



BASED ON THE AWARD-WINNING



GAME

THE WARLOCK SAGAS



VOLUME ONE

INSTRUMENTS OF WAR

STORY BY LARRY CORREIA





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LARRY CORREIA

Cover by

RUK TRAMUTA

Illustrated by

RUK TRAMUTA
MILIVOJ CERAN





I want to thank Dan Wells, Howard Tayler, and Alan Bahr for introducing me to Warmachine, teaching me how to play, and then beating me and taking my lunch money. Thanks to the crew of Privateer Press for letting me play in their world.



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PART ONE

“**W**hat is it that you whisper to yourself, child, when the pain becomes too much?”

Makeda wiped the blood from her split lip. Her head was spinning, and her body ached from the savage beating. “I recite the code.”

“Why must a warrior recite the hoksune code?” Archdominar Vaactash asked rhetorically.

“The code shows me the way to exaltation. Only through combat may one understand the way.” She studied the blood on the back of her shaking hand as she spoke. All of it was hers ... so far. She would have to remedy that. Akkad had beaten her mercilessly, but Makeda could still fight. The tremors slowed and then stopped. “Suffering cleanses the weakness from my being. Adhere to the code and I will become worthy.”

“Correct. You have learned much for one so young,” her grandfather stated without inflection. It was as close to a compliment as the archdominar had ever paid her. “Take up your swords, Makeda of House Balaash. Your lessons are not yet through today.”

The practice swords lay in the sand near where she had been thrown. They were made of hard wood, the edges dented and cracked from hundreds of impacts, the hilts worn smooth by sweat and callus. She had begun learning their use as soon as she was strong enough to lift them. She may have been a child, but she was skorne, and thus she did not question, she endured. Makeda reached out and seized the pair of wood swords. They felt comfortable in her grip, mimicking the heft and balance of true Praetorian blades.

“Rise,” Vaactash commanded.

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Makeda struggled to her feet, muscles aching in protest. Her laminate armor had been crafted for an adult, and was too big for her slim body, but it had kept her intact during Akkad's last merciless assault. She had yet to begin her studies in the art of mortitheurgy, but she did not need to be a master reader of the energy that dwelled within the blood and sinews to understand that her body was in danger of failing her. Her opponent was simply too strong.

Akkad was waiting for her to stand, obviously excited to prove his worth to their grandfather. There were only three people present within the gigantic training arena of House Balaash, but one of them was Archdominar Vaactash himself, master of their house and a warrior so great he had already secured exaltation for his deeds. It did not matter that the stands were empty, since the opinion of Vaactash alone mattered more than the cheers of several cohorts of troops.

"What lesson would you have me teach her next, Archdominar?" Akkad asked. As the elder of the two children of Telkesh, first son and heir of mighty Vaactash, Akkad would someday lead House Balaash. Hoksune dictated that the eldest, unless unfit for war, must lead. It was vital that Akkad display his martial superiority before his grandfather, and so far he had. "She is still but a tiny thing."

Vaactash's expression was unreadable. "Then why have you had to work so hard to defeat her?"

Makeda took some pleasure in seeing the anger flash across Akkad's face as he sputtered out a response. "I merely wished to provide you with an amusing show."

"Watching a paingiver flay a captured enemy is amusing," Vaactash snapped. "I am here to make sure my grandchildren are being properly prepared to bring glory to my house. Demonstrate to me that you are ready to fight in the name of Balaash."

Akkad dipped his head submissively. "Of course." Ten years older, her brother was far larger and had already received advanced training under

the tutelage of their father's veteran Cataphract. Akkad walked to the nearest rack of weapons and removed a war spear, the heavy polearm of the Cetrati. It was longer than Makeda was tall, and even though the blade had been replaced with a block of shaped wood, she knew that it would still hit like a titan's tusk. Akkad tested the balance of the heavy weapon before grunting in approval. He spun it effortlessly before pointing it at Makeda's chest. "I will finish her swiftly this time."

"See that you do. Hold nothing back. Demonstrate your conviction."

For the skorne, life consisted of either making war or preparing for it. It was a harsh, brutal, and unyielding existence. That was especially true for those blessed enough to be born into House Balaash, the greatest of all houses. There was no doubt they would fight their hardest until physically unable to continue or were commanded to stop by their superior. Other, lesser houses may have done it differently, perhaps not risked the lives of their heirs so flagrantly, but that was why they were weak and House Balaash was strong.

Makeda welcomed the challenge. She crossed her swords and saluted her brother.

Their grandfather studied the combatants intently, his white eyes unblinking. Though his form was bent with age, his mere presence seemed to fill the arena. This was a warrior who had led tens of thousands into battle and conquered more houses than any other dominar in several generations, earning himself the extremely rare title of archdominar. He was a master mortitheurge capable of commanding the mightiest beasts and rending unbelievable magic from the flesh. Makeda wished that she could have a fraction of his understanding, but promised herself that one day she would. Vaactash was the epitome of what it meant to be skorne.

After a long moment of consideration, Vaactash stepped aside, gathered up his red robes, and took a seat on the first tier of the training arena. He gestured dismissively. "Continue."

"Come, sister. Let us end this."

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Akkad swung the spear in a wide arc. Makeda raised both blades to intercept, but the impact was so great that it nearly tore them from her grasp. Her arms were already exhausted and quivering. She grimaced and pushed back, but her boots slid through the sand of the arena as Akkad overpowered her. The pressure released, the heavy pole moved back, and Makeda lurched aside as Akkad stabbed at her. He followed, relentless, eyes narrowed, looking for an opportunity to finish her.

He was stronger, but she was faster. Stepping in to the threat, Makeda slashed at Akkad's face with her right, narrowly missing. *Show your foe one blade. Kill him with the other.* She stabbed with her left sword and clipped the edge of his breastplate. Akkad didn't seem to notice. The spear hummed through the air again, and this time Makeda was unable to stop it.

She crashed hard against the arena wall.

The code of hoksune declared that the eldest was the default heir, but every child of the highest caste was a valuable war asset, and thus not to be wasted frivolously. Yet, when Makeda looked into Akkad's maddened eyes, she wondered if her brother really did intend to kill her. She narrowly rolled aside as the wall was pulverized into splinters. Vaactash said nothing.

Her brother was kept coming. The war spear covered vast swaths of the arena with each attack. The muscles of Makeda's arms clenched in agony as her practice swords bounced harmlessly away. Sweat poured down the inside of her cursed, cumbersome armor. She was struck in the ribs, and then in the leg. Flesh bruised and swelling, Makeda continued fighting. She would fight until her archdominar said it was time to stop or she was dead, for that was the code. Another massive strike knocked one of her blades away. It spun through the air and landed in the stands with a clatter.

Makeda knew she was losing, but the words of the code played through her mind. *Only by conflict can the code be understood. Embrace your suffering and gain clarity.*

Time seemed to slow. His moves were too fierce, too uncontrollable. He had underestimated her resolve. Akkad lifted his spear high overhead

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before bringing it down in a crashing arc. Makeda barely moved aside in time. The mighty hit threw a cloud of sand into the air, but before Akkad could lift the war spear again, Makeda planted one boot on top of the war spear's blade. Though sleight, the extra weight was enough to cause his grip to slip as he tried to tug the spear away. The momentary surprise was just enough to allow Makeda one clean strike.

"Balaash!" she cried.

The tip of her practice sword caught Akkad in side of the head. Blood flew as skin split wide. The spear was pulled from beneath her boot and the siblings stumbled away from each other.

Makeda gathered herself, but there was a lull in the fighting. Akkad was glaring at her as if stunned, one gauntlet pressed to his head to staunch the flow of red. She had struck him hard. His ear was mangled, the tip hanging by only a small bit of skin. Surely, he had felt that one.

"I have seen enough."

Gasping for breath, barely able to stand, Makeda looked to their archdominar. Vaactash nodded once. Her heart swelled.

"Both of you have improved since last I watched you spar. It pleases me that the blood of House Balaash does not run thin in this generation. One day I will die and your father, Telkesh, will lead my House, and you will serve him. In time, Akkad, you will take his place. When you learn to temper your ambition with wisdom, you will bring great honor to our house. Your sister will make a fine tyrant in your service, and I have no doubt that multitudes will be conquered to feed our slave pits. Until then, you have much to learn."

"Yes, archdominar."

"The more you bleed in training, the less you will bleed in war. Learn from every fight, Akkad. Do you know why Makeda defeated you this time?"

"She did not defeat me!" Akkad snarled.

"Silence!" The entire arena seemed to flex at Vaactash's displeasure. That one stern word caused Akkad to fall to his knees and bow. *"Do not ever*

disagree with the ruler of your house. If that had been an actual Praetorian blade the contents of your thick skull would have been emptied into the sand. Fool. How dare you question my decree?"

The siblings shrank back. The archdominar's legendary temper was a thing only spoken of in hushed whispers.

"For that you will not have this wound repaired. Have the end cut off and cauterized. You will wear that scar as a reminder of your impertinence."

"Yes, archdominar." Akkad kept his head down as droplets of blood painted a pattern in the sand. He was trying not to sound sullen. "It will be as you command."

"Again I ask, do you know why a tiny child capable of hiding in your shadow managed to beat you?"

"Forgive my ignorance. I... I do not know the answer, grandfather." Akkad risked a quick glance toward Makeda. She could feel the malice in his gaze. Makeda did not gloat. She had merely done her best, as was required. "Please, enlighten me."

"You only understand the concept of victory. Makeda does not comprehend the concept of defeat."



A generation had passed, but the lessons of Vaactash would never leave her. His words were as ingrained into Makeda as the code of hoksune itself. It had been a year since her grandfather's death under the tusks of a great beast of the plains, but she still found herself calling upon his wisdom during times of struggle. She was a mature, yet unproven, warrior now. The Swords of Balaash were sheathed at her side. Slivers of her grandfather's sacral stone were among those empowering the mighty blades, and though only an extoller could contact the exalted dead, Makeda always felt as though Vaactash was there to guide her with his wisdom.

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Makeda would need that wisdom if she were to survive the day.

The atmosphere inside the command tent was as heated as the drought scorched plains. The officers of her decurium were in disagreement over what to do next.

“Tyrant Makeda, House Muzkaar’s forces are nearly upon us.”

“Akkad’s reinforcements have not arrived. We are badly outnumbered. If we do not fall back now we die here.” Urkesh was the dakar of her taberna of Venators. Of course a warrior who specialized in engaging the enemy from a distance with reiver fire would choose the pragmatic, if somewhat cowardly, approach.

“We have been commanded to hold this hill! So we dig in and hold!” Dakar Barkal was the leader of her Praetorian karax. Of course, the karax would choose to die like that, in a perfect xenka formation, each of their great shields protecting themselves and the Praetorians at their sides as they impaled their enemies on long pikes. “Honor demands it.”

“Muzkaar outnumbers us five to one,” Urkesh insisted. “Your honor will not beat those odds.”

“Do you question the strength of the karax?” Barkal shouted.

Makeda let them debate. She knew they would follow her final decision, no matter what. Perhaps in the meantime one of them would surprise her with a solution.

“Your mighty shields won’t matter when a wall of titans stampedes over you.” Urkesh replied.

Venators were the lowest of the warrior caste, but Urkesh was young and hot headed. Makeda doubted he realized how close he was to having Barkal strike him down in anger. “We cannot hold anything if we are dead and howling in the Void. I say we retreat from this trap, move to the plains, where we can maneuver and harass these Muzkaar dogs until Akkad’s forces arrive.”

Barkal looked to Makeda, his narrow face pinched with rage. She needed every warrior, even a Venator whose devotion to dying by the hoksune

code was questionable at best. Makeda shook her head. She would approve no duels of slighted honor until after the battle. She could not spare any warriors. Deprived of his chance to gut Urkesh for his insolence, Barkal went back to defending his position. "Our duty requires us to hold," he snapped.

Deep in thought, Makeda listened to the words of her subordinates as they argued. She was glad that none of them feared death, only the possibility of failure. Skorne lived to serve and die, but there was no honor in dying pointlessly. This was her first command, and she would not lose it easily.

Primus Zabalam stepped forward and placed his body between the two shouting warriors. Both dakars stepped back out of respect for their senior officer. "Regardless of which decision is best, we must give the order soon. We will be cut off by Tyrant Naram's beasts within the hour, and then it will not matter either way." It was the first time the veteran leader of her Praetorian swordsmen had spoken. Zabalam was the oldest warrior present, and had served as one of Vaactash's personal guard. He spoke with the wisdom gained from countless battles. "Our commander must choose now, or the decision will be made for her."

The map lay open on the table, but she stared through it, rather than at it. The map was irrelevant. She had already memorized every brush stroke and line of ink. *Fail in their orders, retreat and live to rejoin the rest of the army, or hold their ground in the vain hope that her brother would arrive in time, and more than likely die as nothing more than a temporary distraction ...* Ultimately, the choice was hers to make.

The situation was dire. The honor of House Balaash lay heavy on her shoulders. It was times like this that tested a warrior's dedication to the code.

Grandfather, what would you have me do?

Having recently reached the age sufficient to go through the rites of passage of the warrior caste, this was the first time Makeda had led a cohort into battle on behalf of House Balaash. Archdominar Telkesh had ordered her to hold this position, a small hill on the plains south of Kalos, but no one had predicted this level of resistance. Their spies had reported that the bulk of

the enemy had been camped much closer to the city, nowhere near here. The main army of House Balaash marched unopposed while Makeda's cohort was outnumbered against the entirety of the forces of House Muzkaar.

If somehow she did live through the day, Makeda intended to have those spies tortured for a long time.

That, however, did not solve her current dilemma. The enemy army was led by Naram, a Tyrant legendary for both his skill with beasts and the cruelty he used in breaking them. She had learned what she could of Naram's exploits, and respected him for his brutal and unflinching victories. He was an adversary worthy of her father and his mighty army, not nearly as appropriate a foe for an inexperienced commander and one small cohort. Yet the ancestors had placed Naram against her, not her father. This battle was hers.

Makeda knew it was not her ever increasing skills in the art of mortitheurgy, nor her natural talent with the blade that made her valuable to her house. It was her certainty in the truthfulness of the code of hoksune. Her grandfather had recognized that. So, as she always did, Makeda searched the code for an answer.

Combat favors the aggressor. There is a time for both defense and mobility, but every tactic is merely a tool enabling your inevitable attack. To draw with and kill your enemy is the true path toward exaltation.

She said a silent thank you to the shards of her grandfather's essence resting in her swords.

Makeda held up one hand, silencing her officers. "We will not retreat ..." Regardless of whether they agreed or not, they began to move out to spread the word. "Nor will we hold this position."

The men froze, uncertain. They looked to each other, none daring to question their new commander. Though she was the youngest in the room, she was their superior both by birth and by appointment. Finally, Barkal of the karax dared speak. "What would you have us do then, Second Born?"

Makeda smiled. "We strike."



The sound of the reivers firing reminded Makeda of a swarm of buzzing insects, only this swarm was made up of thousands of razor sharp projectiles. A House Muzkaar titan bellowed in agony as those projectiles shredded its hide. The gigantic war beast took a few halting steps, showering bright blood from a plethora of wounds. Several Muzkaar beast handlers lashed the thing, urging it forward through the steel cloud. Driven mad with pain, the titan lumbered onward.

“Reload!” Urkesh shouted at his Venators. There was only a single datha of ten armigers, but they acted quickly, unscrewing the spent gas cylinders from their awkward reiver weapons. Makeda sized up the distances. The armigers were quick, but not quick enough. The titan would trample over Urkesh’s warriors and she would lose her ranged advantage.

House Muzkaar had brought no ranged capability, and dozens of Muzkaar corpses littered the road from where they had been scythed down by her Venators while trying to cross. Makeda did not wish to give up that advantage.

Makeda had few warbeasts of her own to spare. Since her cohort had been marching quickly in order to seize their objective, she had only been given a pair of cyclops savages. The tougher, but slower, beasts had been left with Akkad. She reached with her mind, using her mortitheurge powers to find the lump of muscle and hate that was the nearest cyclops. She took hold of its mind and steered it into the path of the enemy titan.

The cyclops hoisted its great sword and stalked forward, towering several feet over even the tallest warriors in its path. What the cyclops lacked in intelligence it made up for in violent cunning. The beast’s single eye flicked back and forth, seeing the battlefield as only a cyclops could, a few seconds into the future, and Makeda wondered if the cyclops could see its own death coming.



The earth shook as the wounded titan charged. Each footfall felt like an earthquake. As large as the cyclops was, it was dwarfed by the titan. Armored tusks crashed into the cyclops' armor with a clang that could be heard over all the chaos of the battle. The cyclops rolled away, and the wounded titan followed, swinging wildly with its massive gauntlets. Instinct demanded the cyclops flee, and it screeched in protest as Makeda overcame its mind and forced it to stand its ground.

Their weapons ready, Urkesh shouted at his taberna. "Concentrate fire on that titan!" The Venators rose from the ditch they had taken cover in, aimed, and let loose a stream of razor needles. Hundreds of projectiles ricocheted off armor plates and ivory tusks, whining into the distance, but hundreds more found their mark. Hide puckered and bled as the titan roared and crashed into the dust.

