

The Great Gods War

Book Two

“The War Within”

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Prologue

Plans in Motion

From the high windows of his workroom, the tall librarian, white-haired and bearded, studied the battlements that defended the gates, and below them on the wide plateau lying like a porch at the foot of the Last Repository. He had wasps of anxiety buzzing in his brain. During the night, he had dreamed of his own death—and not for the first time. In itself, the idea of dying did not trouble him. A new librarian would take his place. His special relationship with the Repository's store of knowledge would pass to someone else: the sorcery preserving the continuance of that bond had been in effect for many centuries. And any new librarian would protect the books, scrolls, and papers as stringently as he did. But he did fear that his replacement might not share his vision of the library's defense. If that happened, all of his efforts would accomplish nothing. He could not bring himself to leave his post at the windows.

He was blind, of course. He had lost his sight when he had become the librarian. The gift or curse of knowing every text stored on the levels above him always exacted the same price. But he was more than a librarian. He was Magister Sirjane Marrow, and powerful. He saw with senses other than human vision. The midafternoon sun warmed his face but did not require him to lower his head or turn away.

In any case, he did not need sight to tell him that Set Ungabwey's caravan was arriving. He heard the grinding of its wheels on the distant stone of the plateau. Subtle vibrations reached him through the soles of his sandals. He could smell the importance of what was coming.

The caravan master's ornate conveyance, his traveling home, was already at rest in front of the gates, waiting for Magister Marrow himself. The wagon's teamsters were tending their horses, while several of Master Ungabwey's servants worked to clean the stains and grime of a hard journey from the vehicle's carved, gilded sides. In addition, the librarian detected a number of smaller carriages settling on their wheels. They housed the caravan's serving folk, and some of them showed signs of damage: shattered spokes in their wheels, cracks and even holes in their roofs, deep scrapes along their sides. But the other wagons that had left the Repository almost three fortnights ago were not in range of the Magister's senses.

Those wagons were the most essential conveyances in the caravan. If they did not come—

They were Sirjane Marrow's latest gambit: only the most recent of his moves in the game he played against ruin, but by no means the least crucial. He had started to put his plans in motion more than a hundred years ago. Twenty years ago, he had beaten down Prince Bifalt's pride and hostility so that Belleger and Amika might be able to negotiate for peace. But since then, he had done little more than watch and wait. Oh, he had approved when the devotees of Flesh had proposed to give the two small realms their singular aid. And he had actively encouraged the devotees of Spirit to travel the continent with Allman Dancer's Wide World Carnival, looking for hints of the library's enemy, seeking out potential allies. In the intervening years, however, he had concentrated his own efforts on training the Repository's sorcerers, on preserving communications with Magister Facile in Belleger, and on keeping watch. He had not urged Set Ungabwey to attempt the mountains until he knew the enemy was coming.

Now the enemy was close. If Master Ungabwey had failed, the librarian's entire defensive strategy would fall apart.

Set Ungabwey and his ever-changing train had come to the Repository several times in recent years, but not on an occasion as fraught as this one; not since he had indirectly delivered Prince Bifalt. Twenty years ago, however, Magister Marrow had had other stratagems ready if his plans for the Prince failed. Now he had no idea what he would do if the caravan did not accomplish its purpose.

An irascible man at the best of times, Sirjane Marrow scowled at the plateau as if the shapes he discerned made him furious.

Still the bedraggled line of conveyances continued to come. Tired oxen tugged more carriages onto the high porch of the library, bringing teams of guards and scouts as well as mechanics and trained laborers. The condition of the vehicles gave further proof—as if the librarian needed it—that they had emerged from hostile terrain.

But not from human hostility. The state of the wagons did not suggest battle-damage. Before the caravan set out, Master Ungabwey's interpreter, Tchwee, had reached an understanding with the Quolt, the strange mountain folk who could have barred the wagons' road. In exchange for a trivial portion of the Last Repository's abundance, the Quolt had promised safe passage, guidance, and aid. They must have kept their word.

No, the hostility was that of the Wall Mountains themselves. They were so tall that even in summer they remained clogged with ice and flailed by snow, scourged by winds only granite could endure. Granite and, apparently, the Quolt. Centuries ago, when the guardians of the library had chosen to build their Last Repository here, they had believed the peaks and elevation and weather would protect them from any assault at their backs. Now, of course, they knew better. The Quolt had testified to that.

