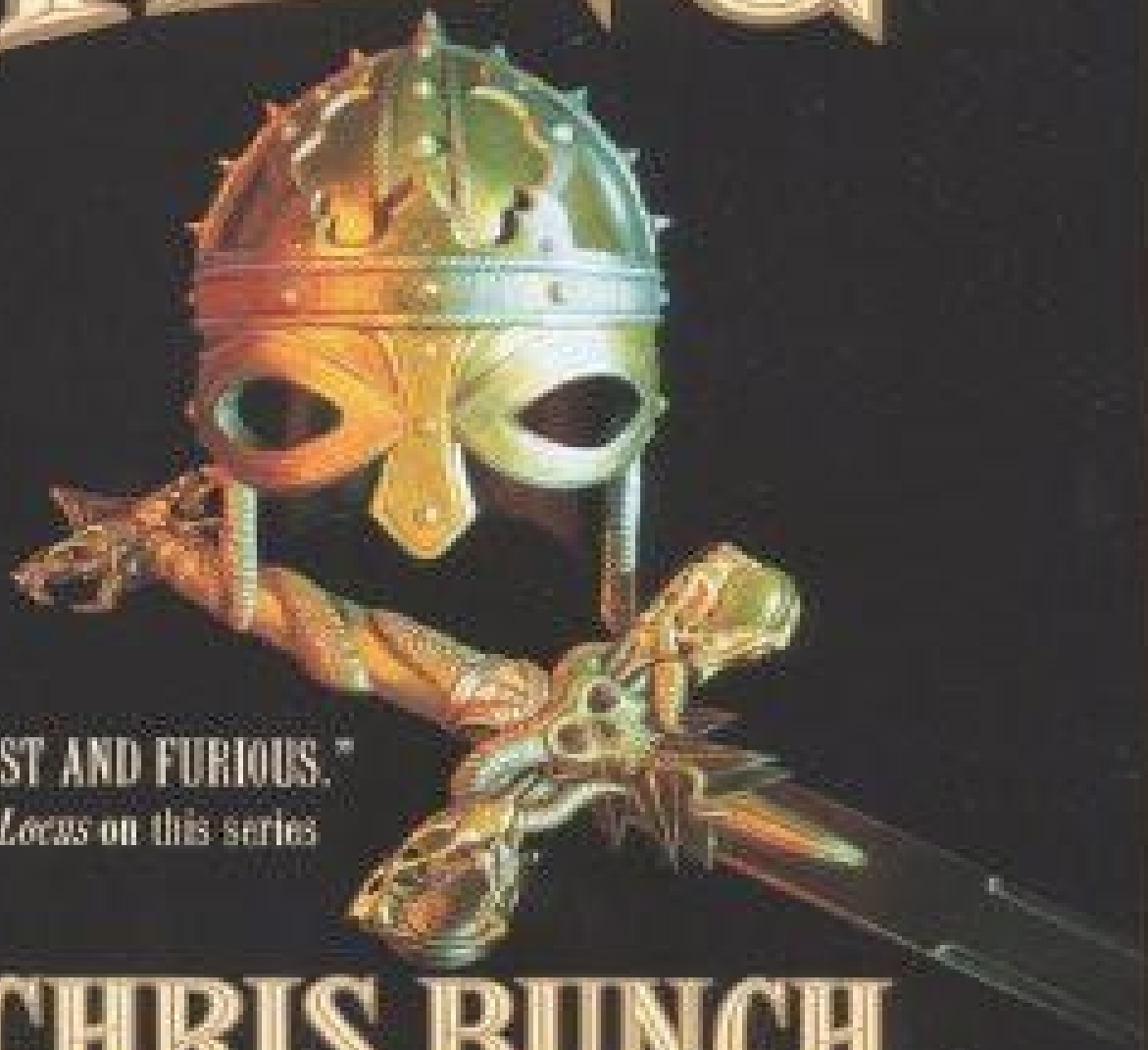


# THE WARRIOR KING



"FAST AND FURIOUS."  
—*Locus* on this series

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## CHRIS BUNCH

AUTHOR OF *THE SEER KING* AND  
*THE DEMON KING*

~~Chris Bunch was part of the first troop commitment into Vietnam. Both Banger and airborne-qualified, he served as a patrol commander and a combat correspondent for *Stars and Stripes*. Later, he edited outlaw motorcycle magazines and wrote for everything from the underground press to *Look* magazine, *Rolling Stone* and prime-time television. He is now a full-time novelist.~~

*By Chris Bunch*

THE SEER KING THE DEMON KING THE WARRIOR KING

THE EMPIRE STONE

**CHRIS BUNCH**

**THE  
WARRIOR KING**

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# **ORBIT**

An *Orbit* Book

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*The clean parts are for Judine And the rest is for Terry*

**ONE**

**THE SUMMONS**

**1**

The unexpected ships arrived an hour before dusk. We'd seen them sailing toward my island prison for some hours and wondered—no one was allowed to sail in these waters without government permission. There were three of them, one a large merchantman, the other two fast pirate chasers, lovely sleek galleys.

My warders scurried to their fighting stations. They were frightened the emperor, now revealed to be still alive, might be trying to rescue me, the last of his bloody-handed tribunes who used sword and

fire to take and hold the throne of Numantia.

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But the emperor grew arrogant, thought himself greater than the death-goddess Saionji, and invaded the kingdom of Maisir to our south.

Our army was destroyed, Numantia invaded by the Maisirians, and I myself hurled Tenedos from his throne when he threatened to send a nightmare demon against first the invaders, then against his rebelling countrymen and our capital of Nicias.

Tenedos, like I, had been sent into island exile. No doubt Bairan, King of the Maisirians, hoped we'd be quietly garroted or have a convenient fall from a battlement when matters had calmed. -

Indeed, Tenedos had been reported dead, and I'd been waiting for my own assassin, not caring, for all the world was a bloody shatter to me.

But then the world had spun about us all: Tenedos had faked his death, gotten to the mainland, and was now building his army, ready to take back his throne from Bairan's puppets who ruled in Nidas.

