example of the difference between themselves and Xanfolo, the man who walked through the dark sky.

The rock incident quickly passed out of the crew’s mind. Montia II was ahead, and there was much to be done in preparation for a landing there. The colony was the smallest of all the colonies possessed by the six cities. There were seldom more than twelve hundred men plus approximately two hundred women stationed at the colony. The walled part was barely two thousand paces square, and there were only eight small towers with the main gate being a connecting device between two of the towers. The towers were not more than the height of three men and the walls only shoulder high.

Most of the living quarters for the workers, public houses, and corrals for the gunas and freighters were all outside the walls. In case of a barbarian attack, the defenders could receive volleys of sling-launched stones coming from the enemy sheltered behind the outbuildings.

There was no room for the Nara inside the walls. That meant the battle carrier would have to be tied down in an exposed position. The crew would have to establish defensive positions around the giant carrier. Xanfolo, like his counterparts in Ponta, Kinsa, and Harg was not happy about risking the battle carrier in long stays at their respective colonies.

The landing was difficult. The soldiers and workers making up the ground crew had little experience at aiding in the landing of a carrier. Once finally secured to the ground, Xanfolo and Nessa immediately disembarked. They were met by an honor guard of pike men and Consana, Consort of the Montian realm and titular captain of the Montian armies.

He was tall for a Montian, but the long period of enduring the heat and no small amount of boredom at Montia II had taken their toll. His face was heavily creased, and his long hair was gray. His eyes reflected a great weariness.

This was not the man Xanfolo remembered. The Consort had been a vigorous leader. What Xanfolo saw before him was a gentle shell of that man. For Nessa, the shock was obviously much greater. After Consana left Montia for his long tour of duty as commander of the colony, all likenesses of him must have disappeared from the palace. At least, Xanfolo could not remember ever seeing a likeness.

He noted the look of anguish on Nessa’s face. He wondered at how much he didn’t know about the royal family. Obviously the Consort had not stayed away from Montia because he was obsessed with the colony’s future. Now Xanfolo found it odd that he had never asked himself why Nessa never visited the colony. Why had father and daughter been separated for so long, and why was there a reunion now?

He barely had time to consider the questions when Nessa tearfully flung herself into her father’s arms. Consana eased Nessa back to an arm’s length and gently wiped the tears from her eyes. The woman who could wield a sword with the best suddenly became a little girl again.

“Come now, daughter. We must not upset protocol, even here in Montia II.”

With his arm around her shoulder, Consana faced Xanfolo and saluted. Xanfolo hastily responded.

“I salute the brave captain from Montia,” Consana said. “The dispatches frequently mention your exploits.” To Nessa he said, “See, I did make a good soldier of Xanfolo just as I promised. Now let us get out of this heat. Come.”

“With your permission,” Xanfolo said quickly, “I will come along later. There are some details I must take care of in regard to the Nara.”

Nessa smiled gratefully at him, and her eyes claimed that she knew better. She knew that Makin could handle any problems, and that Xanfolo was being gracious about allowing her to have some time in private with her father.

“Yes, of course, Captain,” replied Consana, “but hurry along. I have looked forward to a long talk with you. I noticed your sword. You must tell me about it.”

“Gladly,” Xanfolo replied as he saluted. “Princess Nessa knows quite a lot about it. She gave it to me as a gift.”

“Oh, I see.” There was a hint of a frown on his face. “Well, come along, daughter, and hurry with your duties, young man.”

As they walked away, Xanfolo grimaced at the performance of the honor guard. The situation at the Montian colony was dismally like that at the Soren outpost. He remembered being angry because the leaders in Kinsa neglected their colony. How long had it been since he last visited Montia II?

It also occurred to him that the Nara was as vulnerable here as it had been at Zorn. He quickly retraced his path back to where the battle carrier lay tied to the ground. His intention had been to don a disguise before scouting the colony, but what he had seen made him uneasy. He had no wish to lose the battle carrier to a surprise raid.

When he returned to the carrier, however, he saw that his fears were baseless. Makin was already busy establishing security. Four multipults had been dismounted from the airship and placed on the ground at the four corners of the Nara. Around each weapon were several bowmen. Their shields and the multipults’ shields would give some protection from the arrows and stones that might be hurled by the barbarians.

His brief survey of the defensive positions completed, he hurried to the carrier’s entry port. When he emerged, he was disguised as a worker. It had been a long time since he had visited the colony, and as he walked through the corrals and public houses, he was greatly troubled about the future of Montia II. He looked in a public house and saw several soldiers who were in no condition to fight. Their weapons were thrown about on the floor under their table. He knew without looking that the sword blades were dull and maybe even rusty.

He walked to the river which formed the southern edge of the colony and a doubtful defensive line between the jungle and the colony. There was a bridge over the river and a trail that led from the bridge to the jungle. Four pike men were on duty at the bridge. Three were asleep on the ground, and the fourth stood leaning drowsily on his pike.

Xanfolo smothered his anger and resisted the urge to return them quickly to soldierly ways. As he retraced his steps and headed for the gate leading into the walled part of the colony, he came to a conclusion. Whatever problems the royal family had, the Consort must be returned to Montia for a rest. No leader could maintain his edge under these circumstances. The colony must have a new commander, and his service must not be too long. There also had to be a rotation of commanders and men. He thought of the sub-captain of the royal guards as a possible replacement for the weary Consort.

Just outside the main gate was another small public house. On impulse Xanfolo decided to see how many soldiers were in the place and whether or not any of them were

supposed to be on guard. Upon entering he saw two soldiers slumped under the tables, and a worker huddled in the corner. He appeared to be asleep although Xanfolo noticed a stiffness in the sleeper's body. Was the worker dead, or was he feigning sleep? There was something else about the figure that puzzled him. He had a feeling that the workman, whose face was buried in his arms, was somehow familiar.

He started toward the main gate and then suddenly stopped. He knew who the work man was, and as swiftly as the thought crossed his mind, he wheeled about and re-entered the house. The figure sleeping in the corner was gone.

"Where did he go?" Xanfolo barked.

"Who?" asked the woman behind the bar, her hopes of an officer's purse raised by his reappearance.

"The man in the corner. The worker. Where did he go? Is there a back way out of here?"

She leaned over the half-partition. "Why, he is gone! I thought he was asleep."

"Is there another way out?" Xanfolo repeated.

"No, there's a window back here, but he didn't come past me. He had some food and drink, but that's all he would buy."

"Then how did he get out?"

"He must have walked out with you."

Xanfolo stared at the woman and then shook his head. He realized that he was not going to get any more out of her. He turned and hurried outside and circled the building. There were small windows, but no other doors. He found an empty barrel at one corner of the building and climbed up on it. There was nothing on the flat roof, not even a trap door.

People don't just disappear, not even priests, Xanfolo thought, and then recalled that he had thought the same thing about the old man in Nessa's quarters. He did not have either the time or inclination to search through the colony to find a man who could seemingly disappear at will.

There was another way. If the workman was Hona the priest in disguise, then Xanfolo must make Hona come to him. He smiled as he headed for the gate, but the smile faded as he considered that if Hona was in Montia, then the secret ones had found out about it. That was why Xanfolo had been told to come here, but why was Hona in Montia II? Was this a secret League matter or a priestly conspiracy? Indeed, was there a difference between the two?

He passed through the gate and was so wrapped up in his thoughts that he ignored the sleepy guards and did not rebuke them for so easily passing a stranger. He started to go back and discuss the matter with the guards, but stopped. After all, for his newly considered plan, lax security might be helpful.

Royal Consort Consana was waiting for him inside the small quarters set aside for the colony's commander. He greeted the younger Montian with affection, but took obvious notice of the disguise.

"I must change into a more likely uniform," Xanfolo said with a brief smile. "Where is Nessa?"

"She is enjoying what little luxury we have, a tub of water and a large bed. I think she found her quarters on the Nara a bit confining and somewhat lacking in royal touches. Now, come. Sit and tell me what you found on your unannounced inspection trip of my post. Was your disguise useful?"

Xanfolo hesitated and then took a seat. "There are problems," he began tactfully. "The garrison seems undisciplined, and defenses are far from adequate. You have a spy here, from the League I suspect."

"Yes, that is about what I thought you would say. Except for the spy, of course. That is news. Are you certain?"

"There is no doubt. He is a Kinsan priest named Hona. I worked with him on the League's rescue of Princess Talisa. He is a very dangerous priest."

"He got away from you?"

"Yes, he disappeared, but I don't know how."

"The priests have magical means."

"I don't believe that," Xanfolo replied quickly. "They use a display of magic to cloak their other activities. They are making strange instruments for uses that only they seem to understand."

Consana stared down at the floor. "You might be right. Magic may be nothing more than a mist through which we see what we want to see." He raised his head and smiled.

"Nessa told me the story of the sword."

"It is a beautiful weapon," Xanfolo said as his fingers caressed the red hilt.

"Some believe it is a magical sword."

Xanfolo laughed softly. "Well-balanced, sharp-bladed, yes. But magical? No. Nessa nicked me in a mock duel. That's how much magic it possesses."

"Nessa is a fine sword-wielder. The magic of your sword is supposed to lie in the power it gives its owner." The Consort paused. "I owned it once."

"You?"

"Yes, and as you can see, I did not gain much power from it. It brought me to disaster."

"You once possessed this sword?"

"That is true, my young friend. And what I tell you now you must take as a warning, for by possessing the sword you are in grave danger."

"How so?"

"Patience. You will understand when I have finished. Nine rainy seasons ago, Nara's mother died of the jungle fever and Nara became queen, and I, the Consort. Nessa was just a child at the time."

"I remember that time quite well," Xanfolo said as he made himself comfortable in the chair, "although I never knew her royal highness, Nessa's grandmother."

"All went well in Montia," Consana continued, "until I was visited by a man who said he was a member of the Secret Society of the Seventh City. He claimed that there was a lost seventh city, the old myth everyone has heard, and that I held the key to its discovery. He also claimed that while I would never rule, I was to raise up those who would rule all the realms. He also said that I was a man marked for destiny, and that I should have that antique sword now buckled around your waist, the sword of Loran."

"What happened?" Xanfolo asked as he sat up, his mind suddenly alert to obvious comparisons.

"There is the old Montian myth about the city and the river. According to the myth, many generations ago the river ran far to the south of where it does now. A great storm came. The land shook, and the wild seas poured in and destroyed most of what was then Montia. The river changed its course, and the present Montia was built. Somehow I got the idea that

maybe at the time of the great storm there were actually two cities, one on either side of the river just as is the case now with Kinsa and Harg. I became obsessed with this idea and collected all the information I could which included notes on my talks with the Secret Ones.”

“You met them more than once?”

“Oh yes, as often as I could, but always in secret. They insisted on secrecy. It was amazing how much they knew about the secrets of the other cities, about the priests, and of course, the League.”

Xanfolo nodded. “I, too, have found them useful.”

“That usefulness could cost you your life. What I didn’t understand was that the Secret Ones were growing in strength in Montia, but for what purpose I don’t know. I found it hard to believe they really posed a threat to the royal house of Montia, but unknown to me, the Montian priests were closely watching them. When the time was right, the priests sprung their trap and those of the Secret Society who survived were killed. A few escaped into the jungle and were never seen again.”

“And you?”

“The priests made sure the League was given ample evidence that I was deeply involved, probably the leader of a revolution.”

“High treason! How is it you are alive now?”

“Am I truly alive? My word that I was innocent, a dupe at the most, was valueless. I’m still not certain whether or not Nara believed me, but I think she loved me. It is the only act of weakness she ever permitted herself. She refused to turn me over to the League for execution, choosing instead to offer me a choice: either I must kill myself or accept a lifetime of service as commander of Montia II, a life of exile here. Like a fool, I chose what I thought would be life.”

“But what about the League? How did the queen convince the League to accept her verdict?” Xanfolo asked.

“Nara understood the Kinsans well,” Consana replied. “Why waste a valuable asset for the sake of a mere execution? The Soren understood the subtle way in which she could remedy the situation without unduly disturbing the Montian army or the people.”

“That’s right. I remember now. We thought that you had requested the post. There was some gossip that you and the queen had some personal problems, and there were rumors of other women being involved. So no one got excited about your leaving on an extended tour of duty.”

“The priests did their part very well,” Consana said. Xanfolo was surprised by the Consort’s lack of bitterness. He seemed to bear the priests no grudge.

“How much of this does Nessa know?” he asked while wondering if this was the cause of the occasional flashes of anger he had witnessed between the queen and the crown princess.

“I’m not sure. It is my impression that she believes the stories told by the priests. Even so, I suspect that she has never really forgiven her mother for sending me here.”

Xanfolo shook his head slowly. “It is hard to believe that so many lives could be changed by some old men speaking of myths and prophecies out of the past.”

Consana smiled as he gently reminded, “According to Nessa, your inspection trip here was suggested by the Secret Ones. Is that true? Be careful about dismissing prophecies and myths. Remember, the secret ones told me that I would raise up the person who would find Loran, the seventh city, and crown great kings and queens.”

“If that is true, you will have a hard time finding any one here in Montia II to raise a guna off the ground,” Xanfolo replied. “Most are asleep from drink and heat.”

“Remember when Nessa was a small child before the Secret Society matter, and she picked you out as her future consort?” Consana asked.

“Nessa isn’t bashful about going after what she wants,” Xanfolo said.

“And I raised you up from the ranks, did I not? There are those who believe you are a great leader.”

“The Secret Ones prophesied that I would crown great kings and queens. It’s hard to see how that could come true.”

“What about Queen Talisa?” Consana asked.

“Well, that’s different,” hedged Xanfolo. “There is no proof yet that she will even be able to keep her throne, let alone become a great queen.”

“Beware, my young friend. I fear you are about to be bound up in a spider’s web.”

“Bah, I and my sword still control my destiny. No silly mumbo-jumbo or myths or prophecies can change that.”

“Your sword?”

“Mine now. The sword serves me, not I the sword. That is the difference,” boasted Xanfolo.

“Perhaps so, but you would do well to cast it away. That might break the chains of this terrible web that is enclosing you.”

Chapter 20

When Xanfolo told the consort that he wanted a secret meeting of all the officers and the leaders of the workers, Consana’s spirits raised like a battle carrier cut free of its bonds. He wanted to know the purpose of the meeting. Did the young captain bring news from Montia that might add excitement to the dull life at the colony?

Xanfolo smiled and said only that he had information about a secret weapon that would make the colony invulnerable to barbarian attacks.

Orders were delivered to the officers of the Montia II garrison and the leaders of the workmen. They were to be present for a secret conference in the main hall at the setting of the second sun. The orders were delivered by couriers sworn to secrecy upon the pain of death. Consana was greatly surprised when Xanfolo insisted that refreshments be served at the meeting.

“You might as well post notices in public houses,” he grumbled. “This news will be known by everyone well before the meeting convenes.”

Xanfolo frowned. “Too obvious? Maybe I have constructed a trap that’s too easily seen by the prey?”

“A trap? If you mean this conference to be a trap, then we surely hunt a blind man.”

“Perhaps, but the obviousness will add bait,” mused Xanfolo. “Our spy has a brilliant mind, but he is the kind of man who greets each rise of the suns by measuring his own brilliance against their light. He will easily see my clumsy trap. Then he will be as eager to play at snatching the bait as to learn what my secret weapon might be. No, I am certain the trap will draw the prey, but catching and holding him are a different matter.”

“What are you going to do with him if you are successful?”

“My first thought was to kill him,” Xanfolo responded. “But that might be a luxury we can’t afford.”

“What about the secret weapon?” Consana asked warily. “Is there such a weapon, or is it a lie made to serve as bait? My officers already have a morale problem. What will happen when they learn that they too are only part of the bait?”

This was a problem that Xanfolo had not foreseen. His first thought was to say that the officers needed harshness, but he did not want to inflict such a wound on the consort. Claiming that his officers needed a sharp bracing reprimand would cast doubt on the value of the consort’s leadership. Xanfolo could not bring himself to do that.

“Perhaps our spy will give us a secret weapon. He has at least two that I know of.” Xanfolo explained to Consana how the priests had developed a looking tube as well as a tube that launched fire balls.

“With such fire tubes,” he said, “you could easily hold this post against all the barbarians in the jungle or all the priests in Montia...”

As he spoke, Xanfolo slapped a hand to his head.

“What’s wrong?” asked Consana. “You look like you just took an arrow.”

“I overlooked the Montian priests. You have priests here, of course?”

“Yes, but no temple. The priests live with the workers, and in some cases, they are the workers. Most of the workers who actually go into the jungle are also priests. It’s not easy to find people willing to come out here. If it weren’t for the priests, I’m afraid our colony would collapse.”

“That explains why Hona was disguised as a worker,” Xanfolo said. “How could anyone find one particular ant in an ant hill? We need to know how many priests are here. Are they armed?”

“All the workers have access to swords and pikes. When they go into the jungle, they carry weapons.” Consana was puzzled by Xanfolo’s interest. “You seem to suspect that our Montian priesthood is subject to the orders of this Kinsan priest. Do you really believe that is true?”

“It is true enough, and make no mistake about it,” Xanfolo said tersely. “They are combining into one priesthood with one great leader. It never occurred to me that they would work inward from the colonies.”

“There is always the sword,” reminded Consana. “No, I don’t mean the cursed sword of Loran,” he hastily added as Xanfolo’s hand drifted to the red hilt. “I mean, put the priests to the sword.”

“That is easier said than done,” muttered Xanfolo. “The priests have strong support in Clang and Kinsa. A strong move against them could bring on a war between the six cities.”

Consana shook his head. “You are making my exile seem better all the time. At least I avoid the frenzy of the intrigues and conspiracies. Speaking of frenzies, I had better go to Nessa’s room. She and I are going to take a tour of our colony. She has changed from the little girl that I remember. She is very much her mother’s daughter.”

“And her father’s sword-wielder,” laughed Xanfolo. “She is nearly my equal with a blade. You taught her well when you were in Montia. She will be a great queen.”

“You will be a great consort if you do not get caught in the web being woven by the Secret Ones.”

“Cold steel will take care of any webs,” Xanfolo replied as he saluted and made ready to return to the Nara.

“You have the faith of the young,” Consana said with a sad smile as he returned the salute.

There was much for Xanfolo to consider as he returned to check on the Nara. As he expected, Makin had the carrier well-defended and ready for instant lift into the sky if necessary.

“I’ll need four good bowmen,” he told Makin, “and have them report at the consort’s headquarters as soon as possible. Put them under the command of Danomo. He can use the leadership experience.”

Makin’s eyes widened slightly when Xanfolo told him that the bowmen would also accompany him on a patrol into the jungle. His eyes widened even more when Xanfolo ordered him to prepare a compartment deep in the Nara. The compartment would be for a prisoner who must be guarded at sword point.

By the last rays of the second sun, Xanfolo felt that his plan was ready. Guards were stationed about the headquarters in considerable number. Other guards were hidden to watch those standing in the open. Men were posted atop the building, and in a side-chamber off the main hall Danomo watched with the four bowmen.

Xanfolo was reasonably certain that Hona would attempt to infiltrate by passing himself off as one of the servers of refreshments. It was the logical opening, the one opening that had been deliberately created for Hona to use. But would not the priest understand that also?

Briefly Xanfolo allowed his mind to consider a worrisome aspect that had never really gone away since he discovered that Hona was at Montia II. How did the Secret Ones know that Hona was here? And did they know why he was here?

There was not enough time for him to really think through the problem because the officers arrived punctually. By now they understood that the actual commander of the Montian army was present for more than a casual visit. They were alert, and Xanfolo hoped that their attitude had impacted their soldiers as well.

The leaders of the workers were the last to arrive. Xanfolo scanned them carefully. The headman was one of the oldest men Xanfolo had ever seen. His face was furrowed and his cheeks were sunken. The top of his head was nearly bald except for a few stray silvery hairs. Xanfolo noted that Consana made a point of greeting the old man personally. It was not lost on Xanfolo that the well-being of the colony probably rested more in the old man’s hands than on the consort’s rank.

The servers brought in platters of food and drink which were placed at the long table where the officers and work leaders sat. Opposite the long table were a short table and three chairs.

Xanfolo paid close attention to the faces of the servers. They were all young, too young to be Hona in disguise. He had been certain that Hona would attempt to pass himself off as a server, but obviously he was wrong. However, if Hona was not present as a server, where was he?

Consana escorted the old man up to Xanfolo, tipped his head slightly as a courtesy, and said, "Captain, I present to you Zhana, leader of the Montian workmen. He has been here longer than any other living person, and knows more about the jungle than any other Montian alive."

Xanfolo bowed and the old man nodded in return. "So this is the young captain who has gained great fame."

The old man's voice was almost a rattle, and it was hard to understand what he was saying.

"We must talk about the jungle," Xanfolo said. Then he asked, "How long have you been here at Montia II?"

Consana answered for the old man. "He was one of the first workmen sent here to build the new colony."

Before Xanfolo could reply, there was the loud thumping of a pike on the floor. Nessa entered the hall escorted by Danomo. The officers instantly came to attention. A guard stationed at the door, announced, "Her Ladyship, the Crown Princess Nessa of Montia."

Nessa swept regally into the room on Danomo's arm. The young soldier was trying his best to look dignified. She kissed her father on the cheek and touched Xanfolo's with a deft hand. Then she moved gracefully and took the chair offered by Danomo. A worker helped the old man to his seat at the long table directly opposite.

After she was seated with her father at the smaller table, Xanfolo leaned over and asked her if she saw anyone who might be wearing a disguise. Nessa scanned the room carefully, and then whispered in his ear.

"The only one in the room who is not who he claims to be is the old man."

Despite himself Xanfolo darted a quick glance at him. "Impossible," he whispered back. "He's been here since the very beginning of Montia II."

"Then he did so wearing a disguise," she hissed back.

"Why do you think he's wearing a disguise? I must know!"

"Look at his toes. He has a young man's toes!"

"I will."

Instead of sitting down for the conference, Xanfolo paced between the two tables.

"My Lady, my Consort, officers, and leaders of the workers at Montia II, this is a very important conference."

He paced silently, giving those in the hall closely watching him the impression that he was gathering his thoughts. Nessa was right! The old man was wearing sandals, and his toes were not those of an old man. The old man was an imposter, but surely not Hona. Yet, it was unlike the priest to send someone in his place. Hona's vanity would never accept a surrogate.

"Gentlemen!" he announced suddenly, speaking directly to the officers. "I have several secret weapons to put before you. The first one is that most of you are returning to Montia as soon as possible. You have been stationed here too long, and that is my fault. We will order out a sufficient number of men and officers to replace at least half of the people assigned here, and with more replacements to come as soon as the necessary reassignments can be completed."

His announcement was greeted with a quiet disbelief at first, and then joy. Nessa quickly glanced at her father, who shook his head gently. It was well within Xanfolo's powers to shift the units of the army as he saw fit, but the consort must remain behind in exile. Only Queen Nara could approve his return.

“I thought that might get a friendly response,” Xanfolo said as he circled behind the officers.

“The next announcement is that we are going to conduct a deep patrol into the jungle. We will need guides, the best the workers can provide, and a few of our best men.”

As he passed behind the old man, Xanfolo held his finger to his nose, a thoughtful pose, and then glanced at Danomo. The young man’s response was a wrinkled look of puzzlement. Then he shrugged and left the hall.

“This patrol is of great importance,” Xanfolo continued. “We need to know what the barbarians are doing. Are they coming together for a war on Montia II? I suspect that might be the case. As you know, the mountain barbarians probed the outpost at Zorn. It was my opinion...”

Danomo strode quickly into the hall with a drawn sword. The four bowmen followed, arrows fitted to the strings of their bows. Xanfolo drew his own sword and put the point at the old man’s throat.

“And in my opinion,” he smiled, a smile that was cold and thin-lipped, “here is our spy!”

Consana’s voice was dominant over the general uproar. “What? You can’t be serious! This old man was building a colony here before you were born.”