But Magister Marrow refused to consider the hardships and dangers the caravan had endured. The library's survival was his driving obsession. He already had too many piercing anxieties, and each of them felt like a fresh sting.

Then he made out the first of the immense conveyances for which he had been waiting. Gusting steam from their nostrils in the mild air of the heights, six illirim hauled their burden onto the plateau. They were huge, tusked beasts, massive as bullocks, shaggy as sheep: the only animals muscular enough to pull the weight of their long wagon with its enormous load, and tough enough to keep going day after day. That load was tightly sheeted in canvas to protect it from rain or hail or snow or lesser rock-falls; but the librarian knew what it was.

Set Ungabwey had taken three such wagons into the mountains. One had returned.

But while it settled into its place on the plateau, more illirim impinged on Sirjane Marrow's senses. More beasts dragged their wagon into view. Like the first, their burden was sealed in canvas; stoutly tied. And undamaged.

Rubbing his sightless eyes, he allowed himself to imagine that where there were two, there might be a third. And when the third appeared, he allowed himself a moment of relief.

Unfortunately, the return of the caravan did not indicate success. It demonstrated only that Set Ungabwey's people had made the attempt, and had survived with their massive catapults intact. To know the truth, the blind librarian would have to hear it.

He could have sent a messenger to get the caravan master's report; but for several reasons, Sirjane Marrow wanted to hear Master Ungabwey's tidings in person. He and Set Ungabwey had dealt with each other for a long time. He owed the house-bound master the respect of a personal visit. In addition, he trusted his own hearing more than anyone else's; his own ability to detect what lay behind what was said. And if the caravan had succeeded, he had

another challenge for it. He would have to negotiate.

Set Ungabwey was a faithful ally, but he was also a merchant. He would have to be paid. Determining and then accepting—or refusing—his price was the responsibility of the Last Repository’s librarian. And if Magister Marrow could not meet that price, he would have to offer some other payment, something Master Ungabwey valued even more highly.

Sounding more irate than he intended, the librarian summoned a servant to inform the caravan master that Magister Marrow would come to him shortly.

The man who answered was not a monk devoted to the Cult of the Many. He gave his diligence and effort for pay: a detail that made no difference to the librarian. No doubt Magister Rummage, the hunchback—and therefore deaf Magister Avail—knew the man’s name, where he had come from, how long he had served the Last Repository. They could vouch for him. Sirjane Marrow did not hesitate to trust him.

If the librarian had focused his remaining senses, he would have perceived a young man with a diffident manner wearing a blue tunic and pantaloons instead of a monk’s grey robe, black hair tousled on his forehead, sturdy boots on his feet. But the Magister did not trouble himself. He had other issues on his mind. To the servant, he said irritably, “Please tell the caravan master I will attend him. And send someone else to Magister Rummage. He should know I am about to leave the library.”

The young man did not speak: he had not been asked a direct question. Instead, he bowed and left.

Studying the wounded and comparatively small caravan below him, Magister Marrow wondered, Will they be enough? There were no Quolt in Belleger’s mountains. Without guides, Master Ungabwey would need to consult with the rulers of Belleger and Amika.

That idea vexed the librarian. Some of his preparations would be exposed. But he had to face the consequences. He did not have many choices left. And he could not ask Set Ungabwey to brave another range of mountains without leaving the Master free to determine his own course.

Muttering curses under his breath, the old man turned from his windows and began to make his unerring way down through the keep toward the mustering hall and the gates.

Before he reached the hall, the servant he had sent to Master Ungabwey stepped in front of him. “With your permission, Magister,” the man said to explain himself. “I have delivered your message. Now the most holy Amandis asks you to await her.”

“Await her?” snapped the sorcerer. “Why? Master Ungabwey awaits me. What can she want that prompts her to delay me?”

The servant took the liberty of replying, “She did not say. You know her, Magister. She does not account for her wishes. She merely states them and expects compliance.”

That was true, but the librarian had not expected a servant to tell him so. He regarded the young man more closely. “Will Flamora accompany her?”