But as the ships approached the tiny port below my fortress prison, they made certain signals, and my jailers relaxed. The ships were from Nicias, sent by the Grand Council.

I, on the other hand, felt a whisper of fear, in spite of my supposed readiness to return to the Wheel, to be judged by Saionji and sent forth to a lesser life as punishment for the thousands I'd led to their deaths as Erst Tribune Damastes à Cimabue, Baron Damastes of Ghazi.

Not that I had escaped the gods' raking in this life. My wife, now deceased—Marin, Countess Agramonte—had divorced me after our mutual love, Amiel Kalvedon, was murdered by the Tovieti cultists; and later, in Maisir, Alegria, my beautiful Dalriada, died in the long retreat from the Maisirian capital of Jarrah.

I licked dry lips and then had the intelligence to laugh aloud—I'd spent all these times mewling for oblivion like a coward instead of a warrior, and now it portended, and I was terrified. I found resolve and determined to die well, die proudly.

I returned to my spacious quarters, only a cell because of the barred windows overlooking the sea and the double doors with a guarded anteroom between them, and considered matters. I could either stand nobly and calmly at the moment of death as heroes were supposed to or else go down fighting. I remembered an execution in Maisir, when Captain Athelny Lasta, instead of dying quietly, killed the executioner and eight others before returning to the Wheel.

I thought of him and of the various trinkets I'd procured over the long times of imprisonment and laughed once more. For what purpose does a man build weapons if he's seeking a nice, immediate death?

I had a pilfered table knife I'd laboriously ground to an edge against the stones in my cell and a knob of iron such as I'd used to kill the Landgrave Malebranche, far away and long ago in Kallio. I also had

that most important of all weapons—four gold coins and three silver ones I'd managed to acquire from making careful wagers with the guards, first with coppers, then escalating my bets. I put these items in various convenient places about my person, then waited.

Two guards summoned me to the warden, Jelap. He was a decent sort, a bumbling old domina who'd spent fifty years under the colors. This was his last assignment before retirement. I often wondered what he thought of this assignment—four hundred guards and an enormous stone fortress with but one prisoner.

There were three men waiting in his office, all wearing a strange uniform, a rather bilious shade of gray with red facings I realized must be that of the Peace Guardians, the largest military force King Bairan had allowed Numantia. They were mockingly organized into corps as my army had been, though each corps numbered only about 150 men, led by the traitorous Tribune Heme, its ranks filled with thugs so in love with force they didn't mind using it on their own countrymen.

The three were Shamb Catalca and Pydnas Bosham and Huda. It said all there was to say about the Guardians that their ranks, the equivalent of our captain and legate, were the same as the Maisirian Army. These three looked as if they would find a back-alley thieves' den more comfortable than an officer's mess.

I expected anything from a murderous attack to a beating to sneering contempt. What I received was formal respect, which I found a bit amusing. All three were behaving as they thought noblemen should, very much on their best, if unfamiliar, manners.

"We have orders," Catalca said formally, "to convey you to Nicias, to the Grand Council, where the Lords Scopas and Barthou would be pleased to receive you."

Pleased? I was hard-pressed not to show surprise. I glanced at Domina Jclap to see if I could read a clue in his face, saw nothing but stiff propriety, and, just possibly, distaste at being a Numantian officer now forced to deal with turncoats.

I could be as circumspect as they. I bowed. "Having no choice in the matter, but appreciating the manner in which your orders are presented, I shall be ready to leave within the hour."

"Good," Catalca said. "For we're under orders to make the greatest haste. This matter is of grave import."

"May I ask what the lords desire of me?"

The uglier of the two junior officers growled. Catalca glanced at him, and he was silent.

"We were not taken into their lordships' confidence," he said.

"Then let me return to my cell and collect my belongings."

"Very well. Fydna Huda will accompany you."

"There is no need for that," Domina Jelap said. "If we've guarded Tribune Damastes for over two years..."

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"The prisoner has no rank," Catalca said harshly. "His titles were stripped from him long ago."

"I stand corrected," Jelap said. "We merely used the old formalities."

"Those days are real dead," Bosham said, repressing a sneer. "Best forgotten about entirely."

Jelap inclined his head. "While the prisoner is securing his property," he said, "might I at least offer you a bit of a meal and..." he eyed the three carefully, "... some very strong mulled wine? It's been a grim day; more grim, I fancy, out there on the water."

"Now that's an excellent suggestion," Catalca said. He nodded to my two guards. "Bring him back here when he's got whatever he needs. Mind you, prisoner, your goods'U be well searched, so don't attempt any tricks'

"I have no tricks to attempt," I said, looking bland, and went out.

It took only a few minutes to gather my belongings. They said they planned to search me thoroughly, but by now Pd gained a few prisoner's tricks. The knife was in the sole of my boot, the small slug of iron in plain sight as one handle of my threadbare case. I considered mat case and the worn cloak that lay over it and remembered when I had estates, castles, mansions, libraries, enough clothes to outfit a regiment. Life itself proves the Wheel's existence, with its own constant turning.

As we went back to Jelap's office, one warder, a Sergeant Perak, stopped me. The other went on a few steps, then stopped, out of earshot. Perak had always been a bit sympathetic and would give me forbidden news from Numantia.

"Be careful, sir. One of the boat's crew said the emperor's taken two provinces away from the scum Councilors already. Those three pig-futterers're scared of you, as I suspect th' Maisirian worshipers they serve are as well. Scared men do desperate things."

"Thank you, Sergeant. I'm always careful." An odd question came: "When I leave, what'll happen to this fortress? And you and the other soldiers?"

"Not to worry," he said, with a twisted grin. "These're rough times, and a prison that can't be gotten off's always useful. Somebody else'll be here before long." He glanced up and down the corridor, made sure the other warder was out of hearing. "With any luck, it'll be those bum-kissers Barthou and Scopas."

"Careful, Sergeant. They rule Numantia."