Somehow, her cyclops had survived the mighty charge. Barely alive, it was struggling to stand, using its sword to lever itself up. Makeda used her magic, feeling the precious blood pumping out of the cyclops' damaged body, and then she reached deep within the beast and spurred its fury to new heights. The new anger gave her beast unnatural strength, and before the enemy could recover, Makeda's cyclops cleaved one of the titan's four arms off at the shoulder.

The titan's death bellow was like music across the plains. Its suffering would probably be heard all the way to the city of Kalos. Truly this was a great day for House Balaash.

The Muzkaar beast handlers that had been driving that titan were fleeing back across a ravine. "Urkesh." Makeda's voice was calm. "Make sure this is the last time those beast handlers annoy me."

The order was given, and the whine of razor needles filled the air, but Makeda had already moved on to survey the next part of the battle.

House Muzkaar had not expected her furious attack, and Makeda had stacked their corpses deep as a result. Tyrant Naram's army had been confident of their victory, but Makeda had struck so hard and fast that

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House Muzkaar had been thrown into disarray. A wild charge by her swordsmen and karax had bloodied Muzkaar. They had pushed back, but it had been disorganized, panicked, and it was only through superior numbers that Muzkaar had survived at all. She had drawn most of her melee troops away, letting her karax set up a defensive line, allowing her Venators time to bleed the enemy. The proud swordsmen were eager to return to glory, but she ordered them to be patient. Let Muzkaar think they had been used up ...

As the sun climbed and the hot morning turned into blistering afternoon, House Muzkaar counterattacked, and though it was sloppy and hurried, Makeda was drastically outnumbered. She could not win a war of attrition against a Tyrant with a stable worth of titans.

Despite heavy casualties, the line of Praetorian karax was standing firm. They stood shoulder to shoulder, a wall of steel and wood, shields absorbing blows and their pikes thrusting continuously, spilling Muzkaar blood. The karax were methodical, plodding forward, always stabbing.

The code of hoksune taught that the purest combat was individual, warrior on warrior. She could see why it was so much more difficult for a member of the karax to gain exaltation than a swordsman. This was not the battle she knew, the calculation of offense and defense, and the sudden flash of a sword ... This was mechanical. This was more like watching the lower castes harvest grain from the fields. The karax would stab, block, stab, block, and whenever Barkal saw an opening he would order an advance through the blood stained plains, and then as one they would begin their harvest again. It was hypnotic to watch.

Zabalam was waiting for her at the ridge overlooking their remaining karax. His taberna of elite Praetorian swordsmen were ready there, crouched in the tall golden grass, hidden, as per her orders, until the time was right.

“Second Born Makeda.” Zabalam bowed.

"A fine afternoon for war, Primus," Makeda greeted him respectfully. Though she outranked him by birth and command, Zabalam had been her primary instructor in the art of the two swords. Truly, he was a credit to their house. She thanked the ancestors that her father had seen fit to send Zabalam with her cohort. "How goes it here?"

"The swordsmen chafe at being told to hide in the grass like mere Hestations."

"They are elite warriors. Proud ..." Makeda noted. "It is understandable."

"They will do as they are told ... I do not think your brother will relieve us in time."

"Akkad will come." Makeda had her doubts, but she did not speak them aloud.

"The karax have fought past the point of exhaustion. They will fall soon, and when they do we will be overrun by these wretched Muzkaar *belek*."

"Good." A *belek* was a thick skulled, herd animal, strong but notorious for blundering into wallows and getting stuck. Makeda did not think Zabalam realized what a fitting insult that was.

"Good?" Since Zabalam's face had been split nearly in half with a sword many years before, only half of his mouth moved when he frowned. The other side was permanently frozen in a straight line. "I'm unsure how that is a good thing?"

"We cannot outlast a force this size. Our only hope to defeat them is by killing their tyrant. Without Naram, Muzkaar will fall. What do you know of Naram?"

"He is renowned for his skill, but your grandfather defeated him once and took many slaves from one of his cities."

"Yes. It is said he retains a rather passionate hatred of House Balaash, and he is still a warrior without peer. My ancestor shamed him, so he will come for revenge. He knows I am here, so Naram will want to give the killing blow himself."

"Or maybe he will capture you and turn you over to his Paingivers."

Makeda shrugged. "Either way, Naram is coming, and when he does, I will kill him first."

"You remind me of your grandfather sometimes ... But what of the karax?"

"Hopefully Akkad's reinforcements will have an extoller with them." Only a member of the extoller caste or the much rarer ancestral guardians could save a warrior's spiritual essence in a sacral stone so they could live on as a revered companion to the exalted. "Look at how many they have slaughtered. Surely some of them will be worth saving."

"And if Akkad has none of their caste amongst his reinforcements?"

She thought it over for a moment. Though no extoller had arrived, the warriors below did not know that, so she signaled for a message runner. "Tell Dakar Barkal that I am personally observing the battle, watching for any who are worthy of exaltation. Tell him to spread the word to his troops." The messenger did not seem disturbed in the least that he was to relay something which would raise an impossible hope. He merely bowed and ran down the hill. Makeda turned back to Zabalam. "That will make them fight that much harder."

Zabalam's half face twisted up in the other direction. "You *definitely* remind me of your grandfather."



The temperature continued to climb as the sun beat down on her armor. Droplets of sweat rolled from under her helmet and into her eyes. Makeda welcomed the sting. The cries of the dead and dying were all around her. The cohort of House Muzkaar seemed to be an endless thing stretching across the plains. She passed the time mentally steering her cyclops toward the weakest points of the Balaash lines. She stood there, her back banner whipping in the wind. Makeda wanted all of the enemy army to see her, defiant. Let them tell their tyrant that a scion of House Balaash was waiting for him.

Makeda felt the pang of loss as the cyclops that had been injured earlier was dragged down and killed. She drained the last bits of vitality dwelling in the cyclops tissues and gathered that strength to herself. She would need it shortly.

The line of karax faltered, broke, and was swept away before the swords of House Muzkaar. Their center had fallen.

A trumpet blew, and then another. A black banner was raised on the other side of the road and waved back and forth. The entire Muzkaar host hesitated, and then parted as a small escort of warriors and beasts advanced through the army.

“That is a lot of titans ...” Zabalam muttered.

There were only two of the great grey beasts lumbering behind Naram’s personal banner, but nonetheless even one titan was a lot of titan.

“On my signal, rally your men and charge that banner. All that matters is that Naram dies. I shall use my power to give you speed,” Makeda ordered. Zabalam conveyed that order to his swordsmen who were waiting in cover. She mentally summoned her remaining cyclops closer. “Runner.” Another messenger appeared at her side. “Tell Urkesh that when I draw my swords, his Venators must clear a path to that banner.”

The knot of Muzkaar elite had advanced to the front of the army. The squat, powerfully built skorne in the lead had to be Naram. With a spiked club resting on one shoulder, and his black armor gleaming in the sun, Naram appeared a formidable foe. She could sense his mortitheurge power, churning and hungry.

“I remember when you were teaching me the way of the two swords, Primus,” Makeda said.

“You were my finest student.”

“I recall now one lesson in particular. Show your enemy one sword, and when they are focused upon that, kill them with the other. I am the first sword ... Await my signal.”

Makeda walked down the hill to where Naram and his army were waiting. She ran her hands across the top of the thick grass. It was sharp enough to draw blood. The fury taken from her beasts burned like a hot lump of power within her chest. She stepped through puddles of blood, and over the mangled bodies of her warriors.

Naram strode toward her, a great wall of titan muscle on each side. "Makeda of House Balaash!" he challenged. The two beasts were obviously well controlled, as they took a few extra steps forward to shield their master.

She stopped just within range of his voice. "Tyrant Naram." She placed her hands on the hilts of her sheathed swords. Those swords held part of her grandfather. She would never let them fall into the hands of someone so unworthy. "It has been a fine battle so far. Have you come to surrender personally?"

The enemy Tyrant gave a hearty laugh. "I must admit, your tenacity impresses me. It has been a generation since I've seen someone so outnumbered account for themselves so well." He had to shout to be heard over the hot wind. "Order your remaining warriors to lay down their arms. Swear fealty to me, and you may retain your caste. There is room in House Muzkaar for such as you. A political marriage will be arranged to one of my sons. Your father will have to withdraw from Kalos, but this will be best for both our houses." Naram waved his free hand dismissively. "Or you can fight, and once you are defeated and shamed you can join your men as slaves to my house. Choose quickly."

Naram's words, though filled with truth, did not sway her. He did not understand how powerful Makeda's mortitheurgy was ... Few among their people could. Their dark magic took decades of devotion to master, but no one was more devoted than a child of House Balaash. Makeda closed her eyes and felt the world around her. Living tissue and pumping blood. She could sense Naram and his army before her, and her few remaining warriors behind, each and every one of them reduced to their component bits of muscle, bone, and sinew, cloaked in steel and laminate armor,

powered by blood and spirit, all of it there waiting to be manipulated by her superior will. Gathering up the energy gleaned from her fallen beast, she awoke the power within Zabalam's waiting Praetorian swordsmen. In her mind's eye, their blood turned to molten, pulsing fire.

She opened her eyes. Zabalam's standard bearer rose from the grass and waved the flag of the Praetorian swordsmen. They leapt from their hiding place and moved with impossible speed. Makeda drew the twin swords and charged.

"So be it," Naram stated. His titans both took another great step forward, shielding him from view.

Urkesh had received her message; his Venators fired. Makeda heard the high-pitched screech before she felt the passage through the air around her, buzzing through the top of the grass like angry bees. Razor needles exploded into the titans, and then Makeda was within the rain of blood.

The titan's leg was as big around as a tree, and the first sword of Balaash cleaved a chunk of meat sufficient for a feast from its thigh. She sidestepped as a massive gauntlet swung past, and then darted behind the first titan. Makeda was faster than any mortal had a right to be. The second studied her, giant head tilting to the side in confusion, tiny black eyes blinking, before Naram drove it toward her like a great, flesh-covered weapon.

A hand, palm as big as Makeda's torso, reached for her, but she lashed out with a blade, and the titan's thumb sailed into the grass. Makeda dove and rolled, armor clanking. She came up behind the second titan before it could begin to bellow in pain.

Naram stood in front of her, surprised, but already invoking his own mortitheurgy.

But then they were surrounded in swordsmen, and most of them were not his.

The fight was brutal. It was a swirling mass of chaos as swordsmen clashed beneath the thunder of titan feet. She beheaded a Muzkaar swordsman who crossed her path. Naram crushed the skull of a Balaash

warrior with his club. The two leaders met in the middle of the melee, and Makeda knew this was the perfect moment spoken of in the code of hoksune.

Her blades met the spiked club. Naram was incredibly strong, surely driven by his own magic. She had to cross her swords and use both to block at once. The impact would have broken a normal blade, but the Swords of Balaash were anything but normal. Naram shoved her back, and Makeda moved gracefully away, ducking beneath a wild swing from a Muzkaar guard. She returned the favor by removing that swordsman's face.

As his essence fled, Makeda could feel herself growing stronger. *Let this dance continue forever, for surely, this is exaltation.*

The nearest titan picked up one of her swordsmen in two vast hands and pulled the screaming warrior in half. Another barrage of reiver fire put out the titan's eyes. Makeda's remaining cyclops chopped at the other titan.

The tyrant swung at her, but she skipped aside. Naram's mortitheurgy surged outward in a wave of force, knocking down both black and red clad swordsmen. Makeda felt the hot energy pass over her, but she resisted it by sheer force of will, and leapt back into the fray.

Naram looked down in surprise as the tip of a sword burst from his abdomen. He swung his club in a mighty back arc, and the Balaash swordsman who had struck the Tyrant from behind disappeared in a spray of red. Naram grimaced and pressed one gauntlet to his stomach. The nearest titan roared in agony as Naram used his power to afflict the terrible wound onto the flesh of the beast in his stead.

Already severely injured, the titan toppled. Makeda jumped back as the beast blotted out the sun. She narrowly made it out of the way as the impact blew the tall grass flat. Makeda found herself on her back. She rolled and sprung up, trying to get back into the fight, but then there was a black flash as Naram's club filled her vision.

She was falling, turning through the air. The golden grass rushed up to meet her.

INSTRUMENTS OF WAR

Much as Naram had a moment before, Makeda called upon her power, seeking her mental connection to her remaining warbeast. She could feel the damage, the agony, and the blackness of the void. Instead of welcoming it, Makeda shoved it onto her cyclops.

The cyclops absorbed all of the damage it could, snuffing out its life like a candle, but even then, that wasn't enough. The impact still left Makeda stunned and bleeding. The cyclops's body collapsed into the waiting arms of the Muzkaar titan, and not even realizing it was dead, the titan attacked the corpse, pummeling it beneath its great fists. Even disoriented, Makeda was far too practiced to let any vital life energy go to waste, and she instinctively gathered up the last of the cyclops's dying rage to fuel her magic.

The world spun. Makeda got to her hands and knees. All around her, Balaash swordsmen fell. Muzkaar soldiers swarmed in from every direction. Naram walked toward her, spiked club dripping red.

Before he had died, Archdominar Vaactash had taught Makeda everything he knew about the thin line between life and death. Her people were a stubborn, hardy lot, and they did not give up their mortal shells easily. The bodies of dead and dying members of House Balaash surrounded her, but House Balaash still had need of their services. Makeda drew upon the well of power within her own blood. It was the greatest feat she had ever attempted, far beyond what she should have been able to accomplish as novice mortitheurge.

Makeda, scion of House Balaash, granddaughter of the greatest warrior the world had ever known, and daughter of Archdominar Telkesh, did not comprehend defeat.

"You are not done yet," she cried. "Rise and fight for House Balaash!"

Her power spun outward, blowing the tall grass as if another titan had fallen. Naram froze as he sensed the shift in the battlefield. The wind died and the air hung still. "What have you done?" the Tyrant of Muzkaar demanded.

And then the fallen soldiers of House Balaash stood up and returned to the fight.

“What have you done!” Blades pierced Naram’s armor. His remaining titan bellowed and died, and then there were no beasts left for him to shift his wounds to. Hearts stopped, eyes blank, bodies broken, the spirits of the soldiers of House Balaash pushed onward. A sword took a piece of Naram’s arm, another pierced his leg, and a third knocked his helmet off. “What have you done!” He clubbed them down, shattering limbs left and right.

Makeda was on her feet, striding forward, both swords raised. She called upon all the fury inside and used it to strengthen her arms. Bleeding, barely standing, Naram turned to meet her.

But it was too late.

They were eye to eye. Naram’s gaze lowered toward his chest. Both of the Swords of Balaash had been driven cleanly through armor and between his ribs. Two separate shafts of red steel protruded from his back. The heavy club fell from nerveless fingers.

The army of House Muzkaar froze, staring at their tyrant in disbelief. They slowly lowered their weapons to their sides. Silence settled over the battlefield as the fallen swordsmen of Balaash sank to the ground, their obligations fulfilled. Only a handful of Zabalam’s swordsmen had survived, and all of them were painted red, panting, and exhausted.

“You are victorious?” Naram whispered.

Makeda nodded. “Yes.” She could feel the strength leaving Naram’s body. He was only standing because he was leaning against her. Makeda knew the instant she removed her swords, Naram would perish. She slowly lowered him to the grass.

“Heh ... Today was a good day. Best battle ... In a very long time ...” He trailed off, and Makeda could no longer hear his words. His eyes were wide, but not with fear. She pressed her ear in close. Makeda could feel his dying breath on her skin.

"The code shows me the way to exaltation. Only through combat may one understand the way." Naram gasped. "Suffering cleanses the weakness from my being ... Adhere to the code ... and I will become..."

"Worthy," she finished the verse.

What is it that you whisper to yourself, child, when the pain becomes too much?

This was a great and worthy leader of skorne. This one did not deserve to be lost in the Void. Makeda looked to the nearest Muzkaar soldier. "Do you have extollers amongst you?" The swordsman nodded quickly. "Summon one. Now."



They did not look the part of a victorious force as they marched along the road northward. There was no parade of slaves, no baggage train of looted treasure, no trophy heads raised on poles. No, Makeda thought to herself, they looked more like the losers. Only one third of her warriors had survived, and many of them were injured. They limped down the road, reeking of death, and covered in dried blood and bandages. They had no warbeasts. They had been forced to leave their dead behind without ceremony. Their weapons and armor, much of it broken, was piled upon a wagon.

Yet, her single decurium had defeated the combined might of a great house's cohort.

This was not a pure victory however. Normally when a tyrant is thrown down and a house conquered, that house is absorbed by the victors. That had not been an option here. Makeda felt both relieved and bitter about the results. The Muzkaar army had them completely surrounded, and her ragged survivors would not have stood a chance. Akkad and his reinforcements had never arrived. If they had, all of House Muzkaar would have been in chains.

Instead, she had received a message from Naram's successor heir. It had simply read, *As you have spared the essence of my father, I will spare you.*

The bloated red sun set over the golden plains. Only two of her officers had lived through the battle. Dakar Urkesh, who stank of the caustic gasses used to drive his reivers, and the seemingly unkillable Primus Zabalam marched beside her. Dakar Barkal had perished, as had the vast majority of his karax.

"Tell me, Zabalam ..." It was a sign of weakness, but she struggled to keep the weariness from her voice. "This was the first battle I have commanded. Does victory always taste so bitter?"

"Sometimes ..." His ruined face was expressionless. "This was a great victory. Glory will be heaped upon your name when word gets back to our House."

She was unsure if Zabalam was capable of sarcasm. "Do you mock me, Primus?"