The servant held his head so that his hair hid his eyes. “She did not say,” he repeated. His tone did not suggest discomfort. “However, I imagine the most holy Amandis waits for the most holy Flamora.”

Magister Marrow snorted his impatience. But he could not justify venting his irritation on any servant, certainly not on a young man who felt so little awe in his presence. An attitude that Magister Rummage would have called impudence—if the bitter hunchback had been able to speak—Sirjane Marrow found refreshing. More mildly, he said, “Inform them, please, that I will await them in the hall. But I will not wait long. If the devotee of Spirit cannot bear to be parted

from her antagonist, and the devotee of Flesh cannot tear herself away from her self-regard, I will speak with them when I have consulted with Master Ungabwey.”

He thought he heard a muffled chuckle from the servant, but he was not sure. He had already gone past the young man, walking briskly.

Amandis and Flamora were in the keep, of course, as they had been at irregular intervals for decades. In their separate ways, or by their separate means, they knew as well as he did that events were approaching a crisis. It might be the last crisis: the last in the library’s besieged millennia of existence. They gave the Repository their support because they knew its worth. But they also had their own singular priorities—or their own peculiar styles of support. Magister Marrow did not care how fond of Elgart Flamora had become, but he still rued the impulse that had led Amandis to say too much to Bifalt twenty years ago. In his bones, the librarian believed that the more his designs became known, the more opposition they would attract.

Bifalt and the Amikan, Commander Forguile, who had somehow become the Prince’s ally, already knew more than they should. No doubt Elgart did as well.

But those misjudgments were long past. They could not be corrected. What mattered now were the conclusions that Belleger and Amika drew from their premature insights. So far, the librarian had no cause for regret. Those two realms were doing what he required of them.

Knowing every intricacy of the Last Repository, he reached the mustering hall that fronted the gates in a short time.

Those gates were the only entrance to the keep, and they were barred and strutted with heavy iron to protect the books, the scrolls and tomes, the loose papers. Nevertheless, they were the most easily breached of the Repository’s defenses.

Warned, no doubt, by the caravan’s arrival, servants who were also students of sorcery had already lit the many cressets, filling the huge space with light Magister Marrow did not need. Urged by the buzzing in his head, he would have gone straight to the massive gates, confident that they would open as he approached. Instead, he went to the staircase customarily used by the devotees. There he paused to compose himself. Much as he wanted to rail at Amandis, he had no intention of doing so. His allies were too few: he could not afford to indulge a petty frustration at any of them. In any case, his ire would be wasted. The assassin had often demonstrated that she was impervious to insult.

In his place, another man might have peered upward, reflexively trying to see despite his blindness. But after more than a century of service, Sirjane Marrow had almost forgotten he still had eyes. Watching the staircase with his other senses, he concentrated on preparing himself to meet Set Ungabwey.

If he had bothered to count his heartbeats, he would not have reached fifteen before Amandis began to descend the stair.

As always, she glided downward like a woman floating on water rather than treading on stone. As always, she was demurely cloaked from neck to floor, and carried her arms with each hand resting on the opposite forearm inside her wide sleeves. As always, she did not return Magister Marrow’s bow of respect.

She did, however, acknowledge his presence by saying, “We will await the devotee of Flesh.”

For lack of any other useful gesture, the librarian raised his eyebrows. “We will? Why, Devotee? Master Ungabwey has returned. His task was hazardous and necessary. His tidings are urgent. I must hear them.”

Amandis replied with a slight shrug. “We will wait here, librarian, or we will wait in Master Ungabwey’s domicile. He will not speak until the devotee of Flesh is present.” After a moment’s consideration, she conceded, “If Magister Avail’s voice in his mind commands him, he may comply. Otherwise not.”

With both hands, Sirjane Marrow rubbed the surprise off his features. He had known, of course, that Master Ungabwey’s acquaintance with devotees of Flesh and Spirit was older than his own. Now he was forced to admit that he had no idea what their relationships entailed when they were not encamped in front of the Last Repository. His attention—his obsessions—had always been elsewhere. He had no curiosity to spare for anything that did not pertain to texts—or to the library’s survival.