"The hells they do," he said vehemently. "Only with the swords of the dogpiss Guardians and the Maisirians behind them. Things change fast, and where they sit can change faster'n most."

"So who do you want to rule? The emperor again?"

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Perak hesitated. "There might be worse," he said. "Barthou and Scopas were part of the Rule of Ten fools, and from what I read in the broadsides these days, haven't learned anything since."

"The emperor almost destroyed Numantia," I told him.

"Maybe so," Perak said quietly. "But there's enough who'd like to see him try th' throne again, and this time make it right."

I didn't argue, and we went on to Jelap's office. They'd done less eating than drinking, and all three were a bit drink-hammered. Jelap must've been encouraging them by example, for his nose was a little red, and his speech the tiniest bit blurred.

"Are we ready?" Catalca said. "At your command," I said.

"Then let's go," he said, draining his glass. "I know little of the ocean, but I do know it's best to be away from the land when night comes. Follow us, prisoner, and don't try to escape."

I almost laughed. Escape? From this rock in midocean? If possible, I would've done that a year or more ago. But I looked properly obedient and picked up my duffle. They made no effort to make the promised search.

As we went down the dock to the boat Sergeant Perak came close, and his hand snaked out and passed me something. It was a sheathed dagger. I slid it into my case, looked at him. His face was blank, thinking only of duty.

We got into the boat, and it began pulling away. I turned back for one last look at the prison I would never see again and witnessed something most odd.

The warders were drawn up, on the fortress battlements or along the path to the dock, Domina Jelap at their head. All were at rigid salute.

For whom?

Certainly not the Guardians.

I refused to believe it was for me, the last vestige of Tenedos's tyranny.

But I still got to my feet, braced myself against an oarsman, and returned their salute, clapping my hand against my shoulder.

Then I turned away to the waiting ship and what might lie ahead in Nicias.





I kept trying to catch the future's drift as we sailed toward the Latane River and Nidas. I wasn't chained nor closely guarded, which I took as a good sign, although where I could've gone save overboard to my death I couldn't imagine. Catalca said if there was any attempt at rescue, he was under orders to kill me immediately.

I was given the first mate's quarters, which were fairly spacious. I spent happy hours just staring out the port or on deck, glorying in being able to look for leagues without seeing stone walls.

The ship's crew stayed well away from all of us and refused to be drawn into conversation.

The dagger Perak had given me was a nastily lethal item—a handspan long, about two inches wide at the hilt, both edges razor-sharp. Its hilt and pommel were the plainest of metal, the grip of a black hardwood. The weapon's purpose was clear. I devised a hiding place for it—a thin cord knotted around my loins, the sheath hanging in front of my cock. I'd seen how men are always uncomfortable searching around someone's genitals. I had to be a bit careful sitting down, for fear of being suddenly qualified for singing in upper registers instead of warfare, but I felt far better about everything, as a warrior always does when armed.

After four days we saw land, the low green jungled islets of the Delta, and I smelt the hot, tropic welcome of my homeland.

The coastal watch station at the end of the channel was unmanned, run-down, and the buoys marking the channel had gone unpainted. I saw few seagoing ships either coming up or going down channel, a well.

A day upriver we passed a manned heliograph station, and signals went back and forth, messaging our arrival to Nicias.

There was a scattering of fishing boats outside the channel, bringing up succulent green Delta crabs. One galley rowed alongside a boat and came back with a deck-fill, some of which were hoisted aboard to be steamed for our dinner.

The fishing boats were manned by young men, actually boys, a scattering of young women among them. Since I knew little of the Delta customs, I asked a seaman if this was customary, and if so, where did the menfolk work?

He stared at me as if I were a prime idiot, looked about to make sure he wasn't being seen talking to the disgraced prisoner, and said, Their menfolk're fertilizer, in places like Maisir, Cambiaso, Kait... or'd you dis'member there was a war not so long ago?"

Chastened, I thanked him, went back to the rail. I noted the fishermen's expressions were hardly friendly, and one spat as we passed. I chanced being called another fool by asking Huda what price crabs brought these days?

"Hells if n I know," he said. "You don't think Guardians *pay*, now, do you?" It was, indeed, a foolish question. A man with a sword only pays when he, or his officers, is honorable.

I saw Nicias when we were some distance away, by the glow in the night sky as if it were on fire. The city is lit by jets of natural gas seeping from underground deposits, and legend has it the day the City of Lights falls into darkness, Numantia's doom is at hand.

We anchored below the city that afternoon, so I guessed the Council had ordered me brought into Nicias under cover of darkness. Gods, what could they have to fear, I wondered. Wasn't I the cursed first tribune, hated almost as much as the emperor? Or had things changed?

We raised anchor when the dogwatch came on, and sailed on, landing at Nicias's docks near dawn. A mounted unit of Guardians was waiting, escorting four of the black, tiny-windowed ambulances Nicias's warders used to transport prisoners.

"You'll go in one," Catalca said, "and if anyone's waiting to lift you, they'll not know which one."

I marveled at the subtlety of his plan, wondered if he knew enough not to eat soup with a fork, and entered the indicated carriage.

I crouched at the tiny window as we clattered through the morning streets. The City of Lights had always bragged it never slept, but things had changed, for there were few abroad except the lamplighters extinguishing the gas jets, some few drunks, and early risers heading for their jobs. Even the drunks turned away when they saw the Guardians' uniforms—Heme's Harriers had exactly the reputation I thought.

Nicias was gray, tired, dirty, when once it'd been a flashing metropolis of light and color. The war... the occupation by Maisir... the looting of Numantia's treasuries by King Bairan... and above all the grinding knowledge of utter defeat had changed this capital I loved so well.

Entire blocks looked abandoned, and once-prosperous districts were now slums.

We passed brick barracks I remembered well, once the home of the Golden Helms, the useless parade ground force I'd once commanded. They were shabby, lawns unmowed, the whitewash on the tree

trunks peeling, falling away, stone walks cracking. There were lines strung from windows holding drying laundry, some of it women's dresses, then, a sign in front of the barracks, Maisir's yellow superimposed on Numantia's blue, a mailed fist over it, and a slogan: GUARD WELL THE PEACE.