“Silence!” commanded Xanfolo. The room became silent as ordered. The gleaming blades and nocked arrows did not encourage noisy rejoinders. Xanfolo stared at the old man. “It is your toes, sir.”

The old man seemed to have trouble hearing Xanfolo. He cupped his ear with a hand and seemed to be wiggling in his chair so as to hear better. However, Danomo, who had changed places with his captain so that he was now behind the old man, saw that the chair was gradually being pushed back. Danomo put the point of his sword almost to the back of the old man’s neck. When the old man felt the point of the blade on his skin, the chair stopped.

Xanfolo leaned on the table and peered into the old man’s face. “Are you Hona, the priest from Kinsa?”

The old man shook his head and muttered, “No, I am Zhana, one of the founders of Montia II, the last one alive.”

Xanfolo stepped back, a perplexed look on his face. “Send men to the workers’ quarters. Search them well. See if this ancient one’s twin can be found. Turn out the entire garrison.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Nessa said as she approached the old man, a cup of drink in her hand. She flung the drink in the old man’s face and picked up a hand towel from the table. She vigorously rubbed his face. As she rubbed, the old man disappeared and the face of a much younger man appeared.

Consana stepped forward and closely examined the priest’s face. “How did you do this? You fooled me completely. I’ve known the old man for years. You were perfect. It is incredible!”

“Perfect, almost,” corrected Xanfolo.

Hona brushed aside Nessa’s towel and began removing the skin-like make-up from his neck. “Your trap worked, Mythmaker. I thought I could indeed steal the bait from the trap. You are a changed man from when we first met. You would be a match for the Soren double-thinkers and their ever-twisting logic. How did you know?”

“As I said, it was your toes. I didn’t catch it,” confessed Xanfolo. “It was the princess. She noticed that while your face was old, your toes were young. You would have fooled me. I don’t spend a lot of time looking at people’s toes.”

Hona nodded his head in a motion of respect toward Nessa. “You, Princess, have a way of cutting through the fog that blinds most men.”

“What are you going to do with him?” asked Consana.

“He is a spy, father,” reminded Nessa. “There is no need for debate here. Kill him!”

“There is a problem with that solution,” Hona said calmly. “I am here as a representative of the League. I have immunity from Montian laws.”

“Then,” Nessa replied with a harsh laugh, “We shall send our profound regrets and apologies to the League for having mistakenly executed their man.”

“I agree with the Princess,” Xanfolo added. “Besides, Priest, I have a feeling that if there was a regrettable end to your life, there might be those in the League who could rejoice. But first, we must have a little talk.”

Xanfolo turned to Consana. “Hona will have anticipated the possibility of his capture and have a plan of escape from here. We can upset his plans by changing location. Take the prisoner to a place I know for questioning. Have your men clear the public house outside the main gate, and set up guards outside. Send men to find the real ancient one. If he is still alive he needs to tell us much.”

“It will be done immediately,” Consana replied.

“Danomo!” called Xanfolo.

“Here sir!” the young man said sharply as he stepped forward.

“Search the prisoner, and be very thorough. When you have finished, have the four bowmen search him again. I will give a three-day leave to the man who finds anything that might be used as a weapon. Send a cavalry patrol of ten men to the Nara. Have the leader of the patrol warn sub-captain Makin to have all his men on alert. The cavalry patrol is to be added to the force guarding the Nara.”

“It will be done as you command.”

“Also,” Xanfolo continued, “Have a picked force stationed here at the headquarters. We don’t know yet the size or the purpose of the conspiracy uncovered here. The crown princess must be protected at all cost. Have all other troops on full alert and the rest of the cavalry out on patrol.”

“You think the crown princess is in danger?”

“Not until we are all dead,” Xanfolo replied. He then jumped to the top of the table and drew the sword of Loran and held it high.

“Officers of Montia! I do not yet know what we have uncovered here. The crown princess of Montia, last of the line of the royal house, has been put in danger. You know your duty. I want every man in this garrison out and armed for battle. Any workers found in the streets must be searched. If armed, they are to be arrested and held. If they are priests, arrest them, armed or not. Follow the orders of our consort. Protect Montia!”

There was a general uproar following Xanfolo’s announcement. Consana stood by Nessa with a drawn sword while Danomo and the four bowmen gave Hona the searching

of his life. Messengers hurried away bearing orders. Under the cover of the uproar, the two assistant leaders of the workmen edged closer to the door. Their progress came to a halt when the pike man stationed at the door leveled his weapon at their throats.

Xanfolo watched with satisfaction. The soldiers stationed at Montia II were coming to life. "Hold those two for questioning," he ordered.

Danomo approached with a wide grin on his face. "The prisoner is clean, sir. We found nothing."

"I thought that would be the case," Xanfolo replied. "Now we are going to take the prisoner out through the gate to that little public house. You will guard the door, and I want an archer on each side and the fourth on the roof checking you and the other three archers. Kill anyone who comes out of the house."

"But sir! What if it is you who comes out?"

"Tell the men if they see me coming and they don't kill me, their own lives will pay forfeit."

"But, how..."

"We will use a code. I will shout through the door that you are making a map of Montia and you forgot to put in the third semaphore station. Then you open the door and see if there are still two of us in the room."

"Did I really forget to put in the third station?"

"Check your map later," Xanfolo smiled. "Now let us be on our way."

"Wait!" called Nessa. "Maybe I should come along. The priest fools you, but not me."

"I need you here," Xanfolo said and quickly added, "Your Highness, we also need your sword."

"I understand," she answered. "This gown will be quickly replaced by my soldier's uniform. Be careful, Xan! I sense things here that are frightening. Our city can afford to lose a crown princess, but the crown princess cannot lose her captain."

The short walk to the public house was accomplished without problem. Xanfolo noted with satisfaction that a cavalry patrol of four lancers preceded them through the gate. The guards at the gate were numerous and alert.

Inside the room lighted by two liguite torches, Xanfolo faced the priest, and then sheathed his sword. "Now, Priest, we talk."

"No, not yet," replied Hona. "We are not on equal level here." He raised his hand slowly until he reached as high over his head as he could stretch. Then he bent his palm and waved it slowly. "See the shadow on the wall," he hissed.

Xanfolo glanced at the wall. The shadow appeared as a great jungle reptile weaving back and forth. When the shadow suddenly struck, he knew too late what was happening. Hona's body flipped through the air, his sandals striking Xanfolo's shoulders and flooring him. The edge of Hona's hand was at his throat. The priest smiled down at the captain. He got to his feet and offered his hand to pull Xanfolo up.

“Now we are on an equal level. You have refrained from killing me, and I have not taken your life when I had the power to do so. Now let us talk as equals.”

“That was an interesting move,” Xanfolo observed ruefully as he got to his feet. “No doubt you learned that while engaged in priestly devotions?”

Hona smiled. “The requirements of priesthood are always changing. How is it that you picked this time to come to Montia II?”

“And I would like to know why you are here as a spy,” Xanfolo replied. “What happened to the old man whose place you have taken?”

“He died, but that was kept a secret from the people here. I simply replaced him temporarily.”

“His passing is another link lost with the past,” Xanfolo said regretfully. “Even though only a worker, he was one of the original colonists here.”

“Not really,” Hona answered smoothly. “He was the second such old man, and soon he will be found unhurt and slowly shaking his head over the antics of the present generation.”

“What? I don’t understand.”

“You saw my disguise and how it peeled away along with the vigorous help of the crown princess.”

“Yes, go on.” A tiny, empty place in Xanfolo’s stomach doubled in size, for he was beginning to understand a fearful truth.

“If I kept the device on over a period of thirty or forty sets of darkness and light, the mask would become a part of me and could never be removed even with a knife. By the way, old men’s toes are nearly the same as young men’s toes. It is interesting, even under these circumstances, to watch irrationality, an act of ignorance, produce an essentially correct deduction. That was nothing short of amazing! And you, the most successful soldier in all the six realms, easily accepted her illogical proposal.”

“It seemed the right thing at the time,” Xanfolo said dryly. “How many more people are there who wear the masks?”

“Only one, the consort.”

“Consort Consana? Impossible! Nessa would know her own father.”

Hona shook his head. “Maybe she should have checked his toes. The disguise is permanent once the mask melds in with the skin. We have almost perfected this technique, but there are a few problems yet. The real consort died three rainy seasons ago. It was a natural death, of course, and we replaced him secretly. It was a test, our second, of a long-range transfer. Unfortunately, the process we use, as I said, is not perfect. It causes an unexplained swiftness in aging, and death comes in about five rainy seasons.”

“Then this is not priestly mumbo-jumbo, spells, and that kind of thing?”

“No, no mumbo-jumbo, at least as you understand it. We do use trances, however, in training candidates for the honor of becoming someone else.”

“How do candidates feel about the fact that in five rainy seasons they will be dead?”

“How do soldiers feel?” Hona shrugged, “When they learn that they are being sent to some dangerous place to serve?”

“It’s different. We always have a chance to survive. The poor fools who don the mask must know it is a death sentence.”

“It is necessary, and that is enough for the priests,” answered Hona.

“You have told me more than I expected to learn,” said Xanfolo. “It is obvious that only one of us will leave this house alive.”

“Not necessarily,” replied Hona. “If you were to kill me and leave here with what you know, who would believe you? You would become the madman of Montia instead of the mythmaker from Montia. What would that gain you? If you took me with you in the hope that I would support your wild story, you would be a fool as well as a madman. I’ll deny everything, of course.”

Xanfolo sank down in a chair. What the priest said was probably true, although the people might just buy the idea of the masks. He had to do something, but what? He glanced up at Hona.

“There is something you want from me? What is it? You have not told me all this so easily without some priestly motive. After all, I could follow my instincts now and kill you, but then your priests would have to find a new leader, and that could take time. Who knows how much I can accomplish before the new leader can be effective?”

“You are correct. There is something I want from you, and that is why I have not killed you and replaced you with a priest. However, I don’t know if we have a trance strong enough to survive your usual leaps against logic.”

“Speak of what you want me to do to further your plan,” Xanfolo said, a flash of anger in his eyes.

“As you have known for some time,” Hona responded, almost as if reciting a memorized piece, “the present system of the six realms is in a state of near collapse. Ponta is stirring up the barbarians in the mountains although it is hard to get proof. Even if the League could prove it, what then? The proof would make necessary declarations of war.”

“Only if other cities rediscover a sense of honor,” Xanfolo interrupted.

“That is probably true,” Hona acknowledged. “Kinsa is the most powerful of all the cities and should be a match for Ponta, but the Kinsans are not interested in either honor or war. They will go to any lengths to avoid war. Even with all the problems of the cities and royal houses, the real struggle is not between kings or queens, but rather between the priests and the Secret Society. As the royal houses become weaker, that struggle will intensify and probably lead to a series of wars. We cannot allow the Secret Society to gain power. We must build a rational system, and we must defeat that which relies upon myths and prophecies submersed in the past. Either the priests will rule or the Secret Society.”

“And the armies and the royal houses?” argued Xanfolo. “What of them? Are they to play dead dog to your plans? Does our friend Dammer go along with your priests in this matter? Or is he even really Dammer? Is he just a priest in disguise?”

“As in your case, it would be difficult to find a priest who could make his mind function like Dammer’s” Hona answered. “No, Dammer is happily exercising the Hargian cavalry while waiting for the next call to serve the League.”

“What do the priests plan to do about the royal house of Montia?”

“Yes, a good question,” Hona said, a slight frown briefly appearing on his otherwise smooth face. “Because of Montia’s use of non-royal persons as consorts, your royal house is stronger than the others. The people of Montia always know that one of them, even the son of a flower girl, can rise to great power and sire the next queen. But the future of Montia will largely depend on you, and by that I mean depends on you beyond the offspring you bring into the royal house when you become consort.”

“How so?”

“Ponta is stirring up the mountain barbarians, but it’s the Secret Society that is raising up the jungle people to come against Montia. They will spring their plan at the same time Ponta pushes the mountain barbarians into war. If the Pontans are successful, they will gain enormous power, and if the Secret Society is successful they will gain greater power through taking control of a colony, Montia II. That is why I am here. That is why both of us are here. We work toward the same goals, you see. Neither of us wants the Secret Society to gain control of your colony.”

Xanfolo shook his head slowly. “Hona, you are so clever you could slip the skins from grapes and the pulps would swear they were clothed. Most of what you describe is never going to happen as long as the Nara can take to the skies, and I can still hold a sword.”

“Your Nara would be one against the Pontans’ six, and maybe even the Kinsans’ four and the Hargians’ two. How can you with one battle carrier and an antique sword hope to win out against such odds? You must see the realities and not the mirrored images of your own mythmaking.”

“Your reality means blood war between peoples,” Xanfolo said. “It sounds like a war far worse than any chanters can remember.”

“It need not happen if the priests are successful in their long battle with the Secret Society,” Hona said. “We know the Secret Society has tried to gain control of Montia in the past, and we know about the consort and his tragedy. We also know that they are working hard to pull you into their plans. To make their irrationality work, they need a great hero who could become king over all the realms. They need a mythmaker. It is very difficult to make our new but dull knowledge as exciting as their myths. Then you come along and provide exploits that liars would never have dared to invent. I don’t believe the Secret Society can ever succeed unless you openly help them. They seek to bind you to their side, and that is why they gave you that sword.”

Noting Hona’s obvious dislike of the sword, Xanfolo smiled and asked, “Does the sword have magical powers? Is that why you hate it?”

"Its only magic is what you give it," Hona replied. "Otherwise it is just a symbol, a worthless piece of work in itself, but exceedingly dangerous as a symbol. It is the kind of sword that a great king could use." Hona paused and then asked, "Tell me, do you have ambitions to be king over all the realms?"

"No! I do not want to be a king! All I ever wanted is to be a good captain, and that I have achieved. I really wonder if I wouldn't be happier as a dumb cadet following a convoy of gunas." Xanfolo paused as he realized that he was about to say that Hona wasn't the first to ask if he wanted to be a king, and then decided the priest did not need to know that.

"Besides, he continued, "I am not to be the king. According to the prophecies of the Secret Ones, I am to be the maker of kings and queens, the true sword that puts the rightful one on the throne, or some such nonsense as that."

"It sounds as if the Secret Society has its problems with you," Hona noted. "You seem no more interested in helping them than helping us."

"I would destroy you both if I could," Xanfolo replied with great vigor.

"Then on that dismal note, we have the basis of an agreement," Hona said.

"What! An agreement?"

"I only ask of you," Hona continued, "what you asked of me when the queen of Clang was crowned. Swear that you will not interfere with our plans. There must be no slaughter of Montian priests here or in Montia. There must be no alliance with the Secret Society and no war against Ponta until we are ready for war."

"That is all?"

"It will be enough for our purposes, and it is better than the two of us fighting to your death or maybe even my own in this stinking little public house. That is not the way for heroes to go out, is it?"

"True, that is not the kind of story the chanters like."

"I'm glad that we can talk like reasonable men," Hona said. "I would like our agreement to ensure that you will not allow yourself to be used, even indirectly, as a tool to raise up the people against the priests."

"I can grant that, reluctantly. What are you prepared to offer in return?"

"Ask what you want," Hona replied.

"Very well," Xanfolo said. "I want your pledge that you will not spy on Montia, or ever again use your mask people in Montia. Oh, and there is one other provision. I want the fire tubes. I want at least twenty of them and a great many fire balls. I also want to know how to make them. Give me the tubes and then you and the League and the Secret Society can jump in the deadly oceans for all I care."

Hona smiled. "I rather thought you would get around to the tubes. What you ask is a high price to pay, but I have asked you to throw away the chance to be king over all the realms. That is also a high price, and I am prepared to give you the tubes you seek. Come with the Nara to Harg. I will give you the tubes because I don't believe you will use them

to gain power. I will also provide you with materials to make more fireballs, but I fear that it will be difficult for your people to learn how to make the materials. That will take time, and therefore, you must use them sparingly.”

“They will be used for good purpose,” Xanfolo said. “Now, how much do you know about what is happening in the jungle? Are the barbarians massing for an attack on this colony?”

“I suspect so. I have reason to believe the Secret Society is behind the unrest, as I said before, but when I have gone to the edge of the jungle with the workers, I have seen nothing. There are paths through the jungle, and sometimes we see tracks on the paths near the edge of that frightening place. Otherwise it’s as if there was a great wall behind which the barbarians can move without detection.”

“Then how do you know the Secret Society is involved?” questioned Xanfolo.

“We have other sources of information,” Hona said. “We know about the secret visitor in the Montian palace. He obviously wanted you to uncover what we priests are doing here, and through the mischief caused by irrationality, the toe factor, you succeeded.”

“It was easy to get me to come to Montia II,” Xanfolo said grimly. “I could sense trouble here, especially after the attack on Zorn. I want to know when the jungle barbarians are planning to attack.”

“Only when the Secret Society decides to push an attack,” Hona replied.

“I’m going to take a patrol into the jungle,” Xanfolo said, “to find out the truth. I must learn what the barbarians are up to.”

“What they will be up to is slaughtering your patrol,” Hona laughed. “No one goes deep into the jungle and returns alive.”

“Perhaps,” Xanfolo replied. “But according to Consana, or I should say, the priest impersonating him, some of the Secret Ones fled into the jungle. What about them? According to what you said, they are stirring up the jungle barbarians, so they must be coming and going into the jungle. We will do the same.”

“Be careful, mythmaker. You could find yourself making your last myth.”

“If so, then I’ll not be alone. You are coming with me.”

“I? Into the jungle? I’d rather not, thank you. Just being at the edge is enough to satisfy my curiosity.”

“But I insist,” Xanfolo said with a smile as he touched his hand to the red hilt of his sword. “Make it part of our bargain.”

Hona was obviously measuring the distance between himself and Xanfolo and calculating how fast the Montian captain could pull the sword.

“You’d never make it,” Xanfolo warned.

“Very well,” Hona sighed. “The jungle it is, but only because I am at about a half-step disadvantage. Thus is the margin between life in Kinsa and death in the jungle. However, I must have one more concession on your part in exchange.”

“Name it.”

“I almost overlooked this important point,” Hona said. “You must agree that Consana be allowed to die a natural death which will occur in about two rainy seasons. He will not be replaced.”

“Easily agreed to. That was my intention also” responded Xanfolo. “I have no wish to crush Nessa’s heart by killing the man she believes is her father.”

“Then we have an agreement,” Hona said.

“Do you wish to swear it on a sword as we did last time?” Xanfolo smiled.

“No! And certainly not on the ancient sword of Loran.”

“Then we are done, and we go now to prepare for the patrol into the jungle,” said Xanfolo.

“Ah, before opening the door – let me see if I have the correct code—it had to do with a missing third semaphore station. Are you making a map?”

“How did you know about the code?” asked a stunned Xanfolo.

“We learned how to read lips that do not make sound many generations ago.”

Chapter 21

Well before the rise of the first sun, Xanfolo lay awake staring at the ceiling. He turned, and by the soft glow of a small torch held in a wall bracket he could see a smile on Nessa’s face.

He felt an urge to reach out to her, and then decided she could use the sleep. And so could he. The patrol into the jungle required his sharpest abilities, and that meant a clear mind. She had been smiling when she drifted off to sleep. They had coupled, but softly, almost tenderly, which was not her usual style. She said she wanted this love-making to be different, and it was important to her for reasons she did not explain.

His eyes traced her smile. He thought he saw more in the smile than just a surface reflection of a woman still enjoying the after-feelings of pleasure. Nessa was fond of keeping little secrets from him, and yes, she sometimes teased him with a smile that meant an almost childish, “I know something you don’t know.”

Always masks, he thought as he turned over again and closed his eyes. He hoped sleep would catch him before his mind returned to the problem of the life-masks created by the priests. That was truly a secret no one should have learned. What else had the priests discovered? Why were all these discoveries coming to the surface now? So many questions and so few answers! Everyone had their little smile.

Well, he had his secret too, but it was not one to cause smiles. Nessa must never learn that the consort, her father, was an imposter. He could spare her that agony, at least.

Could Hona be trusted? Was he telling the truth about there not being any other masks? His brows furrowed around his closed eyes as he considered the possibilities of madness if the idea was pursued. Who was real, and who was masked? The furrows disappeared as he remembered that masked people, at least for the present, did not survive very long.

There was one reality he could trust. If he got his hands on the fire tubes, then all the powers in the six realms would not be able to storm the walls of Montia. They could take their conspiracies and plague them for it! Montia would stand alone. He had the feeling that they would need the fire tubes and soon. Hona had seemed almost eager to give them to him. Why? Maybe it was because he had opposition inside the priesthood. Maybe there was a priestly counterpart to Hona working closely, if uncomfortably, with the Pontans. How long would it be before the Pontans had fire tubes? Did the priests hope to destroy both royal houses by giving each new weapons?

He felt movement and glanced over his shoulder at Nessa. She was staring at him.

“Why are you still awake?” she asked.

“There is much to think about.”

“I was dreaming about us. I dreamed we had a girl child who would grow up to rule over Montia.”

“Men don’t have that kind of dream,” Xanfolo said.

“I’m not even sure men have dreams. What do you dream about?” she asked.

He smiled and rolled onto his side so he could face her. “I dream about being in bed with a beautiful woman.”

“That beautiful woman better not have red hair and be queen of Clang,” Nessa replied as she squirmed into his arms.

They did not arise until the second sun was in the sky, and Xanfolo rushed his own preparations to make up for his tardiness. A small but very important part of his plan was accomplished when he gave Makin a sealed scroll. The sub-captain was ordered to open the scroll only if he was certain of Xanfolo’s death. The scroll was to be read in the presence of Danomo so both men would know its contents. If Danomo was also dead, a trusted subaltern would suffice.

“What am I to do after I read the scroll?” Makin asked.

“You will be in command then. You will have to make your own decisions. Whatever you decide could easily be wrong, so it makes little difference. Just be prepared to fight. As to either Danomo or a subaltern being present, that is just added help for you and also ensures that what I have inscribed will continue to be passed along.”

“You mean,” Makin said, “in the event that you are killed.”

“Blunt, but accurate,” Xanfolo replied.

“That is a good idea,” Makin said in his usual terse manner. “How long do you plan to remain on patrol?”

“We should be back on the third sunrise from now, but do not become worried if we do not come out for five sunrises. We don’t know what we will find or where or when.”

“We will be ready for flight upon your command,” Makin said.

“Good. When we leave here, our destination is Harg. There we will pick up some interesting surprises.”

And so, with one sun west of the mid-point and one sun east, the patrol left the gate and started on the road to the jungle. Once again Xanfolo found himself mounted on a guna, and as usual, the guna was not cooperative. Hona watched as Xanfolo tried to urge his guna to walk at a swifter pace.

“Your guna has never heard of your myths?”

“I have about the same luck with gunas as I do trying to understand those who seek power,” Xanfolo replied testily.

“What was it Dammer said? When gunas fly?” asked Hona.

“Never mind! We will eventually get to the jungle. I am interested in seeing what you call a base camp. I didn’t know there was such a camp. Is it a defensive position? An outpost?”

“You did not know because the camp is not manned by soldiers,” Hona replied as he made a show of easily mastering his guna. “It is operated by the workers and consists of little more than protection from arrows and stones, a reasonably safe place to sleep in the dark.”

The pace was more leisurely than Xanfolo wanted, yet he was in no position to order the column to hurry along since it was his guna that dictated their speed. The column consisted of Xanfolo, Danomo, Hona, four bowmen from the Nara, and two worker-priests. Supplies were carried on the backs of four pack gunas. Shepherding the laggard column was a troop of lancers.

When they finally closed with the camp, Xanfolo could see that it consisted of little more than some huts built as part of a corral for the gunas and freighters. There was little activity. Several white-clad workers made slow work out of loading a freighter whose foam bags towered up overhead and provided shade from the hot suns.