While the librarian wondered why Set Ungabwey required the presence of a trained killer and a gifted courtesan, a servant came toward him from the back of the hall. She was one of the monks, and she was in a hurry. The slap of her sandals sounded like scurrying in the cavernous space. When he and Amandis turned to face her, she slowed and halted; assumed the deferential posture habitual to all the monks, head bowed, hands clasped in front of her. Under her grey robe, she was breathing heavily.

Magister Marrow assumed that she carried some message, perhaps from Magister Rummage or one of the Repository’s other defenders. But when he opened his mouth to question her, the devotee of Spirit forestalled him.

“She will accompany us,” said Amandis crisply. “Like ours, her presence is required.”

Before the old man could stop himself, he demanded, “Master Ungabwey requires a servant?”

“Not a servant,” explained Flamora’s antagonist or opposite. “This servant. The monk known as Third Father is absent. She is known as Fifth Daughter. She stands in his stead.”

Sirjane Marrow gave up on restraint. “A servant, an assassin, and a courtesan. Are there other requirements that have been kept from me? Does the caravan master need a team of acrobats, or perhaps a dancing sow? He did not rely on such an audience when we last met.”

Then, abruptly, he swallowed his irritation. The gravity of the small devotee’s attention hinted at peril: a warning, not a threat. He knew her too well to imagine that she might harm him. But her manner reminded him that there were things he did not know, matters that belonged exclusively to Set Ungabwey.

Then Flamora called out from the top of the staircase, “Librarian!”

Her voice tugged at him. It was a strange instrument. It gave the impression that viols and lutes were speaking simultaneously, each playing a distinct tune, yet each in harmony. The effect was delicious. No doubt, it was intended to be seductive.

Magister Marrow was in no mood for it; but he could not pretend that it did not affect him.

She came down the stairs in a waft of loose muslin thin as gauze. It floated around her as if to suggest that she was much more than she seemed and yet had nothing to hide. Tiny bells on her anklets chimed silver at every step. Her face and figure invited close scrutiny—or so the librarian had been told—but his lack of sight enabled him to ignore that distraction.

Unfortunately, he could not ignore her voice as well, or her scent, or the floating of her raiment.

She spoke as she descended the staircase. “Thank you for waiting, librarian. You are kind to the vanity of women.” Her tone resembled an arched eyebrow. “I mean to the vanity of some

women. The most holy Amandis has her own pride, but it takes other forms. For example, she takes pride in being obscure. No doubt she has not mentioned that Master Ungabwey has chosen us to be his counselors. He relies on us.

“In a perfect world, others would join us. Alas, they are too distant to be summoned.”

The old man contained himself until the most holy devotee of Flesh reached the foot of the stairs. Then he asked, “Master Ungabwey requires counsel? You know this?”

He might have added, How? More than that, he wanted to ask, Why? Why does Set Ungabwey need advice now? What has happened?

But Flamora answered, “We know him, Magister.” Before Sirjane Marrow could pose his other questions, she gestured toward the gates. “Shall we? I have kept him waiting too long.”

By repute, her smile could ravish oxen. It did not touch Magister Marrow. Nevertheless, he headed for the gates as if he were obeying her; as if he had not also been kept waiting too long. When Flamora slipped her arm through his, he did not shrug her off.

“Do you ever wonder, librarian,” she offered as they walked, “how it happens that Master Ungabwey is able to travel this continent in peace and profit? There are many people, many languages, many customs. Some treasure their isolation. Some are warlike. Most are suspicious of strangers. Certainly, Tchwee is able to speak for Master Ungabwey, but how does he win trust? And not only the trust of other merchants. The trust of entire caravans? Many refuse to set out until they can join their wagons to Master Ungabwey’s.”

The devotee of Flesh held Magister Marrow’s attention in spite of his anxieties. Knowledge had that power over him. In the abstract, he was acquainted with the homelands and natures of the peoples she mentioned. He had learned enough about them to recognize that few of them were likely allies, although they hungered for what the Repository offered. But he had never asked himself how Set Ungabwey had become so successful.

For a man who never left his rich conveyance—

“I will tell you,” continued Flamora. “He relies on his counselors to win trust for him. If people are threatened, his guards aid them. If people are hostile, the most holy devotee of Spirit knows how to answer them. If they are merely suspicious, the Wide World Carnival entertains them. If they are rigid in their isolation”—she laughed like an ensemble of instruments—“well, I make friends easily. And the Cult of the Many is everywhere, teaching by example even when people do not realize they are being taught.