I'd hardly expected Nicias to be as I left it, but the reality struck hard, and I turned away until the ambulance stopped. The door opened, and there were half a hundred Guardians, weapons ready. I got out, looked around.

"So this is to be my new prison?"

"It's not necessarily a prison," Catalca said. "Just a place where you'll be secure until the lords finish with you." He smiled, not pleasantly.

I smiled back, and was amused, not by Catalca, but by my new jail, one which I'd created for other purposes. It was the four-story tower with an interior keep I'd chosen for the Seer Tenedos's safety, back during the Tovieti rising, and I'd also taken shelter there with my bride-to-be Maran. Later it became the emperor's sorcerous retreat, where he called up the demons that encouraged him' to begin the disastrous war with Maisir.

Again I noted the turning of a wheel...

I was escorted to my quarters on the top floor of the outer tower—the same ones the emperor had used. I was told there were three hundred Peace Guardians assigned to this tower, their sole duty to keep me imprisoned.

Here I was to wait until summoned.

Of course, Barthou and Scopas being who they were, I waited for two full weeks on this matter of "grave import." But this was all to the good, for I was able to suborn one of my jailers, a pompous fool named Dubats, one of those who knows everything and must prove it constantly, and got a rough idea of events in Numantia.

The emperor, after rising from the dead, still unexplained as mummery or horrid fact, had left Palmeras for Hermonassa State, which cast off the Grand Council's rule and vowed fealty to him. The two corps of Peace Guardians sent to deal with him changed sides and became the nucleus, such as it was, of his new army.

Tenedos, the warder told me, had moved south along the western coast of Numantia, gathering strength as he did. Ticao had been the second state to declare for him. Unsure of what I myself felt in a world of bad choices, I didn't know if I was proud or ashamed that my home state of Cimabue remained loyal to the puppet government, as had its coastal neighbor of Darkot. But Bala Hissar, Khoh, and Gyantse had gone for Tenedos, as had, on our eastern borders, Bonvalet and Varan.

The government still held the center of Numantia, as well as the vital Latane River, the primary navigational route north and south. Only Isfahan, directly south of the main province of Data, wavered, and it'd been quickly pacified by Peace Guardians. Kallio, the other great state, which had risen first against the Rule of Ten, then continued its subversion against the emperor, naturally stood firm against him, as did Urey, which had been razed by first our own army in its retreat from Numantia, then, more savagely, by the oncoming Maisirians. The Ureyans wanted no more of war, on any side, in any shape.

The City of lights had always been the first to overreact to any emergency, and so, the warder went on they were planning barricades to hold back the emperor, plus which they worried that King Bairan would once more invade and this time destroy Numantia as he'd threatened, and of course demons would soon be sent by the arch-wizard Tenedos to turn Nicias into a wasteland.

This last was not unlikely, for Tenedos had planned on doing just that until I'd struck him down and destroyed the spell he was casting, before leading the last of the army's cavalry in a mad charge against Bairan's army as if I were a manifestation of Saionji herself.

But as yet, Dubats said, nothing much had really happened, other than rumors.

I asked about the Tovieti, the cult Tenedos and I had brought down once, only to see it arise in a different form, then vanish with our destruction. He'd heard nothing of the stranglers with the yellow cord, which was one bit of good news.

Knowing as much as anyone, there was nothing for me to do but wait... and spend hour after hour in muscle-wrenching exercise; for whatever was to come, I must be ready.

One other thing occupied my time. I'd originally found this tower for the emperor and made certain it was impossible for a Tovieti assassin to enter. Now I considered it from a very different perspective—how to get out. I'm afraid that I now thought little of my previous abilities, for I found three possible escape routes, two of which could also be used to enter the building. I'd gained new talents in Maisirian and Numantian prisons. It also helped that the Guardians' commander was an orderly, scheduled man, so the guards were fed, marched, trained, and checked with the regularity of a metronome.

But my scheming was purely to keep my mind occupied, for where would I go once I got beyond the tower's walls and guards? No one would shelter me, and I thought most would see my unfortunately quite memorable face and scream for the warders... or attack me with whatever weapons were at hand. If I had to die, I'd rather die by die clean ax blade or noose than be ripped apart by a mob.

Guards came early one morning, and once more I entered one of the ambulances and was taken to the Grand Palace, once the Rule of Ten's, then, massively refurbished, made modern and luxurious, the emperor's.

The carriage rattled across the moat into the central courtyard, then went to a rear entrance, and I was hustled inside to a small chamber, where once more I waited, four guards watching me nervously.

After a while, the door opened, and half a dozen other guards made sure I hadn't massacred my captors. Scopas came in next, even fatter than he'd been the last time I'd seen him, which was... and I took some thinking back ... more than ten years earlier. Scopas had been one of the first members of the Rule of Ten to support Tenedos and was considered the shrewdest of those incompetents. After the emperor's coronation, he'd tried to weasel his way back into Tenedos's graces, but without success.

Later, when we were fighting in Maisir, he'd led a revolt that failed, but managed to escape and hide before mounting a second, successful rising just before the defeat at Cambiaso.

Behind him came Barthou, formerly the Rule of Teh's Speaker, in spite of his position, never considered terribly astute.

I bowed courteously. Scopas did the same, while Barthou, puzzling on what the proper response should be, made none.

"Damaste à Cimabue," Scopas said, "we have brought you here to offer you life and a chance to rejoin Numantian society as a nobleman, with estates we shall grant you for a gracious living."

"All we want," Barthou put in, and I wondered if they'd rehearsed the put-and-take of their lines beforehand, "is for you to perform a task."

"I wish I could say I was at your service," I replied. "Technically, as your prisoner, I am. What do you wish me to do?"

"First," Scopas said, "I have a question. Have you been approached by the traitor named Tenedos?"