"I am incapable of mockery. If you believe I do so, say the word and I will cut out my own heart and hand it to you by way of apology." He looked her in the eye. "The bitterness is only because you were denied your rightful spoils."

"We should have crushed all of Muzkaar and looted Kalos, if only Akkad had brought his cohort like he was supposed to," Urkesh spat.

"That is what troubles me," Zabalam said.

An entire army had not troubled Zabalam earlier, why would the lack of one? "What disturbs you, Primus?"

"Just a feeling. Forgive an old swordsman for his nerves." Zabalam looked at the ground, not wanting to meet her gaze. "I am sure it is nothing."

"Where was One Ear anyway?" Urkesh muttered.

Makeda backhanded the Venator in the mouth. The steel of her gauntlet split his lip. Urkesh crashed into the dirt, and before he could begin to sit up, she pressed the tip of her blade against his throat. Makeda twisted the hilt slightly, letting the edge of the sword of Balaash rest against the artery.

She could feel his pulse through the steel. All she had to do was relax a muscle and he would die.

Urkesch averted his eyes and did not speak. It was the not speaking that saved his life.

"Heed my words, Urkesch," Makeda hissed. "You killed many today. Your *taberna* was essential to achieve victory. You may prove useful to me again. For that reason, and that reason alone, I will spare your life. However, you will never speak ill of anyone above your caste again, or I will have the paingivers flay you. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Second Born."

"You do not truly understand hoksune. You kill from a distance. You have not looked into another warrior's eyes as they drown in their own blood. Hoksune is not real to you as it is to Akkad, who has felt a thousand deaths at his hands. Lay there in shame and think upon your transgression." She sheathed the sword in one quick motion and walked away. "Come with me, Zabalam."

The old Praetorian left the young Venator in the road and followed his commander. "What would you have of me?"

Makeda did not need deference, she needed honesty. "I have no patience for speaking around the truth. You know that. I never have."

Zabalam nodded. "That is why I asked to be assigned to your cohort rather than your brother's."

"So speak plainly, elder teacher, and tell me what is on your mind."

"Our lack of reinforcements was suspicious. We should be dead." Zabalam took his time, choosing his words carefully. "Akkad has always desired glory. Abandoning you in a battle is as sure a murder as a knife in the back, and it is not unheard of for siblings to murder each other in order to rule a house."

Makeda shook her head. "But Akkad is the eldest. He is already Telkesh's heir. Ancient tradition declares that the eldest must rule." Despite any of her personal opinions about her brother, she would never go against

the traditions of her caste, to do otherwise would cause chaos and weaken their house. "The order of succession has been decreed. Telkesh rules and has declared it so. If I believed Akkad unfit to lead, I would declare a challenge. Anything else would be dishonorable."

"Ah, Makeda, not everyone shares your devotion. They do not follow the old ways so closely. They merely talk of it while having no devotion in their hearts. They assume all are like them. So they whisper and talk. They are not like us. They lurk in the shadows and play politics with their birthright." Zabalam spit on the ground. "Their words are poison, and it would not surprise me if one such as that would whisper to your brother that you are a threat to his eventual rule."

There had to be another explanation. She knew Akkad was ambitious, and he was a fine warrior. She had no doubt he would make a decent archdominar when the time came. Violating the wishes of their father, Telkesh, was unimaginable, and she did not know which idea she found more disturbing, that her brother would leave her to die, or that anyone would doubt her honor so much.

"Incoming riders!" the shout went up along the column. "They fly the colors of Balaash."

Scouts for the army. They would be reunited soon enough. "Do not worry, Zabalam. I will speak to my father about today's events. I'm sure there is an explanation for Akkad's delay."

"As you wish." The Primus bowed.

She could see the cavalry now. The scouts tore down the road, heading straight for Makeda's tattered banner. The first rider came up to Makeda, riding upon a ferox, one of the swiftest predators of the plains. The messenger wore the insignia of a Dakar, and her mount foamed from the journey. The creature snarled at Makeda, so the rider punched it in the back of the head. It wheeled about and snapped at her legs with its long razor teeth, but she struck it again harder. Dominance established, that stroke finally settled it down.

“Second Born Makeda,” the messenger dipped her helmet. It was as close as could be approximated to a bow while on the back of an enraged ferox. “You are alive?”

“Obviously,” she answered. “Where is the army?”

“Encamped a few miles to the north,” the rider seemed rattled. “We were told your cohort had been destroyed by Tyrant Naram.”

“He tried. It was an excellent battle, but Naram was the one who was destroyed. Who told you such lies?”

“Forgive me. It was all over the camp. Ancestors! You have not heard?”

“Spit it out, Praetorian!”

The rider was obviously terrified. Her mount sensed the unusual fear, and turned back curious and sniffing. “Your father — Archdominar Telkesh is dead.”



The ferox was unbelievably swift. The powerfully muscled beast moved in great leaping bounds, its talons ripping up tufts of grass and dirt as they moved across the plains. A sudden plunge down a ravine forced Makeda to place one hand against the reptilian skin before her saddle. It was softer than expected. The ferox turned one curious eye back toward her. Perhaps, if it had been any other unfamiliar rider, the vicious thing may have attempted something, but it could sense the danger in Makeda, and simply did as it was told.

Her mount jumped high into the air, taking them over the edge of the ravine and into the open dusk. A large encampment stretched before them, hundreds of tents, all flying the proud banner of House Balaash. Housing thousands of soldiers, thousands of slaves, and dozens of beasts, it was more of a mobile city than an encampment. Makeda roughly kneeed the ferox in the ribs, pointing it toward the nearest set of lanterns.

The guards rose immediately to challenge her approach. Just because she was flying the banner of Balaash did not necessarily make her an ally, especially here in Muzkaar land.

“Who goes there?”

“Makeda, Second Born of Telkesh.”

The nearest guard shifted the grip on his spear. “Makeda is dead.”

Makeda reached up and removed her helmet as the ferox padded closer to the lantern light. The sudden wind felt cool on her scalp. “Silence, imbecile. Take me to my father.”

The guards looked stunned. “She lives!” One of the soldiers gestured a direction. The ferox snapped at him, and the dagger-like teeth missed his wrist by less than an inch.

A smarter guard pointed with his spear. “Forgive us. The archdominar’s tent is over there.”

Makeda looked at the tent. That was not her father’s tent. That was Akkad’s tent. There was a sudden pain in her heart, an unfamiliar feeling. “Ha!” She kicked the ferox hard. It reached Akkad’s tent within three bounds. Makeda slid off of the saddle and walked quickly inside. These soldiers immediately bowed and moved out of her way.

Despite being a huge affair which needed several of its own pack animals to move anywhere, the inside of Akkad’s tent was crowded with warriors of rank and lineage. Makeda recognized many of her father’s advisors and officers. They all wore solemn expressions which turned to shock when they saw her. Whispers radiated outward as all eyes turned to see.

“Where is my father?” Makeda demanded, but already knowing the answer.

Heads were bowed. Feet were studied. A scribe hurried to the rear of the tent and disappeared beneath a flap into the sleeping quarters.

Abaish was the first to speak. He was of the paingiver caste, but was one of her father’s closest advisors. Only his narrow chin was visible beneath the traditional mask worn by all paingivers. “Forgive our surprise, Tyrant Makeda. We were told that your cohort had perished in battle today.”

“Not today. Perhaps next time. Now where is my father?”

Abaish shook his head with exaggerated sorrow. “I am afraid mighty Telkesh is dead.”

Makeda’s knees turned to water. She tried not to let her emotions show. Telkesh had not been archdominar for long. Vaactash had only been dead a year. This was inconceivable. “How?”

“A sudden illness,” said one of the Cataphract. “He was overcome with fever.”

It seemed impossible, a skilled mortitheurge, a house leader with mastery over energies which controlled the flesh or could withstand death, to be taken by a simple fever.

“The surgeons could not find a cure in time,” Abaish added apologetically. “For that failure Akkad had them executed.”

It was as if saying his name had summoned him, but it had more than likely been the scribe, because the same flap opened and Akkad entered. Tall, broad and powerful of build, his features were sharp and strong, his eyes narrow and intelligent. When the artisan caste attempted to capture skorne perfection in a work of sculpture, it usually looked something like Akkad, except of course, for the one ruined stump of an ear.

He surveyed the room expectantly. All of the assembled officers and functionaries went to one knee and dipped their heads. The act should not have surprised her. Akkad was after all, now the archdominar of House Balaash.

“Sister,” Akkad seemed as surprised to see her alive as she had been to find out their father was dead. However, he was better at concealing his emotions. The paingiver Abaish rose from his knees and placed himself at Akkad’s right hand. Akkad’s smile seemed forced. “It is good to see you. My scouts had told me that your cohort had been surrounded and wiped out on the plains. It is good to see you escaped Naram.”

“I did not escape Tyrant Naram, I killed him.” Excited whispers filled the tent, some more incredulous than others. She could not hear the words, but she could imagine them. *How did this inexperienced girl defeat*

the great Naram? She would deal with them later. Yet many of the warrior caste seemed rather pleased. This news seemed to upset Akkad, but she could not dwell on that. "Please, brother, tell me of father."

"Yes. Poor father. He fell ill during our march. Mighty Telkesh brought low by a disease only yesterday. I rushed to his side as soon as I heard. I was with him as the fever consumed him."

"A tragedy," Abaish agreed.

"Indeed. He was in terrible pain, robbed of his dignity. A death that was in no way fitting—"

"Wait!" Makeda could not help herself. She looked toward the council extoller. They were all watching her. All of their specialized caste ceremonially plucked out one of their mortal eyes and replaced it with a crystal that allowed them to see into the spirit realm. Her reflection was visible in the extoller's crystal oculus. "He did not die in battle ... Are you saying his essence was not preserved?"

The extoller shook his head sadly.

Makeda gasped. "No." Telkesh had not been given the opportunity to be proven worthy. *Her father had been consigned to the Void.*

Akkad folded his arms as he studied his council. Abaish leaned over and whispered in Akkad's good ear, and it reminded her of Primus Zabalam and his warning about those that lurked in the shadows. Akkad frowned. "Why do you not bow before your archdominar, Makeda? Do you intend to disrespect me?"

Makeda was shaken from her thoughts by the accusation. "Why—"

"You are not kneeling. Why do you disrespect House Balaash by failing to honor your archdominar?"

And in that moment, Makeda knew ...

Akkad had known father was dying this morning. He had abandoned her entire cohort, knowing that Naram would kill them.

She could see the truth in the faces of many of the warriors in the room. They had figured it out as well.

INSTRUMENTS OF WAR

“Kneel,” Akkad commanded.

Her brother had consigned her to death. *Why?* Did he truly consider her a threat to his rule? Her mind was still fatigued from combat. Many of the warriors were staring at her expectantly. She could feel anger boiling up within her, yet the traditions of their caste were clear on this matter. It was the responsibility of the eldest to rule. Makeda forced the anger back, then went to one knee and lowered her head. “I am sorry ... archdominar.”

Akkad had no idea that her sense of honor had just saved his life.



PART TWO

The Hall of Ancestors was a sacred place, and the only sound was their footfalls upon the stone. At this late hour the stonemasons of the worker caste were gone and only a few extollers scurried about in the shadows. Archdominar Vaactash lit their way with a single lantern. The pale light illuminated row upon row of statues as they passed. Makeda thought the Ancestral Guardians towered over her, much as her grandfather did.

“Do not shrink before them, child. These are your exalted ancestors and their revered companions. They lived for House Balaash. We are the culmination of their great works,” Vaactash said softly. “Each one of them has a story.”

“Yes. Father ordered the servants to give us summaries,” Makeda answered.

“And of course, when the summaries were not enough, you read everything in the library ...” It was not a question.

Makeda suddenly felt nervous. Was that why she had been summoned to the Hall? In a society based upon strength and born into a caste bred for war, scholarly pursuits were frowned upon. Time spent on lesser arts could have been spent on more important things. Yet, one did not disagree with the archdominar. Akkad’s missing half ear was a constant reminder of that fact. “Yes, Grandfather. I have read the histories. In truth, I find them ...” she trailed off.

Vaactash paused. The lantern cast deep shadows around his gaunt features, his eyes nothing more than white dots in a black pit. “Finish your words.”

"I have read all of the histories of my ancestors, and I am *inspired* by them."

"How?"

"I wish to emulate their successes ..." She glanced at the statues. Inside each of them was a sacral stone, and within each of those stones rested the spiritual essence of a hero, fallen for the honor of House Balaash. She did not wish to give offense, but the truth was required. "Yet avoid their mistakes."

Vaactash nodded once, his expression unreadable. "This answer is acceptable." Then the light turned away and the old warrior continued on his way down the hall. Despite an old injury that had left Vaactash with a limp, Makeda had to hurry to keep up with her shorter legs.

A moment later they reached the center of the Hall. Vaactash stopped before the largest statue. He turned back to her, the lantern again casting odd shadows on his features. "Do you know why this statue is special?"

Makeda nodded. "It is because there is not yet an essence stored within it." The stone workers had been toiling away on this project for years, for what seemed like most of her short life. It was the finest example of the artisan caste's craft in the entire Hall. It was a stylized rendition of her grandfather, only a much younger version, a version which she had never seen herself, and frankly had a difficult time imagining. "This is to be your exalted resting place, Grandfather."

Vaactash turned back to the statue and stared at it for a long time. Makeda stood silently, not knowing why she had been summoned in the middle of the night. "We are still so devout in our worship ..." Vaactash spoke slowly, choosing each word carefully, "for a people who have no gods."

Makeda knew what the ancestral teachings said about the subject. "The skorne do not need gods. Through hardship we forged our own path. Only the weak need gods."

"So it is written ... Where there was only a wasteland, we built our world. We forced crops from the sand, subjugated the beasts of the plains,

and taught ourselves the power that dwells within blood and pain." The greatest living warrior remained fixated on his statue. "And what happens to those of us who die without achieving exaltation?"

Was she being tested? "There is only the Void." It was a place of black infinity, a boundless eternal suffering that even the most creative of paingivers could never hope to emulate. Except for the exalted few or their revered companions, all skorne were destined for eternal torment.

"Long ago, there was no exaltation ... All of us were consigned to the Void. It was only through the wisdom of Voskune, Ishoul, and Kaleed that we learned the way to preserve our essence. Rather than being cast into the Void, our spirits could be kept safe in a sacred stone. Our wisdom could be saved to be shared with our descendants, and in times of dire need our honored ancestors could even return to fight for their House."

"It is a great blessing," Makeda agreed.

"Yet, even after the revelation, so few could be saved. Choices had to be made. Who would live on and who would be cast into the eternal death? There must be order. It was Dominar Vuxoris who would become the First Exalted. It was his teachings which would become hoksune, the code governing the conduct of all warriors. Thus it was declared that only through adherence to the tenets of hoksune could we prove our worthiness. Only the greatest of warriors can earn exaltation. For everyone else, there is the Void."

"But, Grandfather, you have earned your place amongst our ancestors. In time my father, Telkesh, will as well. I will do the same."

"When I heard you were neglecting your mortitheurgy in order to read the histories, I was angered — Balaash blood is not thin scholar's blood — but I can see now that there was no need. There is a place for such knowledge amongst the warrior caste."

Makeda felt relieved to know why she had been summoned, and even more so knowing she had passed the archdominar's test. "My ancestors will guide me as I defeat the enemies of our house."

“And there must always be enemies ... I do not think you understand the burden of the warrior caste. You are old enough now. I will tell you a story.” Vaactash leaned against his statue, taking the weight off of his crippled leg, in a rare display of weakness. “Two generations ago, I visited the islands south of Kademe. That was the first time I have seen the sea. It is far bigger than Mirketh Lake. It seemed to stretch further than the eye could see, further even than the wastes.”

That much water sounded inconceivable, but Makeda did not dare question the archdominar’s truthfulness. She preferred her ears properly shaped and pointy, not mangled into scar tissue.

“There are mighty predators that live beneath the sea. Those that fished the deep waters spoke of a fearsome beast that would eat anything in its path, so I sought out one of the local beast handlers to learn more.”

Makeda nodded. Of course, anyone skilled in the art of mortitheurgy would be interested in a fascinating new beast. Those that could be broken could be useful weapons or tools, and those that could not provide lessons in anatomy.

“The beast handler told me much about this mighty fish. It had more teeth than a ferox, and was the ultimate killer in its realm. It could sense the spilling of blood from miles away and never hesitated to destroy the weak.”

“It sounds wonderful.”

“Indeed. Yet that was not what fascinated me the most. You see, this sea beast must constantly be in motion, hunting, seeking prey, or it will *die*. It cannot be restrained. It cannot stop, for to stop moving is to perish. It was not its might, or its savagery that impressed me. No ... It was this constant need of struggle that reminded me of the warrior caste.”

“I do not understand, Grandfather.”

“Like the sea predator must perpetually hunt, so we must perpetually have strife. We are instruments of war. Only through war can we achieve exaltation. If that opportunity is removed, then we cease to be *skorne*.”

"The houses would never stop fighting! That would be madness."

Vaactash chuckled. "Perhaps ... Perhaps I am just an old warrior in his waning days and my mind tends to wander toward abstract thoughts. You have learned of *how* our ancestors fought, but now you must truly understand *why*." His voice grew dangerously low. "Only through conflict can we become pure, and only the pure can be exalted. This is why we fight. This is why we always *must* fight. Strife is our only opportunity to avoid being cast into the Void. Our entire society is based upon this."