“Also Master Ungabwey is wise,” she concluded. “He knows that trade and knowledge benefit all who consent to share them. If we saw no worth in him, or in what he does, we would not be his counselors. In our separate fashions, we benefit also.”

Magister Marrow nodded to himself. Flamora had told him enough: he could imagine most of the details she left out. And ahead of him, the reinforced gates were opening. Casting his senses through the gap, he discerned Set Ungabwey’s elaborate residence only a few dozen steps away.

In front of the carriage door stood Tchwee, waiting.

Sirjane Marrow was tall, but Master Ungabwey’s black interpreter was taller. He was naked to the waist, clad only in a dhoti cinched below his navel; and his strong torso and muscled arms gleamed in the afternoon shadows as if his skin had been burnished with oils or sweat. In the mountain breeze, his chest and hairless scalp steamed like the labored breathing of the illirim. By that sign, the librarian understood that Tchwee had just emerged from the uncomfortable heat of Set Ungabwey’s home.

Eager now, desperate to know, Magister Marrow passed between the gates onto the plateau with Flamora still holding his arm, Amandis and Fifth Daughter close behind him.

“Librarian,” greeted Tchwee in a good-natured subterranean rumble that made his grin audible. “Make us welcome with wine and song. I do not hope for women.” His tone implied a teasing glance at the most holy devotee of Flesh. “But our need for other pleasures is severe. We are much scathed, and more than a little humbled. Nevertheless, we have returned.”

Sirjean Marrow disentangled himself from Flamora and bowed to the interpreter. “Honored Tchwee.” He tried to match the black man’s manner. “Some women may be willing, but if you are wise, you will not wish for song. You have not heard me sing.”

Tchwee chuckled. But when the librarian heard his own attempt at banter, he gave it up. His mood was too dark. More brusquely, he added, “Will Master Ungabwey speak with me?” When Flamora nudged him, he amended, “With us? Will he speak with us? I need his tidings.”

Tchwee barked a laugh that sounded too cheerful to be insulting. “Certainly,” he answered. “Master Ungabwey awaits you. He emulates the patience of stone, but his eagerness does not diminish.”

With a flourish of his arm, he invited Magister Marrow’s small company forward. Then he ascended the steps to the door, opened it, and went in.

“Master Ungabwey.” His voice seemed to echo out of the carriage. “Your guests have come.”

Sure of his footing despite his blindness, Magister Marrow entered Set Ungabwey’s domicile.

The circumstances felt strange to him, portentous in both obvious and obscure ways. He had been here on other occasions, but none of them had stung him with so many different concerns. The future of the Last Repository was at risk, as it had been when he had asked Master Ungabwey to dare the mountains. Of course the situation felt portentous: he did not know whether the caravan had succeeded or failed. But when he had explained what he wanted a few fortnights ago, he had been alone with Set Ungabwey; alone apart from Tchwee and the caravan master’s four ochre-robed daughters. Yet now the master wanted his counselors around him? Positively required them?

What had changed? Clearly, the stakes were higher now, for Set Ungabwey as well as for the Repository—but why?

To the extent that Magister Marrow bothered to perceive its details, the Master’s council chamber matched his memory of it: excessive warmth, a floor covered with rugs and strewn with satin pillows, doors ornamented with gems and silver, a starscape painted on the ceiling. As usual, brass trays crowded with goblets and ewers were set among the pillows. A dozen lanterns gave light for those who needed it—and added heat without regard for those who preferred cooler air.

Set Ungabwey’s daughters sat in their customary places against the walls. They were older than they had been when he had last focused his attention on them: over the years, they had become mature women. But as far as he could tell, they had not moved a muscle since he had left their domicile half a season ago.

Nor had their father. While Amandis and Flamora entered behind Sirjean Marrow and chose pillows, then urged the monk to do the same, the tall old man studied Set Ungabwey.

The caravan master was immensely fat: so obese he could hardly stand without help; so laden with excess flesh he could barely open his eyes. Indeed, he would have looked absurd if he

had not wielded such power and respect. As he sat cross-legged, his thighs supported his belly, while his shoulders provided resting places for his jowls and earlobes. Like Tchwee's, his skull was bald; but unlike his interpreter, he lacked both eyebrows and lashes. For clothing, he wore sheets of ochre muslin.