"How could he do that?" I asked, amused. "Remember, you've had me imprisoned, sealed off from the world."

"Magicians," Barthou said, looking from side to side as if for ears to magically protrude from the walls, "have ways of doing things mortals like us cannot know of."

"I'll answer your question with the obvious: No one has approached me to do anything," I said.

"We're aware you swore an oath to the one who was once our emperor," Scopas said. "And I'm also aware of your family motto, *We Hold True*."

I was slightly impressed—I didn't think the fat man was that aware. I nodded.

"Do you consider your oath still stands, considering the man called Tenedos still lives?"

I thought of various subtleties, decided I wasn't capable of them.

"I don't know," I said truthfully. "I was the one who struck Tenedos down, at Cambiaso, and possibly permitted the Maisirian victory. Doesn't that render the continuance of my oath rather meaningless?"

Both Barthou and Scopas reacted in some amazement. There were but two mortals who knew what'd happened in his tent before Cambiaso. I'd said nothing, out of shame, and evidently Tenedos had done the same.

"That's as may be," Barthou said. "The question stands—are you still willing to serve the emperor?"

I shook my head. "I serve no one now," I said. "As a prisoner, not even myself."

"Would you wish to change that?" Scopas asked.

"We must stop the interloper Tenedos," Barthou said, "and quickly. Or else the worst will happen."

"What's the worst?" I asked. "That Tenedos takes the throne once more... or that King Bairan comes back with his army, which I assume he would if the emperor returns?"

"You've answered your own question," Scopas said. "As to how we wish you to serve us, specifically: we are getting permission from King Bairan to increase the size of the Peace Guardians, to make the force large enough to stand against Tenedos."

"What's the matter with the traitor Heme, who now leads them? I understand everyone loves him for his political realism," I said harshly.

Both Grand Councilors looked unhappy.

"Guardian of the Peace Heme is not exactly a leader the populace warms to," Scopas said. "We need someone better known, better thought of, both to gain the recruits we need so desperately and to serve as a beacon in battle."

This stopped me. I thought the people of Numantia thought me the worst of villains for having led them into slaughter. But if I assumed these two knew what they were talking about—quite an assumption from their past record—things might be different.

"You mean I'd be a figurehead," I said, "with Heme still in command."

"Of course," Barthou said. "What else could there be?"

"Since Heme is little more than raw ambition in the flesh, and completely unqualified to be a general of the armies... even a pissant one like the Peace Guardians... I'd be several species of a fool to serve under him. Particularly if his mistakes would be blamed on me, as you've indicated."

Barthou started to snap a retort, but Scopas held up his hand. "Let me try another approach, since you haven't rejected me completely," he said quietly. "Would you agree to take over the army... I mean the Peace Guardians ... if Heme were set aside, in some sort of honorary position but out of the real line of command? You wouldn't be able to hold the rank of tribune, of course—there are political considerations that prevent that title from ever being revived. Perhaps we might use the rank of supreme *jedaz*, which should lessen any problems King Bairan might have with your return to the

military."

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"I know it's hardly civil to answer a question with another question, and I'm not doing that," I said. "But I need more information. An army... no matter what you call it... isn't led by one general, one tribune, or whatever Maisirian rank you like. Who else can you call on?"

"The liaison between us and the Guardians is Timgad," Scopas said.

I remembered him vaguely—a toady who'd been appointed to the Rule of Ten after the Tovieti riots began, a toady of Barthou's. He... and his position... didn't matter, for if I accepted their offer I'd no more listen to the Council than I would Heme.

"Lord Drumceat, even though he lacks experience, has a great deal of fire and enthusiasm," Scopas went on. "We plan to name him Rast."

Drumceat was the reactionary rural baron who'd taken over the death patrols created by my brother-in-law Praen, after the Tovieti slaughtered him. I'd once ordered him from my house.

"A man with great experience," Barthou put in, "is General, now Rast, Indorc."

Experience... at being totally political. The Rule of Ten had tried to foist him on the army as supreme commander, and Tenedos had refused him. Hardly a plus.

"Another is Rast Taitu."

A decent man, relieved by Tenedos for refusing Tenedos's orders to attack at Dabormida. Something of a plus.

"Someone without experience, but, like Drumceat, with fire," Barthou said, "is Baron Lany."

He was the ex-head of warders in Nicias who'd replaced me as head of the provisional government in Kallio, after the emperor had sent me home in disgrace, who evidently did an excellent job. A plus.

"Probably our best officer," Scopas said, "is Guardian of the Peace Heme's adjutant, a real firebrand named Trerice. He never served in the army during the war but organized supply caravans to the borders. He prided himself on never losing a man or a bale of goods to bandits or anything else. Properly, he was rewarded. I guess he found peacetime boring, for he joined the Guardians and quickly rose in its ranks. Heme's been using him in the countryside, where he's been most effective in suppressing dissent. He's considered totally ruthless in following his orders, doing much the same task you performed for the emperor. I suppose you had the same reputation."

No, ruthless was not a distinction that I'd ever heard connected to my name, and I hoped it had never fit I guessed this Trerice might be competent, since Heme wouldn't let him near Nicias and power.

"There are others, of course," Scopas went on. "Middle-rankers from the war, who've risen to the occasion. We're quite confident."

I refrained from sneering. If they were so confident, why'd they drag me out of jail? I could have given them the answer right then, but still liked the fact my neck ran directly from my body to my head.

"I see," I said. "Naturally, I'd like a day, perhaps two, to consider this."

Barthou looked unhappy, but Scopas nodded hastily. "Of course, of course. Take all the time you need. You'll forgive us if we don't herald your return for a while, nor permit you to reenter public life."

"No," I said. "I don't want to become an embarrassment." I started for the door. "So if you'll let me return to my... secluded quarters..."

Scopas oiled me out, and I went down the hall, surrounded by guards. I glanced back at the corridor's end and saw Scopas looking thoughtfully after me. Barthou came up beside him and said something. Scopas, still looking at me, answered, shaking his head.