A long arrow flight away from the edge of the camp lay the jungle. It was a dark wall of interlocking leaves, vines, and tall trees. The jungle was a storehouse that held great riches, but to gain these riches there was often a high price to be paid in human lives. Montians avoided going into the jungle beyond a day’s slow march along trails used by the workers and sometimes by the barbarians. Already the giant balme trees were hard to find at the edge of the jungle because most had been cut at a great profit because the wood was exceedingly hard. Cutting down just one tree required a large crew of men and ax sharpeners who worked for several days.

Another lucrative discovery was the genmil flower. The priests had learned to make many salves from the flower, and the roots of the plant were mashed to produce a strong Montian drink well known in all the realms for its mind-rattling effect. Unfortunately, the flower was hard to find, growing as it did on a vine amidst other vegetation. It was

frequently guarded by a small reptile whose body looked exactly like the vine. A flower picker who made a mistake paid instantly with his life.

The jungle made life relatively pleasant for the Montians. The small number of workers who actually entered the jungle fringe provided opportunities in transport, manufactory, and trading for the less venturesome. The economic strength of this system easily supported the army, doctors, chanters, and flower girls. Of course, the priests were able to maintain themselves because they controlled much of the economy. From all, a small tax was collected for the support of the royal house.

The Montian prosperity was not begrudged by the other five cities. Kinsa, of course, envied no one. The other four cities were secure, though life was somewhat harder for their citizens. People in the other cities had no desire to work in the feared Montian jungle, nor did they look forward to living in Montia's extremely warm climate. Usually the climate was blamed for causing the Montians to be so easy-going. At the same time, Xanfolo had gained fame in all the cities as a soldier and was considered the finest commander of a battle carrier in all the realms.

But the chanters told of past wars between Clang and Montia that were bloody beyond the knowledge of the present generations. They also told of the war of assassins that had greatly weakened all the royal houses. However, the bad blood between the Clangians and the Montians did not stem from economic factors. The fair-skinned Clangians had no desire to go into the jungle and bring out its riches.

The order of the march was set. One of the workers led the single file procession followed by two of the Nara's bowmen, Xanfolo, Hona, Danomo, and two more bowmen. The second worker guide guarded the rear. Both guides insisted that everyone keep close together and touch nothing. By darktime, they should reach a small clearing which had been cut by the workers. Beyond this clearing was pure jungle.

They would have to find trails made by the barbarians, a task that the guides said would be all too easy. Xanfolo patiently explained that he wanted to find a trail that would circle toward the river. Once they reached the river they would follow it back to the open plain where the cavalry escort was assigned to wait. He reasoned that if the barbarians were massing, they would do so along the river, a reference point easily understood by the barbarians, an avenue that pointed like an arrow at the colony.

"Let's go!" Xanfolo ordered.

The guide entered the jungle followed by the file of men. When the last guide took four paces into the jungle, they were lost to the sight of the cavalry escort.

"And so another myth is about to be born! The man who walks in the dark sky now walks in the dark jungle," said Hona in a loud whisper.

"It's only a useful myth if we return," Xanfolo grunted. He remembered the false Consana's story about the secret society people who had escaped certain death by fleeing into the jungle. They probably only delayed their end briefly. If the false Consana knew this story, then so did Hona. He was tempted to lose himself in his thoughts when he saw a dark object the size of his hand scurry along a vine just above his head.

“Careful, Captain!” whispered Hona. “That creature has eight legs and venom that will make you pray to the three orbs for a quick death.”

He kept his eyes open after that. There was not likely to be much of value this close to the open plain. The workers used this trail frequently. If there were any barbarians close, by they would hear them coming and sift back into the jungle before they could be seen. Xanfolo was looking for signs of large encampments, or any sign of preparation for a large-scale attack on the colony. The march proceeded without incident, except that Xanfolo soon learned that in the dark and dank jungle with all its moisture, he was hotter than he had ever been and his thirst was becoming unbearable.

He had been in the jungle fringe which was close to Montia, but that part had many clearings where trees had been cut. The trails were wide and comparatively safe. That jungle was nothing more than a decorative park compared to this fringe near Montia II.

Xanfolo halted the patrol. “We need a drink.”

The lead guide nodded and slipped off the trail, his heavy sword in hand. He moved silently, and in two steps could not be seen. When he returned, he had an armful of bulb-like fruits which he passed around. The insides were mushy, but the liquid was sweet and served well to quench their thirst.

They had counted on finding this fruit which grew in considerable profusion throughout the jungle. Xanfolo could see that if they did not have this fruit at hand and had to carry their own water, the patrol would be even more difficult. The denseness of the jungle made it hard to tell where the suns were, or when darkness would be upon them. Life in the jungle was a matter of rotting vegetation and new growth pushing up through the rot. They continued their slow pace, breaking often for liquid refreshment. Xanfolo lost track of time and found himself staring more at the sweat-soaked shirt of the bowman ahead of him than at the ground or the leafy ceiling above.

Their arrival at the clearing came as a surprise to Xanfolo. One blink of the eye and he was immersed in the jungle, and the next he was in a small clearing. He instantly saw that the clearing offered only the most doubtful kind of security. The center was within easy arrow range of the jungle where the barbarian bowmen could hide. However, the clearing allowed a welcome view of the sky where the younger sun could be seen as it was about to disappear beyond the horizon. How much better it was up in the sky aboard the Nara instead of down here in the fetid, steamy, dark jungle where unseen dangers were everywhere.

The camp was quickly made. Three tents, little more than large bags with center poles and securable flaps for getting in and out, were set up within a sword’s length from each other. Three men were assigned to each tent with one of the three on guard duty outside.

Xanfolo asked when the period of the greatest danger would occur, and the lead guide replied, “Not until after the mid-point of darkness.”

“We will have a good moon this darkness. That will help,” replied Xanfolo.

One of the guides said, “That is when the shadows appear. Some of the shadows might be real.”

“Then our bowmen will get some practice at shadows,” Xanfolo replied.

Chapter 22

Xanfolo, Danomo, and Hona shared one tent. Two bowmen and one of the guides were assigned to each of the other two tents. For the first guard period, Danomo, a bowman, and a guide would stand outside. Xanfolo assigned himself, a bowman, and a guide to take the second shift. Hona and two bowmen were assigned to the third shift.

Darkness came suddenly. It was like being in a closed room when all the lighted torches were put out at the same time. Xanfolo stood with the first guard until the rise of the moon. Before moonrise, he could barely see the darker form of Danomo standing a sword-length away.

There had been noises in the jungle during the light time such as birds high in the trees singing their songs. But with the dark, the jungle awakened. The noises seemed close at times, and then faraway. There were squeals and groans, hissings and rustlings, and then strange far off booming noises. Xanfolo thought the jungle noises would cover the advance of the entire Clangian cavalry regiment through the area. When the moon appeared, it could not be seen at first because of the trees, but its light was enough so that Xanfolo could see Danomo's face. There was a quick smile on the young man's tense face.

"The light from the moon will help," reassured Xanfolo. "I'm going to get some sleep now. If anything strange happens, wake me."

"How could it get stranger than this?" asked Danomo as he shifted his sword from one hand to another.

"All quiet?" asked Hona when Xanfolo crawled into the tent.

"Not very quiet, but it seems secure," he replied. "You should be asleep."

"I have given up sleep until this patrol is finished, or I am dead," replied Hona wearily.

"Well, if you are going to be awake, you can work on a problem I need solved. When we flew to Montia II, I had two bags of rocks rigged at the Nara's rim rail. When we were over a target we dropped the rocks, but they all landed beyond the target. Why?"

Hona laughed. "That is simple. The rocks are going at the same swiftness as the Nara. If you wait until you are directly over the target, the rocks will continue to fly forward even as they fall to the ground."

"How can that be?" Xanfolo asked. "Rocks do not fly."

"If you want to hit a target with your rocks, you had better assume that they do. You must guess your swiftness and calculate when to release before you get to the target. Better yet, drop the rocks so they bounce and roll into the target. The impact on cavalry would be much better. One bouncing rock might hit two or three lancers or their gunas. Your idea is interesting. The Nara will be the most powerful battle carrier in all the realms, what with the usual weapons, rocks, and fire tubes. What will you do with all this power? The Secret Society has pinned its hopes on the Nara and her captain as their way to power."

"I have only one objective, to defend Montia," replied Xanfolo.

"If so, then all the cities and all the people will benefit," Hona said.

The moonlit darkness passed without trouble, except from the myriads of bugs that stung or bit the guards. Toward the end of Xanfolo's watch, he thought he could discern a pattern in the booming sounds off in the jungle, but he couldn't be sure. When he asked the

guide on guard duty with him about the sounds, he merely shrugged and said he had no idea what made the booming noise.

With the first sun's rise, all were up and the camp was quickly broken and packed. In a line as before, they stood at the edge of the clearing. The guide hesitated and looked back at the file behind him. "Forward!" Xanfolo ordered angrily.

The lead guide looked back again, his face pale and eyes filled with fear.

"Bowmen, ready your arrows and kill the guide if he does not move out," Xanfolo ordered.

Faced with certain death from behind, the guide chose the fearful unknown. His sword flashed in the light as he began hacking a path.

The going was hard and slow. The lead man was replaced frequently, but Xanfolo was careful now to keep a bowman at the rear of the column. They maintained a generally westward direction though it was not easy to be certain because the multiple layers of the leafy canopy shut out the exact locations of the suns for long periods.

It was well after the midpoint of lighttime when they stumbled onto a small path. The path seemed to veer off to the southwest which would take it to the river. They followed the path and moved much quicker than before.

When the first sun was setting they came to a junction with another path running north and south. This was a much wider path, almost wide enough to be considered a trail. It was wide enough for three men to easily walk side by side.

In the remaining light, Xanfolo and a bowman cautiously set off to explore the larger path while the rest of the patrol squirmed on hands and knees for several paces off the path and hacked out a tiny area just large enough for the three tents. Danomo then crawled back to the path so he could guide Xanfolo and the bowman when they returned. Otherwise, they would never be able to find the tents.

Xanfolo moved slowly, squeezing against the brush on the side of the path. The bowman followed, mimicking his captain's motions. They had not gone far when they discovered yet another path coming from the northwest and junctioning with the one they were following. This path was also wide enough for at least three men.

The barbarians could quickly and secretly move an army down the main path and no one in Montia II would ever know the barbarians were coming until it was too late. Xanfolo tried to study the damp ground, but he could not prise any secrets from the dirt packed hard by barbarian feet. Then he realized that the ground was packed hard because the path was probably used by many, many barbarians.

When the birds high up in the trees suddenly stopped their singing, he turned and motioned the bowman to head back the way they had come. He quickly pulled the bowman down and back against the bushes. He had no sooner done so when a barbarian emerged from the junctioning path. He was short, wiry, and carrying a spear. He trotted onto the main path, headed toward the river, and was followed in ranks of two by more barbarians armed with bows and spears. This was no scouting party. This was an army on the move.

When they finally disappeared, Xanfolo and the bowman worked their way back in the darkness that was covering the jungle. They were intercepted by Danomo who led them to the tents.

"There were at least two hundred of them," Xanfolo said softly to Hona. "They almost stumbled over us. If the birds hadn't suddenly gone silent, the barbarians would have had their first victory over us."

“They must have been heading toward the river just as you suspected,” said Hona.

“How many more parties are moving to the river? How many more to come? I have three hundred soldiers at Montia II,” stated Xanfolo. “How many priests are present who know how to fight?”

“There are at least a hundred who will fight as well as your soldiers,” Hona whispered. There was a strong note of pride that could not be concealed in the whisper.

“And the false Consana? What does he know of leading men in battle? When you did your mask trickery, did you ever consider that the false Consana might have to lead men in the defense of the colony?”

“Lower your voice, Captain, please,” urged Hona. “We are only a few paces from the trail, and it would not be wise for your people to learn the truth. As to your question, we did consider the possibility, but thought it unlikely that there would be any major fighting. I still think the barbarians will eventually try to take Zorn, but this is a different situation. This is a matter in which the Secret Society plays a part, not Ponta.”

Xanfolo laughed softly. “Did it ever occur to you that maybe the jungle barbarians are obeying no one’s urgings, that for some reason unknown to us, they have decided to go to war against Montia? Not everyone jerks when you pull their strings like the handlers of the wooden doll shows at the public houses. The jungle barbarians have their own minds. Now, I sleep. When the first sun rises, we will face interesting problems.”

“Montian captains and jungle barbarians have much in common,” Hona replied softly.

Though hot and uncomfortable, the second darktime in the jungle passed without incident. The two guides expressed both joy and amazement that they were still alive when the first sun appeared. They gathered jungle fruit and the watery bulbs to augment their iron rations, a parched grain known in all the armies of the six realms as guna food.

“We are less than a light time’s march from the river if this path runs true,” Xanfolo explained after they had packed their gear. “It is possible that a large number of barbarians are already at the river. We will follow this path, but great care must be taken. Stay close together.”

“What will we do,” Hona asked, “If a party comes up behind us, and we are caught between the barbarians ahead and those behind?”

“We will die,” replied Xanfolo.

“I hope there is a better solution,” said Hona.

They had not gone far on the new path when they discovered a narrow trace which appeared to turn at a back angle toward the river. It would bring them out close to where the river emerged from the jungle, or, as Danomo suggested, “The trace leads nowhere.”

Xanfolo did not hesitate. “Nowhere is better than being caught between two barbarian parties.”

As they threaded their way through the jungle, their shoulders brushing vines and leaves on both sides, it was clear to all that the trace had been cut recently. Was it a new trace that could be enlarged to become another path to the river? He cautioned the guides to be alert because there might be a barbarian work party ahead pushing the trace forward.

However, they saw and heard nothing except that which belonged to the jungle. Both suns were beginning their descent when they closed up on the lead guide who was crouched over and pointing ahead. They could see that the trace opened out into a large area where the brush had been removed, but not the larger trees.

“We must be at the river,” whispered Xanfolo. “We are not far from safety now.”

They crept to the edge of the clearing and watched closely to see if there were any barbarians nearby. Xanfolo motioned to the bowmen to follow and cover him. Then he darted from concealment and took up position behind a tree. He moved to another tree, and a bowman followed him to the first tree. In this fashion, the patrol crossed the clearing.

Xanfolo saw the river through the thinning jungle. Its sluggish green water was a welcome sight. They could not be far from the fringe where Montian workmen had carved paths and clearings. He made up his mind quickly. With the patrol set up as a base near the river, he, Danomo, and a bowman would work their way back up the river in an effort to see if they could find any concentrations of barbarians.

They carefully threaded their way along the river’s bank, but they didn’t have to go far when they saw a large clearing ahead. At least twenty barbarians were sitting on the ground in the clearing, and in the center were two men. They were taller and older than most barbarians, and Xanfolo immediately guessed that these were Montian Secret Ones who had fled to the jungle when the real Consana was accused of high treason. One of the two men stepped up on a stump and began speaking in the sing-song manner of the barbarians. The other Montian standing silently at his side seemed irritated. He tugged at the speaker’s arm and spoke sharply in the tongue of the realms.

“Push them harder. We must strike the colony now. Stir their blood. Tell them again how they must destroy the false Lord of Loran who rules the colony. Tell them the false lord is going to destroy them. Tell them he will lead a great army against them.”

That was enough for Xanfolo. He knew who and why. They must return to the colony immediately, and make ready the defenses.

He turned and saw a barbarian with raised spear standing several paces away. The barbarian screamed a hideous war cry as he threw the spear. The bowman was closest and took the spear in his chest. Danomo was on the barbarian in a wink and killed him with a sword thrust to the heart.

“Run!” shouted Xanfolo.

They darted through the tangles of vines, jumped fallen branches, and felt the sting of thorns as they desperately tried to reach the rest of the patrol. The war cries of the chasing barbarians spurred their efforts.

As they broke into the clearing where the others waited, the barbarians hesitated. They could see that their quarry had friends, and the friends quickly demonstrated they had a deadly sting. Arrows from the Montian bowmen found targets and cause the barbarians to seek the safety of the jungle.

“We found them!” panted Danomo as he lay on the ground to catch his breath.

Both Hona and Xanfolo, winded as he was, laughed. “So it would seem,” said Hona. “What do we do now?”

“They do not have the numbers to attack us,” said Xanfolo. “What they will probably do is try to surround us, and maybe harry us a bit until they can bring more of their own people. We will continue moving along the river, fighting if necessary, but always moving. We can’t be too far from our own people. Keep together. Fight well.”

One of the barbarians moved boldly out into the open. He was young, clad in a loin cloth, and armed with a spear which he shook vigorously at the patrol.

The bowmen smiled and prepared to end his life when Hona stepped in front of them “Wait! He is only one. If he charges, let him come in. If he doesn’t charge, then maybe his reluctance will spread to the others.”

“If we fill him with arrows,” grunted Xanfolo, “That might also discourage the others. Let’s observe the priest’s game, and we might learn something about their tactics.”

The young barbarian danced about the clearing, moving from tree to tree, and taunting the defenders as he danced.

“He’s very clever,” noted Danomo. “He’s working his way closer while pretending to dance.”

The dance suddenly changed into a screaming charge that brought the young barbarian into their midst with a surprising quickness. But Xanfolo’s blade easily caught the spear’s point and a deft twist flipped the weapon from the barbarian’s small hands. With his free hand, Xanfolo pushed the barbarian back and caught his leg with a foot. The man fell to the ground with Xanfolo on him in an instant, his sword ready to pierce the unprotected throat.

“Hold your hand, Xanfolo! Do not kill this one!” cried Hona.

“Why not?” Xanfolo growled as he planted his foot on the barbarian’s chest and held his sword ready.

“Xanfolo? You are the Fonof?” the man on the ground asked.

The Montian captain hopped back, his foot flying off the man’s chest as if he had just stepped down on a poisonous reptile. The barbarian had spoken! His accent was strange, but he could speak in other than the singsong riddles the jungle barbarians used for speech. Fonof? How did the barbarian know either of the names, Xanfolo or Fonof?

Xanfolo turned to Hona. “Do you recognize our young barbarian? Is this some more of your priestly trickery? You could both die here depending on whether or not I believe your answer.”

“This is not the place to decide fates except your own,” Hona replied quickly. “Here come our captive’s friends.”

The barbarians broke from cover and danced toward the defenders. Their war cries and scowls were fearsome. One of the guides could stand it no longer and plunged into the river to escape. He swam out ten paces and screamed as thin reptile-like tentacles wrapped around his body like whips and dragged him under the water.

Xanfolo uttered a harsh laugh. “At least death by combat has its advantages. Now hold your arrows until they get closer.”

In the excitement over the guide dying horribly in the river and the approaching barbarians, the defenders forgot the young barbarian in their midst. He leaped up and screamed, “Xanfolo, Xanfolo, true Fonof, true Fonof!”

The advancing barbarians stopped and appeared to be puzzled. Then as the meaning of what their young friend was saying made its way through their minds, they dropped their weapons and began bowing and chanting, “Fonof, Fonof, Fonof!”

“So, you are a mystical leader in the jungle also?” asked Hona.

“Whatever nonsense this is,” Xanfolo muttered, “It serves us well for now. We must leave while the barbarians are distracted. Move, quickly!”

But before they could start, the young barbarian knelt down in front of Xanfolo. “I am Pie. I go with the Fonof. I serve the true Fonof.”

“Not a bad idea,” Xanfolo agreed thoughtfully. “We can learn much from Lord Pie!”

Chapter 23

They sat cross-legged on the deck of the Nara, the captain from Montia whose exploits were known in all the cities and a barbarian who was a mystery to all the same cities who honored the captain. For Xanfolo, this was a chance to learn secrets known only by the Secret Society and perhaps the priests. He was eager to begin a dialogue, but not so eager that he overlooked Hona's ability to read lips. Therefore, Hona was confined below.

Nessa and Makin watched from the bridge, and Danomo sat atop a diskerpault with an opened scroll fastened to a wooden panel. Slowly, he drew an image of the captain and the barbarian. He could hear much of what they said, but his attention was focused on his art.

Xanfolo studied the young barbarian across from him. His face was darker than the typical Montian golden brown, but this hair was the same color. His eyes showed no fear of being up in the sky on a battle carrier.

When asked what he thought about such a wonder, he shrugged and replied that there was no reason for fear. His Fonof was aboard, and he would follow the Fonof wherever he decided to go.

"Pie?"

"Yes, true Fonof?"

"How did you learn to speak our tongue?" Xanfolo asked. He was aware that unlike the common speech used throughout the six realms, with some irritating dialects, the barbarians had many different tongues, or so the chanters claimed.

"When I was small, we found men like you in the jungle. Some died." Pie made a throat-cutting movement with his hand and then grinned. "Some were not killed, and they learned our tongue. They taught me their words."

"Why didn't you kill all the strangers?"

"Some knew the word by which I know you, Fonof. Then when they learned our tongue, they told us of a lost tribe. We know of the lost peoples. In the jungle, there are the bones of a great place, bigger than Montia, your home."

"How do you know that the lost city is bigger than Montia?"

"Because I have been to Montia," Pie answered proudly.

"What? How?"

"I put on the white clothes and walk between huts."

Xanfolo stared at the young barbarian and then glanced up at Danomo. Pie was almost as tall as Danomo, though thinner. He was darker than Danomo, but so were most of the Montian workers who spent so much of their time exposed to the sun's heat and light.

"Do many of your people walk in Montia?"

Pie shook his head. "Most do not speak your tongue or are afraid."

Xanfolo was relieved to hear that. He dismissed visions of Montia being pulled down from within.

"Have you been to the lost city in the jungle?"

"No."

"Do you know where it is?"

"No, but some of the ancient people can remember going there when they were young. Now they do not know the paths."

“Do your ancients always speak the truth?”

Pie grinned. “Sometimes, I think they do.”

Xanfolo smiled in return. He had his own doubts about some of the truths told by the chanters.

“Why do you call me ‘Fonof’?”

“You are Fonof. What else should I call you? I have heard men in Montia speak of you. I have heard the strangers who now sit in the councils of our elders speak long about you. I know you can walk through the dark sky. I know you once leaped into the sky high as we are now. I know you have slain many, many warriors. You are Fonof.”

“But my name is Xanfolo.” He had wondered about his name and could not see how it could be mistaken for Fonof.

Pie nodded in agreement and grinned. “Yes, you are Xanfolo, the Fonof.”

A title? Xanfolo instantly understood what the slender barbarian meant. Why hadn’t he thought of the possibility that Fonof was a title and not a name? Maybe it was a title that meant king over all kings. That would be in agreement with what he knew about the myth believed by the Secret Society.

“Your people are gathering for an attack on my people at the colony. Why is this so? If I am the Fonof, why do you want to attack my people?”

Pie appeared troubled by this question. They sat in silence while the barbarian considered his answer. Slowly, he explained why.

“The visitors who sit with the council of elders learned that there is a false man in your colony who once claimed to be Fonof. They said false Fonof must die. If not, he would destroy true Fonof, you who walks through the dark sky. All the families and clans agree. The false Fonof must die.”

Now it was Xanfolo’s turn to appear troubled. He stared at the deck while methodically breaking the problem down in his mind. The Secret Ones in the jungle knew that Consana was an imposter. They could not have known this unless messages passed back and forth between the Secret Society in Montia and the Secret Ones in the jungle. That would not be difficult to achieve. After all, Pie had walked in Montia without any problem.

However, if the Secret Society knew about the masked or false Consana, then Hona’s priesthood must have a traitor. How else could the Secret Society learn the truth about Consana? For the first time, Xanfolo gave serious thought to Hona’s claim that the real battle for power going on in the realms was between the priests and the Secret Society, and not between the various royal houses and the League.

“When will your people attack?”

“Soon.”

“How soon?”

“Soon.”

“Before the rainy season?”

“Yes, before the rainy season.”

“If the false Fonof dies before the attack, will your people make war on Montia?”

“No. No war if false Fonof dies.”

Later, when Xanfolo and Hona were alone, Hona was told that his priesthood had been betrayed. The Secret Society knew about the replacement of Consana.

“Now, surely you can see how foolish your plan was to replace the fallen Consort with a masker, and you can see what must now be the consequence,” Xanfolo said.