His only acknowledgment of the librarian's arrival was a slight nod that made his cheeks wobble. If he spared a glance for his counselors, Magister Marrow could not detect it. Apparently, he took their attendance for granted.

As usual here, Tchwee knelt beside the caravan master. On this occasion, however, he was not alone.

In a far corner near one of the doors to the carriage's private rooms stood a hulking figure that made the librarian think instinctively of a bear. Not as tall as Tchwee, but much broader. Covered from his hooded head to his bare feet in furs that he wore as if they were his natural skin. A flat face deeply tanned, a look of absence in his glacial blue eyes. Despite his size, he had an air of uneasiness, a discomfort that seemed to have nothing to do with wearing winter garments in a chamber heated like the western desert.

Sirjane Marrow had read about such people. As with other distant races, he knew where they came from and how they lived. And he had heard Tchwee's description of them. But this was his first encounter with one of the Quolt in person.

The way the man stood gave the impression that he would have preferred to crouch on all fours. If he looked like a bear, perhaps he walked like one as well.

Still standing, the Magister bowed to his host. Prompted by uncertainty or intuition, he bowed to the Quolt as well.

To his surprise, the man responded by uncovering one hand from his furs, touching his fingertips to his forehead, then resting his palm briefly over his heart.

The skin of his hand was a startling white, the hue of untrammelled snow.

"Please, librarian," said Tchwee comfortably. "Be seated. Take wine. I will explain."

Staring blindly, Sirjane Marrow sat down as if he had been dropped. He was too shaken to touch the wine. What was going on here? Did Set Ungabwey need his counselors because the Quolt was present? Had something fatal happened?

There were Magisters in the Repository who could see events and individuals at any distance; but Sirjane Marrow, the oldest sorcerer, had not asked them to turn their sight eastward. Because their gift was rare, he had too few of them—and too many other places that required watching. His own thoughts were fixed on Belleger and Amika. He had trusted Set Ungabwey to send or deliver timely reports. After all, there was nothing the librarian or his fellow sorcerers could have done to aid the caravan master's efforts.

Smiling as if he were unaware of Magister Marrow's confusion, his growing alarm, the interpreter asked, "Devotee of Flesh?"

"Gladly," replied Flamora. Filling a goblet from one of the ewers, she held it up, first to Set Ungabwey, then to Tchwee, then to the Quolt. Both the caravan master and his strange guest ignored her; but Tchwee nodded his approval. With a sigh of appreciation, she drank.

Amandis and Fifth Daughter did not follow her example. For their own disparate reasons, neither the devotees of Spirit nor the monks of the Cult of the Many indulged in wine or ale.

When the devotee of Flesh lowered her goblet, Tchwee began.

Sonorous as the groan of rock shifting deep in a distant mountain, he said, "Librarian, this man is Sirl Hokarth. He has been chosen to speak for the Quolt. In their name, he has given you a

gesture of respect. In his tongue, however, ‘respect’ has an added meaning. It entails a bond of kinship. His gesture calls you his brother.”

While the Magister tried to imagine why any Quolt would call him brother, the interpreter turned to Sirl Hokarth. In a language full of harsh consonants, exaggerated fricatives, and piercing sibilants, Tchwee presumably repeated what he had just said to Sirjane Marrow. The sounds hurt the librarian’s ears, but he thought he understood: not the words themselves, of course, but the style of speech. A people who spoke the tongue of the Quolt would be able to make themselves plain across great distances, or in high winds: a useful ability among the ragged peaks, sheer valleys, and masked crevasses of the Wall Mountains.

But his tension was rising. He had no patience to spare for a language he had never heard before. As soon as Tchwee stopped, the Magister demanded, “Why?”

He meant, Why does he call me brother? He does not know me.

But he also meant, Why have I been kept waiting? Did I not explain that the library is threatened? My need is urgent. I need to know. Did you succeed? What has happened?

Before Tchwee could respond, Set Ungabwey raised his head. In a high, thin voice, a falsetto croon, he said, “Because I believe.”

There he stopped. Apparently, he considered that he had said enough.