I guessed my thinking wasn't as impervious as I'd hoped but wasn't that disappointed. Scopas had years and years of determining meaning from a flinch or a glance.

I'd already decided I wouldn't become a Peace Guardian under any circumstances. Not only was it morally abhorrent, but with lackluster buffoons for officers, my chances of defeating a brilliant sorcerer and sometimes-prescient general like Tenedos were nonexistent.

The question was, how could I turn them down and continue living?

The next question became—if I managed to survive this crisis, what came next?

I had no answers for either question.

I startled awake into a dream. The Emperor Laish Tenedos stood, arms crossed, in the center of my room. On either side of him were braziers, sending out scented smoke in many colors.

The emperor smiled, and I knew I was not dreaming at all.

I came out of bed, began to bow, naked as I was, then caught myself, confused.

Tenedos guffawed. "In spite of the oath you took," he said, "you do not have to make obeisance. I have not regained the throne." His smile vanished. "Not yet, but soon."

"How did you do this?" I managed.

"That perplexes me a bit," he said, reaching into invisibility and pulling up a camp chair. He reached once more to the side, came back with a crystal decanter and glass, and poured brandy. He replaced the carafe and sipped.



This is a spell I devised," he said, "that began with the Seeing Bowl you and I used once, when you were in Kallio.

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"With it, I've sent... messages... to certain men who served me in the past and whose service I now require. The few times I was able to connect with them, it was all very hazy, unclear, not like this.

"Perhaps it's because I worked great magic in the tower you're now in, and there's a... perhaps residue is the word.

"Or perhaps it's because you and I were closer than any of my other officers and officials.

"You see, Damastes? I am back, it was not a myth, not a double, and my powers are stronger than ever."

I managed to hide a shudder. The seer king's great secret was that he gathered his sorcerous strength from blood, from death, which was why he worshiped the death-goddess Saionji, when almost all other Numantians trembled at her name. I'd only realized this secret near the end, before Cambiaso; it was something I should've sensed years earlier.

So his powers were back, and more powerful? I wasn't sure if that meant he'd learned greater spells or more frightening, if he'd made another pact with another demon, promising blood for power.

An even worse thought came: had Tenedos in fact died, rather than faking a death? Had he struck a bargain with Saionji herself and been able to return to this world in the same form, rather than being thrown onto the Wheel to be reborn in some other body in some distant land, perhaps an animal instead of a human?

Tenedos was looking at me closely.

"Might I ask your thoughts?" he inquired in a mocking tone.

I shook my head. "I'm not altogether awake, so they don't bear repeating."

Again, Tenedos laughed. "Damastes, my friend, you were always a terrible liar. But it matters not. Were you thinking about the past? About what you did to me at Cambiaso?"

I made no reply.

"You need not let it dwell on you," he said. "For that was in the past, and now is the time I call you to return to your duty as first tribune, commander of my armies, and assist me in regaining my rightful throne, my rightful possession of Numantia."

"In spite of what happened?" I said.

"I cannot say I love you for what you did. I was blind in my rage at being betrayed by Scopas, Bartho the cowardly lice who populate Nidas, and was about to send them doom." He drank. "I was not

thinking dearly at that time, for I never should have allowed myself to worry about them until I'd destroyed the Maisirians.

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"You should have restrained me, but not in the manner you did. For Numantia's sake, as well as mine and, considering your present situation, your own as well."

I thought for an instant of asking how one subdues a wizard in a terrible rage, a wizard who can call up demons able to destroy fortresses and armies.

"But, as I said," Tenedos continued, "that is in the past. During my exile, I had a chance to think of what I did, both right and wrong, and how I would change matters given the chance.

"I was given the chance, or, more correctly, I seized the moment. Now I am on the path of recovery, of return.

"I've amassed a great force of men, nearly one hundred thousand. But I lack officers to lead them into battle, men of experience, even though I have many with the desire, and blood that races to the sound of drums. King Bairan killed too many of our best

"But I'm confident that I... that we... can win, and when I use the word we, I mean you, Damastes à Cimabue, my bravest soldier."

"What is your plan? How will things be different?" I temporized.

"First I must regain the throne, reunite Numantia behind me. Scopas, Barthou, their regime and especially the execrable Peace Guardians and the detestable Heme must be destroyed. There shall be no mercy, no surrender permitted. I made the mistake of being merciful once and allowing dissent. I will not make that error again."

"What about Maisir?" I asked. "Bairan will hardly stand by and allow you... Numantia... to return to its former glory."

"He will have no choice," Tenedos said. "Of course he'll call up his armies when he hears of my successes in the field and bring them north.

"By the time he crosses the borders, makes his way through Sulem Pass or the other route through Dumyat, it will be too late. Once here in Numantia, he'll be as we were in Maisir, campaigning in a foreign land, with everyone's hand turned against him.

"I'll meet him in the field when and where he least expects it. Then the Maisirians... and their murderous king, the bastard who put you under a spell and forced you to become a murderer and near regicide... shall be utterly destroyed.

"Remember, we have a great advantage. You slew his greatest mage, the *azaz*, at Cambiaso. I was more powerful than he was then and am twice that now.

"So let Bairan come north with his War Magicians. This time I know what I'm facing, and have begun to reassemble the Chare Brethren and ready my own battle wizardry!"

"Before he reaches the border, I'll strike down all his sorcerers and leave him naked to my... *our*... hammer blows, material and spiritual!

"Once he and his army are destroyed, I won't make my other mistake of invading Maisir. No, I'll let them fall into utter chaos for a generation, perhaps two, while they're casting envious looks north at our peace, our contentment, our prosperity. Then they'll beg to be allowed into my hegemony."

Again my memory flickered, remembering how Tenedos had told me peace must never be allowed to reign in Numantia, for a nation not fighting for its life, for its soul, falls into decay and ruin. But what Tenedos said brought a more important question.

"Your Majesty," and I confess the words still came easily. "You just said something strange, something I don't understand. You said a generation or two must pass before the Maisirians want to serve *you*"

"Your mind is still as agile as always," Tenedos said.. "This is another secret I'm on the verge of discovering, a way to extend our lives double or double again normal, perhaps even longer.