“Betrayal is always possible,” Hona acknowledged. “There have been numerous priests involved in the study and experiments needed to make masks. Some were from Soren, and they are skilled at treachery.”

“I’ve always been happy that the Pontans and Soren are allies,” Xanfolo commented.

“The Pontans would rather have the Clangians for allies,” Hona replied, not bothering to conceal his satisfaction. He knew how sensitive the Montians were to such an alliance, and that his sting did not go unfelt.

“You know what must be done at Montia II,” Xanfolo said, changing the topic abruptly.

Hona nodded. “I know what you are going to demand. Our masked Consana must die so the barbarians won’t destroy the colony.”

“As soon as possible. Can you arrange it?”

“Yes, it can be done, but it will mean two priests must die, not one.”

“How so?”

“The priest who wears the mask must die and so must the one who kills him. There is no way to escape from Montia II. Your soldiers will not treat kindly the slayer of the Consort. There must be a better way to do this. Consider what the impact of the Consort’s death will be on Nessa and Queen Nara.”

“I have men at Montia II who will die at the hands of the barbarians. I have to choose between them and two priests. As for the royal house, better they mourn for a man already dead than learn they have been duped by an imposter.”

“The royal house might end up blaming you for the death of the Consort,” said Hona. “What if they refuse to believe you? What if they believe you are mad and actually caused the death of the real Consort?”

That was a point for consideration, and Xanfolo wished he was not so pressed to prevent war. The rainy season was not far off. If the false Fonof was not slain soon, the colony would have to be sacrificed.

“If I have to be sacrificed, so be it,” Xanfolo replied, and then brightened as he saw in his mind another argument. “If the Secret Society is not successful in their attempt to kill the false Consana, then how long will it be before they expose him so that both Nessa and the queen believe the truth?”

Hona sank into his thoughts before replying. When he glanced up, Xanfolo could see a painful surrender in his eyes. Then the priest’s eyes turned opaque and showed nothing of what was within his mind. Xanfolo guessed that the priest masked as Consana might be a relative. He remembered the two brothers named Gant, one brave and honorable, and the other just the opposite.

“The second priest need not die,” Xanfolo said slowly.

“How is he to escape?”

“When the masked Consana is killed, it must be made to appear the work of neither priest nor assassin. The blame must be set upon the barbarians. Have the death scene appear as if one or more barbarians penetrated the headquarters. The soldiers will be quick to believe the story.”

“And what will they do to the barbarians in retaliation?” asked Hona

“Not much,” laughed Xanfolo. “The last thing the soldiers want to do is go near the jungle.”

“By the three orbs!” exclaimed Hona.

“I’ve never heard a priest swear before.”

“And I’ve never seen a soldier who could think so much like a priest. You keep changing from when we first met. What you ask will be done. There is no choice. When we reach Harg, I will have a message sent by semaphore from Harg to Clang, then to Montia, and on to Montia II.”

“Coded?”

“Oh, yes. Very coded.”

“We should reach Harg soon. The winds are friendly. We will load the fire tubes and fire balls and hurry back to Montia. We can practice their use while we are flying.”

“I will stay in Harg and then travel to Kinsa where I have much to do,” Hona said.

“The betrayal?”

Hona nodded yes.

The winds continued to be favorable and the journey to Harg was quick. The Nara loitered in a circle beyond Harg until after the second sun had set and the deep gray before the darkness prevailed.

When the city’s lights could be seen, Hona searched for a certain pattern and guided Makin’s sure hand to a secret landing site just outside the city. Xanfolo didn’t like the idea of landing at a strange site after dark. Nor did the fact that the landing crew would be composed of priests offer him much in the way of reassurance. There was also the nagging question about the priests maintaining a secret landing site. He decided not to push the issue with Hona, but he would remember to factor such landing sites into his tactical military considerations.

When the carrier was secured, Hona led Xanfolo, Danomo, and twenty men to a nearby building. It appeared to be a storage shed, but cleverly hidden inside was a trapdoor.

“Underground?” asked Xanfolo.

“It is wiser to do the best work hidden under the ground,” replied Hona as he led them down a stairway and through a tunnel that opened out into a large chamber. Six tube-like objects, wrapped in cloth, were in plain view on the floor. Behind them were twenty large bags.

“I count six fire tubes,” Xanfolo said. “We discussed twenty.”

“In time there will be more,” Hona answered. “But now we only have ten, and we need four of them to learn from. Besides we have only one hundred twenty fire balls. You can use your six tubes twenty times each, or if you had twenty tubes you could use them six times.”

“I will return for the rest of the twenty and more fire balls,” Xanfolo said sharply.

Hona stiffened at the tone of his voice, then relaxed and smiled. “I will keep my bargain.” He handed Xanfolo a scroll. “Here are the instructions on how to use the fire tubes. They are a very simple weapon. You secure the tube; light the fuse on the small cylinder that holds the ball, put it in the large tube, and aim very quickly. I am not certain this will prove to be a powerful weapon, but it is perhaps better than dropping rocks.”

“I plan to use both,” Xanfolo laughed. “Come men. Load up and let us return to the Nara. We lift off as soon as we are aboard. Our next stop will be in Montia.”

When the Nara was aloft, Makin joined Xanfolo who was at the forward rail and deep in thought about what seemed to be an ever-growing number of unanswered questions that plagued him. “These bags we loaded hold the new weapons,” Makin sniffed. “This will mean more drill, a great deal more drill.”

Xanfolo smiled "There is much work to be done." He described how he thought the new tubes should be mounted. Makin would have to build six frames with swivels that could be moved about the deck.

"What about shields such as we have on the multipults?" Makin asked, his curiosity overcoming his distaste for interrupting normal routines.

"Yes, but the shields must be far enough apart, like wings, so the tube can be swiveled through a wide range of movement. I also want a large bag of foam made ready. No, make that several bags. They should be about a pike's length in diameter. Weight them so that when tied to a rope forty paces long, it sails out behind us at about our level. We will need all this done by the next midpoint of lighttime."

"Then it will be a busy darktime," Makin said.

"And a busier lighttime," Xanfolo added.

Later, when Xanfolo rested beside Nessa, she whispered in his ear, "What are you going to do with Pie?"

"Learn from him all I can about the barbarians. Why?"

"Will he sleep across the door outside our chamber in the palace?"

"What?"

"That's where he is now, asleep outside our compartment. He told me that he must guard you against danger."

"I assigned him to Makin and Danomo's compartment. Well, let him sleep. Believe me; any place is better for sleep than the jungle."

By mid-point of the suns, two of the frames for the fire tubes were ready, except for the shield. Work on the other four was in progress. The bag of foam floated about forty paces behind the Nara. A large face which was supposed to be an image of Prince Tagge covered the side of the bag opposite the Nara.

With the six men who were assigned to operate one of the two mounted tubes gathered close by, and the balance of the topside crew paying close attention, Xanfolo gingerly took a fire ball from a bag. It was actually a cylinder about a short sword's length long. There was a heavy string about a finger's length long trailing out the bottom of the cylinder. Somehow, thought Xanfolo, the process did not seem as simple as Hona had explained it or his drawing showed.

"Step one," he announced loudly. "Make the tube look toward the target." His crew easily wheeled the frame into position at the rim rail. "Step two, light the fuse."

Danomo handed him a small liguite torch. It took a blink of the eye for the fuse to catch."

"Step three, put the fire ball into the tube." When the cylinder was placed in the tube, it did not slide to the bottom. "Lift the tube," Xanfolo called urgently as he lifted the end of the tube so the cylinder could slide to the bottom. "Aim tube at the target," Xanfolo said as he quickly aimed, and then stepped back.

They waited for the fire tube to act as Xanfolo had described it after the battle for the Zorn outpost, but nothing happened. Just as Xanfolo was beginning to consider tilting the tube to examine the cylinder, there was a flash of light and a fiery streak which missed the target by several pike lengths. The tube, not being secured, turned rapidly like a vane in the wind, broke free of its frame, and spun across the deck causing crew members to scramble.

Pie was on his knees, his head bowed to the deck, his hands firmly clasped about Xanfolo's ankle.

Xanfolo smiled and announced, "Well, at least it would have hit a target as big as the Tagge! We do need to make a few changes in our procedure, I believe."

"And if the changes do not work, maybe we should give these weapons to the Pontans?" Makin asked.

Xanfolo remembered then that when Hona had used the fire tube at the Zorn outpost, he held it tightly butted into the ground.

As he raised the badly frightened Pie to his feet, Xanfolo said, "Let's try again. Remount the tube in the swivel. This time, I'll hold the tube tight so it can't jump about the deck."

"Are you sure?" a worried Makin asked. "Will that be safe?"

"Probably," answered Xanfolo. "I saw Hona do it and survive. If he can, then so can I."

"Then we have crewmen who can do the job," Makin said.

"I agree, but not until I do it first."

The tube was secured again into the swivel and another fire ball cylinder lifted gingerly out of the storage bag. The fuse was lighted and the fire ball cylinder dropped into the elevated end. Then Xanfolo lined up the tube on the target, and held it in place.

A great whooshing sound and flash of fire occurred at the same time. A fiery ball hurtled through the air and struck the target which seemed to explode into bits and pieces of flaming cloth and clots of foam. The crew of the Nara stared in disbelief and not a little fear at what the fire tube had done.

"Well, Sub-captain Makin, what do you think of our little tube now?" asked Xanfolo.

"Truly, it is a fearsome weapon. I think we will need three men on each of the six tubes. Two can move the frame easily, and the third can carry the fireballs. One should handle the fire balls, one should light the fuse and load, and the third should aim the tube and hold it down. We also need to make some wooden balls for loading practice. We will use our bowmen for this job because they have a trained eye for a target. With a little drill we can promise the Pontans an interesting time if they attack us again."

Xanfolo smiled. The Nara's bowmen would indeed be busy. "When you think they are ready, have each tube team launch two fire balls. On the second launch, I want to see all six tubes as close together as possible and the launch made all at the same time so it will appear that a wall of flame come forth from the Nara."

"It will be done," promised Makin.

Xanfolo had one other objective that he knew must be accomplished on this flight. From the battle carrier's stores, certain metal rods were used to make a ring in which a man could stand with arms outstretched. He also asked Pie to make a drum. The young barbarian worked quickly and by the next light, he had an instrument he thought satisfactory. The crew listened with great interest as Pie practiced.

However, the loudness of the powerful drum soon became a problem for the crew. This was especially true in the center tube which acted like a huge echoing chamber. It was not long before the crew began grumbling about "barbarian noise-makers." Xanfolo had to gently suggest to Pie that he had practiced enough.

"What use is this drum?" Makin asked, sensing that Xanfolo was hatching an idea.

"I hope to use it to prevent a war," Xanfolo answered. "When we reach Montia, we will fly very low over the jungle and approach our landing from that direction. Then our barbarian friend can take up position in the bottom entry bay and beat his message. Maybe we can get the barbarians to call off their attack on Montia II."

"But how will the barbarians around the colony know of this message?"

"They use drums to communicate the same as we do with semaphores," Xanfolo answered. "It seems to work well in the deep jungle. I heard drums when we were on patrol, but at the time, I thought it was just noise made by jungle beasts."

"Somehow," Makin replied, "I think this metal ring and drum matter has to do with what is written in the sealed scroll you gave me."

"You are correct, but for now, it is better that you do not understand. I'm not even certain that I understand as much as I'd like."

As the journey wore on, the tube crews practiced their movements about the deck. When they became proficient, the weapons were joined in combinations. Finally all six fire tubes plus twelve multipults were arranged to form a curved but solid line at the rim rail. The remaining unassigned bowmen were formed in line behind the heavy equipment, and then moved as one unit, first to the right wing and then the left wing.

The combination had been Makin's idea, and Xanfolo was pleased that his sub-captain not only adapted himself to the new idea, but worked hard to improve on the original concept. Makin had also warmed to the use of Danomo's talents as an artist. He drew the dispositions on scrolls so the most efficient movements could be plotted first and then tested on the deck.

The crew's progress in these evolutions was demonstrated for Xanfolo and Nessa. Makin staged a mock battle drill which he led from a position atop the bridge with Danomo as his signaler. The drill ended with the simultaneous launching of all six fire tubes, the effect being a great burst of fiery balls screaming across the sky.

"My compliments, Sub-captain Makin," Xanfolo said so that most of the crew could hear. "You have put together a good combination here. When we have two more battle carriers to fly with the Nara, we need not fear any alliance of powers that could be brought against us. And with royal approval, which I believe will be forthcoming," and he smiled at Nessa who nodded in agreement, "I promote Sub-captain Makin to the rank of captain and commander of the Nara. Captain Makin, I am your guest, sir."

"My thanks," he stammered, "To you, Xanfolo, and to you, my Lady."

Later, when they were watching the setting of the suns at the rim rail, Nessa turned to Xanfolo. There was a softness in her eyes.

"You made two people very happy with your announcement. Makin is happy because he is now a captain with an important command. And I am happy because my consort will not be flying off on a battle carrier that isn't even named after me."

"If I became your consort," Xanfolo replied, "I would have a great many duties."

"I suppose so, but your first duty will be to me, and that will be the law of the realm."

"There will be other battle carriers, and all will be armed with fire tubes."

"I agree, but only because I trust your judgment," Nessa said. "Do you really believe they will be needed? Do you see war, I mean real war, such as back in the times the chanters tell about?"

“Yes, but we may avoid at least some trouble this darktime, I think. There is much trouble ahead with the League, Ponta, and the priests. It could easily end in a great war, and we must be ready.”

She did not reply, turning her head back to observe the disappearance of the suns. There was more that he wanted to tell her. The death of Consana, the false consort, would be a terrible blow. Would she believe him if he explained what was to happen and why it had to happen? No, he told himself. Let Nessa accept the death of her father. She must never know the message that Pie’s drum would send during this darkness now spreading across the sky.

When she did not respond, Xanfolo waited silently beside her. “We pass over the jungle this darktime,” he offered. “Pie will drum a message to his people that should work to keep Montia II safe.”

“I hope your plan works. I fear for my father’s life.”

“A colony can be a very dangerous place,” Xanfolo said carefully.

“If anything happens to my father, I’ll never forgive my mother. I have never understood why he had to go into exile. That was a terrible penalty he had to pay, and which I also pay.”

“Maybe you will know what really happened by this rainy season or the next.”

“I doubt it,” she replied. “Some royal secrets are hidden in hard-to-find places such as the deepest recesses of royal hearts.”

At the midpoint of the darkness, Nessa learned at least part of Xanfolo’s plans for what was to come. She was aghast. Xanfolo’s plan was frightening. She even ordered Makin to forbid the mission, but Xanfolo reminded both Nessa and Makin that in the absence of the consort, he was in charge of all Montian soldiers. “Now,” he commanded, “Make ready.”

Xanfolo took his position. He lay flat on his back in the middle of the metal ring. Placed closely together and ready to be ignited were liguite torches attached to the ring. Xanfolo was securely strapped to a support beam that spanned the ring.

“Raise me up and light the torches,” he ordered. “Then over the side with me.”

Slowly Xanfolo, appearing to be standing in a ring of fire, descended until the rope fastened around the top of the rim was fully extended. As Xanfolo dropped through the dark, Pie’s drum beat a furious, commanding rhythm. He stopped briefly, and then started again.

Xanfolo, secure against the beam, raised his arms and waved them slowly. From his perch, he could see the shadows of trees passing below. Makin had indeed made a fine calculation as to how long the rope should be in order for Xanfolo to appear to be walking in a circle of flame just above the treetops.

Myths do have their value, he told himself.

Chapter 24

The Nara arrived at the Montian landing field shortly after the rise of the first sun, and from his position at the forward rim rail, Xanfolo could see that another battle carrier was at anchor.

“A Kinsan battle carrier, I believe. What is this about?” he muttered to Nessa who stood at his side.

Captain Makin brought the Nara to ground on the first attempt to land. The Montian carrier was anchored a goodly distance from the Kinsan. Xanfolo watched closely. In his mind, he was seeing the Kinsan carrier as the coveted second Montian craft. He dipped his head, a gesture that was really an internal salute to his own foresight in making the landing field large enough to handle several battle carriers.

As he and Nessa stepped down, a small reception party moved forward from a group of crewmen. Xanfolo was mildly surprised. Although Nessa’s presence surely justified a reception, the Nara had closed on the city in darkness. How had the palace functionaries known of the Nara’s approach?

He smiled when he saw that the reception party was headed by Dammer. His smile faded when he saw that the Hargian cavalryman was accompanied by priests. There was a priest on either side of him, and four more behind him. The two standing by him wore the gold of Kinsa and the black of Ponta. Two of the priests in the second line wore the colors of Soren and two others wore the colors of Harg. Then his quick eyes noted that the Montian bowmen were scattered about the area, but all within easy range of the reception party.

Standing apart and waiting to greet him were the sub-captains in charge of the royal guards and the regiment of archers.

“Danomo, Pie, stand on either side of our royal lady and beware,” Xanfolo warned tersely. “I think there is trouble here. Those priests have the look of assassins.”

Makin, at the rim rail high above, also thought the situation looked dangerous. He quickly ordered ten crewmen at the bottom to form an honor guard for the Nara’s passengers. The order was signaled to the bridge and then passed on through the voice tube to the subaltern in charge at the bottom exit portal. The subaltern and his men hurried to take up position around the crown princess. The two sub-captains approached and saluted.

Chandora, the leader of the royal guards, spoke in low tones, addressing his remarks to Xanfolo. “There is grim trouble, my Lord.”

At his use of the royal title, Nessa’s eyes opened wide, but she smiled her approval.

“Give the command, my Lord, and the trouble will be quickly eliminated,” Chandora answered.

“No!” Nessa’s voice cut through the fresh new light like a sharp sword.

Both sub-captains bowed. The leader of the bowmen spoke gruffly. “Your Highness, if they try, they are dead. I promise you.”

“So, let us hear what my Death Circle friend, Dammer, has to say about his business here,” Xanfolo said. “No deaths are necessary, at least for the present. Keep a close eye on the priests, though. Unless I have lost my eyes, they all wear swords under their robes. Stay here while I greet my old friend.”

Xanfolo walked forward and presented himself before Dammer whose face was red with embarrassment. Both men bowed formally, Dammer first since his was only the rank of a subaltern even though his position as a representative of the League was a significant elevation.

“I did not think to meet an old friend with so much formality,” Xanfolo said. “Nor did I expect to see a good Hargian cavalryman harnessed by gunas instead of atop one.”

Dammer smiled at Xanfolo’s jibe at the priests, and then his face sobered. “This is not a pleasant duty. I would rather be in a Death Circle fighting the barbos than do what I must.”

“Then you must do your duty,” replied Xanfolo. “Let me hear the worst of it.”

Dammer came to a stiff attention. “I arrest you in the name of the League and tell you that you are to come with me to Kinsa now where you will face trial on charges of high treason!”

After he finished his declaration, Dammer looked down at the ground. “I think you should kill me now,” he muttered. “If you go to Kinsa, they,” and he jerked his head back toward the priests behind him, “mean to kill you after the formality of a trial. Maybe you won’t even live to see Kinsa. If the Kinsan war bird does not fall to pieces while in flight, this lot with me might well push you over the rim rail.”

“Does Queen Nara know of this matter?” asked Xanfolo.

“She knows that I am here to arrest you. When she was informed upon our arrival, she held us confined here at the landing field. She said it was for our own safety, and that if the Montian people knew, they would tear us apart with their bare hands.”

“Good,” replied Xanfolo. “She speaks the truth about the people, I think. As for throwing me off the Kinsan battle carrier, I would walk through the sky to Kinsa!”

“By the three orbs, I think you could do it!”

“Do not worry about the assassins in priestly robes who would probably cut both our throats if they got the chance,” Xanfolo said. “While you are here, and if I go to Kinsa, they will remain as guests of the Montian army.”

He turned and beckoned to his sub-captains who were waiting in front of an increasingly impatient Nessa. Both responded at a quick trot, their hands on the hilts of their swords. “Make the priests comfortable. Find an empty guna stall, put them in it, board it up, and guard them closely. For their own well-being, give them only water and the army field ration, guna food, until further orders.”

Both sub-captains smiled at the thought, then saluted and turned to shout orders.

“I trust you will find these arrangements for your escort satisfactory?” Xanfolo asked Dammer.

“You have given them quarters far better than their rank deserves,” laughed Dammer.

“Come with me, old friend,” Xanfolo said. “Later we may have to kill each other, but for now, we are two brothers-in-arms who stood together in the Death Circle. You must meet the crown princess. She is the one in the cadet’s uniform.”

While Xanfolo led Dammer to meet Nessa, the Montian bowmen quickly hustled the stony-faced priests from the landing field. These priests would no longer pose problems.

Later, after Xanfolo and Nessa had refreshed themselves, they and Dammer met with Queen Nara in a chamber made to hold secrets as tightly as a Soren vase held water.

Queen Nara eyed Nessa’s uniform with gentle amusement. “Now a crown princess soon to become a sub-captain?” she asked.

“I like these uniforms. They are made for action,” Nessa responded.

“When I am gone and you are queen, I think you will reign as our mothers did long ago. Your throne will be a chariot and the sword your scepter.”

“My chariot will fly in the sky and bark fire at my enemies,” Nessa replied.

Xanfolo raised his eyebrows. Nessa caught his signal and knew that she must say no more about barking fire while Dammer was present.

Queen Nara leaned forward and raised her hand for silence. She softly asked Dammer, “What are the charges against my captain?”

Dammer reached inside his tunic. He produced a scroll and handed it to the queen. “There are a great many charges, but their purpose is to make the captain appear to be guilty of something. The most serious charges are two in number. One has to do with the crowning of Queen Talisa of Clang, and the second deals with blasphemy. This charge is especially being pushed by the priests.”

“Blasphemy?” questioned Nessa. “No one has been charged with that in my memory except for those who are members of the Secret Society.”

“What is the nature of the blasphemy?” asked Queen Nara.

“The priests charge that Xanfolo has stepped over the boundary of religious sensitivity by walking through the dark sky, and did on one occasion, leap high into the sky and not come down again as a right-thinking person would have done.”

Xanfolo burst into laughter. “Are they serious?”

“Yes, they are deadly serious,” Dammer answered.

“Well, it sounds as if the League has its work cut out,” Xanfolo said. “I could live to be an old man while the League debates over whether to have a wooden stake driven through my heart, a death such as that of Lomae the poet, or have me diskerpulted to oblivion as I sent a member of the Secret Society, or maybe just a casual lopping off of my head.”

“Don’t overlook another alternative,” said Nessa with a grating harshness. “The League may follow all the formalities, but with its major hope that either on the way to Kinsa or during the trial in Kinsa, assassins will solve the problem. Do you see it, Queen Mother?”

Queen Nara answered quickly. “It seems obvious enough. The armies of at least four realms would never agree to an execution of my brave captain, and least of all, at the orders

of the priests. I agree with the crown princess, and I wish now to add that I value her opinion. I believe she is no longer a child. She has become a woman who knows how to lead a city.”

Nessa was surprised by her mother’s statement. She started to reply, but kept her silence when her mother raised her hand.

“I have one more point to make regarding the Crown Princess Nessa. I have decided there will be a royal marriage in Montia.”

“When?” Nessa asked eagerly.

“I thought at the start of the rainy season,” Queen Nara replied.

“A perfect time,” said a delighted Nessa. “The timing could not be better.”

Queen Nara stared closely at Nessa and murmured, “And timing in this matter is not without importance.”

Nessa stared innocently up at the ceiling and then turned to Xanfolo.

“During the rainy season, the Nara cannot fly. The trails are impossible. We will have to devote ourselves to a long wedding party that the chanters will sing about for a generation to come.”

“By my sword,” swore Dammer, forgetting where he was and who was present, “I come to arrest the captain on charges that require his death, and end up planning his wedding. But if we live, please invite me to the wedding. I have heard about Montian wedding celebrations. They are renowned throughout the realms!”