Makeda bowed, thankful for the wisdom the archdominar had shared.

"Do you know what the foulest, most evil idea in the world is, Makeda?"

She shook her head. "Peace." Vaactash spat the word out, as if it tasted foul on his tongue.

She knew the word, but peace was a difficult, abstract concept to her. "That is not our way."

"Correct, but it is a tempting one. I know you do not understand this now, but you may when you are older. Those of the lower castes can seldom achieve exaltation, so the ideal appeals to many of them. Sometimes, the idea of *peace* may even corrupt some of our own caste."

"I cannot conceive of this."

"Of course there are times when a house is not making war. There are consolations after conquest, or when a house bides its time waiting for an opportunity to strike, and during such there is a lack of conflict, but it is certainly not *peace*. No. There is always another rising power, or a strong leader who becomes weak and must be cast down, or even the old being toppled by the young. You see, our caste must have something to strive against. It betters us. It completes us. Strife must be embraced."

He had never spoken so freely before, and Makeda tried her best to absorb her grandfather's wisdom.

"For every house I have imposed my dominion upon, I must constantly prove my worth, or I will be replaced by someone more worthy. Ultimately, it is possible for a conqueror to unite all of our caste beneath one banner.

Even then, there would be strife among our caste, for we are like the great sea beast, and to cease striving is to perish.”

“I understand, Grandfather.”

“Do you, Makeda? Fools often mistake this tempting concept of peace with the similar concept of surrender. They would live without strife. There are many who feel as if being born into the warrior caste should be enough to earn exaltation. They would see an end to war so they could grow fat and soft, and yet somehow escape the Void. So few of us can be exalted, it is vital that only the greatest achieve this.”

“That is what the code dictates. It would not be right for anyone to achieve exaltation without sufficient struggle.” The blasphemous idea shocked Makeda and filled her with anger. “Why, then the weak would be saved while superior warriors would be cast into the Void!”

“Indeed. You must ponder on these things.” Vaactash regarded her solemnly. “A warrior’s thoughts must remain open to ideas beyond what they have been taught. Akkad is cunning, and his mind is quick, but it is dangerous to entertain new ideas without governing them against principles of honor. If only I could combine your adherence to hoksune with your brother’s ambitious pragmatism, then House Balaash would be unstoppable. The mind reels at the possibilities.”

“I will serve House Balaash as the code dictates and when Akkad is archdominar, I will serve him. I promise.”

“A warrior does not need to promise, Makeda. The mere act of saying a thing will be done means that it will. To our caste, the act of saying and doing are the same. I have no doubt as to your loyalty to our house and for that I am glad you were Second Born.” Vaactash smiled. It was a rare expression. “Enough of an old warrior’s ramblings. That will be all.” He turned and went back to admiring his soon to be tomb. “You are dismissed.”



“You are dismissed.”

Makeda bowed low. “Yes, Archdominar Akkad.”

She stood. Only a few of the warriors assembled in the great tent met her gaze, and those were warriors she had trained with or who had served under her grandfather. There were too many new faces amongst the leaders of House Balaash. Makeda turned and walked quickly for the flap. More than anything, she wanted to be outside, away from whispering nest of razor worms. Her brother seemed pleased at the show of subservience, but Makeda noted that Abaish of the paingivers was whispering secrets into his ear before she had even made it outside.

Makeda took a deep breath of the cool night air and savored being alive.

Grandfather, what would you have me do?

The surviving remnants of her own decurium had not yet arrived. It would take them hours to catch up to the nimble ferox that had carried her here. Despite their great victory, she already knew there would be no conquerors' welcome for them. They had been a sacrifice sufficient to avoid suspicion, for why would an archdominar throw away troops? Surely, Akkad had meant for her and her token army to die on the plains, killed by Muzkaar hands and not by his treachery.

Her body still ached from the day's battle. Though she had been able to stave off serious injury by shoving it off to her cyclops, the pain remained. Makeda remembered her training and welcomed the pain. Morkaash, the first of the paingivers, had learned that suffering could lead to enlightenment. She accepted this truth. Once pain was understood, even welcomed, it could provide clarity of thought.

Makeda needed clarity right then.

With thousands of warriors present, the encampment seemed unnaturally still. The sudden, dishonorable death of Telkesh hung like a fog over the warriors. The only noise came from the nearby pens, as the enslaved warbeasts shuffled and grunted and fed. This encampment had been set up while she had been marching to her intended execution, so

it took her a few minutes to find the tent of Telkesh. The archdominar's banners were missing, surely taken to adorn Akkad's own. Telkesh's tent was dark.

A few of her father's longtime slaves remained outside it, kneeling in the sand, wailing and gnashing their teeth at the loss of their master. Makeda stepped around their prostate forms. There was a great pile of ash where they had burned Telkesh and a few of his servants in a mighty funeral pyre.

"It is already done?" Makeda whispered.

One of the slaves looked up at the sound of her voice. He squinted in the dark. "Makeda lives?"

"It is I." She recognized the slave but had never bothered to learn the name of someone from such a low caste. "Why was my father burned so quickly?" she demanded.

The slave looked away in fear. "The new archdominar declared that the disease could spread through the camp."

Makeda gritted her teeth. This was an added insult to the memory of her father. "Tell me of this mystery illness. What were the symptoms?"

"It was as sudden as lightning on the wastes. We had just broken camp and set out on the day's march when the master felt a pain in his stomach. It radiated out to his limbs and he complained of tingling and weakness. Soon, he was unable to march or even stay in a saddle. He was overcome with fever, and then madness and seizures. I was there. He twitched and jerked so much that I could not even get water past his lips."

The description reminded Makeda of something she had read in the family histories ... "And the chirurgeons?"

The slave pointed to a nearby pile of rocks that she had not noticed. It was an accepted form of execution. Place the condemned beneath a board, and then slowly pile rocks upon it all day until they were eventually crushed flat. It was an agonizing and slow method of execution, and thus one of the favorites of her people. "Tormentor Abaish was displeased with their failure."

"I see. Did the chirurgeons speak with anyone before their execution? Did they speak with any of my father's retainers?"

"Besides Abaish and the new archdominar?" the slave shook his head. "A few, but all of them were given the honor of going into the fire to accompany Telkesh on his journey into the Void." He trembled in fear. Makeda realized she had unconsciously placed her hand on her sword as if she were about to draw it. She let go of the hilt.

"What is your name, slave?"

"Kuthsheth, personal servant of Telkesh, and Vaactash before him."

"Bring me the servants that prepared Telkesh's meal that morning."

"I'm sorry. I cannot. They too were cast into the fire."

Makeda's hands curled into fists. She remembered now what she had read years ago in the family histories about one particularly dishonorable ancestor, a tyrant who had used poison to remove threats to his rule.

Murder was not unknown amongst her caste, but it was frowned upon. Being caught at it would bring shame to your house, but that did not mean it did not happen anyway. A people that lived in a state of constant warfare had to find a balance between honor and the more pragmatic matters of house politics, but even then, a house lord deserved to die by the blade. It was possible Akkad had been impatient to assume his mantle and poisoned their father. However, Telkesh was of the warrior caste, and had proven himself as a mighty Cataphract in Vaactash's armies. Poison was meant for sick animals and slaves who had ceased to be useful, not for house lords. Poison was a terrible, shameful way to die, and the most dishonorable way to kill.

Makeda had one final question, but it was not one that could be answered here.

"I speak out of turn, but your father will be missed." Kuthsheth said. "I was a soldier once. When Telkesh defeated my village, and I was taken prisoner I believed my life to be through, but Telkesh was an honorable master. I am consigned to whatever fate you would have of me, but I am

thankful that my children will have the opportunity to rise to a higher caste in the greatest house of all, Balaash.”

Telkesh had been a strict devotee of the code of hoksune. Surely, he had proven his worthiness, so why had he been robbed of his Exaltation? Having no doubt that she was being watched by Akkad’s spies, Makeda knelt as if she was paying her respects to the pile of ash. She kept her voice low. “Kuthsheth, I have two tasks of you. You will take word to my cohort. Seek out Primus Zabalam. Tell him my orders are to stop where they are now. They are not to enter this encampment. But first you will go now in secret and find the extoller Haradum. Tell her, and only her, that I have need of her, and that she will speak to no one about this. She must meet me ...” Makeda needed someplace within in the camp where she would not be easily spotted or overheard. “Tell her to be at the beast pens at midnight.”



The titans were nervous.

Something was in the air, and it was not just the stink of the massive warbeasts.

Makeda sat in the shadows, wrapped in a cloak. The encampment’s beast pens were a hurried affair of boards and serrated wire, in no way sufficient to hold an excited titan. But these beasts had been subjugated and broken. They would do as the barbed whips of the beast handlers demanded. The fences only kept them from wandering too far. Titans were relatively smart animals, but they were still animals.

The herbivores would graze along the march, but it was too dangerous to let them graze on the open plains while in enemy territory. A titan was a considerable investment of a house’s resources, so at night they were kept inside the encampments. Slaves had brought in tons of feed for the beasts, so Makeda had hidden herself between a haystack and the fence.

They did not look so dangerous without all of their armor, but Makeda knew better. In the distance, the camp's lone bronzeback scratched itself against a nearby post. The post was thick and had been set deep into the ground by slaves just for that purpose. The alpha titan's rough grey hide turned the post into splinters with in few minutes. Born in the wild, there was no such thing as a tame bronzeback, only one that was temporarily compliant because of an exhaustive regimen of carefully regulated abuse. There were paingivers watching it even now, because a single enraged bronzeback could cause unspeakable damage.

In the morning the beasts would be dressed in armor, and the pain compliance hooks would be driven into the most sensitive parts of their flesh, all in order to make them more efficient weapons and stores of mortitheurgeal energy. But for tonight, the itch finally satisfied, that particular beast lay down to sleep, surely to dream of grass and cows.

Makeda reached out and touched the great bronzeback's mind with her own. "Sleep well, great one. For tomorrow House Balaash may have need of your might."

A keening wail caused Makeda to shudder. The titans looked up from their chewing. A nearby Agonizer had begun its piteous mewling. Thankfully, it fell silent after a few moments, and the titans returned to their hay. That was lucky. Nobody wanted to listen to an Agonizer all night. She continued to scan for threats, but could see nothing. The occasional guard passed by, but she remained unseen.

Makeda had gone into Telkesh's tent and found a dark cloak. She had then slipped out the back. Hopefully, if Akkad was having her watched, then the spies would still be watching the tent. The warrior caste did not waste time mourning, but it was not unheard of to spend time meditating upon the deeds of the deceased.

However, Makeda needed to focus on the problems of the present, not dwell on the past.

Her stomach growled. Quite some time had passed since she had last eaten, but warriors were used to fasting. Makeda simply ignored it and went back to her vigil. She spotted a hunched form entering the beast area a short time later. A small glow came from under the hood, a sure sign of the extoller's crystal gaze. Haradum had arrived. Makeda had known that she would come, for it had been the elder Haradum that had taught her about the traditions of their people since Makeda had been but a small child.

The extoller caste was supposed to be separate and distinct from the politics of the houses. They were the isolated guardians of Exaltation and the only ones who could communicate with the deceased. Haradum was utterly devoted to the Extoller's path, and Makeda had no doubt that she could be trusted to be honest, but even then, Makeda watched for a time for any sign of a trap. When she was confident that Haradum was alone, Makeda rose.

Aptimus Haradum approached immediately. Of course she had seen Makeda hiding in the darkness. The crystal eye could discern the essence which was inside all living things. She was an ancient, alive for at least six generations, her face a mass of wrinkles and folds dangling loose over a skull. The only smooth part of Haradum was the crystal that had replaced her right eye.

"Second Born Makeda. It pleases me to no end to discover that you are still among us," the extoller wheezed. "I rejoice at this good fortune."

"Time is short, elder." Makeda kept her voice low. Nobody would be able to hear them over the heavy breathing of the nearby titans. "I must know. Why was the spirit of Telkesh not preserved?"

Haradum did not seem moved by Makeda's intensity. "A difficult decision. It was not mine to make. Shuruppak was the extoller present at Telkesh's deathbed. I did not hear until afterward. I was busy working on my research. Did you know that beetles have a spiritual essence as well?"

Shuruppak had been raised as a warrior, and been a companion of Akkad's before deciding to pluck out his eye in order join the extoller caste.

"Tiny, tiny, little things ..." Haradum put her bony hands together at the wrist and quickly wiggled her fingers back and forth, like scurrying legs. "Yes. But their essence does not go to the Void, no. Are there beetle gods then, I wonder?"

Had Haradum's mind finally broken? It happened occasionally to the few among their people who managed to die of old age. "Telkesh has killed hundreds in battle. Like Vaactash before him, Telkesh was all that it means to be skorne. My father lived by the code. That cannot all be washed away by one day of fevered madness. Why would Shuruppak choose not to save him?"

The ancient extoller's mortal eye narrowed and she leaned in conspiratorially. "When a spirit is pulled, screaming, into the Void, it can tell no stories. So much knowledge is lost that way."

"Answer me, Haradum."

Haradum smiled. She had no teeth. "I just did. What stories would Telkesh have been able to tell, I wonder? Would he be able to tell of plots and lies? Would he be able to tell of conspiracies between houses? Perhaps of allegiances between castes which are supposed to remain neutral?"

"Tell me these stories, elder."

"I would not know. I am nothing. I wish only to be left alone to continue my research. Yet, an extoller hears things ... Yes, yes we do. It is easy sometimes to forget we are there, always watching, always judging. Telkesh judged too. He judged wisely. When presented with two paths by his advisors, he always chose the warrior's path, never the plotter's path. Perhaps those advisors tired of being denied? Maybe they decided they needed a new archdominar, someone willing to listen to their strange new ideas, one not so bound up in the traditions of old? Akkad would be such a one, yes?"

"He would," Makeda agreed. Akkad cared far more for personal glory than he did for tradition.

"These same plotters, after deciding to go so far, would not risk having yet another honorable warrior of Balaash only a heartbeat away from becoming archdominar. Surely, once this scion discovered the truth, she would raise an army from all of the honorable warriors of her house, and wage war against the plotters."

So there had been a conspiracy to kill Telkesh and replace him with her brother. Akkad's actions were cowardly, and depriving Telkesh of Exaltation was blasphemous. "Thank you, elder. But there will be no army raised. I will not weaken my house through civil war." Makeda placed a hand on Haradum's shoulder. She was surprised at how fragile the extoller felt beneath her robes. "Even if Akkad murdered my father ... He is archdominar of House Balaash. The code declares that he is to rule. It is my place to serve, unless I believe he is a danger to the house, and then I must bring a formal challenge."

"We both know you are no match for Akkad in single combat. You will surely die."

"I cannot go against the traditions of my caste, elder."

Haradum's laughter sounded like the rustle of dusty paper. "Child, those without honor assume that everyone is like them. There is no way he will accept a formal challenge to his rule. He will send assassins for you."

"How do you know this, Haradum?"

The crystal eye flickered across the beast pens. "Because they are already here."

Makeda spun in time to see the shapes running between the haystacks. There was a flash of crimson and steel and someone leapt effortlessly over a serrated wire fence only to disappear into the darkness. *Bloodrunners!*

Bloodrunners were the elite killers of the paingiver caste, students of the magic released at the moment of death. Their presence confirmed

the extoller's tale. "Flee, Haradum." The Swords of Balaash appeared in Makeda's hands. "Return to your beetles."

A titan startled and snorted as something brushed past one of its column sized legs. There was movement all around them, a single careless footstep on gravel, the hiss of a dagger leaving its sheath, and then the bloodrunners attacked.

The first came seemingly out of nowhere, leading with a curved blade. Makeda deflected the attack with one sword, spun, and drove the second deep into the attacker's bowels. He gasped as she ripped the sword free, but did not cry out. She marveled at the mastery of pain, but only for a moment, because then she was fighting for her life.

A female stabbed at her throat, but Makeda ducked and slashed, cutting the bloodrunner nearly in half. They were all armed with the strange daggers, hooked and jagged, tools designed to incapacitate and torture. Makeda struck aside another attack, and then another. That bloodrunner had been a bit too slow, and a sword of Balaash removed his arm at the elbow. That one made no sound either, he merely stepped to the side, struggling to staunch the flow of blood.

The assassins were all around her, blades humming through the air. The clang of steel on steel caused the nearest titans to stir and grunt themselves awake. Those that had been eating looked up from their hay, confused and wondering if it was time for battle.

A handful of sand was thrown at her eyes, but she turned away just in time. Another kicked a cloud of straw between them, and fainted, all in an effort to distract her from another bloodrunner who was trying to stab her in the back. These assassins certainly did not follow hoksune, but Makeda relished a new challenge. She spun one sword, reversed her grip, and stabbed behind her, driving the point clean through the lightly armored torso of a bloodrunner. "Who sent you?" She sidestepped, and chopped another one to the ground. The spilled blood fueled her strength. "Who?"



They did not answer. More of the assassins materialized from the shadows. Makeda dodged aside before she was surrounded. The terrain was not to her advantage. "Akkad?" A dagger clipped the edge of her armor. It stung and she felt the warmth of blood trickling out. Makeda circled around the nearest haystack. "Abaish? Who?"