"This I find ironic, for as Saionji's greatest servant, perhaps she's going to permit me to remain free of the Wheel for a longer time as a reward, me and those I decide are worthy of this ultimate privilege."

I looked hard into those dangerously gleaming eyes I'd been held and commanded by for most of my life. I couldn't tell if he was telling the truth, was raving, or was trying to entice me, as if a promise of more years in this hardly pleasant life was much of a lure.

"I know you haven't forgotten the oath you took to me, even though some might say you broke it when you struck me down."

I'd spent many hours puzzling about how much grief that arrogant motto, *We Hold True*, must've brought my family over the generations.

"One thing, sir, I must settle now," I went on. "I refuse to admit I broke my oath when I prevented you from bringing chaos to Numantia. For isn't it the duty of an officer to keep his superior from breaking *his* oath? And you took one to your people, in front of me and the Great Gods Umar, Irisu, Saionji, to never treat your subjects with cruelty or disdain. Didn't you?"

The emperor's face reddened, and his fist clenched on his glass. I waited for it to shatter, but he forced calm, put a smile on his lips, and laughed sharply, falsely.

"I suppose," he said slowly, "that's why friends are so damnably uncomfortable. They keep reminding you of things that are... hard to accept. Very well, Damastes, my ... my friend. We'll call the matter of oaths and their breaking even.

"Now I ask you once more. Will you revive your oath, your pride, Numantia's pride, and serve me again?"

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"Help us regain our rightful place in front of the gods, as the fairest, most favored nation on this world. Help me make Numantia even greater, so other worlds look on us with helpless envy.

"Help me destroy Numantia's enemies... before they unutterably destroy us!"

I felt his words shake me, shake my world, barely kept from falling to my knees.

"If I do, sir," I managed, "what about my present predicament?"

Tenedos smiled, the smile I'd seen often when he won a hard point, defeated a stubborn foe. Again he stretched his arm into nothingness, came back with what looked like a coin or an amulet.

"Here," he said, and cast it toward me. If I doubted I wasn't dreaming, the clink of the coin on the floor gave final proof. I reluctantly picked it up. It was warm, rapidly grew cold.

"Rub it, think of me, and I'll send magic to assist you in whatever escape you deem feasible," he ordered. "Once you're free, point it until it grows warm, and follow in that direction until you find me."

He stood. "Remember the good times," he said. "Remember what it was like, knowing we were the center of the world, and everyone listened to us? Obeyed us? Obeyed us gladly, for we were the shining light of the universe, tearing away the dull darkness of the past. Now it's time to return to those days. You and me, the way it was, the way it shall be.

"Welcome back, Damastes," he said softly. "Welcome back, my friend."

And I was alone, looking at the far wall of my chamber.

I stared long at the amulet, worked in strange figures not of this world's geometry, and carved with what I guessed were letters in an equally strange language.

So the Emperor Tenedos assumed I would return to his side, while the Grand Council dallied and I stalled them.

Slowly the thought came—I didn't want either of them, nor did I want to be a warrior any longer. Maybe after some time had passed I'd be willing to return to my calling, but not now. Not in this confusion.

"Remember the good times," the emperor had said. But I couldn't. I remembered battlefields strewn with bodies, cities aflame, demons rending warriors whose bravery was nothing against their fangs and talons. I remembered Amiel Kalvedon, dying with an arrow wound in her side, dying full of hope

for the morrow, dying carrying my child. I remembered Alegria, wanting to make love in the frozen nightmare of the road north of Jarrah, then dying quietly, a trickle of blood runneling from her lips.

No, not good times, but gore-drenched nightmares.

All I wanted was to escape to somewhere completely peaceful, where no one would bother me and I would raise a hand against no one. I thought wistfully of the quiet, peaceful jungles of Cimabue, where I'd been but seldom since childhood, and now wished I'd never left

Of course there was no way I would ever see them again, so I tried to put the thought from me.

At least, I consoled myself, there was a possibility I could escape the Council's vengeance if I told them no. Tenedos's magic would help. Then I'd only have to get away from the revenge of the world's most powerful wizard.

And did I really believe that Tenedos, the wizard who never forgot nor forgave an enemy, except so long as he needed him, would truly forget that blow I struck before Cambiaso? Did I believe if I helped him regain the throne, he wouldn't turn on me and wreak the most ghastly revenge for what I'd done at Cambiaso that a devils-haunted mind could devise?

Gloom fell, and I forced it away by going back to my dreams of Cimabue, the embracing jungle, gentle rain falling, a pool with mossy rocks growing out of it, being a boy curled under a leaf twice his size, a tiny fire glowing under my pot of rice and the fruit I'd gathered. I remembered the bark of a sambur, the cough of a distant tiger, and contentment in the moment, not fearing the morrow but looking forward to its promise.

I found my lips moving in a prayer, a prayer to small gods, to Vachan, the monkey god of Cimabue, and to Tanis, my family's private godling.

I must've slept, for the next thing I remember is Dubats calling to me and bright sunlight blazing in my windows. I had visitors.

"Send him... or her up," I called, feeling unwarrantedly cheerful.

My callers were Guardian of the Peace Heme and his aide, a bemuscled, scar-faced hearty named Salop.

I didn't know if the Councilors knew Heme loathed me for many reasons, the most recent my discovery of carriages of his private luxuries when we were fleeing Jarrah, while his soldiers were lucky if they had a frozen chunk of long-dead horsemeat every two days as they stumbled barefoot through the snow. I'd ordered these delicacies given out *to* the troops and told Heme if he disobeyed my order I'd have him stripped of his command and reduced to the ranks—a death sentence.

Both men were armed with sword and dagger and wore the gray-red of the Guardians, except properly tarted up with gold filigree here and there, as befitted men for whom position meant everything and honor nothing. Heme had a package which he put on a table.