They broke up in laughter at Dammer’s praise of Montian ceremonies and the parties that celebrated the ceremonies, but Xanfolo’s laughter was forced. He knew there could be no wedding at the start of the rainy season. By then the palace would be hung in green sheeting laced with black stitching, a mark of mourning that must last through an entire change of seasons, from one rainy season to the next. Consana, father and consort, would soon be dead. His first death must be kept a secret, and mourned only by Xanfolo himself while those who were closest to the consort would mourn the death of the false Consana.

A string of curses ran through his mind, and he dearly wished that he had killed Hona. Then he backed away from that thought. If it had not been for Hona, he would not have been able to save Montia II. Concern for the colony and the consort’s tragedy led him back to the marriage. He guessed it was an attempt on the part of the queen to patch up family matters with Nessa. Announcing the marriage might be a way for the queen to...

“See, my Lord hears of his wedding date and already he has the bridegroom’s long face,” laughed Dammer.

“No! No, I look forward to the wedding,” Xanfolo protested. “I was just wondering what part Hona played in the bringing of these charges.”

Dammer shook his head. “None, I think. Gossip in Kinsa has it that he barely escaped charges himself.”

“How was this indictment made without the Montian ambassador’s protest?” Queen Nara asked.

“In secret as you might expect, Your Highness,” answered Dammer. “Soren now has the center chair and two votes. Those two votes plus the Pontan one are enough to bring an indictment on the worst of the charges. However, it takes a majority of the seven ambassadors to convict and order death for the guilty.”

“This is nothing more than legalized assassination!” Nessa challenged, her mood changing from one of happiness to one better suited for the knife in the middle of darkness. “The answer is easy enough: a royal decree forbidding Xanfolo to leave Montia. What could the League do about it? Nothing!”

Queen Nara smiled at her daughter. “Your idea is very much in agreement with what I want, but what consequences would we face?”

“It would mean war,” Xanfolo said. “As good as the Nara is, we could never fight against Ponta’s six battle carriers, the Kinsan four, and the Hargian two. That is twelve to one. I am ready to fight four at once and hope to win, though that would not be easy.”

“What harm does it do us if they float around over our heads?” Nessa asked. “We have the rainy season to make ready for any trouble they can bring us on the ground.”

“If they can control the sky with so many battle carriers, they can stop our convoys. We would not be able to receive supplies from Montia II or Clang, or through Clang from other cities,” Xanfolo replied.

“We would still have the jungle to draw from,” said Nessa, “and especially now with Pie to help us.”

Xanfolo nodded. “That is a big factor, but the other five cities would eventually mass an army against us that would wear us down. We would lose our strength until the end.”

“And then?” asked Queen Nara.

“After such a long siege,” Xanfolo replied, “the armies against us in the field would sack Montia.”

Queen Nara shook her head. “I have heard enough of consequences. Can we split off any of the other cities? Can we find at least one ally?”

“There is one possibility,” Xanfolo said with a sideways glance at Queen Nara.

“No, I do not like that alternative,” she answered quickly.

“If you are talking about shipping Xanfolo off to Talisa in exchange for an alliance, then let’s not wait for the League to act. Let’s drop rocks on the Clangian palace,” Nessa said angrily.

Dammer had been silent during much of the discussion. He seemed to be more than a little shaken by what appeared to be a growing sentiment for war. “I would urge that some way short of war might be found,” he said hesitantly. “If Montia is crushed, then how long will it be before the other cities are at each other’s throats?”

“I agree,” said Xanfolo.

“What is this, the soldiers begging off a war?” asked Nessa.

“It is not avoiding war that we discuss,” Xanfolo said, “but rather how not to lose a war. My Lady Nessa did have a good idea, though.”

“Dropping rocks on the Clangian palace?” asked Queen Nara, her eyes expressing mock disbelief.

“Not quite that,” replied Xanfolo. “If we made raids on the fields where the Pontans, Hargians, and Kinsans store their battle carriers, then the Nara would rule the sky. We could easily destroy their convoys. If we had two or three more carriers like the Nara, we need not fear the League or any combination of enemies.”

Dammer disagreed. “For every two you build, the Kinsans are rich enough to build four.”

“Then we are truly isolated and survive only under the dictates of the League,” Queen Nara said pensively. Then she smiled at Dammer. “I see you wear the uniform of a cavalryman. Have you served as long as your face tells me?”

“Yes to both, My Lady.”

“Do you long for the days in the past when a thousand lancers on gunas could master all they wished, and that done between the rising and setting of the two suns?”

“Your Highness has read my mind,” Dammer replied with a slight bow.

Xanfolo stood up and left the table. He strolled, deep in thought, to the wall where he traced unseen patterns in the rough surface. He turned and faced the two royal women and Dammer.

“When we were on patrol in the jungle, we lost a priest who panicked when the barbarians charged. He ran into the river where a terrible water reptile wrapped itself around him and dragged him screaming under the river’s surface.”

“What an ugly story!” exclaimed Nessa, wrinkling her nose.

“You went into the jungle and survived?” asked Dammer. “Here’s another good tale men will tell over and over again once they learn of the exploit.”

“More about that later,” Xanfolo promised. “What we must not do is panic before these charges and run into a river whose surface hides a terrible end.”

“What are you suggesting?” asked Queen Nara.

Xanfolo turned to her and smiled, but it was a cold smile that created a chill, a hint of death to come. Dammer’s hand drifted to his sword.

“We must go into the river and find the beast and kill it,” Xanfolo answered.

“Is this a riddle?” asked Nessa impatiently.

“No. I must go to Kinsa and face the charges. Then I must hunt down and kill the beast that threatens us.”

“The League will have you killed. The League is the beast!” cried Nessa.

“I think not,” Xanfolo replied. “Unless there is treachery beyond what I already expect, Soren will cast its two votes and Ponta its one vote against me. Kinsa, Harg, and Clang will vote to support me. Unfortunately, Montia cannot vote since I am a Montian.”

Queen Nara was puzzled. “You trust your life to a queen’s mercy after having refused her offer of marriage?”

“If Talisa betrays Xanfolo, then she is a dead queen,” Nessa promised bitterly.

“The League has not yet recognized the Clangian princess as the legitimate queen,” Dammer noted. “The Clangian ambassador is the same one who served the regent.”

“But he will still do the queen’s bidding,” Xanfolo said, “or else.” He followed with a motion that mimicked Pie’s hand drawn quickly across the throat.

“Maybe so, but I would not want to trust any League official too far. If you are right, that leaves assassins,” said Dammer, “and I have thought all along that the Pontans would use them to do their dirty work. I cannot guarantee your safety, my Montian friend, but I pledge that if there are assassins, I will be at your side, and my sword will be at your service.”

“That is good to hear,” said Queen Nara. Then she turned to Xanfolo and continued, “All you have to do is avoid the assassins. That is not the easiest of accomplishments, but it is a reasonable plan. I am a little surprised to find such a streak of cleverness in you. I am not used to that in soldiers, and in you most of all.”

Xanfolo shook his head. “I fear your earlier judgments of me are correct, Your Highness. Most of my ideas seldom work out as I plan. There are always changes forced upon me.”

“Are we in agreement on this plan?” Queen Nara asked, her eyes questioning Nessa.

“Yes,” Nessa answered quickly, “but I and my sword go along.”

“There will be great danger, My Lady!” said a horrified Dammer. “I could never agree to risk the life of a royal crown princess.”

Xanfolo opened his tunic. “See that little scar, old friend? The crown princess is very skilled with a sword, and certainly doesn’t lack the resolve to be a good fighter. Besides, I think you would rather walk in the dark sky than go against my lady on this.”

“I am going,” Nessa said. “I will take the Montian seat at the League. That way I will have a voice, and there will be no possibility of our ambassador practicing treachery instead of diplomacy. We will also take Pie and Danomo as aides.”

“Is it wise to take the barbarian?” asked Queen Nara.

“Yes,” Xanfolo answered “His appearance will stir the Kinsan curiosity.”

“And the Kinsan consideration of profit,” Nessa added.

“It is settled,” Xanfolo announced. He turned and stood at attention before Dammer. “Sir, I have the honor of being your prisoner.”

Chapter 25

The first matter to be decided at the trial was the presence of weapons in the League's chamber which was a violation of League rules. Prince Tagge had arrived with several Pontan noblemen, and all refused to surrender their swords. The League was faced with either giving in to the Pontans or fighting them. A compromise of sorts was arranged, with the Kinsans leading the way. The Pontans were allowed to keep their weapons, and an equal number of others in the chamber could also remain armed. The second group included Dammer, who sat at a small table with Xanfolo. Nessa kept her sword, as did Danomo who sat on a chair behind Xanfolo.

Pie kept his spear-sword, a wicked looking weapon that was half blade and half shaft. He had crafted it during his brief stay in Montia and during the flying trip to the trial on the Kinsan battle carrier. The young barbarian sat cross-legged on the floor beside Danomo. His eyes constantly scanned the chamber for trouble. He frequently hefted his weapon and then stared meaningfully at the ambassadors in their chairs behind a long table that faced Xanfolo and Dammer.

Another royal visitor, the Kinsan Duke of Zorn, also kept his sword. He sat on a bench beside Prince Tagge of Ponta, a fact that Xanfolo noted with disgust. That was the kind of gratitude that could be expected from the Kinsans, he thought.

A second procedural battle came as a surprise to the League's ambassadors. Nessa argued long and well that under the circumstances, Xanfolo, the accused, should keep his weapon because there was as much to be feared from assassins as any punishment the League might order. Xanfolo watched with deep interest as Nessa performed brilliantly. She had changed so much since he first went away on the mission to rescue Talisa. Then she had been a child-woman, but now he could see in her the strengths of both her mother and father.

The vote on whether Xanfolo could remain armed was six to zero against. Nessa, of course, could not vote because she represented Montia, but surprisingly, the Clangian ambassador offered another possibility. Xanfolo's sword could be held by Dammer. The Clangian ambassador was supported by Kinsa and Harg, but was voted against by Ponta, Soren, and the center chair which was occupied by a Soren. A tie vote might well free Xanfolo, but no one at the ambassadors' table was sure whether he could at least sit as an accused man with his sword close by.

There was a flurry of activity at the long table. How was this dilemma to be resolved? Priestly advisors huddled with the nervous ambassadors and conferred at length while Prince Tagge sat back, his face frozen in anger. A similar three-three vote on the charges would free Xanfolo. It appeared that the Clangian ambassador was going to support the Montian captain.

Only Nessa sat alone. No priests buzzed advice in her ears. She smiled contentedly as she watched the other ambassadors attempting to unravel this seemingly minor point. Then she arose from the table. Immediately both Prince Tagge and the Duke of Zorn were on their feet. They bowed as she strolled across the chamber and nodded pleasantly at them.

"Gentlemen," she announced while demoting them considerably in rank. "We seem to have reached a sticking point here."

The observers packed in behind the railing caught her words and answered with a burst of laughter. Both the prince and the duke smiled.

"Does the gracious and beautiful Crown Princess of Montia have a solution to the problem?" asked the duke.

“Why, yes, now that you mention it. I believe it would be an act of high soldierly honor if our prince here squeezed the nose of his ambassador and changed his vote.”

This was greeted by more laughter, but not even a smile from the prince. A look of cold hatred spilled down from his eyes and formed the base for a growing sneer.

“Well, Prince?” asked the smiling duke. “Can you squeeze the nose of an ambassador? It seems a small enough matter.” He sauntered over and peered down at the Pontan ambassador’s face. “On the other hand, after examining the nose, I say you have a major project here.”

Another burst of laughter spread across the chamber, but the laughter stopped instantly when Prince Tagge raised his hand and spoke sharply.

“The Pontan ambassador will change his vote.”

The overweight and large-nosed ambassador spluttered, “Change? Change my vote? This is most unusual. I thought...”

“Change your vote or your head and your nose will be on the floor by your feet!” snarled the Prince.

The Pontan ambassador quickly turned to the Soren in the center chair and announced, “Ponta votes to allow the accused to have his weapon held beside him by the League representative!”

The Soren in the center chair immediately rose and scuttled down the line to the other Soren ambassador. After a whispered conference, he returned to his chair and announced, “The League now stands unanimous on the matter of the accused man’s sword.”

Nessa made a deep bow to the prince and the duke. They ceremoniously bowed in return. After that she strolled casually past the accused man’s table and winked at him.

Dammer turned to Xanfolo. “You’ve already won, if this vote is any example. Clang supported you on the sword. Why not on your life?”

“Maybe,” replied Xanfolo. “But this seems too easy.”

There was a delay while a Kinsan priest left the room to retrieve Xanfolo’s weapon. During this recess, Xanfolo studied the chamber carefully. It was large enough to accommodate the participants plus a number of spectators. The room was shaped like a rectangle with a long table and seven chairs near the back wall. Against the wall priest advisors sat on stools while waiting to be called for consultation. High on the long back wall were narrow windows that allowed shafts of sunlight to strike into the benches for the spectators along the opposite wall. Was there a way, he wondered, for anyone to stand outside one of the high windows? Was there a support beam of some kind that an archer could use as a platform?

On his left was a section filled with ornate benches. The duke and the prince, both of royal blood, sat alone in the front row. Behind the prince were six Pontans, either of noble blood or at least of a captain’s rank. Six Pontans? What did that mean? An easy answer. There were six Pontan battle carriers! They must be somewhere nearby or maybe up in the sky. Suddenly he understood what Prince Tagge had in mind. Not only were the Pontans seeking his own death, they also planned to destroy the Montian battle carrier, the Nara, as well. He also understood that the Kinsans had been very clever when the League had forbid his coming to Kinsa and the trial with the Nara.

On Xanfolo’s right, and at least twenty paces away, was the far end of the chamber. There were two doors that could be opened to form one large entryway, which was probably useful for ceremonies. He leaned over to Dammer.

“Where do the doors lead?”

“To a corridor where the quarters for the ambassadors and their assistants are located.”

“Is there an outside entrance?”

“Yes, in back.” Dammer nodded in the direction of the ambassadors.

“Then that is one of the directions the assassins will come from,” Xanfolo said.

“We will be ready,” Dammer replied grimly.

Xanfolo motioned for Danomo to come close. He whispered in the young soldier’s ear. Danomo hurried across the chamber and whispered in Nessa’s ear. She quickly glanced at the doors and back at Xanfolo. She smiled and nodded while Danomo returned to his post.

That left only the area behind the table for the accused. There were three rows of benches on either side of the main entry doors. There was a rail, not higher than a sword’s length, separating the benches from the small table. Xanfolo noted that Pie was now sitting so he could face this possible threat. The young barbarian was extremely quick-witted, and Xanfolo had no doubt that Pie would make good use of his strange weapon.

The benches were packed. As nearly as Xanfolo could tell, they were all men, and even though the weather did not warrant it, some wore cloaks which could easily conceal daggers or even swords. He counted ten such men. There were also numerous priests who were notorious for concealing weapons under their robes.

His study ended, and the ambassadors stopped their consultations when a Kinsan priest hurried into the chamber bearing the Sword of Loran.

The Soren in the center chair rapped his bony knuckles against the table. The many conversations stopped.

“If there are no more procedural problems,” and he glared down the table at Nessa who smiled in return, “we can continue this trial. The ambassador from Ponta will read the charges.”

The Pontan ambassador stood, opened a scroll, and after a discreet glance at Prince Tagge to make sure there were no changes, he read the accusations.

The list was long, and just as Dammer had predicted, the two most serious charges were given a lengthy description. Xanfolo had disobeyed his orders from the League by crowning a queen without approval. In addition, he had committed blasphemy by pretending to have supernatural powers.

“Where is Hona?” Xanfolo whispered.

“I have not seen the Kinsan priest since we were crowning a queen in Clang,” replied Dammer.

Witnesses against Xanfolo were called. He was surprised when two Clangian priests testified that he had crowned Talisa queen. Surely their cooperation with the League did not have her approval. At least, the Clangian ambassador was proving faithful, even though the late regent had appointed him.

Subaltern Dammer was called to give testimony against Xanfolo. The Pontan ambassador had a battle on his hands. Dammer answered every question with a question and claimed the charges were a pile of guna droppings. Instead of the word *droppings* he used a form of slang common to the cavalry which caused an outburst of laughter from the spectators. However, he did admit that Xanfolo had crowned the Queen of Clang when he had no League authority to do so. He also admitted that the Montian captain had actually

walked in the dark sky. His attempts to explain how and why it was done were cut off by the Pontan.

The League's case against Xanfolo ended with an impassioned plea by the Pontan ambassador to put Xanfolo to death in order to save the League.

"After all," the ambassador said ominously, "if the Montian captain lives, a terrible war could be the result. The Montian must die!"

After a brief flurry of whispered consultations between the ambassadors, the Soren rapped the table again.

"What does the accused have to say in his defense?"

Xanfolo started to rise when the Duke of Zorn slowly got to his feet. He assumed a pose of casual ease that bordered on insolence.

"Before the accused speaks, I would have this time for myself."

The duke paused as he acknowledged the bowed assent from the Soren in the center chair.

"The captain from Montia is a brave soldier. If his services were not so highly valued in Montia," and he paused again to tip his head toward Nessa, "then this captain would be more than welcome in the service of Kinsa. I am aware that there are many in the other five cities who believe that Kinsa's good fortune has weakened resolve, and that a stiffening of the Kinsan spine would end many problems. It may be that Kinsa will find ways to do just that."

He paused yet again, his head down, his eyes staring at the floor. When he raised his head there was an ugly arrogance, a Pontan-like harshness across his countenance. Those who could see his face were startled.

"Consider what your lot would be," he continued, his voice cracking the words like the weighted tip of a whip, "if Kinsans had more spine."

Then he smiled again and became more like his usual self, more indolent than insolent. "These charges are nonsense, of course. Kinsa will never forget the brave captain who saved the outpost at Zorn. Kinsa will vote to acquit the captain."

He sat down again, ignoring Prince Tagge's angry stare.

The Soren in the center chair rapped the table. "Does the accused wish to speak?"

Xanfolo stood and faced the ambassadors.

"There is little I could add to the speech made by the Duke of Zorn on my behalf. Nor am I inclined to beg for mercy. I do call for one witness. I call for the Kinsan priest named Hona to appear."

"Your request will be honored," the Soren replied.

A golden-robed Kinsan priest sitting on a stool behind the central chair quickly moved to the Soren's side and whispered in his ear.

The Soren nodded and then addressed Xanfolo.

"The League would honor your request, but unfortunately it cannot. The Kinsan priest is dead."

Xanfolo was stunned. Hona dead? How could this be?

"Assassins," Dammer growled loudly.

Both the Duke of Zorn and the Kinsan ambassador turned pale. The duke's hand edged nervously toward his sword.

"Can the League tell me how the priest died?" inquired Xanfolo, struggling to keep control of his face, and at the same time shut off the meaning of this news so his mind could remain uncluttered.

Again the Kinsan priest approached and whispered in the Soren's ear. When the priest finished, the Soren smiled politely at Xanfolo.

"I am informed that the death of the priest was a matter involving problems within the Kinsan priesthood, and is not a subject of concern for the League."

Whatever else Xanfolo might have felt for or against the priest, and the scales were evenly balanced in this sense, he would never forget that it was Hona who had given Montia six very good reasons why the city would survive. The six fire tubes were a good enough reason. Maybe that act caused Hona's death.

"Does the accused have any other witnesses he wishes to call?" asked the Soren.

"No," replied Xanfolo in a low voice. "I have no wish to pronounce a death sentence on anyone else."

"Very well. That being the case, I can see no reason why the League should delay any longer its vote concerning the fate of the accused."

"Wait! Montia will be heard even if she cannot vote," cried Nessa as she rose from her seat.

The Soren looked at the other ambassadors and with a voice tinged with resignation said, "Montia will be heard."

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"And so," Nessa continued, "Let the League hear Montia's reply first hand. I accept her proposal in the name of my mother, Queen Nara of Montia, for I am here, as you all know, as an ambassador with plenipotentiary powers. You may vote now, if it is necessary."

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"You had better pay more attention to military drill than poetry readings, duke," warned Nessa. "You had better find a way to shake Kinsa out of its silliness or the Pontans will end up owning Kinsa."

"I am considering changes," the duke said softly as he bowed.

Chapter 26

As they stepped off the anchored Kinsan carrier, Xanfolo knew that Hona had succeeded in putting their plan in motion before he died. The entire corps of two hundred thirty-seven young men and boys formed the honor guard for their return. The corps stood at a somber attention behind the army's top officers. Each of the officers and cadets wore a black sash across their green tunics. The battle standards were festooned with black streamers.

Captain Makin and Sub-captain Chandora stepped forward, their pace measured and slow, their faces showing a flinty brown hardness, a formal bearing seldom exhibited by Montians for any purpose save honor and death. The two officers presented themselves before Nessa and Xanfolo.

"My Lady," Makin said softly, "I have the sad duty to tell you that your father, the Consort of Montia, is dead."

Nessa staggered as Xanfolo steadied her by taking her arm. Her eyes opened wide in disbelief, but tears rolled down her cheeks.

"I'm sorry," Xanfolo mumbled as he tried to console her.

"How did it happen?" she asked.

"We do not know for certain," Makin answered. "From what we got off the semaphore, a barbarian snuck in, probably disguised as a worker. He ran away, but the garrison is searching for him."

"The barbarians will pay dearly for this!" vowed Nessa, her grief giving way to instinctive anger.

Pie sensed her anger as well when he heard her words. He looked warily about. His hand reached back toward his sword-spear which nestled in a long sheath slung across his back.

Xanfolo touched him on the shoulder and looked into his eyes. There was no need for words. The young barbarian understood that the Fonof would protect him. His hand dropped to his side, but he still kept a close watch.

Nessa was silent as they marched to the palace. The avenue was empty. If there were people in the public houses, they made no noise.

When they reached the palace, they learned that the queen was in seclusion and would see no one. Xanfolo and Nessa retired to her quarters where they sat in near-darkness. He held her hands, gently trying to comfort her.

"My mother was as much my father's killer as the assassin," Nessa said bitterly as she broke her long silence. "She exiled him to that awful place. And over what? Some silly nonsense about the Secret Society and those fools in the League. If my father's death is the saddest point in my life, my happiest will be when my mother dies."

It was not her words that troubled Xanfolo. He had expected a flash of hot anger, typical of Montians, which would fade almost as quickly as it appeared. What he heard in her voice was a deep and hard bitterness. Was there never to be an end to the consequences of his plan to save Montia II? Surely he could not be blamed. Of that he was certain. Consana was not Consana. The death of the false Consana saved the colony. Hona came to mind, and he scoured the memory of the Kinsan priest. It was Hona who set this problem in motion with his use of the mask. It was Hona who wished to destroy the Secret Society.

Nessa's hands felt small in his. There was no strength left in her fingers. He knew she was heartsick with grief. He wanted to tell her the truth, to soften the blow, but would she then hate him for not having exposed the false Consana immediately? If he had done so, would anyone have believed him? Hona was certain that the Montian people would not believe such a story.

He tried to reassure himself that he had made the right decisions, but in doing so, had he failed her? He remembered Nessa boldly stepping forward to face more than twenty assassins. She was truly of royal blood mixed with that of the consort, the man who would die twice. As he mulled over her cleverness and bravery, he found himself coming to the conclusion that he really did want Nessa. He wanted to be her consort. He had always accepted the idea before, but on a casual basis, as something that would inevitably happen in the future. Now Xanfolo realized that he loved Nessa more dearly than life itself. He was in an impossible situation. Deep in his mind was the beginning of a hot rage. He was feeling the need to smash walls, to strike out at the elusive demons that plagued him.

His eyes, suddenly alert, lifted from the barely-seen floor, the spell of doubts gone. There was a sound that was not right, but he could not identify it. His hand reached out to the table by the chairs. He found the liguite torch and an igniter. The torch blazed with an eye-stunning brightness.

"I want darkness," Nessa hissed as she raised a hand to shield her eyes.

"Quiet. We are not alone," whispered Xanfolo as he got to his feet and silently drew his sword.