Crack. There was a flash of pain as something hit her in the back. She turned to see another bloodrunner, this one lifting a long, bone-studded whip for another swing. Makeda wheeled about, shrugging out of the cloak. *Crack.* The whip snapped through the fabric and was entangled. With a frustrated snarl, the bloodrunner shook his whip, trying to free it.

Two more attacks left Makeda with two more small cuts and two more dying bloodrunners. They were masters of anatomical precision, guiding their attacks past her armor. There were at least a dozen more assassins moving around the pens, and she would bleed to death long before she took them all. She kicked the knees out from under a bloodrunner and he fell, impaling himself on his own blade. *I must escape.*

One of the slave's hayforks flew at her from out of the shadows. She knocked it aside, turned, and vaulted over the fence into the titan enclosure. Her boots slipped in the muck of the wallow, but she did not fall. Two bloodrunners were right behind. One dove between the wires, rolled, and came up standing. One simply leapt smoothly over the top in a rustle of cloth. She struck at them simultaneously, but they both parried with their daggers.

Agitated, the nearest titan opened its mouth and bellowed a challenge, bits of ground hay flying everywhere. Makeda had trained her entire life, learning how to master warbeasts and forcing them to obey her will, and she recognized an opportunity when it presented itself. It would take a second of concentration, but it was worth the risk. *I am your master. Obey me.*

The two bloodrunners pressed their attack as their brothers followed. The one with the whip appeared to be the leader. He was silently

communicating through a series of rapid hand gestures at the bloodrunners still hidden in the shadows. An alarm horn blew as the Balaash guards overseeing the pens realized something was wrong.

Obey!

The titan blinked stupidly for a moment, but then its tiny black eyes narrowed in understanding.

Destroy.

Makeda parried another attack and kicked that bloodrunner hard in the stomach. His mouth twisted beneath his mask, but he remained focused on his mission. It only mattered for a split second though, since the titan's fist hit him so hard it left a pink cloud hanging suspended in the air.

The titan lifted itself to its full height and roared its battle cry. If the alarm horn hadn't already sounded, *that* would have certainly woken up the entire encampment. The second bloodrunner turned in surprise, so Makeda used the chance to slice his head off. It landed in the muck of the wallow at her feet, so Makeda kicked the severed head at the other remaining bloodrunners. "*Balaash!*"

The bloodrunners tried to avoid the titan, but it was too late. One had gotten caught on the wire fence, and the titan closed its hands around the assassin. This was the first one that had lost his composure and he started shouting. This seemed to annoy the titan, since it simply lifted the bloodrunner overhead and then hurled him screaming out into the night.

There were still bloodrunners everywhere, but they seemed to be fading back into the darkness, aware that their mission of a quiet assassination had failed. The titan easily stomped the fence flat and went after them. Light and shadows bounced along the fence posts nearby as the guards came running.

CRACK!

Makeda nearly blacked out as something wrapped hard around her neck. She was jerked from her feet and landed sprawled in the mud.

The one with the whip had not given up yet.

INSTRUMENTS OF WAR

Her armor had saved her life, but bone shards had pierced her neck. The whip pulled and the noose tightened. Makeda slid through wet ooze. The cuts deepened, yet she was calm. *No arteries severed ... Yet.*

A quick slash of her sword cut the whip in half. The pressure ended and she could breathe again. The guards were closer and she could hear their angry cries over the ringing in her ears.

“Capture the traitor, Makeda!”

“The archdominar says his sister has betrayed us!”

Curse you, Akkad. She did not need to be a mortitheurge to know that she was losing far too much blood. She would not be able to face the guards. She would be captured and executed as a traitor. Her name would be stricken from the histories.

The last bloodrunner was not content to let her die under a board and a pile of rocks however. He was intent on doing the job himself, and had dropped his ruined whip and drawn a paingiver’s blade. He was charging across the pen, and Makeda knew she would not be able to stand in time.

He was upon her, dagger raised, mouth twisted into a snarl, but then the paingiver seemed to come *apart*. He jerked and spasmed as blood flew into the air, and then fell onto his face, forward momentum sliding him through the mud to stop at Makeda’s feet, his back shredded so badly that she could see the white of his spine. He had been dead before Makeda had even heard the whine of the reiver.

A ferox landed next to her with a splash. She looked up to see the predator laboring under a pair of riders. Primus Zabalam and Dakar Urkesh both dismounted. She tried to speak, but no sounds would form in her damaged throat. “Makeda!” Zabalam grabbed her by the armor and hoisted her up with surprising strength while Urkesh loaded a fresh needle cone on his reiver.

“You must flee, Makeda,” Zabalam hissed at her. “Akkad has declared you an outcast. Your life is forfeit. Go. Your cohort is waiting.” The guards were almost upon them. The titan she had enraged was still chasing

bloodrunners and crushing tents underfoot. There was no time. Zabalam was right. She tried to climb into the saddle, but she was weaker than she thought, and struggled to do so. Zabalam pushed her roughly upward. The ferox shifted beneath her, but understood this was not the time to fight against its handlers.

A horrendous whine sounded as Urkesh spotted another bloodrunner and cut him to bits. Zabalam grabbed him by the arm. "Go with Makeda. I charge you to protect her." He drew his swords.

"What are you doing?" Urkesh shouted.

"This ferox can't run fast enough to get away if there are three of us on it. I'll buy you time. Protect her with your life. She is the future of House Balaash, not that wretched dishonorable belek, Akkad." Zabalam looked to Makeda, the half of his damaged face that still worked turned up in a grin. "My apologies for insulting your family."

Makeda still could not speak. She put one bloody hand on Zabalam's head. It left a red print once she took it away. Urkesh climbed up behind her.

"You always were my best student. Now go!" He stuck the ferox on the rump with the hilt of a sword. The predator lurched away in an ungainly run.

Makeda looked back to see Zabalam striding toward the rushing host of guards, arms extended, displaying his swords proudly. "I am Primus Zabalam of the Praetorian, sword master of House Balaash, student of exalted Vaactash, and I fight to defend Makeda, the *true* heir of Telkesh! Who among you is stupid enough to contend with me?"

About half the guards froze, torn and unsure, but the other half attacked.

"Come then!" There was a flurry of motion as Zabalam struck back against overwhelming odds.

It was a single perfect moment of all that it meant to follow the code of hoksune, but then the ferox darted around a tent and Zabalam disappeared from Makeda's sight.

“Ride! That way.” Urkesh pointed with his reiver. The Venator had obviously never ridden a ferox before and was doing his best to hold on. Makeda kicked the predator in the ribs and turned it with her knees. There was a huge crash as the enraged titan slammed through a tent and appeared in front of them, a bloodrunner stuck on one of its tusks. Urkesh shouted in surprise right in her ear. The ferox bounded around the titan in two leaps, avoiding the beast handlers who were trying to bring the titan under control.

More horns sounded. Officers stood at the corners, waving torches and repeating Akkad’s proclamation that Makeda was a traitor to House Balaash and had to be captured. Yet as the ferox loped through the camp, many soldiers saw her, but did not move to intercept. Enough others did, however, that escape did not look likely.

Cataphract moved ahead of her, war spears leveled. She struck the ferox and it turned, sliding through the grass, only seconds away from being impaled upon a wall of spears. A brief sprint and another corner took them into more swordsmen. One tried to stab the ferox, but it simply lunged forward, sank its huge teeth into a shoulder, and shook him to death. Another soldier came from behind but Urkesh shredded him with a reiver burst.

Soldiers loyal to Akkad were moving throughout the camp, shouting for the traitor Makeda’s blood. “We’re not going to make it,” Urkesh stated.

Makeda knew the Venator was right. They would be surrounded, cut off, and brought down. Unless ...

The titan she had bonded with was occupied, so Makeda reached for the spirit of the great titan bronzeback she had connected with so briefly earlier. He was still there, snoring peacefully through the pandemonium now engulfing the encampment. The petty games of the skorne didn’t matter to the mighty bronzeback. He existed only for the next challenge or the next cow. Makeda tapped into her power and awoke the bronzeback from its slumber. Bonding to such a potent beast, especially after such a

fleeting contact, would be a great challenge. It took all of her effort, but Makeda pushed hard against his mind. His spirit was great, but simple, and she awoke its natural rage, in fact, she ignited it and set it free.

A terrible roar shook the entire encampment. Every skorne for miles all looked in the same direction at the same time. The ferox slid to a trembling halt. "What in the name of the ancestors was *that*?"

Our escape, Makeda thought, but it was too difficult to speak.

The enraged bronzeback let its feelings be known by picking up another titan and throwing it across the encampment. The vast animal blotted out one of the three moons for a moment as it passed overhead. The titan's landing shook the foundations of the world and nearly knocked over their mount. Makeda did not need to kick the ferox in order to make it run this time.

They bounded past Akkad's soldiers, knocking down a distracted Cataphract, as the bronzeback rampaged through the camp. Then they were out on the open plains and fleeing into the unknown.



The pain began in her ribs and radiated out from there. At first it was a tingling in her nerves, and then a tightness of the muscles, and then an arcing lightning through the veins and arteries. Her mortitheurgy identified the cause quickly. The bloodrunner's daggers had been treated with a strong poison, but she was overcome so quickly there was nothing she could do but scream.

Every move of the ferox sent pain rippling through her body. Every jolt and bounce caused joints to grind as if filled with broken glass. The air in her lungs bubbled like acid, eating away at her flesh.

The midnight plains faded into darkness as she was robbed of her sight. She could no longer control their steed. Her limbs would not respond to her commands, and every effort at making them work increased the pain.

This was more than poison. This was a living thing, born to cause suffering.

At one point she slipped from the saddle and crashed into the dirt. It felt cushioned compared to the pain cascading through her body, but even then, the poison discovered this small bit of relief and extinguished it. The ground seemed to become hotter until every bit of clinging dirt burned like lava. Urkesh lifted her back onto the ferox. He said something about pursuers, but it was hard to hear over the hurricane in her ears. The pain caused her to hallucinate and his fingers pierced her skin like the needles of his reiver.

The pain went on and on. Time lost all meaning. Reality was replaced with a world that was nothing but agony, and somehow Makeda knew she was dangling by a thread over the Void. All she had to do was cut that tiny string of life and she could plunge into the Void. It was cold in the Void, but the cold would extinguish the fire which was consuming her. She could see her father within the Void. The poison, the evil, sentient *thing*, had done the same to him, until he had cut the thread and welcomed the nothing.

Somehow the pain became worse, and through it all, the only bit of the real world that remained with her was the presence of the Swords of Balaash, and the tiny sliver of her grandfather's spirit which fueled them. Despite the agony, her exalted ancestors were still there. They helped her understand.

This poison was designed to kill mortitheurges, brewed to unravel bodies, corrupt wills, and break minds. Normal poison was useless against someone who could stall death or manipulate blood and tissue. How could she fight such an enemy? She reached for her Power, but it was swept aside by the crashing waves of agony. The harder she tried, the more pain it inflicted on her as punishment. It whispered that only the cool Void could save her.

Suddenly a gigantic black stone statue towered over her, offering a path away from the Void. The stylized face of Vaactash did not move as the

thought hammered its way through her mind. “What is it that you whisper to yourself, child, when the pain becomes too much?”

And then the words were there.

Suffering cleanses the weakness from my being. Adhere to the code and I will become worthy.

The suffering was the key. She could not reach her Power because she was weak.

Her Power was still there, still ready to be utilized, she only needed to be strong enough to take it. She had to go through the pain, through the unraveling of mind and spirit. Let death come. Let her heart stop, but in that brief time while hurtling toward the Void, she would take what was rightfully hers.

Makeda welcomed the poison and told it to do its worst, for she was skorne, and she would *never* break.



The pain was gone. Now there was only the memory of pain.

Where am I?

The walls were made of rock, chipped and chiseled until it was in the semblance of a room. A single lantern hung from a brass fitting sunk into the wall, leaving most of the space hidden in darkness.

Is this a dungeon? Have I been captured?

Yet when she moved, she discovered that she was not in chains. She felt the cold stone floor beneath her palm before realizing her body was resting on a pile of dark furs. Her armor was missing and she wore only a thin grey robe. She noticed a bloodstained cloth nearby, and resting upon it was a multitude of tools, tiny blades, pliers, hooks and barbs, needles and thread, bottles of potions, and bags of herbs. Though similar, these were not the injury causing tools of a tormentor, but rather the injury repairing tools of a surgeon. Bandages pulled as she tried to sit up. Someone had tended to her many wounds.

Where are my swords? There was a brief flash of panic before she spotted them, sheathed and leaning against the wall. Makeda breathed a sigh of relief. Death was far preferable to losing her family swords. *Thank the ancestors.*

Something stirred in the darkness. There was a shape there, and it took Makeda a moment to make out the silhouette of a skorne in the light armor of the Venator, with a reiver resting on his lap.

Her throat ached. "Where am I?" The words came out so raspy that Makeda did not recognize her own voice. It did not feel like just the whip, but rather that her throat was raw and parched, as if she had been yelling for hours.

The warrior in the shadows stood quickly. "She is awake," he spoke loudly, his voice seeming to echo through the chamber. "Makeda is alive."

"I tire of hearing that said as if it is some sort of surprise." Speaking hurt. She welcomed the minor pain as it helped clear the sleep from her mind. She had seen real agony, from now on minor pain would merely be another tool. "What is going on?" Makeda pushed herself up, but the effort made her head swim.

The figure in the dark had been Urkesh, and he rushed to her side. "Do not struggle." He caught her by the shoulders and lowered her back to the furs. It was an insult to have someone of a lower caste touch her without permission, but it was obvious no offense was intended. "Those assassin's blades were poisoned. You nearly died."

Poison ... a weapon of cowards and traitors. "Akkad. He poisoned Telkesh."

There were other voices inside the cavern. Armored footsteps echoed. More figures appeared. She should have been able to recognize them, but her vision seemed blurry. However, they were wearing the colors of House Balaash. Some of them were bearing their own lanterns, and now she could see the room was larger than expected, with windows covered in thick brown curtains. A small hunched figure moved between the much larger skorne. "They are aware. I told them. Most even believed."

Haradum? “So you survived the assassins, elder teacher. Good.”

“I followed your cohort for days, even after Akkad’s loyalists gave up the chase.”

“Days?” Her body felt weak, but she did not feel like she had been asleep for days. “How long have I been ill?”

“Ten days and ten nights. I believe it was the same poison which felled mighty Telkesh. The others thought you had died.” The old extoller came closer and placed one cold hand on Makeda’s forehead. The crystal oculus stared down at her. “But I could see that your essence had not yet left your body. You would not allow death to claim you ... It seems the last of the fever has passed. You must rest. The flesh needs time to heal.”

“The flesh will do as I tell it to.” Makeda rubbed her eyes. Her vision was improving. Now she could recognize many of the other figures as officers of her father’s army. Their faces were grim, their white eyes reflective in the glow of the lanterns. “Where am I?”

“The Shroudwall Mountains,” Urkesh answered. “We were fleeing Akkad’s army and needed a place to hide.”

“This is an old fortress. The mountain passes are extremely difficult to cross,” stated one of the warriors, who Makeda recognized as a veteran Cataphract of her father’s cohort. “Your army is safe here until you decide it is time for us to mobilize.”

My army? All that had remained of her small cohort had been a few battered taberna, and many wounded. This time Makeda focused through the dizziness and forced herself to sit up. Urkesh was there, ready to help, but she ignored him. She placed her hands on the stone and forced herself upright. Her knees nearly buckled, but she would not show weakness before these warriors. “What army do you speak of?”

The Cataphract nodded to the side. One of his soldiers rushed to the nearest curtain and drew it back. Cold night air flooded into the room. “While you were taken with the fever, they gathered.”



Though curious, Makeda first walked slowly to the side and retrieved the Swords of Balaash. The scabbards felt good in her hands. Only then did she go to the window. Her steps were slow, unsteady. Her muscles quivered with weakness, but she would not show it. The cold air cut through her thin robes and she began to shiver uncontrollably. She had lost weight and knew she had to look like a spirit that had escaped from the Void.

Outside the window was the ruined courtyard of a once great castle. They were so high in the mountains that the clouds had come down to gather around the towers like fog. Those clouds were glowing, reflecting the flickering light of hundreds of campfires.

"I do not understand ..." Makeda whispered.

"In the beginning, it was just your cohort and a handful of slaves," Urkesh said. "But word spread of your sickness. Others had to come and see."

"It was a few at first," the veteran Cataphract said. "Warriors loyal to Telkesh and Vaactash, then maddened cultists of Xaavaax, and even soldiers of proud vassal houses such as Bashek and Kophar. Akkad executed many as an example, but soon whole taberna and even decurium had deserted in order to come here and keep watch over you. More gather every day."

Makeda was stunned, her mind unable to estimate the number of troops assembled here. Even if there was but a single datha around each of those fires, it had to represent a mighty host, surely more warriors than most houses could boast, possibly even enough to rival Balaash's combined sabaoth.

One of the warriors saw her standing at the window. There was a shout, and then another and another, until the entire camp erupted in one long incomprehensible roar. It was a battle cry.

She was nearly overcome. "But I was sick with fever. I was helpless." The events in the encampment came rushing back. "I have been cast out of my

house and declared a traitor. Why would they risk everything to follow such a weak leader?"