"My man Catalca informed me you'd been brought to Nicias," Heme said coldly. "Our Grand Councilors are the fools they've always been to think they could use my Guardians and I wouldn't find out about it."

"I had no idea you weren't privy to their decision," I said.

"Don't expect me to be a fool," Heme said. "I knew they'd already discussed bringing you back and ordering the lapdog to lunge at his former master."

"One whose lips are firmly wrapped around a foreign king's cock has little reason to call another a lapdog," I snapped back.

Salop growled, started forward. Heme held out his hand.

"No," he said. "That isn't our way."

Salop grunted, stepped to the side, glaring.

"Yes," Heme went on, "not only bring you back, but let you steal my glory, let you take over my Guardians. Those arrogant shits!"

"Perhaps they sensed you couldn't lead a horse out of a burning building," I said, not giving a damn what Heme thought, able for the first time to kick back at those who'd put the boot into me for such a long time. "Not that I'm agreeing with your lunatic assumption that the Council plans to relieve you."

"And *you* will be able to destroy the emperor?" Heme said. He snorted. "The only thing that will bring that bastard down is for King Bairan to return and finish the task he left half-completed."

"Spoken like a true Numantian," I said sarcastically. "And then what? Do you think after he destroys Tenedos he'll obediently bounce back into Maisir as he did the last time, like a child's toy on a rubber string?"

"Of course not," Heme snapped. "This time, let him incorporate Numantia into his own realm, as he should've done before. I believe, Cimabuan, in the inexorable judgment of the gods. We were tried by Irisu and found wanting, and Bairan should've realized that and taken the gift so generously presented."

I stared at Heme in total loathing.

"I thought I'd enjoy baiting you," I said. "But there's no pleasure in badgering slime-worms. Go on. Get out. Even a prisoner is entitled to have some standards."

Heme rose. "No," he said quietly, his rage vanished. "For there are *matters to be dealt with*."

I had an instant to notice the emphasis, realize it was a signal, when Salop jumped me, pinning my arms at my waist with his strength. Bigger, stronger, and younger than I was, he held me immobilized.

"A pity," Heme said, "you attacked me when I came on a friendly visit to discuss how we could mutually help the Council. Scopas and Barthou won't believe the story, but they won't have any choice, and the masses will eat anything we tell them to."

"We should have killed you after Cambiaso," he said, drawing his sword. For some reason, I had all the time in the world to consider its elaborately worked blade, its ivory grip, its golden, gem-encrusted guard, hilt, and pommel. With his free hand, he took the bundle from the table, opened it, and a shortsword clattered onto the floor. "That," he said, "is what you attacked me with. I barely saved myself, and only because of my aide Shamb Salop's quick wits. I'll have to punish your warders most severely for allowing one of your accomplices to smuggle in the sword."

"I wish I could draw out your doom, former First Tribune, for your arrogance and how you shamed me in front of lesser beings," he said. "But my story must have some credibility, and someone missing eyes, nose, and cock might increase the difficulty of my explanation."

He drew his sword back, and I smashed my head back into Salop's face. The cartilage of his nose crunched, and his teeth snapped. The man screeched, loosened his hold, and I sent my elbow back into his ribs, hearing them crack, sidestepping as Heme struck.

His lunge went home, keen blade driving into Salop's guts. The man gasped agony, grabbed the blade eyes wide in disbelief, then fell, almost tearing the weapon from Heme's grasp.

I had no time to grab Salop's still-sheathed sword, nor to reach my own dagger. Heme's teeth were bared in a silent snarl.

"So you managed to kill my finest soldier," he hissed. "That shall make the story better."

He closed in in the careful steps of a skilled swordsman, and I was doomed.

I'd known soldiers who were known for battle rage, an uncaring frenzy that took them so they cared only about destroying their enemies, even if it came at the cost of their own life. In the final frenzy at Cambiaso I'd known that blood fever as well, in my complete despair, seeing my entire world shattered around me.

Now it came again, after the long months of confinement, fear, and hopelessness, a target I hated in front of me, a man who'd sold everything he should have held dear, from pride to honor to country, and I laughed in pure joy. Everything was easy, everything was mine.

Heme's expression of glee changed to fear, and he flailed his blade back and forth, forgetting his swordsman's training of calmness, direction, trying to create a steel web between us.

I had time, all the time in the world, stepped away from his slash, and struck hard with the back of my fist at his blade, which hung motionless before me.

The steel snapped in three parts, and they pinwheeled slowly up and around us, and Heme goggled at the stub of his sword.

He dropped it, fumbled for his dagger, but he was too late, far too late, and I had him by the throat, fingers digging into the sides of his neck, feeling the thrum of blood, fingers like the seizing talons of the eagle, and his face went red, his mouth opened and his tongue bulged and I was holding him, a man not much smaller than I, clear of the ground, shaking him like a trapped bear shakes a hound.

I felt a snap, and Heme's head lolled, and I smelt shit as his dead body voided. I dropped the limp corpse, stepped back.

The red thunder against my temples died, and I stared at the bodies of two men, one the highest-ranking soldier of Numantia.

Now I was indeed for it.



I'd rather be cut down like a running boar than make a sambar's last noble stand. I stripped off Salop's uniform, tried to ignore the wet, dark stain around its middle as I pulled it on.

I checked both men's pouches, cursed when I found Heme's empty, but Salop's was full of gold and silver. The Guardian of the Peace must've been one of those pretenders who felt it's an underling's job to pay... or perhaps he was merely an inveterate freeloader.

I took my own coins, the dagger Perak had given me, and tucked that innocently deadly iron pig into pocket.

I fastened Salop's weapons belt on, tore braid from Heme's uniform and tied Salop's boots together and strung them around my neck, and was ready to go. Then I caught myself and took Heme's gem-crusted dagger and, as a second thought, the stub of his sword, tucking them inside my tunic.

The last bit of corpse robbing was Heme's sword belt, which I stripped of its sheaths and looped around my neck. I considered the three possible escape routes, decided on the one I knew to be easiest and most likely to get me killed.



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