Nessa was instantly at his side, a dagger in her hand. They heard the brushing sound of water being gently roiled and quickly turned to face the pool. Slowly a head and two piercing eyes rose up above the water's surface. The eyes stared at them.

"What is it?" cried Nessa, a thin edge of panic cracking her voice.

The head, nose, mouth, and chin appeared to float atop the water.

"Speak, head," growled Xanfolo. "Spirit, priest trickery, or assassin, it matters not to me."

Words came from the mouth of the head, "You who are known as the Fonof have proven false. I have come for the sword of Loran."

"Come and get it," taunted Xanfolo.

"Give me the sword, false Fonof," insisted the head.

"Oh, I'll loan it to your body, if you have one."

"Give me the sword. You have proven false."

"How? How have I proven false?"

"You destroyed the masked consort which was your duty, but you also betrayed the Secret Society people in the jungle. The barbarians believe you are the true Fonof, and they killed all my people. I am the only one left."

"What does this mean?" cried Nessa.

"Give me the sword, false Fonof," repeated the head.

"Never!"

The head slowly sank in the water. Xanfolo dropped his sword and handed the torch to Nessa while at the same time snatching the dagger from her hand.

"Call the guard!" he yelled as he dived headfirst into the pool.

The head was connected to a body with hands and feet. That much Xanfolo learned as the thrust of his dive took him to the bottom of the pool. At the bottom, instead of the small

closed drain, he felt an opening large enough to allow a thin man to squeeze through. This knowledge was registered in the blink of an eye as he pushed up from the bottom and struck quickly with the dagger. The intruder frantically tried to grapple with Xanfolo, but the Montian captain angrily drove his dagger into the man's belly. Xanfolo wrenched the dagger to one side and then back again before withdrawing it. He pulled the limp, but still alive intruder up so they both stood on the bottom of the pool with their heads out of the water.

As they surfaced, Xanfolo found himself looking at the cold steel of two pikes just a hand's length from his face. Nessa was crouched at the pool's edge, the sword of Loran in her hands and poised for a strike.

"Behold!" laughed Xanfolo. "Two heads! And one of these near death, I think. Pull him out and get more torches. Hurry!"

The guards dropped their pikes and hauled the dying man out of the pool and laid him on the floor. He was short and very thin. His face was painted with strange red designs.

"Who are you?" asked Xanfolo as he pulled himself from the pool and knelt down beside the dying man.

"I am the last of the secret ones," the man groaned. "You have killed the Secret Society."

"Liar!" Xanfolo laughed derisively.

"Give me the sword."

"Oh, I'm a cut above that. Before you die, tell me, how did I betray the society?"

"You walked," he gasped, "in a circle of light...through the darkness...your drum told the jungle people...we were false...they killed all but me."

The dying man tried to rise, but fell back, his open eyes fixed in a stare that saw nothing.

"That finishes him," said one of the guards.

Then from the man's lips came one last whispered plea, "Give me the sword."

Xanfolo got to his feet and sheathed the sword of Loran. "Now search him, though I doubt you will find anything. Turn out every available guard. Make sure the queen is safe. Ransack every corner, every chest, and every cupboard in the palace."

"He said he was the last," Nessa offered.

"I wouldn't be that fortunate," Xanfolo answered bitterly. He turned to the guards. "I want this pool drained, now. At the bottom you will find a secret entrance. Find out where it leads. Report to me when the work is done."

With the two pikemen following, Xanfolo gently guided Nessa to his quarters. After making sure the guards understood their instructions, he reassured Nessa. "You will be safe here and can rest."

Xanfolo's quarters in the palace were smaller than his rank warranted. A subaltern might expect as much at a hard duty post. There was a small table, a chair, a raised platform with cushions for sleeping, and windows near the ceiling for ventilation. There was also a rack from which hung his spare uniforms and the sword he had retired after the gift of the sword of Loran.

They sat on the edge of the platform. Nessa's eyes seemed to stare blankly at the floor. Her hands lay unconnected in her lap. She did not speak or move.

"Is there anything I can say to help?" he asked.

She sighed, raised her hand, and shook her hair back in place. "Did you have my father killed?" she asked in a low and tightly controlled voice.

“No, I did not.”

“What did the dead man mean, then?”

Xanfolo stood up and faced the opposite wall, his back to Nessa. After a pause, he turned and began his story from the time she knew when they had been visited by the member of the Secret Society who had urged them to go to Montia II. He took it step by step, through each twist and turn. She listened and did not change her expression when he told her how he learned that the real Consana, her father had died earlier, but that his death was kept a secret. Xanfolo explained how Consana had been replaced by a priest with a mask that became real, and how the priest had been trained to think like her father.

“But how did you know that Hona was telling the truth?” she asked. “Did he trick you into having my father killed?”

“No,” Xanfolo replied, but in his mind there was a moment of doubt. “No, because when we caught Pie, he explained why the barbarians wanted the false consort dead, and how they were going to annihilate Montia II in order to achieve that goal.”

“Didn’t you tell me that it was Hona who kept you from killing Pie?”

“Yes, and I gave that long thought, but not even Hona could have coordinated such a trick. He did not know my plans, or at least all of them.”

She smiled at him. It was a brief smile, and he was not sure of its meaning.

“Xan, you are not the hardest man in the realms to figure out. You do have a certain predictability. Did you know that Pie was telling his people to kill the secret ones?”

“No, I didn’t. He was supposed to tell his people not to attack the colony because the false consort was to be killed. I never told him I wanted the secret ones killed, though it doesn’t seem like a bad idea.”

“No, perhaps not,” Nessa said thoughtfully. “Certainly, that seems to have been part of Hona’s plan all along, at least as you have explained it. Were you used by Hona? Did you stumble into a trap laid by devious priests?”

“I had to consider the safety of the garrison at Montia II,” he responded stiffly. “I made the best decision I could under the circumstances.”

“Yes, I suppose so. However, maybe you should ask who framed the circumstances. Poor Xan,” she said softly. “But I warn you, if you ever do something like this to me again, I will kill you. My mother must never know of this or she might well kill you. This will have to be yet another royal family secret.”

There was a sound of scuffling outside the door. “Who’s there?” called Xanfolo as he drew his sword, strode across the room, and jerked open the door.

In the corridor was a determined Pie, his sword-spear at the ready. Facing him was an equally determined lady-in-waiting to the queen. A guard was standing by, uncertain about what to do next.

“She is one of us,” Xanfolo said to Pie.

“The queen requests your immediate presence, Captain,” the lady said while keeping close watch on Pie. “Please come with me.”

“At once,” replied Xanfolo. He turned to tell Nessa, but she was just behind him. “I will return soon. Try to rest.” And to Pie, “Guard the woman until I return.”

On the way to the queen’s chamber, Xanfolo wondered just what it was that the young barbarian had drummed to his jungle people that would make them kill the members of the Secret Society. Why did he do it? Was Pie really a barbarian? Nessa had raised a

number of ugly possibilities. He sighed as he weighed the idea that even barbarians have secrets and schemes designed to work their way into a man's mind.

The lady guided him to the same small room where he had been before. Queen Nara was seated at the table. She wore a black gown with a green sash. Her hair was shorn from her head. Her face was heavily powdered, giving her eyes the appearance of looking out from behind a white mask.

He bowed as the lady in waiting left and closed the door behind her. "My Lady," he acknowledged.

She stared at him and then asked, "You found another member of the Secret Society in Nessa's quarters?"

"Yes, my Queen."

"Is this part of a plot?" she asked. "Are the secret ones working with the barbarians in an effort to kill off the entire royal family? First my husband is killed by a barbarian, and now Nessa is threatened by a Secret Society member. Just where do you fit in all of this, Captain?"

Xanfolo shook his head. "The visitor came for me, not the Crown Princess Nessa. He wanted the sword back because he thought I had betrayed the Secret Society."

"And you killed him? Why?"

"It seemed the thing to do."

"How is Nessa bearing up under the death of her father?" Queen Nara asked. Xanfolo was more than willing to change the subject of the discussion. There was a sharp edge in the queen's voice that he had never heard before.

"She's been through a strange time," he replied. "She was both brave and wise at the trial. I owe her my life."

"Did she really face more than thirty assassins by herself?"

"It was more than twenty which is enough. She was alone for no more than the blink of an eye before we formed a Death Circle."

"Does she hate me?"

"I don't know for certain. She is upset now. She does believe your treatment of her father was too harsh. Montia II is a hard place. I plan to relieve the garrison there more often than in the past."

"There cannot be a royal wedding now," Queen Nara said, jumping abruptly yet again to another concern. "We will remain in mourning from now through the rainy season, and on to the start of the next rainy season."

She stretched out her hand. Xanfolo quickly moved to her and knelt. Her hand caressed his cheek. Then she quickly withdrew her hand as if from the edge of a burning torch.

"Go back to Nessa now," she said sharply. "But take care that you do not fan her interest in revenge. There is enough trouble without a palace conspiracy against me."

"Your Excellency?"

"Go! Leave my chamber at once or you will be the next consort condemned to a life at Montia II!" she screamed.

Chapter 27

Far off over the wild ocean waters there hung dark cloudy ridges that disappeared into the sky at the top and into the waters at the bottom. The rainy season was coming near, as soon as five lighttimes away, but maybe longer. The winds would decide when.

Xanfolo read the sky as usual shortly after the first sunrise despite being in a foul mood. The queen was angry at him, and when he returned to his quarters after his disturbing session with the queen, Nessa had barred the door. She shouted through the door that she wanted to be alone with her grief, so he slept as best he could in the common quarters used by the guards.

The one bright spot since the rise of the first sun was a report from the guards who had worked all through the darkness to drain Nessa's pool and investigate the opening at the bottom. Sub-captain Chandora reported that there was a remarkable series of water locks and piping made from Montia's Balme wood. The pipes led to the cavern under the city that carried away the wastes.

"Send a patrol into the cavern," Xanfolo had ordered. "That's not a pleasant assignment, but it must be done. Wherever there are pools in the palace, put bars across the bottom. When the rainy season begins, place guards at the entry points to the cavern. If anyone is hiding there, they will have to come out or drown when the rains come."

Xanfolo continued to scan the sky. He all but forced his mind away from his cares and the past until he was lost in the pleasant thought of taking a long voyage on the Nara. There were the lands beyond the mountains that could be explored, but first, he would have to find a way to get a carrier over the craggy barriers. If that was accomplished, what would he find on the other side?

He was startled out of his reverie when he heard his name shouted. A young subaltern was running toward him. Xanfolo recognized him as having been in charge of a diskerpault on the Nara. Makin had apparently promoted him.

The subaltern stopped and saluted. "Subaltern Chiano reporting, sir!" Very carefully saying each word clearly as he had been drilled, but with a barely suppressed excitement, he continued the ritual.

"Captain Makin sends his respects, sir. He informs you that the semaphore reports six Pontan battle carriers are raiding our convoy trails." The young subaltern, having delivered his message correctly, could not restrain himself and longer. "By my sword, sir. The whole Pontan war fleet!"

Xanfolo smiled. "My compliments to Captain Makin. Copies of the report are to be given immediately to the queen and to the crown princess. Captain Makin is to complete his preparations for flight."

Forgetting his military etiquette, the young subaltern asked, "Are we going after them, sir?"

"Indeed we are!" replied Xanfolo.

The young officer saluted and turned. He took two very proper steps, and then broke into a run.

Nearby guards were summoned and dispatched as messengers. Subalterns Dammer and Danomo, and the barbarian, Pie, were to report immediately to the Nara. A messenger was also sent to bring sub-captain Chandora and his officers.

Xanfolo also sent for the Montian high priest and the sub-captains of all the regiments. He ordered a scroll and pen be brought to him which was quickly done. Using the bench for his table, he wrote several lines, and then taking a ring from his finger, he dipped it in ink and pressed it against the scroll.

This finished his preparations. Now he had to wait while his orders produced results. Obviously, the Pontans had followed the Nara home from the trial. Prince Tagge had all six of the carriers at Kinsa during the trial just as Xanfolo thought. Not being able to trap either himself or the Nara at Kinsa, Prince Tagge had come to Montia to finish the job.

It did not take long for his orders to produce action. The presence of a Pontan war fleet was spur enough for the tardiest. The high priest of Montia arrived first with two assistants. Chandora arrived next. The sub-captains of the cadet corps, the cavalry, the bowmen, and the pikemen followed close behind. They gathered around the bench and sat on the ground.

"There is not much time, so I will speak to the point," Xanfolo said. "There are six Pontan battle carriers attacking our convoys. I don't know that else they intend. The Nara leaves instantly to engage them. My purpose will be to give the Pontans a battle that will greatly reduce their ability to do more mischief."

He produced the scroll and continued, "I have written here my promotion of sub-captain Chandora to captain. The scroll is his written authority to command all in my absence. It is my wish that all our soldiers, even the cadets, stand ready for battle. Cavalry patrols are to probe the trail to Clang and the trail to Montia II. I doubt if the Pontans can muster much of a ground attack at present, but we must make certain there are no enemy forces secreted close to the city. The Montian priests have arms and trained men. No, don't deny it."

Xanfolo saw the beginning of a protest forming on the head priest's face and he waved angrily as he spoke.

"I know all there is to know about the training of priests to use weapons. The priests who fight are to be drawn up in a regiment and take their orders from the regular officers. And, Captain Chandora, if the priests give you any problems at all, kill them. Start with the high priest and make his death come slowly. Give him ample time to reflect upon his life."

Chandora smiled as he promptly acknowledged the order. "Your command will be carried out with an exact promptness."

Xanfolo nodded in return and paused before continuing to issue his orders.

"I have only one thing left to say, a point you all learned the first moment you entered the cadet corps. The queen dies only after her last soldier is dead. Good fortune to you all."

As the officers and priests hurried away to their duties, Captain Chandora approached Xanfolo.

"There is a personal question, sir. A hard one, but necessary, I think, if I'm to take command during your absence." Chandora did not add that the absence was surely going to be permanent.

"Ask it."

"Is there anything I should know about the Secret Society or assassins?"

Xanfolo gazed at the newly-made captain. Chandora obviously was not a fool. He would make a good captain and maybe a future consort if necessary.

"Yes, there is much that I could tell you, but I think you will be better served going in without my knowledge. I can say though, that you must trust no one. Do what you sense is

right, but be prepared to see that your best plans have consequences you never intended. You face more hazards than I. All I have to do is fight six Pontan battle carriers. Death is at least a reasonable consequence.”

After Chandora saluted and left to carry out his greatly expanded duties, Xanfolo turned and glanced briefly at the palace. He decided that there was no need for goodbyes. That would only cloud his mind. Besides, there was no reason to believe that Nessa was willing to see him. What mattered now was getting the Nara into the sky and finding the Pontans.

Makin was ready when Xanfolo reached the base, and the Nara soared into the sky on its mission. All weapons were ready. The crewmen moved about their various tasks with the efficiency Makin had drilled into them. Their faces showed a hard resolution that cannot come from drill, but rather good selection of brave men. Danomo was assigned to the looking tube, a position of responsibility he would stay with until the Pontan war fleet was sighted. Xanfolo hoped the looking tube would give the Nara an advantage. If the Nara spotted the Pontans before the Pontans saw them, then Makin would have a chance to put the Nara into the best fighting position.

At the forward rim rail, Xanfolo and Makin made their plans. Xanfolo explained, “At six to one, we need a very simple set of plans if we are to achieve success.”

“What do we consider success?” asked Makin.

“We cannot win. We both know that, but we can make their victory a sorry one. We can hurt them enough to reduce their power. I would very much like to destroy three of their carriers and make the remaining three long for a lengthy stay at their home base. That would be a satisfactory outcome.”

“In other words, what we have here is a Death Circle in the sky,” Makin said thoughtfully. “I’ve never had the honor of being in a Death Circle.”

Xanfolo laughed. “I’ve been in three and survived. Maybe the ancient term has lost its meaning.”

“If so, this journey will restore it,” Makin replied. “How do we handle the command?”

“I will be in the battle line,” Xanfolo answered. “You will command the Nara.” He paused as he squinted upwards at the kites. “I think they will harry us with four carriers while the other two go high for our kites. What I suggest is that we attack the two high carriers.”

“Attack? At six to one odds?”

“Yes, if possible. We want a position against the two high carriers so we can run abreast, the Nara on the inside curve of the flight pattern, then the first Pontan carrier, and then the second.”

“Then we are looking for a long battle?” asked Makin.

“True. The longer the better. If we can last long enough, the Pontans might get caught by the approaching rainy season. If they continue the battle to that point, they will all be destroyed.”

“And we, too?”

“A reasonable price.”

The Nara flew in a circle over the jungle, and by the next rising of the first sun, curved back toward the trail to Montia II. Makin kept the carrier at its maximum height. When Xanfolo questioned his purpose, Makin explained that by staying at the maximum height, the Pontans could not go higher and attack the kites. That was an interesting solution,

Xanfolo admitted. He did not tell Makin that the Pontans could remain low and continue to destroy convoys until the Nara was forced to come down in an effort to protect the helpless men running the convoys. But after reflection, he decided that Makin was correct. The Pontans would have to conform to the Nara's movements. They did not come all this was just to harry convoys. Also, they had to be aware that they must succeed in their primary mission, destroy the Nara and its captain, before the arrival of the rainy season.

He paused briefly at the thought that if he were dead, the crew of the Nara would not have to go through the battle. If he surrendered himself to the Pontans, Prince Tagge might be satisfied and leave Montia and the Nara alone. Just as he had sacrificed the false consort at Montia II to save the colony, shouldn't he sacrifice himself to save the Nara and probably Montia? He shook his head at the thought. He and his sword were the mainstays of the Montian defense. Then he wondered if he was simply fooling himself. Finally, he grew angry. There was too much thought. Before his assignment to save Talisa, his life had been simple. Now there was a question with many answers to every move he made. He longed for the sight of the Pontan battle fleet.

Shortly after the rise of the second sun, Danomo cried, "I have them in the looking tube!"

Xanfolo ran to the tube and peered in the end as Danomo stepped back. Makin hurried from his place on the bridge. Xanfolo gave him his chance at the tube.

"It is a splendid sight. Six battle carriers in a formation like stars in the dark sky," he said softly, and then resumed his professional manner. "They are well below us. It will take them until at least midpoint to come up to us since they do not yet see us. We can tighten our circle so we are on the inside of the flight pattern. We will at least start the battle with the advantage."

Not long after the Nara began its delicate dance to achieve the advantage sought by Makin, the Pontans discovered the Nara and made their adjustments to gain height and position. When the Pontans finally rose to a level with the Nara, they found themselves misaligned. They flew six abreast, with the Nara making a seventh, and on the inside of a curving course. Xanfolo could see that the five outside carriers were frantically trying to maneuver inward, but they were so far out of position, so far apart, that they were effectively out of the opening phase of the battle.

The closest Pontan had the best chance. Its larger kites gave it more swiftness. As the range closed, Xanfolo readied his battle line. The six fire tubes were in the center with four multipults on either side. The bowmen lay flat on the deck behind the center of the line. Xanfolo took position just behind the center, between the line and the bowmen. Standing by him with drawn swords were Danomo, Dammer and Pie.

Makin brought the Nara around in a tight circle, but the Pontan carrier still edged closer and actually gained distance.

Xanfolo's eyes narrowed as the Pontans tested the range with a disk. The whirling, black edge grew larger as it neared the Montian carrier. He had wanted to launch the first disk, but now his crew instead, instead of the Pontans, watched the first sign of death coming toward them.

"Steady now," he shouted as the disk fell short of the Nara. He decided that since he could not launch first, he would wait until the Pontan came close. Even though the Pontan had four disks to the Nara's two, the Pontans could only bring two to bear on the Montian carrier.

As the Pontan edged closer, a large boarding party could be seen gathering at its rim rail. Two more Pontan diskers came whirling through the sky. Xanfolo braced himself as they slammed into the Nara's side. Xanfolo turned to a signaler standing nearby and said one word, "Now!"

The signal was waved to the bridge, and the Nara suddenly careened toward the Pontan carrier. The distance was close enough now for the multipults. The eagerness for battle could easily be seen on the Pontan faces crowded at their rim rail.

Both carriers launched multipults at the same time. Two of the deadly pults actually collided in the sky. The rest skimmed across both decks. Men on both carriers fell, the pults slicing through their bodies with deadly effect. Pontan arrows whispered across and clattered against the shields of the fire tubes and multipults. Clawed hooks with trailing ropes came flying through the sky from the Pontan carrier. Some caught on the Nara's rim rail.

"Cut those hooks!" cried Xanfolo. "Tubemen, light your fuses and aim at the most Pontans you can see. Let's give them some fire to warm them. Bowmen, give them your arrows after the fire."

The tubemen sprang to the fire tubes and rattled through their drill. Shouts from both carriers ceased. In the few eye blinks it took for the fuses to burn, the Pontans somehow grasped the idea that something new and terrible was about to happen.

The tubes roared. A wall of flame flooded over the top deck of the Pontan carrier. The smoke cleared quickly. The Nara's bowmen leaped forward to find targets.

On the Pontan top deck, men tried desperately to beat out the fires that consumed their clothing. Some in utter desperation threw their flaming bodies over the rim rail and fell to a fiery death. The deck of the Pontan carrier was afire, and oozing foam could be seen. One of the fire balls had smashed through the crowd of Pontans and struck the center bridge. What was left of the bridge burned brightly.

The Nara's bowmen slowly lowered their bows. There seemed no reason to send arrows into what was already dead and burning.

Makin was the first to recover from the shock of seeing such devastation. He ordered the kitemen to bring the Nara back into its curved track. The lurching of the airship broke the spell cast by the new weapon.

"I have lived too long," Dammer lamented. "This is a kind of war that has no honor. My time is past."

Pie lay with his forehead pressed against the deck, his arms outstretched toward Xanfolo. He repeated over and over, "True Fonof, true Fonof."

"See to the wounded," Xanfolo ordered Danomo who then passed the word to the signaler. But the signal was unnecessary. The Montian doctor was already making his way across the deck.

The Nara continued on its track, a long circle, with the other five Pontan carriers still trying to close. The smoke from the stricken but flyable carrier faded away. It was limping for far-off Ponta.

Xanfolo nodded approval as Makin signaled from the bridge that the crew was to go on shifts with most resting and eating. The darkness would be on them soon, though that did not necessarily mean the end of the battle. There would be a huge full moon which would light the sky enough so the nearest Pontan carriers could see the Nara if they stayed close during the period of darkness before the moon arose.

He glanced about. Pie sat on the deck behind him, waiting patiently for whatever came next. Danomo supervised the carrying of the dead and wounded below. Dammer sat brooding atop a diskerpult. The old cavalryman was greatly troubled by what he had seen, but Xanfolo saw the matter differently. He did not have the luxury of dwelling in the past. His was the responsibility to protect Montia. Honor was an empty word if there was no Montia.

Darkness came and the five Pontan carriers faded from view. Xanfolo held a brief meeting with Makin. "Hold our present path through the darkness," he ordered, and then remembering that Makin was now a captain and in command of the Nara, he added, "At least, I think that is a good idea."

"I think so, too," Makin said. "Our objective isn't to run away, so we need to do what the Pontans think they wish. They will calculate our circular path and probably detach two or three carriers to head us off while the other two chase."

"Well stated, Makin. That is what I would do also. I hope we do not have to fight in the darkness. We will lose our ability to see them through the looking tube while there is still time to make course changes."

"And we lose our signals as well. Everything will have to be done by shouting," Makin said. "Of course, if we are still fighting when the suns are up, we should be nearly over Montia. Our people will be able to see the battle."

"Then we will have to fight especially well," Xanfolo replied grimly.

The Nara continued on its circular course. While it seemed as if they were barely moving, Xanfolo knew the carrier was making its swiftest time. The kites were stretched out almost to the limits of the rope guides, and a firm wind was pushing hard. On this leg of the circle, there was still a wind blowing from the ocean toward the mountains. At this rate, they would come around the circle and be forced to greatly reduce their swiftness. The kites would have to pull against a different wind, but the Pontans would face the same problem.