"It was anything but weakness." It was a new arrival who answered. Makeda turned to see a young paingiver whom she had never met before. "When I heard of these events, I had to come and see for myself. This poison is an extraordinary invention, a curse that would make even great Morkaash proud. It is a marvel of the paingiver's art. Never before have I seen a mixture capable of causing such pure agony and suffering. It felled even the great Telkesh and drove him insane within a single day. Even as strong as he was, his flesh could not withstand that level of purification before it broke his mind."

The pain. It was only half recalled, like a bad dream. Yet, she had not broken. She did not follow the way of the paingivers so she did not feel as if she had reached any sort of enlightenment, but she had endured. That was what mattered.

"Your cohort told others of this terrible agony you were experiencing," Haradum said. "So they had to come to hear for themselves."

"Hear what, elder teacher?" Makeda rasped. "Hear me descend into gibbering madness?"

"No," the paingiver answered. "Despite being rent apart by the most delicious agonies possible, you rose above it. As your body was wracked with unfathomable pain and seizures, you transcended it all. These warriors came to hear the way to enlightenment."

Haradum sounded reverent, "For every day for ten days and every night for ten nights, you recited the entirety of the code of hoksune."

As if of one mind, every warrior in the room went to their knees and bowed.



PART THREE

*T*he twin Swords of Balaash had been placed reverently on the stone floor before her as Makeda knelt in meditation. At times she was envious of the extollers and their ability to commune with the exalted dead, because the swords were silent to her ears. Hours had passed, but still the answers eluded her. If only she could truly know the wisdom of her ancestors, perhaps then choosing between the demands of honor and the potential future of her house would not be so difficult.

They were high in the Shroudwall Mountains and the air in the uppermost chamber of the tallest tower of the fortress seemed permanently chilled. Makeda's measured breathing left clouds of steam in the air. The sun would rise soon, and when it did, her army would need direction.

She heard a sound behind her, a shuffling and wheezing on the stairs. Makeda did not need to look to know it was Aptimus Haradum. The aged extoller had made it a habit to check on her. "Archdomina Makeda?" she called out.

"That is not my title, Haradum."

"Your warriors seem to think it is."

Makeda stared at her swords. "They believe me to be more than I am."

Haradum wheezed and shuffled her way into the chamber. "So many stairs, and it is so cold here. This place must have been built by nihilators wishing to suffer. I am lucky our young dakar with the reiver allowed me to pass. I believe he has appointed himself to be your personal guard."

"Urkes?" Makeda asked. She had not been aware the Venator had been following.

“Yes, yes. He took the final order of Primus Zabalam most seriously. I collected Zabalam’s soul by the way. He killed twenty warriors before catching a spear in the throat.” She patted a glowing stone chained to her apron. “He will make a fine revered companion to Vaactash.”

Makeda was surprised by the sudden tightness in her chest. She hid the physical reaction, and nodded in approval. “A wise choice.”

“As for the young Venator, after you were overcome with poison, he lost control of the ferox. Wily beasts have no patience for untrained masters. He carried you on his back for miles until reaching your decurium. He never left your side the entire time you were consumed with fever.”

“I was unaware.” Urkesh’s commitment to duty was commendable. Perhaps it was possible to honor hoksune even without looking into a warrior’s eyes as you killed him.

“What troubles you, Makeda?”

“I have a decision to make, but the code does not provide me with clarity on this issue. I do not like being uncertain.”

“You always were one for clarity. As Vaactash used to say, when a titan is chasing, do not dither, pick a direction and run!”

That did not sound like something her grandfather would have said at all. “I would ask a favor of you, Aptimus.”

“I am already aware of what you seek, and I already have an answer for you. While you were battling the fever I attempted to commune with the essence of your grandfather’s spirit which dwells within your swords. Such a task is onerous and difficult, and sometimes our exalted ancestors do not deign to answer. Sometimes they know that the living must seek out wisdom for themselves. There was only the briefest communication.”

“What did he say?”

“The true heir of House Balaash has already won.”

Makeda was not surprised. It was not like Vaactash to provide an easy way out. “Akkad is the eldest, thus it is his legitimate right to rule.

However, should an heir be deemed unfit, and I believe his dishonorable and cowardly murders —

“Do not forget the blasphemy!”

“Of course.” Makeda suppressed a small smile. “That too. These things prove he is unworthy to lead House Balaash. So it falls to me to issue a challenge. It is my duty to defeat him in single combat and assume the mantle of archdomina.”

“Assuming of course you could defeat the finest warrior of his generation in a duel, but that doesn’t matter now, does it?”

“Akkad will ignore my challenge and have me killed. Someone so dishonorable will not risk his throne. Akkad declared me an outcast. Officially, I am of lower status than a slave.”

“Most slaves do not have their own armies.”

“Yes. And if I march this army south, then somewhere on the plains north of Halaak we will clash against the rest of House Balaash. Thousands upon thousands will die.”

“It will be glorious.” Haradum shook one of her bony fists in the air. “To war! To war! The blood will flow like rivers!”

Makeda sighed. “The problem with a civil war is that whoever wins, House Balaash loses. The victor is irrelevant. We will rule over a house that is weakened and ripe to be conquered by our neighbors. House Balaash has too many enemies to gut our army and expect to survive.”

“Yes, yes.” Haradum was nodding along. “Perhaps you should accept your title of outcast and wander the wastes the rest of your days. I hear the Abyss is quite the sight to see.” Haradum’s laugh rattled like bones being shaken in a dried leather bag.

“My fate does not matter, Aptimus, only that of my house. Is it better that a blasphemous fiend rules than I start a war that ends House Balaash? Will my house rot under the rule of a dishonorable archdominar? I am of the warrior caste. I must fight for the good of my house.”

“Is that why you fight?”

Makeda paused. It was a simple question with a complicated answer. Why did she fight? Why did the skorne have to fight? She thought back to the time when she had come to understand the reasoning behind that question, in a hall filled with silent ancestors ...

And then Makeda had her answer. *Thank you, Grandfather.*

“Do you know what the foulest of all words is, Haradum?”

“Surely something involving rhinodons. They are obnoxious things with disgusting reproductive habits!”

“The foulest of all words is *peace*.” Makeda took up her swords and rose. “Come. I must prepare the warriors. We march.”

The ancient extoller squealed with delight. “Many will be exalted, I am sure!” Haradum cackled and patted one of the many empty sacral stones she wore like jewelry, knowing it would soon be filled. “To war! To war!”



During the journey south, Makeda’s body healed, but her mind was in turmoil. At night, sleep would not come, and when it did, it brought uneasy dreams of disapproving ancestors and House Balaash in flames.

Her cohort grew. New warriors joined her daily. From simple hestations from the plains, wearing armor stitched together from titan hide, to steel-clad Cataphract the size of ancestral guardians, to nihilators with barbed pain hooks embedded in their flesh, to Venators armed with slings and vials filled with corrosive acid, to rich and powerful tyrants with stables of warbeasts.

Veterans knelt before her. Great leaders presented their swords or their mortitheurgy and swore to fight in her name. She formed new datha and taberna, and promoted warriors to lead them, gave battle orders, and saw to their logistical needs. They travelled fast and lean, making do with innate toughness rather than sufficient rations. By day Makeda learned to balance the politics, bickering, and petty ambitions of competing warriors, and by night she dreamed of war.

The warriors came for various reasons. Some because of old loyalties to Telkesh, or belief in the code, or disgust over the dishonor of losing an archdominar to poison, or vassals who decided to support one heir over another, to others who simply wished for a battle worthy of their skills. But whatever the reason, they continued to join, and the further south they went, the stronger her army became.

Within a week of leaving the Shroudwall, her army had grown large enough to pose a real threat to Akkad's forces. She estimated nearly a quarter of House Balaash's total sabaoth was under her command. A host so numerous, in fact, that if they were to go down in defeat, it would be a great enough battle that it would ruin the entire army of House Balaash.

For one of the only times in her life, Makeda understood what it was to fear.

She feared not for herself. If she was to be found wanting, let her be cast into the Void with the rest of the failures. That did not matter. Makeda feared for the future of her house.

Ancestors, if I am to be defeated, let it happen swiftly, so my house may be spared.

Each night she counseled with her officers and listened as the tacticians made their plans. Too many of those plans ended with a slaughter that would lead to the eventual destruction of her house. She spoke with each of the officers individually, searching for ideas that would accomplish her mission, yet leave the great army of Balaash relatively intact.

Yet it was not one of the mighty war leaders that had proposed a possible solution to her dilemma.

It had been a slave.



"I do not see Akkad's personal banner among the horde," Urkesh said as he moved his eyes from side to side, searching carefully for targets. "He did not bother to come himself."

The Venator had proven to have the most acute vision of any of her officers so Makeda was inclined to believe him. "I should not be surprised." It was difficult to keep the disgust from her voice. "But I am disappointed."

The morning mist had risen from the lake and a low fog hung over the plains. Makeda had spent most of her life in this region. She knew it well. Within a few hours the sun would rise enough to cut through the knee-high fog, but until then the air would be still. To the east an endless sea of red and gold marched through the churning grey. The majority of the great army of House Balaash was arrayed before her, thousands strong. A few miles behind that army she could see House Balaash itself, once her home, and now her objective. At her back was a smaller army, made up of warriors who believed that honor meant something. To the north stretched the long crystal blue expanse of Mirketh Lake. To the south open plains went on for miles before reaching the great city of Halaak.

It was a fine place for a civil war.

Makeda and Urkesh stopped on top of a small rise to survey the opposition. The rest of her command staff was making their way up the hill for a hasty council before the battle commenced. It had taken a month to march south from the Shroudwall Mountains. During that time they had met a few small cohorts of Akkad's loyalists, but had faced no serious combat. Judging by the great force waiting for them, that was about to change.

It did not matter. Makeda had looked upon these officers and judged them worthy. The warriors of House Balaash who believed in hoksune and the traditions of their ancestors had flocked to her banner. Despite being outnumbered three to one, victory would be hers. The real question was whether House Balaash would survive for long after the slaughter necessary to achieve such a victory.

The potential fall of her house had kept her awake each night during the journey. "I was afraid of this. I had hoped he would show himself. Curse Akkad. This complicates matters, Urkesh."

"I understand."

"Do you?" Makeda glanced at her subordinate. The Venator had barely left her side since their march had begun. "You assume much, Dakar. I know what I must do, but in order to succeed, I fear I must behave as dishonorably as my brother."

"A Venator spends so much time looking at targets in the distance that often we cannot focus on things that are near." Urkesh studied her for a moment. "I know what vexes you. The burden can be seen in your countenance, Archdomina."

"That form of address is not yet my right."

"It would not be my place to disagree with you, but if it was, I would tell you that you are wrong. You are nothing like your brother. He would burn your house in order to rule it, but you would kill yourself in order to save it. This army follows you because to them you embody the code of hoksune. You are more the true heir of House Balaash than your brother could ever hope to be, and these warriors know it."

Her caste did not display their emotions openly, so Makeda gave the Venator a small, respectful nod. "They follow me because they follow the code. So why are you here, Urkesh?"

He shrugged. "The code means different things to different warriors. Just because I am not good at it, doesn't mean I don't believe it."

"You are wiser than you look."

"Thank you, Archdomina." Urkesh went back to surveying the opposing army. "Now where are you hiding, One Ear?" Urkesh looked over at her and grinned. "I didn't think you would mind me calling him that now."

Makeda sighed. "Do not tempt me. Beheading you could still boost morale."

The incorrigible Venator chuckled. The other officers had reached them, so Urkesh hid a slight smile with a subtle cough. "Since Akkad is telling everyone that our army is only a minor rebellion, apparently he

decided we're not worthy of his attention. Akkad has failed to honor us with his presence."

Her officers took in the great horde awaiting them. "Leading from the rear? That is not how Akkad was taught," muttered Primus Tushhan of the Cataphract. "I served Telkesh and Vaactash before him. They would never have done such a cowardly thing."

Aptimus Haradum had shuffled her way up the hill along with the officers. "Not cowardly, cunning," she interjected. "Akkad is a shrewd one. He knows his sister will take the honorable and direct path. His absence is the most politically expedient choice." At times Makeda suspected the ancient extoller was not as mad as she liked everyone to think, but then Haradum cackled with glee, removing all doubt. "House Balaash will be emptied of blood before you crack him from that shell. Extollers will have gathered from all across the land! So many will die! Everyone will die! It will be *glorious!*"

Makeda ignored the crazed extoller and addressed her officers. "I cannot challenge Akkad if he's not present. If he were here, he would have to accept and risk potential defeat, or decline and be dishonored. I was hoping he had enough honor to come out and face me."

The gigantic young Cataphract from the vassal house of Kophar gave a deep, hearty laugh. "Be careful what you wish for. I have trained against Akkad. He is a mighty warrior, the finest of our generation. I do not mean to question your skill with the blade and offer no offence, but know that Akkad is one of the greatest combatants I have ever seen."

There were solemn nods of agreement from every officer who had served with Akkad in combat. Even her most loyal warriors understood that honor alone would not carry her through that duel, yet they followed anyway.

"Not that I wouldn't enjoy watching you two duel, but I did not come all the way from Halaak to leave without a proper battle," Only a small contingent of House Kophar volunteers had joined her forces, but they were renowned for their size, ferocity, and strength.

“Do not worry, First Born Xerxis. You will get your fight, but it is better to spill my own blood than leave our house without an army to defend it. I intend to finish this quickly.” The time had come to share her plan. It would be controversial, but it was necessary. “Tell me, noble Cataphract. Does your house still speak of how my grandfather conquered you?”

Xerxis frowned, not liking having to admit his family had ever been bested. “Of course we do. Each of us studies the battles in great detail.” He folded his thick arms. “There is no dishonor in losing against the greatest tactician of all time.”

“Of course not. When Vaactash went to war against House Kophar, your warriors impressed him, so much in fact that he decided it was a waste to kill them. I remember him telling me the story, *why kill these warriors who would be able to fight so capably in my name?* So instead Vaactash concentrated his strength against your dominar, defeated him, and added the proud Cataphracts of Kophar to his own army, strengthening us all.”

That seemed to placate the heir of Kophar. The rest of her officers nodded. “What do you propose then?” Xerxis asked.

“There was great wisdom in what Vaactash did to House Kophar. I will not see House Balaash destroyed. I will not satisfy my honor only to see House Muzkaar or Telarr sitting upon our throne within a year. As Vaactash said, *why kill those who would be able to fight so capably in my name?* Yes, you will fight here today, but seek your exaltation quickly, because you will only fight long enough for me to reach Akkad.”

“There is the matter of a very large army standing between the two of you,” Tushhan pointed out.

“Indeed, but Haradum spoke the truth. Akkad will expect me to do the honorable and direct thing. He knows honor demands my place here, leading this cohort. Yet, I remember the lessons of my sword master. Show your foe one blade, and kill him with the other.” Makeda looked toward the waters of Mirketh Lake. “Today you will be the first sword. I will be the second.”



As the battle of House Balaash commenced, hundreds of eager extollers looked on, seeking those worthy of exaltation from the masses.

Every veteran on the field knew that by the time the sun crawled to the middle of the sky, thousands of House Balaash's warriors would be dead.

Venator catapults hurled balls packed with explosives and steel shards high into the air to hurtle down into the opposing ranks. The mechanical whine of millions of needles filled the plains as thousands of reivers fired simultaneously. Beasts bellowed and shrieked, whipped into frenzies by the beast handlers, before being released on paths of destruction.

And despite this great conflict, the army of Makeda fought on, unaware that their leader was not there.



If only I could combine your adherence to hoksune with your brother's ambitious pragmatism, then House Balaash would be unstoppable. The mind reels at the possibilities.

The words of Vaactash gave her hope. Makeda's hand was resting on the hilt of one of the Swords of Balaash. If victory required her to be pragmatic, then she would do so, no matter how much it pained her. She knew her grandfather was watching over her, but she could only hope that he approved of her decisions.

Kuthsheth the slave worked the oars, and the small rowboat made steady progress along the shores of Mirketh Lake. The morning fog had not yet burned off, and it still provided some measure of cover.

Makeda could not see the battle begin, but she could hear it. The clash of sword and spear, the whine of reivers, the thud of catapults, the screams as acid ate flesh, and the thunder as warbeasts clashed. It was the sound of two forces testing each other. Soon the melee would become general. Her

army would fight and die all without her there to lead it. Makeda cursed fate and begged her ancestors to forgive her dereliction of duty.

She wore a rough cloak of woven hair, ratty and filthy. The garb of a slave hid her armor. Her banner, bearing the noble glyph of House Balaash, had been left flying with the army she had abandoned. It was not even the indignity of it all that bothered her; it was that she was being robbed of her chance to lead her warriors into glorious combat. Perhaps if she was lucky, one of the great underwater beasts of Mirketh Lake would do everyone a favor, rise from the depths, and devour her to hide the dishonor.

Makeda had never truly hated Akkad before. She had merely done her duty as honor dictated. She was warrior caste and lived to bring glory to her house. However, now as the great battle commenced without her, Makeda understood what it was to hate. She despised Akkad.

And she pitied him as well. How empty would a life be without hoksune to fill it?

"We are nearly there," Kuthsheth said. "The docks are not —" he cringed as a shadow passed overhead. The massive beating of leathery wings rocked the tiny boat with blasts of wind, but then the Archidon was past. The flying warbeast paid no attention to their boat. It had been summoned to the battle by some powerful mortitheurge. It roared and dove, plunging out of sight behind the dunes along the shore.

"The docks are what, Kuthsheth?" Makeda asked calmly.

"They are not well guarded. The slaves use the docks mostly to bring fish to the kitchens. There are always a few warriors, but I am certain they will be the most inexperienced."

Of course. The most capable would have gotten themselves placed into the battle. No capable warrior would volunteer to guard a dock when such an opportunity for exaltation presented itself. At worst they would be facing Hestatians, little more than militia. "The problem will be Akkad's personal guard. They are all veteran Cataphract."

“Also the bloodrunners who prowl the corridors,” Kuthsheth said, and seemed surprised when Makeda did not appear to understand what he was speaking of. “Noble Telkesh kept a few on retainer to watch out for assassination attempts against his heirs. They skulk about the house, answering only to Tormentor Abaish.”

“I was not aware of them.”

“That is because they are very good at skulking ...”

Makeda had learned there was much she had not known about the inner workings of her household. There was a world beneath the surface, populated by workers, slaves, and servants, members of the lower castes which she had never bothered to notice. The warriors and leaders of a great house did not wish to look upon their lesser all day, so they remained hidden as they fulfilled their purpose.

Kuthsheth was laboring against the oars, but he did his best to compose himself. “Once I get you into the central keep, I believe I can distract the bloodrunners. They pay no attention to house slaves. I have overheard them speaking about what they perceive to be vulnerabilities. Once you are inside the servant’s tunnels, I will cause a disturbance in Abaish’s laboratory. That should attract the bloodrunners like a moth to a flame.”

“What do you intend to do?”

“Make lots of flames.”

To attract the attention of the bloodrunners was to die. “Why do you do this?”

“Because I was a warrior once — a swordsman of the Praetorian — long ago before my village was taken. As is our way, I lost my caste and was placed among the slaves of House Balaash. Because Telkesh was an honorable master, my children will be given the chance to be warriors. If not them, then their children, or their children’s children, will have a chance at achieving exaltation. That is the way.”

It had been this particular slave who had broached this espionage idea to her during their march south. He had overheard her speaking with her

officers, and had later spoken on the subject of this little known passage through the great fortress that was House Balaash. At first she had been annoyed by Kuthsheth's impertinence, but the more she thought about it, the more she could see the possibilities. If Akkad tried to avoid their duel, then she would bring the duel to Akkad.

There was an explosion in the distance. Makeda turned to see a ball of fire rolling into the sky. The battle had been joined.

"We are nearly there. Do not worry, Archdomina."

Makeda did not correct the slave's title.



The last dying warrior fell into Mirketh Lake with a splash. The water billowed red around him, and then he sank from view. Makeda lowered the Swords of Balaash and let them disappear beneath the slave cloak. The docks were clear. She had eliminated all of the guards before the alarm could be raised. "Come, Kuthsheth. Show me these tunnels of yours."

The slave finished rolling the last corpse into the lake, before rushing past her, his sandals slapping against weathered wood. They passed barrels of salted fish and sacks of grain. In all the years she had lived here, Makeda had never seen this part of her great house. Kuthsheth opened a door and led her inside.

There were a few slaves there, working away, chopping fish with cleavers, blissfully unaware that they were being invaded. What did it matter to a slave if they were being invaded? The work would continue regardless of who was their master tomorrow.

Kuthsheth knew right where to go, so she followed, keeping her head down and her face covered. He took a lantern from the wall to light their path. They went up a flight of stairs, down a long tunnel, and then up another circle of stairs. Kuthsheth took her through a multitude of passages and alcoves. The great house had grown and been added to for

twenty generations, until the interior was a warren that would confound any invader, but her guide knew these passages well. The stone around her began to feel familiar and comfortable. The lantern oil smelled of home.

They entered a hall that Makeda knew. She had gazed from these windows, admired this artwork. Her sleeping quarters were not far away. It was an odd sensation, being an invader in her home. "We are nearly there." Kuthsheth rounded a corner and disappeared from view.

"You, slave! Where are you going?" a voice demanded. "Did you not heed your overseer?"

"Forgive me, Praetorian. I meant no —"

"Silence!" There was the sound of a gauntlet striking flesh. "This area is off limits while the council meets."

Makeda walked around the corner. A swordsman stood over the fallen Kuthsheth. He looked up at Makeda and snarled. "You slaves will get the lash for —" and then his head went bouncing down the hall. Makeda had time to wipe her sword clean with the slave cloak before his body realized it was dead and fell, dumping blood onto the polished floor. She frowned. Killing an honorable Praetorian was such a waste ...

Kuthsheth stood, rubbing the spreading bruise on his cheek. "Thank you, Archdomina." He pointed at a nearby tapestry detailing the life of Vuxoris. "Behind that is a passage which will lead you to the council chambers. Please allow me a few minutes to set fire to Abaish's laboratory, otherwise you will surely encounter bloodrunners on the way."

"One moment, Kuthsheth. If you are to die for me, then you should do it as a member of the caste you were born into." The headless Praetorian was bleeding on her boots. Makeda reached down and picked up the dead warrior's swords. She presented them, hilt first to the slave. "I hereby proclaim you to be of the warrior caste of House Balaash. Here are your swords, Praetorian."

"My lady, I ... I ..." His eyes were wide, his mouth agape.

"Wield these in my name."

INSTRUMENTS OF WAR

Kuthsheth took the swords from her with trembling hands. "I will." Now armed, Kuthsheth moved like a changed skorne. With renewed purpose, he quickly lifted the tapestry, revealing the passage. "There is an alcove around the first corner. You should be able to see when the bloodrunners leave, but they should not be able to see you. Go straight on after that, up three levels of stairs, and you will come out near the council room."

Makeda had spent many hours in the council room, watching and learning as her grandfather, and then her father had ruled over their house. It would be a fitting place to face Akkad.

"I have been a slave of your family for two generations now. I know the soul of Vaactash favors you." Kuthsheth, still reeling from Makeda's generosity, bowed with humility. "May he guide your steel."

Makeda threw off the slave's cloak and entered the passage.



There had been six guards in the hall leading to the council chamber, but they had not mattered. The last of them crashed through the double doors of the council chambers and rolled down the stairs in a clanking, bloody heap.

The assembled leadership of House Balaash leapt to their feet and reached for their weapons. Akkad was standing at the great window which looked toward the west, watching the distant battle. He turned to see the guard spill out the last of his life down the marble stairs. "What is the meaning of this?"

Makeda paused in the doorway and surveyed the council chambers. The room had always reminded her of the arena, only this sunken floor was meant to be occupied by house leaders rather than gladiators, and the stone benches were filled with those petitioning the council as opposed to bloodthirsty spectators.

There were thirty present, assorted leaders of House Balaash and their vassal houses, as well as representatives of other castes, such as the extoller Shuruppak, the wretch who had denied her father's exaltation, and of course, Abaish, who represented the paingivers, and then many scribes and scholars. There were gasps or curses from all present. Akkad's personal guard lowered their spears and rushed forward in a rattling armored mass to place themselves between their lord and the threat.

Makeda turned slowly, looking everyone present in the eye. Many shirked and looked away, others met her gaze, knowing a reckoning had come. Those were the ones torn between honor and duty. They retained some measure of her respect. *Excellent*. She needed witnesses. She would kill all of the others later, and she made careful note of who fell on each side.

"I am Makeda of House Balaash." She kept her voice cold and level. "Second Born of murdered Telkesh, granddaughter of mighty Vaactash, and I have come to take back what is mine."

Akkad seemed speechless, but Tormentor Abaish rose from where he had been seated at his left hand. "How dare you enter this house! You are an outcast, a criminal! You have been exiled!"

"So now the whispering servant finds his voice? Do not worry, Paingiver. I will get to you," Makeda stated. Abaish dropped his shoulders and lowered his eyes as he tried to hide behind her brother. "So, Akkad, why did you bother to wear your armor if you are too much of a coward to lead your army?"

Her brother's lip curled back in a snarl. "I am afraid of no one."

"You should be ..."

"Kill the traitor!" Abaish shrieked. "Kill her!"

The elite Cataphract of Akkad's personal guard hesitated. The order had not come from their archdominar, and for this Makeda was thankful. She would not be able to fight an entire datha of Cataphract. "Only a coward would send his warriors to do something he lacked the spine to

do himself." She pointed the Swords of Balaash at Akkad's heart. "Akkad murdered Archdominar Telkesh with poison, denying him a proper warrior's death. Akkad is a coward and a usurper. His dishonorable behavior has brought shame to House Balaash. Shuruppak of the extoller caste is a heretic, denying murdered Telkesh his rightful exaltation in order to hide Akkad's crimes."

"Lies!" Abaish was desperate. Even if Makeda was to be killed, the words had been spoken, the accusation made, and it could never be taken back. "No more of your lies."

"Search your hearts and know I tell the truth." Makeda looked about the crowd as she walked down the stairs. "You are the leaders of House of Balaash. I am disgusted that the honorable few among you would tolerate this filth in your midst. You would have a coward take up space in our Hall of Ancestors?"

More eyes were averted. Makeda vowed that those would weep bitter, repentant tears before this day was through.

Akkad pushed between his Cataphracts, roughly shoving them aside. "You dare threaten the archdominar with his family's blades?" One of his retainers ran forward, presenting the archdominar with his personal war spear. It was a mighty weapon that also bore slivers of their ancestor's souls, and its blade glowed with a pale light. "I will not tolerate this insolence. Surrender *my* family's swords, and I will have you executed painlessly. Resist and you will suffer —"

Makeda laughed. "You think to threaten me with pain, brother? I know pain."

"You know *nothing!*" Akkad bellowed.

"I survived the same poison you used to kill Father. Tell me what I don't know then, brother, because I would like to understand this treachery of yours before I send you into the Void."

"You threaten me? For half a generation I fought for Vaactash. I won battle after battle in his name. I crushed our enemies and drove

them before me. I burned cities and took hundreds of slaves. Yet they never listened to me. For a year I fought for Father, but he preferred you. I was the heir! Me! You are a child. You play at war. You speak of lessons that no longer matter and stories of dead heroes, but they are not your words. You have not earned them! You are weak, pathetic, tiny!"

"My lord! Say no more, please." Abaish cried.

She continued slowly down the stairs until she reached the sunken floor. "Is that all? Because while you talk, our army kills itself. Think of the future of our house."

"You don't understand that it doesn't matter. Just like Telkesh, you lack vision."

"Enough," Makeda ordered. The council chamber was suddenly deadly silent. "Stand aside," she ordered the Cataphract, and shockingly enough, they did.

Now it was only brother and sister, nothing between them but two philosophies that could never be reconciled. The glyph of House Balaash had been engraved deep into the marble beneath their feet. Akkad stood at the top. Makeda stood at the base.

"You speak of dangerous new ways. They are not *our* way. Demonstrate your conviction, Akkad. I challenge you to a trial of individual combat."

"To the death." Akkad lifted the war spear and spun it effortlessly. "Come, sister. Let us end this."

They met in the center of the glyph.

The war spear hissed through the air in a blur. Makeda blocked with one sword. The impact sent electricity through her joints. She slashed with the other sword, but Akkad spun and knocked it aside with the shaft. Specks of light, like dust motes in the sun, floated as the two magical weapons hammered against each other.

Akkad moved with frightening speed, he was still bigger, still stronger, and Makeda barely danced aside as the war spear tore a chunk

of stone from the floor. He lunged, stabbing, and Makeda rolled aside at the last instant. The spear pierced the chest of a scribe. Akkad lifted the screaming worker and flung him off the blade. The lesser caste members pushed back, scrambling over each other to get to the higher seats. Contemptuous warriors shoved them aside so they could better watch the duel.

Makeda attacked, furious, her blades descended, hacking away, one after the other. One would strike while the other rose in a continuous rain of soul-hardened steel. Akkad retreated smoothly, the massive war spear diverting every attack. He backed against the far wall, but then placed one boot against it and launched himself at her.

She avoided the blade, but his armored shoulder caught her in the chest and knocked her back. Ribs cracked. Akkad swung the war spear along the ground, but she was able to jump over it. Akkad followed, extending one hand and pointing at her. Makeda was unprepared for the bolt of power which leapt between them. It hit her in the side. Sickening energy crackled through her bones, causing her muscles to contract in clenching agony. She was flung back, but managed to stay on her feet. *His mortitheurgy is strong.*

Akkad rushed forward, eager to finish her, but Makeda focused through the crackling pain, and forced her arms to respond. The dark powers were gathered up from her body, channeled through her, and pushed away. Akkad gasped as his spell was broken. Makeda quickly counter attacked. One sword diverted his spear, while the other one struck armor, then flesh, and finally bone.

They separated, with the full length of the Balaash glyph between them. Akkad glanced down at the strap severed and dangling loose below his shoulder plate, and then blood began to drip slowly down his armor. He pressed one hand against the wound, and grimaced as he probed the hole. It was not fatal, not nearly so, but the message had been sent, and Akkad had felt the sting of Balaash steel.



Makeda stood, waiting, her armored breastplate scorched and smoking. Akkad's attack had hurt her, but this pain was *nothing*.

Wary now, Akkad took his bloody hand from the wound and placed it upon the shaft of his spear. He shifted slowly, his boots sliding across the marble as he took up a ready stance, the spear point angled low toward the floor, ready to sweep up and eviscerate. Makeda lifted her swords, one protectively before her, the other low and ready at her side, in a stance taught to her long ago by Primus Zabalam.

They waited, unmoving, studying each other, watching for any sign of weakness, any opportunity to strike. Two warriors, both masters of their respective martial traditions were coiled, ready.

A minute passed. *Another*.

No one in the council chambers made a noise. All knew that a single movement would end the duel and decide the fate of House Balaash.

The loudest noise in the room was the *drip drip drip* of Akkad's blood sluggishly decorating the floor.

It was that splattering of life that would force Akkad to move first. Such was the danger of having such an understanding of the anatomy and the power that dwelled within. Time was no longer on his side, and every heartbeat that passed would leave him that much weaker. Makeda shifted, ever so slightly, and her grip tightened on her sword. The tiniest bit of a smile split her face.

The siblings struck.

They looked into each other's eyes. This should have been one of those moments of perfect enlightenment spoken of in the code, only achievable at that razor sharp moment between life and death, but as Makeda saw into Akkad's soul, she saw only the turmoil, the lack of conviction, the doubt in the true ways of their people, of their family ...

She judged him unworthy.

The spear blade had grazed her, barely turned away by one sword as she'd stepped inside her brother's reach. The tip of her other sword was *in* Akkad's neck.

Makeda spoke slowly to her dying brother. "I would have followed you. It was your place to rule. I would have done whatever duty required of me. I would have followed you into the Void if necessary."

Akkad tried to speak, but sound would not form through the blood running down his throat. She could tell he could still understand her words though, and that was what mattered.

"But you thought I was weak, malleable like you. You misjudged me. Now you must go into the Void alone." Makeda twisted the sword and drove it upward, deep into Akkad's brain.

The true heir of House Balaash has already won.

The new archdomina of House Balaash pulled her sword from her brother's skull and stepped away from the falling corpse. Akkad collapsed, and lay there in a crumpled heap, deprived of all his glory, his blood slowly coloring the crevices of the house glyph engraved in the floor.

Makeda looked up from the body and around the council chambers. None dared question. She would deal with the traitors soon enough, but there were more pressing matters at hand. She turned to the nearest military officer. "Order the cohorts to stand down. Tell them Makeda rules House Balaash now and has declared this battle to be through. No more of my soldiers will be wasted today." Several warriors ran up the stairs to spread the word. One of the Cataphract opened the great window to the west, while another brought forth a green signal flag, the color which would order a full halt. He shoved it out into the wind, and began waving it side to side.

Extoller Shuruppak gathered up his voluminous robes and rushed down the steps, grasping for an empty sacral stone at his belt. Makeda looked at the extoller with mild disbelief as he knelt next to Akkad. "What are you doing?"

"Akkad was one of the greatest warriors of his generation. I must keep his soul —"

“Silence.” Reaching down, Makeda gathered up a handful of the extoller’s robes. “You would betray the ideals of your caste?” She hauled Shuruppak roughly to his feet. Makeda raised her voice, but she was no longer addressing the extoller. “Let the dishonorable name of Akkad never be spoken again in the halls of House Balaash.”

“But Akkad was —”

“I must have not made myself clear.” Makeda dragged the extoller past the Cataphract with the signal flag, and hurled Shuruppak out the window. His scream could be heard for several seconds, but they were too high up to hear the impact.

Turning back to the council, Makeda raised her voice. “My brother’s name will be stricken from all of the histories.” Several scribes immediately opened their scrolls, inked their quills, and began furiously blotting out names. “And as for his fellow conspirators ...” Makeda glanced at Abaish, who was crouched on a stone bench, looking like he might be contemplating jumping out the window himself. “Fetch *my* tormentors. Fetch *all* of my tormentors. They are going to be very busy.”

Makeda went to the window. In the distance, horns were sounding. The green flag had been seen. The fighting would cease, and hopefully before enough of Balaash blood had been spilled to leave them weakened before the other great houses.

Smoke rose in pillars across the battlefield. From this great distance individuals were nothing more than tiny specks of movement, only mighty warbeasts could be distinguished as what they really were. It was nothing more than a swirling mass of color, red and gold, death and life, all beneath a spreading tower of black.