The great shining moon dominated the sky and provided all the illumination necessary for battle. Xanfolo stationed an extra lookout whose only function was to stare at the moon to look for a Pontan battle carrier crossing its path. His eyesight would be greatly reduced by staring at the brightest object in the sky, but it was better to have just one man with temporarily ruined vision than to have other lookouts hurting their night vision.

The first warning of trouble came from the lookouts at the bottom of the Nara on the narrow platform around the central tube. A Pontan carrier had succeeded in rising until it was on an approach that put its top deck directly under the Nara. The Pontan kites loomed up above the Nara's rim rail. Xanfolo, wrapped in his cloak, had been napping by a diskerpult, but he leaped to his feet, instantly awake, and the Pontan battle tactic was clear in his mind. By hooking onto the Nara's bottom deck, the Pontans could attack the central tube and work their way to the tracked center which controlled the kites.

He shouted his orders to the launchers and the fire tube men. "Kill the Pontan kites!"

The kites were within range, almost blotting out the moon with their enormous size. As he ran toward the bridge, he called for the bowmen, Dammer, Danomo, and Pie to follow. When they gathered at the bridge, Makin reported calmly, "The Pontans have grappled onto us. They are in the bottom of the central tube, but we still hold most of the tube and the lateral passages."

At the point where the two inverted saucers were joined, there were lateral tunnels leading out to the control track for the kites. Makin had set his defensive line of six crewmen

at the junction of the two saucers. This wider area gave enough space for a circular walkway around the tube. He reported that the crewmen had rigged a liguite torch so that when the Pontans climbed the two ladders that ran from the bottom entry portal to the top deck, they would be easy targets.

“Come, Dammer, we have a post that can only be held with good hands and swords,” Xanfolo said.

The Hargian seemed to brighten at the prospect, but then grumbled, “It’s with good steel, but the central shaft is like a hole, and we are the little furry creatures in the hole.”

Xanfolo assigned Danomo to the top deck and motioned to Pie to go down the tube after the bowmen. As he followed Pie, he paused to listen to a last piece of advice from Makin.

“We cannot afford a stalemate,” he cautioned. “If we continue this way until the other four carriers come upon us, we won’t be able to maneuver. We must get free of this Pontan.”

“I know,” replied Xanfolo. “We must fight our way to the bottom and cut the grappling ropes. It will be a nasty business.”

The climb down was slow. Six men were on one ladder and seven on the other. Finally, they reached the center platform and joined the six crewmen already on watch there. Xanfolo could see that he had too many men for the small space. He sent two of the crewmen and four of his bowmen to work their way through a lateral tunnel to the control center. The two crewmen were assigned to defend from within the movable kite control center while the bowmen were to climb atop it. From there, they could use their arrows to keep the Pontans from climbing up the outside of the Nara in an effort to reach the kite controls.

The defenders of the tube did not have long to wait. Xanfolo saw two objects emerging from the darkness below. Pontans were coming up the ladders.

“Shields!” warned Dammer.

The lead Pontan on each ladder was holding a shield over his head with one arm and climbing with the other.

“Bowmen,” Xanfolo ordered quietly. “Send your arrows from opposite sides, now!”

The bows twanged and arrows instantly hit hard objects and fell harmlessly to the bottom of the tube.

“The second men and those following are also carrying shields on their arms,” Dammer said. “It’s like an armored worm coming up each ladder.”

The overhead shields reached the level of the platform. The defenders could see that the second and third men behind each of the two leaders did indeed carry shields on their outside arms.

The defenders stabbed downward, but their only result was to stop the climbing armored worms.

“Stand aside!” roared Dammer. He cleared room for his heavy cavalry sword to work. His first blow caught the edge of the shield and clearly staggered the Pontan. The second blow was so fierce that the shield bearer was thrown from the ladder. He fell to his death.

As Dammer worked his way around to the other ladder, two bowmen took his place and stared down at the unprotected face of the Pontan next in line. They sent two arrows into his head, and he dropped silently to the bottom.

One by one, the two archers cleared the ladder on their side while Dammer beat the shield on the other side until that bearer was dislodged. Two more archers began deadly execution. “It was a good idea, though it must have cost them at least ten men,” Xanfolo said

thoughtfully. He knew he didn't have a plan on how they were going to attack going down the ladder. *Bowmen can aim their bows up as well as down*, he told himself.

Dammer examined his sword. "This is hard work for a sword. What I need is a woodsman's ax, or maybe some of those rocks we carry in the bags off the rim rail."

Xanfolo had already started working on a wild scheme and Dammer's suggestion put the finishing touches on it. He edged his way to the speaking tube and whistled loudly.

"Bridge," was the quick reply.

"This is Xanfolo. Get Makin, now." The no-nonsense captain was at the tube in the blink of an eye. As Xanfolo told him what he wanted, he wished he could be there to see Makin's face. Carrying rocks aboard the Nara had never appealed to him.

When finished, Xanfolo turned to one of the lower deck crewmen. "Quick, now, man. Do you remember the target we used to test the fire tubes?"

"Yessir,"

"Can you make another?"

"We have spares. Captain Makin ordered several made in case the first was faulty or more than we needed for target practice."

"Can we get one of them here?"

"Yessir, though we will have to beat on it to get it through the lateral tunnel. We didn't fill it completely."

"That's perfect," Xanfolo said as he winked at Dammer. "Now, hurry!"

"I think something wild is about to happen," Dammer said. "Something like walking in the darkness?"

"Worse," laughed Xanfolo. "We are going to fly down the tube." He peered into one of the laterals but could see nothing. He had to move quickly so this Pontan carrier could be killed before the others joined the battle.

There was a whistling noise from the speaking tube. "Xanfolo here," he answered.

"Makin here," came the reply. "We have killed their kites. What you asked for is on its way down. Doubtless, you have a good reason for your request."

Makin's last comment brought smiles to the faces of the crewmen who were well aware that their two captains disagreed about the carrying of rocks aboard the Nara.

"Look sharp, now," Xanfolo cautioned. "There are ropes coming down. Watch out for the bags coming with the ropes."

Three ropes slowly descended with large bags of rocks tied to the coils.

"Take those bags and tie them to the rail around the walkway," Xanfolo ordered.

"Space them evenly. When I give the command, you must cut the bags and let the rocks fall. That will keep our friends below busy. After you cut the bags, grab the ropes and slide down. You will find Dammer, Pie, and myself waiting for you. Don't waste any time getting down the ropes. Your objective is the same as ours. We must cut the grappling ropes holding the Pontan carrier to us like a leech, and then they will drift into oblivion."

"I have a question," Dammer said dryly. "Just how are we going to fly down the tube ahead of the ropes?"

"You will see," Xanfolo said. "It will be a quick way down, that I promise you."

With some grunting and no small amount of muted cursing, crewmen pushed the bag filled with foam out of the lateral passage and onto the rail of the platform where it was precariously balanced.

Xanfolo punched it. His fist sank in almost to his wrist. "This will do the job!" he announced.

While Dammer slowly shook his head in disbelief, Xanfolo explained what was coming next. Two ropes were tied across the open tube. Then the bag was punched and beaten until it rested atop the ropes.

"Impossible!" cried Dammer. "When this bag hits with us on top of it, both the bag and our heads will be smashed like melons. On the whole, I'd rather ride a guna into battle instead of a foam bag."

"I'll take the bag every time," Xanfolo laughed. "Now, mount up."

He led the way, crawling out on the quivering bag until he reached the other side. He gripped his sword in one hand and with the other he held the bag's cloth as tightly as possible. Pie followed without question, though his eyes were wide. He would follow his Fonof regardless of the risk. When Dammer edged gingerly on the last space available on the bag's crunched surface, the ropes holding it swayed as if about to give way.

"Are you ready?" came a voice from below.

"We are ready. Release the rocks," ordered Xanfolo.

He had hoped he could hear the rocks banging their way down, but the sound was completely muffled. Then suddenly, he felt himself falling. He tightened his grip until the knuckles in his hand ached.

They heard the sound of a loud splash of garbage-laden water, and he felt himself bouncing up and then down again. He could feel the oozing foam on his legs and arms, and somewhere, partly under him and across Dammer, was Pie.

"Quick! If you are able, up and ready," he urged. Pie wiggled loose and stood up, and then fell again as he slipped on the foam. He jumped up and stepped to the open portal. He thrust his sword-spear outside the portal.

Dammer was on his feet, and seeing the moonlight outside the hatch, roared his battle cry and charged out the hatchway. He was hit from both sides by blades, one stabbing him in the shoulder, and the other hitting a rib on the other side, but he did not go down.

Xanfolo was out the hatch behind Dammer and took the other, both men beating back their foes. Pie leaped through the hatch and seeing a rope tied to the rail, instantly cut it. While Xanfolo beat back his man, Pie turned to help Dammer who was leaning against the side of the tube for support and trying to beat off his foe with the large cavalry sword. Pie slid in low, almost off the narrow platform, and hooked his bladed spear in the Pontan's belly. Pie looked up at Dammer and grinned.

"Well done, barbo! Well done."

Xanfolo heard the clank of a grappling hook fixing on the rail. The Pontan carrier's top deck was only a short climb below. He tried to glance back and nearly got spitted for his folly.

Help arrived when the bowmen leaped out of the entry hatch and took up positions. Now the numbers were better. The Pontans, knowing full well what was going to happen if they didn't hold the platform, fought without any signs of weakening.

Pie threw his weapon at a Pontan and pierced his chest. He pulled out a dagger which he gripped with his teeth and swung over the side, a leaping motion that with another one-handed grab of the bottom rail propelled him past the next defender. He crawled up on the platform between the Pontans. His dagger worked on them, pulling three of them down

before they understood what had happened. With a rush, the Montians overpowered the rest while Pie happily cut the ropes that bound the Pontan carrier to the Nara.

Suddenly, there were screams of anguish from the deck of the Pontan carrier, and then it seemed to fall away. The carrier drifted aimlessly with the wind on its last voyage.

Xanfolo rested, his hand holding the rail. It had been a hard fight. Then he saw the price that had been paid for the victory over the Pontan carrier. Dammer was down with two wounds. Two of the bowmen had been killed by arrows, and one of the crewmen stabbed to death. In the heat of the fighting, Xanfolo had not been aware that the Pontans on the carrier below them had tried to stop the attack by using arrows. When he looked up, he could see by the moonlight that there were arrows stuck in the Nara.

The surviving crewmen stayed behind as a bottom guard. The remaining bowmen helped Xanfolo rig Dammer for a lift to the top by the three ropes which still dangled down inside the tube.

Xanfolo used the speaking tube to tell Makin what had happened. Dammer slowly rose up the center tube, laughing through gasps of pain as he did so. "I seem to be going up and down a lot." Then Xanfolo and Pie began their long climb to the top deck.

After Dammer was laid out by the bridge for the doctor's attention, and the bowmen returned to their normal places, Xanfolo sat down with his back to the bridge. Makin sat down beside him, both men gratefully stretching their legs out on the deck.

"It has been a long darkness," Xanfolo said wearily.

"The first sun will rise soon," responded Makin.

"We lost good men in that little skirmish."

"I know," Makin said. "Dammer will be fine. The doctor said he did not have any dangerous wounds. It was an odd pattern, a sword wound on each side."

"Dammer was the first out of the hatch," Xanfolo said. "He knew they would be waiting on both sides. When he took the cuts, I was able to come out unhurt."

"What do you think will happen next?" asked Makin. There was no hint of fear in his voice. He asked the question the same way he would ask for what city they should set course.

"By now, the Pontans should be working to get position on us. When the first dawn comes, we will find at least two Pontan carriers flanking us and two more out ahead."

"I don't like that," Makin said.

"Being surrounded is seldom a pleasant experience," Xanfolo smiled.

"No, I don't mean that," replied Makin quickly. "What I don't like is that they will pride themselves on having out flown the Nara. They will never realize that we could break off whenever we wish."

"Well, when we are done with them they will be in no mood to gloat," mumbled Xanfolo.

"Oh, I meant to tell you, the new subaltern, Chiano, took over a fire tube and brought down the Pontan kites."

There was no answer from Xanfolo. Makin peered at him and saw that he was asleep. He quietly got to his feet and began checking his men and preparing for the rising of the first sun.

Xanfolo heard Makin's mention of Chiano, but in his mind, he kept getting him mixed up with Danomo. The mixing images of the two young soldiers faded as a new sound crept into his mind. He kept hearing the word *pardon, pardon, pardon*, and slowly he shook

his eyes open. Chiano was leaning over him saying, "Your pardon, sir. Your pardon, Captain Makin presents his respects and wants you to know that the Pontans are upon us."

Chapter 28

Xanfolo slowly got to his feet and peered in the open part of the bridge. A crewman standing by the speaking tube pointed toward the forward rim rail. Makin stood there, one hand behind his back, the other shielding his eyes as he stared at a Pontan carrier closing quickly on the Nara.

His stiffness forgotten, Xanfolo hurried to the rail. "We have company?" he asked.

"Correct," replied Makin. "They have us boxed, front, back, and both sides. They seem to be trying to close all at once, but the winds are not helping them."

"When and if all four lock on us, we are done for," Xanfolo said. "I had hoped we could prolong this battle, but this is the end of it. Well, enough of that. We must attack before they can achieve their plan."

Makin nodded. "I thought you would favor attack. What did you have in mind?"

"We take the one on the left and let the rest chase us," Xanfolo said thoughtfully. "The winds are right for such an attack. What I would like is to ram it hard in a sheering motion, slide around it as we both go forward, and then work free. Make them work their kites and go through more maneuvers to establish another box on us. Can we do it?"

"Yes, it is possible, but I cannot guarantee how tight we can make the curve. Also, there will be a period when our kites will be in jeopardy."

"We will have to risk it. But I promise you, we will make their deck so hot, they'll not be looking for our kites."

"It will be done," Makin said firmly.

Xanfolo yelled his orders, not waiting for the signaler to pass them along. The battle line was formed on the left. As before, Xanfolo stood behind the center with the remaining bowmen flat on the deck behind him.

"Danomo, you and Pie will stand at my side," Xanfolo ordered. "Subaltern Chiano, take command of the diskerpults! When I command, launch and keep launching."

Chiano had lost none of his enthusiasm for battle. He saluted cockily and dashed to the nearest diskerpult.

Makin brought the Nara over hard, its momentum carrying it toward the forward edge of the Pontan carrier, just as he had promised.

Xanfolo turned and waved his sword. Chiano saw the signal and as the captain lowered his arm, the diskerpults launched diskers. The first passed barely a sword's length over the Nara's battle line, causing everyone to instinctively duck. Xanfolo smiled at the young subaltern's willingness to take risks. As the diskers smashed into the Pontan carrier's side, he ordered the fire tubes into action.

"Launch by sequence of one," he commanded.

This was a new tactic Makin had devised. One by one the fire tubes were launched, a rippling of fire that reached out across the narrow gap between the carriers, one fire ball after another streaking across the Pontan deck with deadly effect. The diskerpults whirled into action again. One of the diskers slammed into the Pontan battle line scattering both men and multipults.

“Hold for volley launch,” Xanfolo ordered the tube men, “and brace yourselves for collision.”

The Nara sheered across the front quarter of the Pontan carrier. The impact caused the two carriers to bounce apart.

“Launch fire tubes,” screamed Xanfolo, his eyes scanning the faces of the Pontans on the other side of the gap. Those faces disappeared in the flame and smoke that engulfed the Pontan carrier’s forward half of the deck. The Nara continued to hold a tight circle, but was unable to make another bounce. The Pontan carrier came around with the Nara, and Xanfolo guessed that the Pontans had learned much about handling the giant carriers.

However, the Pontans were hurt, and even though the distance between the two carriers had opened up, both the diskers and the fire tubes were still able to inflict damage.

“Number one tube only. Aim for their bridge. Number six tube only, aim for a diskerpult,” Xanfolo ordered.

The Pontans recovered from the shock of the fire tube, and almost as if in answer to Xanfolo’s orders, the two Pontan diskerpults that could be brought to bear, launched. One sailed overhead, but the second slammed into the left wing of the Nara’s battle line throwing men and multipults and fire tubes across the deck before careening over the other side.

Xanfolo turned to Danomo. “Take the bowmen and restore our line as best you can.”

Danomo moved quickly to carry out his orders, while Xanfolo shifted the battle line around the rim rail to counter the changing positions of the two carriers.

Danomo hurried back to report, “Number one tube is ruined. We are remounting number two tube. Three of the four multipults are wrecked. We have enough men to handle the remaining weapons and a few extra. Our dead are numerous. The doctor has come forward to treat the injured. I have three of the injured who can still function back in the line.”

While Danomo made his report, both carriers launched diskers. As one of the diskers came at Xanfolo, he thought it was going to hit him. He raised his sword in salute to the Pontan launcher crew, barely completing the salute when the disker slammed into the foam just below the deck. The impact threw Xanfolo and the men closest to him to the deck, but no one as injured.

The second Pontan disker smashed into one of the Nara’s two diskerpults, utterly shattering the weapon and working harsh execution on the crew.

The Pontan carrier was also hurt in the exchange. The Nara retaliated with one disker and a fire ball that cut through the Pontan fighting line and slammed into the bridge. Most of the fighting line was down and the bridge was gone.

The Pontan carrier trailed away, but there was no time for celebration on the Nara. Another Pontan carrier was approaching from behind. An additional carrier was circling in from the front in a maneuver that would bring it into a head-on collision with the Nara. It would have to be dealt with first.

“Quickly now!” Xanfolo shouted. “Shift the battle line all the way forward.” While the crew carried out their drill under Danomo’s watchful eye, Xanfolo ran to the bridge. Makin met him at the entryway.

“The Pontan is going to ram us head-on,” Xanfolo said. “We must not let them grapple. Swing to one side or the other after we hit.”

“We will have to swing inside, if at all,” replied Makin. “If the Pontan actually crashes into us, we will probably lose our kites. By the way, my congratulations on the victory over that last Pontan. We are doing much better than I thought possible. We have put away two of the Pontan carriers.”

“Yes,” answered Xanfolo, “but we are losing men. Can you spare anyone from the crew below?”

Makin shook his head. “Not yet, but when we lose our kites, we will join the battle line on deck.”

They saluted and Xanfolo dashed across the deck to join the line cobbled together by Danomo. He passed the remaining diskerpult crew and Subaltern Chiano as they manhandled the pult’s carriage into position.

“You did well, Subaltern,” he shouted. “Launch on your own command. You’ve earned the honor.”

As Xanfolo neared the battle line, he heard Chiano urge his crew, “Forward the pult, boys! Forward the pult!”

Montia still has good men, he thought, and then he hoped they weren’t being wasted without purpose. Doubts left his mind when he saw Danomo’s battle line in position to meet the oncoming Pontan carrier. The front consisted of only one fire tube flanked by a multipult on each side. There was at least a disker’s width between the weapons.

The crew was flat on the deck. Farther back and near the rim rail on both sides of the front were two fire tubes and two multipults on one side and two fire tubes and one multipult on the other.

“An interesting alignment,” Xanfolo said as he reached Danomo’s side. “What is it supposed to hold?”

Danomo grinned. “It’s a little different, I guess, but we have well-drilled crews. When they are spread out and flat on the deck, the Pontan multipults cannot do as much damage. When the Pontans close in on us, we can rush forward and concentrate at the point of the attack. Whichever way the Pontan turns, we can hit with three fire balls instantly and all five on the second volley. Besides, we are facing carriers, not a guna cavalry charge.”

Xanfolo smiled despite a strong effort to keep from it. “We will quickly test your theory.”

The two carriers closed rapidly, and collision was certain. The signaler standing behind Xanfolo tapped him on the shoulder. “Signal from the bridge, sir. Two Pontan carriers closing fast on both flanks. Last dance begins.”

“Acknowledged,” said Xanfolo.

“Look!” cried Danomo. “It’s Dammer. He’s coming forward.”

The Hargian cavalryman, supported by Pie, hobbled past them. “The last Death Circle,” he growled, and kept going until he reached a multipult. Pie pulled a rope from around his waist and tied Dammer upright to the weapon’s shield so he could stand and wield his sword.

“It is that time,” agreed Xanfolo as Pie hurried back to stand nearby.

Chiano's diskerpult launched. The disker ripped into the Pontan side just below the deck. The one fire tube in the forward front belched its fire and smoke, and a flaming ball seared through the grim-faced Pontans massing at their rim rail. The fire ball took its toll, but the wounded and dead were quickly dragged away. The Pontans had learned to accept this new way of dying.

The Pontan diskerpults launched two diskers, but both passed harmlessly overhead. And then the collision!

It was a jarring hit, but men on both carriers kept their feet. The Pontans attacked and soon the sky was filled with multipult disks. Montians dropped to the deck. Hands, arms, legs, and a head were severed by the deadly sharp disks. Xanfolo wished the crew had stayed flat longer. Danomo had been right.

The remnants of the front line fell back, Dammer being dragged along with the multipult. The fire tubes on each side roared and sent their flaming balls into the mass of Pontans already throwing grappling hooks to catch the Nara. When the smoke from the fire tubes cleared, the grappling hooks held, but there was no mass of Pontans waiting to board.

The two fire balls from the left flank had scoured through the line on a left to right diagonal. The two fire balls from the right flank burned their way on an opposite diagonal. The four Montian bowmen still standing calmly shot arrow after arrow into the dazed survivors.

"Cut the grappling ropes," ordered Xanfolo. "Aim your fire tubes at the bridge."

The center tube launched a fire ball and hit the edge of the Pontan bridge. Before it could be reloaded, however, the Pontan sent two more diskers at close range. One disker smashed into the Nara's bridge, and the other slammed into the center fire tube. Men and tube were smashed into oblivion. The disker's impact caught both Xanfolo and Danomo, and both men tumbled to the deck.

Xanfolo stood up and shook his head until it cleared. Danomo lay quietly on the deck, his face pale and one leg bent uselessly under his body. Xanfolo felt a hand on his shoulder. It was Makin.

"Our kites are gone and the other two Pontans will be on us quickly now. I've ordered my men topside. We still have four multipults and four fire tubes, though we are almost out of fire balls. I have split the force into two groups, one to defend against the Pontan on the left, and the other group to defend against the Pontan on the right."

Xanfolo pushed the image of the young dead subaltern out of his mind. He nodded in agreement. "I will lead one battle line. You lead the other."

Chiano, still in action, sent another disker at the trailing Pontan carrier, its position having changed after the collision, its kites badly fouled. The disker flew on a true path and smashed into the Pontan's bridge.

"Well done!" shouted Xanfolo. Then he called across the deck, "We are down to two, Makin. Cheer up!"

"It has been a pleasure serving under your command," Makin replied in a voice heard by all as he saluted with his sword.

"Acknowledged," Xanfolo said softly.

As the weary crew pulled and pushed the remaining weapons to form two lines, he glanced over at Danomo's body. The young subaltern would never draw maps again.

He looked around for Pie. The barbarian was helping push the multipult with Dammer lashed to it. The cavalryman was singing barracks songs at the top of his voice. His leg was pinned against the multipult's frame by an arrow.

Four diskers whipped across the Nara's deck, two each from the closing Pontan carriers. The bridge remnants were shattered again and the Nara's last diskerpult destroyed, the carriage and two crewmen carried out over the side to their deaths below.

Xanfolo shouted across the deck to Makin, "Use the tubes to the last, but throw them over the side before the Pontans board us. They must not get the tubes."

Makin waved his agreement and then turned to face the attack. The tubes launched as the Pontans came within range. The fire balls struck their targets but did not stop the Pontans who retaliated with another volley of four diskers which smashed both battle lines.

As the Pontan carriers struck the drifting Nara, the fire tubes lashed out for the last time.

"Overboard with the tubes!" shouted Xanfolo.

Four men, each carrying a tube, ran to the rail and threw the tubes over. They returned to their shrinking battle lines in time to meet a volley of multipult disks. The disks sliced through the Montian defenders, leaving only a few men still standing.

"Fall back on what's left of the bridge. We'll defend there," Xanfolo called to Makin.

Pontan grappling hooks secured the Nara, and Pontan swordsmen crossed to the Nara's deck. Xanfolo and Makin and no more than twenty men, including wounded still capable of standing, waited in a semi-circle, their backs to the shattered bridge. Xanfolo stood in the middle, flanked by Makin and Pie. Their swords awaited the Pontans.

When the Pontans saw that victory was almost in their grasp, they rushed forward to finish off the defenders with cold steel. However, victory proved difficult to achieve. The Montians were compressed under the pressure of the attack, but the Pontans paid a terrible price for each step forward.

Pontan leaders shouted orders and the swordsmen fell back, leaving an open space between themselves and the Montians. Xanfolo guessed what was coming and ripped open his tunic.

Pontan bowmen trotted in line across the front and raised their bows.

"Cowards!" Xanfolo cried as the arrows were loosed. He felt a blinding, searing, screaming pain rip through his skull. For an instant, he could see nothing. Then his vision returned, though badly blurred. He could see the Pontan bowmen, their bows lowered. He was the only Montian still standing.

Xanfolo stood with an arrow transfixed through an eye, the point of the arrow sticking out through the side of his face, blood dripping down on his bare chest.

He smiled, and then taunted his adversaries. "Come Pontans. Come die with me!"

As his sight failed and he felt death coming, he heard a Pontan voice shout, "He is truly the man who walks in darkness. He cannot be killed!"

Chapter 29

Xanfolo knew he was totally enclosed in darkness, but he could hear the dull rumblings of the thunder that came with the rainy season. Somehow he was still alive. He had survived yet another Death Circle, but in doing so, he must have been taken prisoner by the Pontans. He flexed his fingers. They moved. He raised a hand. There were no restraints. Slowly he checked each limb. He ran a hand over his chest and found only a light cover. Then he remembered. He had been hit in the head by an arrow. He carefully raised his hands to his head. The bottom of his nose was uncovered, but bandages met his fingers above.

Xanfolo realized that if he was a prisoner, it must be in Montia. The muted rolling thunder meant the rainy season had started. Ponta had rains during the season, but not like Montia. The bandages were tight and smooth. He was being treated by a Montian doctor.

He tried to speak, but could only manage a few guttural sounds. His throat and mouth were dry. He cleared his throat and tried again. A scratchy and feeble sound resulted, but he could hear his words.

“Is anyone here?”

He heard a response. “Doctor, he is awake.”

“Where am I?” croaked Xanfolo.

He felt a hand gently lift his head, and then a cup at his lips. He drank the liquid. Its coolness soothed his throat.

“Where am I? What happened?”

“You are in the palace,” replied a voice which he recognized. It was the Nara’s doctor.

“Did anyone else survive besides us?”

“Not many,” replied the doctor.

“I must know what happened. Who survived? How?”

“Rest now,” advised the doctor. “You will learn all when you are stronger.”

“Now,” growled Xanfolo, “or your next assignment will be a one man outpost in the jungle near Montia II.”

“If you agree to rest quietly, I’ll tell you what I know.”

“Agreed.”

“What we didn’t observe during the fighting was the approach of the Kinsan and Hargian battle fleets.”

“All six carriers?” asked Xanfolo.

“I think so. The Pontans disengaged and fled, leaving behind quite a few of their men. The Kinsans grappled the Nara and took off the survivors.”

“And the Nara?”

“The Kinsans said there was no way to save the Nara. They cut her loose and let her go on a voyage to oblivion.”

“Survivors?”

“Your barbarian came through the battle without a scratch. Captain Makin was hit in the leg with an arrow and had a sword wound in his side. He is up and about, though hobbling. Subaltern Danomo was a little less fortunate.”

“He lives?”

“Yes, but he lost his foot and leg just below the knee. He had an infection, and I had to cut to save his life.”

“What about the crew?” Xanfolo asked.

“Seven crewmen also survived. They were all wounded, but they will live.”

“What’s wrong with my head?”

There was a long pause before the doctor spoke again.

“You were hit in the eye with an arrow. The point came out the side of your face. I’m sorry, but you lost that eye.”

Xanfolo raised his hand, palm up. “It happens sometimes in battle. My other eye?”

“It is not injured. We will take the bandages off soon and you will see again, but you will always have a blind side to defend. Even so, you are very fortunate. I was not sure that I could save your life. You have been in and out of consciousness for seventeen lighttimes.”

“Then I must have reports, immediately. So long asleep! Send Makin in at once.”

“But you agreed to rest.”

“Rest? By my sword, doctor! I’ve rested seventeen lighttimes. That is enough. Where is my sword?”

“Very well, I will have Makin come in, but no one else, and you must stay quiet. There is still much to heal.”

“I want to see Nessa, the crown princess. Where is she?”

There was another long pause. The doctor cleared his throat and answered, “She is indisposed.”

“I hear the sounds of a Soren in that reply. What has happened to Nessa?”

“Stay quiet,” the doctor replied. “I am going to find Captain Makin. We can have him carried in a chair. Rest now until we return.”

Xanfolo lay in dark silence, his eyes probing places in his mind that were even darker behind his eyes than in front. The doctor had truly spoken like a sly Soren. Where was Nessa? Did she still think him the cause of her father’s death at Montia II? And what of Queen Nara? Was she still in seclusion, in mourning? Had she decided that he posed more of a problem for the city than she was willing to accept? He remembered her parting words, wild words about palace conspiracies.

He heard men walking and breathing hard, and then the scraping of a chair on the floor.

“Captain? Are you awake?”

It was Makin. Xanfolo raised his hand in salute and answered, “Yes. How are your wounds?”

“Minor,” Makin replied. “The doctor is overly cautious in my case. I have been able to hobble about for two lighttimes now, only he doesn’t know it. Another lighttime and I’ll not need the chair.”

Xanfolo laughed softly. “I think the doctor knows about your efforts. Tell me, what happened on the Nara? How did we survive?”

“It was the arrival of the Kinsan carriers that brought an end to it. The two surviving Pontan carriers limped off for home. We broke Ponta’s back, although I fear that we did not put an end to Prince Tagge. According to the Kinsans, he stayed in Kinsa.”

“Some victory! Prince Tagge lives, and the Nara is dead. And Kinsa is supreme over all the cities.”

"True, but those are unavoidable consequences," Makin said calmly. "The Kinsans are not as aggressive as the Pontans. That gives us time to recover and build a new Nara and other carriers. We will need them, I think."

"Your voice has the sound of war in it. Explain."

However, it was the doctor's voice that Xanfolo heard next. "This is enough talk for now. You must rest, and you, Captain Makin, return to your quarters, and no more walking or I'll have you strapped down."

"Do you have your sword, Captain Makin?" asked Xanfolo.

"Yes, my belt and sword hang on my chair."

"Then kill this doctor so I can get some work done."

There was a pause followed by soft laughter. "I cannot kill the doctor," Makin said. "He is running down the corridor, and there is no way I can catch him."

"Good enough. He is a fine doctor, but doesn't seem to understand that people like you and I recover quickly. Now, tell me what has happened during my long sleep."

"Are you certain you are strong enough for this much talk?"

"Give me your sword and move closer," warned Xanfolo.

"Very well. Kinsa now controls the League and probably the priesthood as well. The Duke of Zorn is now the king of Kinsa."

"Murder?"

"No," answered Makin. "The old king was made to abdicate."

"Then we have a silly man in control of the most powerful city, the League, and the priesthood. The realms are in for hard times."

"Perhaps, but be careful about the Kinsan. Under that silliness there is hard metal. He has moved quickly and with great success to gather power."

"How so?"

"He has forced the Pontans to give up their control over Soren."

"Amazing! That makes the Kinsans masters of both Harg and Soren. We must strike an alliance with Clang at once. There is no time to lose."

"Too late," Makin said softly. "To gain Soren, the Kinsan had to give Ponta a sweet gift in return."

"What?" Xanfolo asked warily.

"Prince Tagge is to marry the Queen of Clang."

"No!" cried Xanfolo. "This cannot be!"

"Sad truth," Makin added.

"Then Montia is alone. The only city not under the Kinsan thumb."

"There is more sad truth, but I hesitate to tell you."

"Speak, man!"

"The League has decreed that after the rainy season ends, the Kinsan king and Crown Princess Nessa are to be wed."

"That can't happen!" Xanfolo all but shouted. "There is the period of mourning. It is the law!"

"Ah, but the priests have changed the law," Makin said.

"There will be no marriage as long as I breathe and can hold a sword," said Xanfolo, but his voice carried little conviction. He began to feel something he had never experienced before, the sickening touch of defeat, a seeping feeling that traveled up and down his bones leaving a weary and useless refuse behind.

"Are you all right?" Makin asked anxiously.

"Oh, yes." Xanfolo paused and then in a somber voice said, "I have played the fool for the Kinsan and now have my reward. He set in motion a grand scheme, and my sword and dead crew were the levers. Where is my sword?"

"The last I saw of the red-hilted sword, it was sticking in the deck of the Nara and joined the carrier in the ride to oblivion."

"Good riddance. Give me your sword."

"No, I cannot do that," Makin said. "You judge yourself too harshly. You did all that was possible against incredible odds. The chanters and the singers in the public houses proclaim your prowess and bravery. You have become a legend!"

"Did Queen Nara approve of this arrangement with Nessa?"

"She had no choice."

"And Nessa?"

"I don't know for certain, but there is gossip that she tried to kill the queen."

"That comes as no surprise. Where is Nessa now?"

"She is in the temple. The Kinsan carrier that brought us home is also here. The Kinsan captain quite correctly believed that the rainy season was upon him. He anchored his carrier in the Nara's berth. The crew are in the temple as guards over the crown princess."

"And our priests?" Xanfolo asked. "Are they on the side of the Kinsans?"

"It appears that way."

"The Kinsans cannot take Nessa away until the rainy season ends," Xanfolo said slowly. "There is a Kinsan carrier on our base. Perhaps the fool can play a trick yet."

"The queen has forbidden any interference," Makin said, "on pain of death."

Xanfolo laughed. "Makin, you heard the Pontans. I am the man who walks in darkness. I cannot die."

"I'm beginning to believe that myself," answered Makin. "Now, if you feel up to it, I've brought a friend with me who wishes to see you."

"Good. Then counting your friendship that means I have two."

A hand took his and pressed it to a forehead. "Fonof! Fonof lives!"

"Pie!"

"I have waited as the doctor ordered," murmured Pie. "Now I will sleep by Fonof's couch to protect him. The doctor says Fonof's eye is gone. Pie will guard Fonof's blind side."

"It is good that you are here, Pie. I feel better now. I have an army!"

"More that you suspect," Makin laughed. "Pie has been sneaking off in the rain with his drum. He walks all the way to the jungle's edge and sends messages."

Xanfolo remembered the message that Pie had drummed to the jungle from the Nara. He had never asked Pie what was in his message that caused the barbarians to kill the Secret Society people hiding in the jungle. He started to ask when he heard people enter the room.

"Captain Chandora, sir. Congratulations on your victory over the Pontans. The doctor says you are to rest now."

"Captain Chandora! We must talk," said Xanfolo, ignoring the captain's attempt to reinforce the doctor.

"Indeed we must," replied Chandora cheerfully, "But not until you have rested. I need your advice on matters, but I want you to recover first."

Makin joined the doctor's coalition when he announced that he, too, was feeling weary. And Pie, after being nudged by Makin, added, "Fonof sleep now. Have great visions of what is to come."

"Very well," Xanfolo replied. He had to admit to himself that he was weary. However, he was not sure how much weariness was caused by his wound, or by the revelation that his victory was sour and of little value.

"Drink this," the doctor said as he held a cup to Xanfolo's lips. "It will help you rest."

After he drank, there seemed no time at all between when the cup left his lips, and he heard voices trailing away. Then there was nothing, a blank, black nothingness. Somewhere in the blackness there appeared a dot of light. He became aware of the dot, but did not know when. The dot grew larger, becoming a circle of light that continued to fill his mind. As the circle grew larger, he could see objects in the circle. One of the objects grew until he recognized the Nara drifting among the mountains well below their peaks, as if searching for a passage, a wide cleft, or an unseen valley, a natural trail through the mountains that would permit the carrier to fly beyond the impassable barrier.

Then Nessa's face replaced the Nara. She smiled at him and beckoned him to follow her, but when he tried to do so, Nessa became Queen Nara. It was the Queen Nara whom he remembered from their last parting, her hair shorn, her face powdered a stony white, her lips framing the word, "Conspiracy." Then Nessa returned, and although he could only see her face, he knew she had a dagger, and that Queen Nara was gone forever. Nessa beckoned again and he followed. They were in her quarters, and a terrible figure came up out of the pool just as before.

Xanfolo woke with a start. He looked about the dimly lighted room. There at the end of his couch was a figure, a man of his height, a Montian because he was tanned brown. The man wore a crown and was dressed in armor unlike any Xanfolo had ever seen. In his hand was a sword. Xanfolo gasped when he saw that it was the red-hilted sword of Loran.

"Who are you?" asked Xanfolo. "What do you want?"

The visitor replied in a strange dialect, but Xanfolo understood the meaning of the words.

"I am the Fonof, ruler over all Loran. My blood flows in your veins. You are the direct descendant of the royal house of Loran, the seventh city that ruled all the others. I have returned your royal heritage, the sword of Loran."

"It was left behind on the Nara," said Xanfolo. "How could you have it?" Then regarding his own question as being silly, he added, "But what is finding a lost sword to a Fonof who no longer lives? What kind of magic is this?"

"You are the Fonof who does not rule, but you are the maker of rulers of Loran," said the figure.

"I know, I know," Xanfolo replied impatiently. "The Secret Society told me the same thing. Then they wanted the sword back. They claimed I was a false Fonof."

The man raised his hand and pointed a finger at Xanfolo. "You are the true Fonof. Those who followed the Secret Ones became lost in their own secrecy, more loving of the secrecy than the recreating of Loran. You are the true Fonof. There will be new followers, new armies, new leaders, and you will create them all."

"But how? All is in ruins now. I have made Kinsa the most powerful city in all the realms, though that was not my intention. I have failed."

“Kinsa is not Loran,” the figure replied. “You have not failed. You have succeeded. There is the old sun, the young sun, and the great and beautiful moon. Just as the old sun created both, so you have created a new sun and a new moon. One will rise to rule Loran, and one will rise to rule both Loran and all the realms. All the realms.”

Xanfolo could see the figure beginning to fade. “Wait! Don’t go. What of this new sun and moon? How is that possible?”

The fading figure returned momentarily. “You have planted the seeds. Even now they are growing.” The figure dissolved as Xanfolo shouted, “Wait! Come back!”

The light disappeared, and he heard other voices in the room. He heard the doctor’s voice saying, “The fever has come back on him. What was he shouting?”

“He must have been dreaming.” It was Chandora’s voice. “What happened, Pie? You were here.”

“It was a vision,” Pie answered solemnly. “His sword was returned. I saw it appear at the end of his sleeping place. See, there it is down by his feet.”

“By the orbs! The barbarian is right,” said the doctor. “How can this be?”

Xanfolo heard no more. He descended once again into the black nothingness.

Chapter 30

When Xanfolo awoke from his sleep, he still stared at blackness. There were the muted sounds of a great storm outside, and he knew where he was, and he remembered his vision. And he was hungry.

“Welcome back.”

It was Makin’s voice. “You’ve been through a bad fever for the past four lighttimes.”

“That long? I had strange dreams. I even dreamt about the sword of Loran. A man wearing strange armor and a crown stood at the end of my couch. He said he came to return the sword. Such is the wildness of the mind that fever causes.”

“Only part of what you describe was a dream,” Makin said. “The sword was returned, but we do not know who returned it. Pie was here, yet he claims he saw only the sword move by itself to your couch. The barbarian claims it was part of your vision. That is nonsense, of course.”

“Probably so,” agreed Xanfolo. “This is likely a priestly trick. In the past, priests were able to cloud men’s minds. But even so, there is something the priests could not easily do.”

“What is that?”

“The sword. The Nara rides the winds to oblivion, and the sword is with the Nara.”

“Perhaps.”

“Perhaps? What do you mean, perhaps? You said you last saw the sword’s point stuck in the deck of the Nara.”

“That is true,” Makin replied. “But there is no reason to believe that I was the last to see the sword.”

The mystery over the return of the sword lingered in Xanfolo's mind during his recovery. However, there being only questions and no satisfactory answers, he put his energy into regaining his powers. There were no more fevers or strange dreams. He slept soundly and awoke refreshed and stronger. The bandages were removed, and he regained his sight in the remaining eye. The doctor fitted him with a black eye patch held on a strap around his head. There was more than one soldier who wore such a patch.

Food, drink, rest, and frequent conferences with his captains kept him occupied as he regained his strength. Makin was also recovering at a rapid pace. He was able to walk; although with a limp which the doctor said might stay with him for the rest of his life. Danomo's stump healed over. He was fitted with a wooden peg which allowed him to move about with the aid of a crutch.

Xanfolo kept his silence about what was going to happen at the end of the rainy season. He scouted the temple where Nessa was held, laughing to himself at the thought of rescuing yet another princess. This would be no easy task. The temple was heavily guarded by armed priests and the Kinsan carrier's crew.

Before he could make a decision or a plan, he must talk to one other person, Queen Nara. She continued to stay in seclusion. Until she sent for him, he would have to bide his time.

He did not know what to make of the reappearance of the sword of Loran. Obviously, someone had been in his room while he was having his dream. But how? It was as puzzling as the vision Pie told him about. The barbarian said that he had sent the message to the jungle barbarians as he was asked to do, but he also sent another message telling them to destroy the Secret Ones.

"Why?" Xanfolo questioned.

"Because I had vision," Pie answered. "Man wearing crown and strange clothes came to me in vision. He said Secret Ones were false and would betray true Fonof if they lived. What else could I do?"

Xanfolo smiled. "You did what was right."

"There was more to vision, Fonof. Stranger said I lead you beyond mountains to faraway lands to find truth. But I do not know what that means. Mountains can be climbed, but on other side is only sand and great heat. No one can live on sands because there is no water."

"A carrier could cross the sands," mused Xanfolo. "But no carrier can fly high enough to cross over the mountains."

Pie brightened. "But if carrier could fly to mountains, we could lift carrier over mountains on our backs."

"What?" cried Xanfolo.

"We put carrier on our backs and climb mountains."

"Of course! Why haven't we thought of that before? Why haven't the priests thought of it? But the mountain barbarians would never allow us to pass. They would kill us."

"No," Pie shook his head. "We go to mountains on other side of jungle. People there are same as my people. They believe in Fonof. They help, not kill."

"By my sword, Pie! It could be done! It will be done! We will fly over the great desert and learn what is on the other side."

The thought of a voyage beyond the mountains was a spur to Xanfolo's recovery. Xanfolo worked with his sword as often as possible. He learned to compensate for the lack of

an eye. During a session with Pie serving as an opponent, they practiced defending his blind side. The young barbarian always circled to Xanfolo's blind side to test him.

A lady-in-waiting interrupted the session with a curt, "The queen will see you now."

As he sheathed his sword, the lady spoke again. "You must leave your sword. The queen commands it."

"Very well," responded Xanfolo as he unbuckled his belt and handed it to Pie.

They walked in silence through the corridors. He noted the guards and their alertness. Chandora had done a good job. In the coming war with Kinsa, he would need such men. He soon realized that they were not heading for the queen's quarters. He stopped, aware that he was unarmed.

"Where are you leading me?" he asked sharply.

"The queen has taken a different chamber for this part of her mourning," the lady explained.

When she opened a door and motioned for him to enter, he felt the cool, damp air from outside. He cautiously stepped past the lady and found himself in a covered patio that was walled on three sides. The fourth side was open but curtained by rainwater falling from the roof. Beyond this wet curtain was a small, walled garden. The dampness and stray breezes from the winds caused him to pull his cloak tighter around his shoulders.

When the lady closed the door, it was hard for him to see until a harsh, white light from a jagged flash of lightning ripped across the cloud-heavy sky. He saw Queen Nara sitting on a couch in a corner. She stared silently at the storm.

The white powder she wore on her face was brightened by the lightning. As before, he saw the covering as a mask. Her shorn head and disheveled robe gave her a look of madness.

He hesitated, then approached her and bowed. "My Queen."

She ignored him and continued to stare out at the storm until a nearby flash of lightning startled her out of her thoughts. Only then did she look up at him.

"Come sit by me," she said, beckoning with her hand.

Xanfolo moved to her side. "My Queen, I am sorry about your grief. I have bungled everything, and..."

"Don't," she interrupted. "I am Nara. Talk to me as a person, not as a queen. Your eye is gone, but you have recovered?"

"Yes, my...I mean, yes. I am strong now. The loss of the eye is not a problem. A soldier must expect such losses."

She did not answer, and remained silent. She stared out at the storm, but appeared to see nothing. Finally she turned to him.

"You know about Nessa?" she asked softly.

"Yes."

"I had no choice," Nara sighed. "I did not know if you would live or die. The Kinsans control everything now. If I had not agreed, they would have destroyed Montia after the rainy season."

"How is Nessa?" he asked.

"She is unhappy. No, that is an understatement. She tried to kill me. When I saw the dagger's point, I thought at first it was good. I should die, but I really know better. My death could change nothing. Nessa's father would still be dead, and she would still be the future bride of the King of Kinsa instead of marrying you."

“What happens now to the Montian royal house?”

“They have covered every possibility. Nessa’s first girl child will become the queen of Montia after I am gone. The first boy born will become king of Kinsa.” She laughed gently and leaned closer to him. “Maybe Nessa has a surprise for them.”

“What kind of surprise?” asked Xanfolo.

Nara smiled. “Poor Captain. So brave, but I know in my heart her first-born will be a girl. She will be born during the time of the full moon, a beautiful new moon to replace that which has grown old and tarnished.”

“We will find a way to defeat this Kinsan power,” Xanfolo said angrily.

“Perhaps,” she agreed as she reached out and touched his cheek. He could feel her hand tremble as she touched him.

“Are you all right, Nara?”

“Yes,” she replied. “That is the first time you have used my name.”

“But not the first time I have thought of it,” he said.

“Hold me,” she said, taking his hand and slipping it inside her robe where he felt her soft skin, strangely warm given the chill dampness of the room. “Hold me,” she repeated as her face closed to his. Her lips brushed his lips, and her arm slipped around his neck.

In an instant, they were together on the couch, their naked bodies writhing together until he took her in a wild fit of passion mixed with anger. Her moaning acceptance of his roughness fed his fire, the moans passing by his ears and then lost in the growing screams of the winds.

Jagged patterns of lightning careened across the sky followed by a constant thunderous roar, the whole coming together in a wild mixing of storm and passion. Then an end to passion, and he fell on her. His arms and legs were useless. His breath came in great shuddering gasps. They lay that way, her hand softly caressing his cheek.

His arms and legs slowly regained their strength. He raised himself from her body and rolled on his side with his back to her.

“There is something I haven’t told you. It is part of the League’s decision,” she whispered.

“What is that?” he asked as he leaned on one elbow and watched the lightning.

“You are to become my consort.”

He heard the words and knew their meaning. There should be an anger burning in him, but there was nothing. He felt no hatred of Nara, even if she might have tricked him into making love to her, tempting him to gain his willingness to comply. He knew his own heart; he was easily tempted by Nara. He did not even feel hatred for the Kinsan king who set this matter in motion. Maybe the Kinsan thought of it as some kind of consolation prize for the loser. Or worse yet, a reward for service to Kinsa by a fool.

He rose up from the couch and felt the chill of the damp breezes against his naked body as he walked to the rain-curtained opening. He stood there, his head back and his arms outstretched as if welcoming the lightning and thunder.

“Xanfolo?” she called.

He did not look back. As he spoke, he let the winds carry his words away.

“I must go beyond the mountains.”

THE END