She watched the smoke climb into the clear sky and wondered if she could see as the extollers did with their crystal eyes, would the flow of souls into the Void look like that smoke drifting into nothingness? When the worker caste refined the impurities from metal, they had to torture it with fire. The weakness burned away and what was left was refined.

Saved.

“This is why I fight,” the Archdomina of House Balaash whispered to herself.

Grandfather said a warrior did not promise. House Balaash would not fall today, nor would it fall as long as she lived, and as long as House Balaash stood as the greatest of all houses, the skorne would continue as unceasing instruments of war.



Archdominar Vaactash had imparted great wisdom to the child Makeda that night in the Hall of Ancestors. He had taught her, even praised her for her devotion to hoksune, and cautioned her as to her place within the hierarchy of their house. It had been a blessed evening, one that she would always remember, and now she had been dismissed.

Makeda stood perfectly still, unsure, staring up at the seemingly giant Vaactash and the even bigger statue behind him. She was not quite ready to navigate her way back through the darkened Hall of Ancestors, and there remained one thing that the archdominar had mentioned which she had always wondered about. She built up her courage to speak. “Grandfather, I have a question.”

Vaactash turned away from the great statue that would someday hold his soul, and toward her, curious as to why she had not fled when given the chance. “Yes. I will allow this question. Speak.”

“Tell me about the gods we don’t have?”

The greatest warrior of their people folded his arms. “You ask difficult questions, child.”

“Yes.”

“Lyoss had gods ...” Vaactash stroked his long chin as he contemplated his answer. “There are lands beyond that sea, lands beyond the Abyss, beyond the Stormlands, even lands past where the giants dwell. We live

in a land free of meddling gods, but are there still gods in those other dark lands? I do not know. And if there are gods there, do they have people who worship them still?"

"Only exiles have gone beyond those places, Grandfather. They are a mystery to us." It was an odd thought, but she was clever enough to see it through to a logical conclusion. "But if there are others, and they still had their own gods, then they would be soft, probably used to relying on divine help. Not like the skorne at all."

"Indeed. Ponder on this then, child. We must always make war because our salvation depends on it ... But should the opportunity present itself, what if we could make war on *someone else*?"

Makeda mulled it over, and the sudden answer struck her like a war spear to the heart. "If there was a foreign house, we could have a whole new adversary. There would be no need for our people to make war on each other. Making war against a new enemy would surely provide opportunities for exaltation to all our houses!" The idea nearly stole her breath away.

"This idea is only a fantasy, but imagine it with me, Makeda. All skorne, all of the warrior caste, all of the houses, united in one glorious conquest. It is *beautiful* ... May your dreams be of war, Makeda."

"May your dreams be of war, Grandfather."



Two generations had passed, but the lessons of Vaactash would never leave her. His words were as ingrained into Makeda as the code itself. It had been ten years since her grandfather's death under the tusks of a great beast of the plains, but she still found herself calling upon his wisdom during times of struggle. She was the archdomina now and had led her house through countless battles. The Swords of Balaash were sheathed at her side. Slivers of her grandfather's sacral stone were among those empowering the mighty

blades, and though only an extoller could contact the exalted dead, Makeda always felt as though Vaactash was there to guide her with his wisdom.

“Archdomina, I fear the news is grim. Three more western houses have fallen before the invader from the west. Two of the southern houses have bent their knee and offered fealty rather than fight. The ranks of the invader’s army have swollen with troops.”

“The invader is like nothing we have ever seen before. He has crushed every cohort that has stood in his way.”

The council chamber of House Balaash was silent as the words sunk in. Makeda walked away from her advisors and across the Balaash glyph that adorned the floor. The stain had been scrubbed clean over a generation before, but she could still sense a chill on the spot where her nameless brother had died so long before.

The word from the western tors had been troubling, but this new information was even worse. The divided houses were being systematically conquered. It was as Vaactash had spoken of so long ago. There were lands beyond theirs and now a warrior of incomprehensible power had come from those lands, systematically subjugating her people.

“We are the last great house standing in his way...” one of her tyrants said.

And should we fall, all our people will be dominated.

“What is the name of this *conqueror*?”

“They say he is called Vinter Raelthorne.”

Walking slowly, Makeda went to the window and looked toward the west. Ominous clouds had gathered over the plains. The honor of House Balaash — the honor of all skorne — lay heavy on her shoulders. It was times like this that tested a warrior’s dedication to the code.

Grandfather, what would you have me do?





SKORNE INDEX

Ancestral Guardian: An exalted ancestor whose sacral stone is placed in an armed statue that it can animate to enter battle alongside skorne warriors. It employs empty sacral stones to recover the slain as revered companions.

Archdomina/Dominar: Rank reserved for skorne leader controlling multiple houses in pre-Empire skorne, or one of the tors (territories) in the Skorne Empire. Archdomina is female, Archdominar is male.

Arcuarii: Arcuarii are a type of cataphract wielding an ancient weapon called an arcus.

Arcus: A combined harpoon launcher and polearm weapon utilized by Arcuarii.

Balaash: One of the greatest skorne houses before the Skorne Empire was unified, and subsequently ruling the empire under Supreme Archdomina Makeda, who seized this position by casting down Vinter Raelthorne IV.

Bashbek: House remembered primarily for Supreme Extoller Norvaak, who belonged to this house and brought it to ruin after committing heresy.

Bloodrunners: A branch of paingivers focusing on fighting and assassination, closer to the warrior caste and noted for utilizing mortitheurgy for supernatural mobility and diversion.

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Cataphract: A highly respected upper warrior caste in the skorne, comprised of an extremely skilled and physically capable minority which learns to master heavy armor and special fighting formations. Several different traditions of cataphracts exist and each utilizes different weapons and fighting formations.

Cetrati: Cetrati are a type of cataphract who wield war spears and shields, trained in close formation fighting.

Cohort: One of the large fundamental army increments of the skorne. For many houses, a cohort represents its entire army, and is led by the tyrant or lord tyrant. Particularly large houses combine multiple cohorts into a sabaoth.

Dakar: A skorne officer rank, utilized by those who lead either a datha or a taberna of soldiers. Junior dakar are entrusted to lead a datha, while senior ones are entrusted to lead a taberna.

Datha: A small squad of warriors, usually six to ten in number, led by a dakar.

Decurium: A sizable group of soldiers serving a house or army, being ten taberna or 200-500 warriors, led by a primus.

Domina/Dominar: Rank above Lord Tyrant and below Archdominar reserved for the head of a significant house. Domina is female, dominar is male.

Extoller: A highly respected spiritual caste responsible for burial rites, including preserving the most honored skorne in sacral stones after death. Extollers are skilled in mortitheurgy but practice this art to preserve, honor, and communicate with exalted ancestors. Extollers replace an eye with a crystal oculus to perceive spiritual essence.

INSTRUMENTS OF WAR

Exalted: Honored ancestors who are deceased but preserved on Caen in sacral stones are considered exalted, the state of being every skorne aspires to achieve by acts of valor. Very few skorne become exalted, and then generally only renowned members of the warrior caste. The exalted can occasionally be communicated with by extollers.

Ferox: Term derived from deadly long-fanged carnivores used as mounts by skorne praetorians, applied to both the animal itself and those riding them. Ferox are never entirely tamed and employing them is always risky to the rider.

Great Cataclysm: A vast disaster thousands of years ago Immoren was changed by a vast supernatural explosion, opening the Abyss and creating the Stormlands. This resulted in the destruction of the Lyoss Empire and forced the nomadic skorne to seek shelter in the Shroudwall Mountains, founding Malphas and beginning skorne civilization.

Halaak: Largest skorne city, became the capital of the Skorne Empire after unification.

Harakith: Largest river north of the Shroudwall Mountains, feeds into the Mizrah Sea.

Havaati: Primary language of the skorne.

Hestatians: A lower warrior caste of skorne utilized primarily as city garrisons and rural militia, as well as the least skilled of any house warrior force. Often used as reserves or fodder in major battles.

Hezaat: Largest river in the Skorne Empire, flowing from Melhaas Lake to the ocean near Kademe.

INSTRUMENTS OF WAR

Hokar: An explosive “paste” discovered by skorne chymists (alchemists) which can be utilized in cannons. Does not work well in small quantities (and hence small weapons).

Hoksune: The Hoksune Code is the most important philosophical credo of the skorne warrior caste, originally set down by Vuxoris the First Exalted. It emphasizes how one is only truly alive in battle. Honor is found in fighting perfectly and fearlessly in the face of certain death, an inevitability one must simultaneously accept and defy.

Immortals: Soldiers preserved by ancestral guardians to become revered companions frequently have their sacral stones set into statues armed for battle known as immortals, which fight in units alongside a house’s living soldiers.

Jakaar: This major house gains dominance over House Lushon shortly after the invention of the reiver firearms. This house creates the first organized and trained venators.

Kadamesh: Largest skorne ethnicity comprised mostly of southeastern skorne living along the fertile Hezaat River and also those dwelling in the city of Kademe. These skorne have emigrated throughout the Empire and can be found in every region.

Kademe: Second largest skorne city, the only true “port city” in the Skorne Empire.

Kadesh: Skorne language spoken predominantly in the southeast.

Kahzek: Influential house in the city of Kademe, notable for Lord Tyrant Hyvlaarik who once defied the houses of Halaak but was slain in the Battle of the River Houses.

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Kajar: Considered part of the Kadamesh regional ethnicity, the Kajar are actually a distinct minority descended from southern skorne who did not seek shelter in Malphas after the Great Cataclysm.

Kalos: Notable skorne settlement northwest of Halaak, close to the Blasted Desert.

Karax: A fighting discipline of praetorians employing pikes and shields in formation to serve as resilient soldiers.

Kasortaan: Small skorne ethnicity of the northernmost skorne including those living beyond the Shroudwall Mountains.

Kolrath Ocean: Ocean northeast of Immoren.

Kovaas: “Rage ghost”, what happens to an exalted ancestor whose sacral stone is shattered, releasing their soul as an insane and wrathful spirit.

Lord Tyrant: Rank above Tyrant and below Dominar, utilized in the Army of the Western Reaches for those leading a major cohort or multiple cohorts. Traditionally also a title in use by house lords allied and subordinate to a stronger house but in control of smaller houses.

Makeda: Became Supreme Archdomina of the Skorne Empire after overthrowing the Conqueror, whom she had previously served as Archdomina of the Army of the Western Reaches and leader of House Balaash, that house’s greatest leader since Vaactesh, her grandfather. Sister of Akkad, younger daughter of Telkesh.

Malphas: First city of the skorne, located below a cliff up in the Shroudwall Mountains. The origin of skorne civilization.

Malzash: Skorne minority found primarily in Malphas and Halaak, they consider themselves the descendants of the most esteemed houses of ancient Malphas.

Master: Master can be used as an honorary rank for many different roles in skorne society, mostly those among the worker caste, particularly those castes requiring specialized skills or advanced knowledge.

Master Tormentor: An honorary rank to the paingivers who are at the top of their caste, and who are not counted as subordinate to other peers. Master tormentors are nominally the leaders of their caste, although presently subordinate to Lord Assassin Morghoul.

Melhaas Lake: Smallest of the three major lakes south of the Shroudwall.

Mirketh: Mirketh Lake is really an inland sea, the largest body of water of inland eastern Immoren, and in fact the largest inland sea of Immoren.

Mokkar: The Mokkar - a great desert occupying a sizable section of the southern skorne territory. Some of this area is inhabited, but most skorne settlements are on the periphery or found near chartered oasis.

Morghoul: Lord Assassin serving the Skorne Empire as leader of the paingivers, which have been made a house under his command by Supreme Archdomina Makeda. Played a key role in the Second Unification, many battles of the Army of the Western Reaches, and ensuring the compliance of Halaak for Makeda.

Morkaash: Ancient warrior-philosopher and ascetic who focused on learning anatomy and the infliction and endurance of pain and agony as a method of enlightenment. A key figure in the development of the paingivers, who also advanced mortitheurgy and whose philosophies also influenced the nihilators.

Mortitheurge: One who practices mortitheurgy as a primary avocation and who is not an extoller, paingiver, or house leader. Master mortitheurge is a title of significant respect for those of exceptional skill in this field, and may be adopted as an honorific title by house rulers with sufficient depth of knowledge.

Mortitheurgy: A broad field of skorne arcane study rooted in the energies of flesh, bone, and spiritual essence. Mortitheurgy allows some skorne to become warlocks. Its powers are essential not only to mortitheurges, but paingivers and extollers. Some degree of mastery over this study is required of all skorne house leaders.

Nibilators: An extreme cult of warrior-ascetics who seek exaltation through acts of extreme courage and self-destruction on the battlefield. They seek spiritual clarity and supernatural power through self-inflicted pain.

Paingiver: A versatile caste of assassins, spies, beast-handlers, and interrogators. An ancient tradition rooted in fundamental skorne philosophies laid down by Morkaash. The most proficient paingivers apply the principles of mortitheurgy to their arts. Currently led by Lord Assassin Morghoul and treated as a house under his rulership.

Praetorians: Considered to represent the backbone of the warrior caste, soldiers of several fighting disciplines who serve their houses by following the hoksune code. Most praetorians practice sword mastery, but others employ polearms and shields, others subjugate and control ferox steeds to serve as cavalry.

Primus: An officer title among the skorne, utilized by those who lead a decurium, the largest division of a cohort.

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Reiver: A type of skorne firearm which utilizes compressed explosive gas to hurl needle-like projectiles at great force at a long range.

Revered Companions: Those preserved after death but counted just below true exalted in esteem are revered companions. This state is reserved for soldiers who die in major battles in the proximity of ancestral guardians or extollers who preserve them in sacral stones. Many become immortals and fight on for their house.

Sabaath: A large army of skorne, including multiple cohorts, generally led by a dominar.

Sacral Stone: A piece of special obsidian which has been enchanted by special mortitheurgical rites known to the extollers to attract and preserve a soul before it passes beyond Caen. This is the mechanism of exaltation. Sacral stones or pieces of sacral stones contain great power which can be harnessed by weapons and armor.

Shroudfall Mountains: Large chain of imposing mountains in the northern Skorne Empire serving as the primary geographical barrier between the northern and southern portions of eastern Immoren.

Soresb: A dialect of Havaati found among the nomadic skorne of the plains and fringes.

Sortaan: Plains of Sortaan, the great arid grassy expanse west of Halaak.

Sortaani: Second largest skorne ethnicity, includes most of the western skorne including those in the plains and numerous smaller settlements.

Taberna: A group of soldiers serving a house or army, literally a “tent” of warriors, being several datha, generally from 20-50 in number, led by a senior dakar.

INSTRUMENTS OF WAR

Tormentor: A rank of experienced paingivers, the equivalent of an officer rank within their caste.

Tyrant: Rank usually reserved to the head of the house army or the house itself, if it is a minor house. In a larger skorne army, this title may represent solely control of a cohort without authority over a house. Regardless, every tyrant will have a cohort that answers to him.

Vaactesh: Notable Archdominar of House Balaash, father of Telkesh, grandfather of Makeda and Akkad.

Venators: Venators are deemed members of the warrior caste, but of considerably lower standing than praetorians or cataphracts, due to their emphasis on fighting at a distance via the use of reivers and similar weapons, a relatively modern invention. This mode of combat, while essential to modern warfare, is less honorable according to hoksune.

Venhokar: The explosive gas utilized in reivers and similar weapons, derived in a dangerous process involving pouring powerful acids over iron and collecting the gas which forms by this interaction.

Verskone: Coastal town south of the Mokkar, isolated from the rest of the Empire by the desert.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Larry Correia is the New York Times bestselling author of the *Monster Hunter International* series, the *Grimnoir Chronicles* trilogy, and the military thrillers *Dead Six* and *Swords of Exodus*. He has been a finalist for the Campbell award, the Julia Verlanger award, and won an Audie Award for *Hard Magic*. He is published by Baen Books. A former accountant, military contractor, firearms instructor, and machinegun dealer, Larry now lives in the mountains of northern Utah with his wife and children, where he has moose in his yard.

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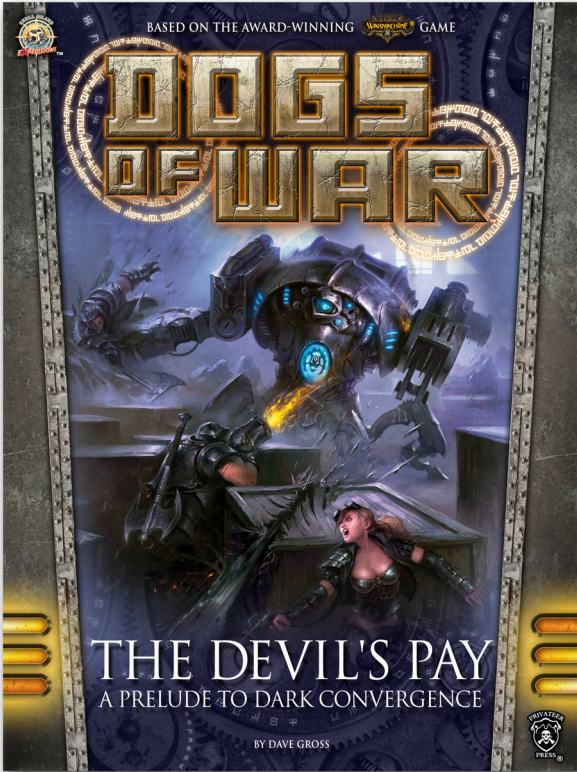
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