No one moved or spoke. The lanterns seemed to give off more heat. Magister Marrow felt moisture on his forehead. Sweat dripped down his spine under his robe.

As if to ease an awkward moment, Tchwee offered in tones the old man felt in his chest, “You will understand, librarian, that we had no cause to credit your fears. You speak of a terrible foe, but no one confirms your concern. Throughout our travels, no one. And who would threaten such a storehouse of knowledge? How could they threaten it?”

“If you had consulted me,” interjected Amandis, “I would have confirmed it. The Wide World Carnival travels more widely than your train, and some of my sisters in Spirit go with it. From rumors and hints, they have determined that the threat has substance.”

Magister Marrow gave the devotee of Spirit a quick glance of approval; but both Set Ungabwey and Tchwee appeared to ignore her. While they remained silent, one of the Master’s daughters rose. Filling a goblet with wine, she carried it to her father and helped him drink, then returned to her seat. As she settled herself, the interpreter resumed addressing the librarian.

“Master Ungabwey accepted your request because it was yours. And he delayed naming his price because he did not know what difficulties awaited him, or whether your request was possible, or how high its cost in lives might be. But he also delayed because he was not certain his task was necessary. From the first, he was prepared to turn back—and to suffer your disappointment.”

The Magister struggled to contain himself. “But now he believes?”

Instead of responding directly, Tchwee faced Sirl Hokarth with another translation. This time, his spate of sounds had a querying cast. When the fur-clad man nodded, Tchwee returned his attention to Sirjane Marrow.

“He does,” stated the interpreter. “We have become better acquainted with the Quolt. We have heard their tales. They have explained their straits—and their desires. We know now why they offered their protection and guidance. We begin to understand the threat you seek to guard against.”

Abruptly, Sirl Hokarth stepped out of his corner. Almost roaring, as if he wanted to be heard atop the Last Repository, he delivered a speech: perhaps an announcement or proclamation

he had prepared in advance, perhaps a spontaneous outpouring, Magister Marrow could not tell which.

After an instant's hesitation, Tchwee matched Hokarth's oration with a simultaneous translation or paraphrase. He spoke in a low voice to avoid distracting the Quolt, but he managed to make his words clear.

"For many and many generations," the interpreter explained on Sirl Hokarth's behalf, "this block of stone"—he indicated the library—"has been a peaceful neighbor. It does not intrude. Its people do not intrude. When men come into our mountains from the block of stone, we remain hidden. We see they do no harm. When they depart, they do no harm. And they do not send other men to follow in their footprints. There is peace between us.

"The men who came from the east were not peaceful."

Involuntarily, the librarian flinched. He was right about the danger. But he schooled himself to remain motionless, silent, so that Sirl Hokarth and Tchwee would not stop.

"They were warriors, many warriors. Our speakers met them to warn them away. The mountains are our homeland. They are enough for us. We will not share them. But the men from the east slew our speakers. They found our nearest camps and destroyed them. They stole food. They savaged women and children who failed to flee. And we could not stand against them. We are strong, but we could not. They threw forces at us, forces of fire and disease and killing thirst. In battle, they made infants of Quolt with clubs and spears.

"When they found the ways through our mountains—the ways to the block of stone—they marked them for all to see. Then they returned to the east, laughing at the jest of our resistance."

By now, Magister Marrow was able to recognize the anger in Sirl Hokarth's manner, the restrained fury. But the Quolt did not pause, and Tchwee did not.

"We were humbled. And we were threatened. We knew those men would return. Many and many more would return. Why otherwise had they marked the ways? When the black man who speaks our tongue came, some among us wanted his death. A small death to show our courage. But he came from the block of stone, the place of peace. And we understood his words. We understood what he asked. We liked his purpose. It was retribution of a kind we relish. A reward we could not obtain alone. When we were agreed, we offered our help. To restore what the men from the east took, we asked only tokens of friendship."

When Sirl Hokarth and Tchwee were done, the silence resembled a distant thunderclap. While the Quolt returned to his corner, Magister Marrow sat momentarily stunned. The posture of the devotee of Spirit retained its usual relaxed poise, but Fifth Daughter was rigid on her pillows. None of the master's young women gave any sign that they were aware of the charged atmosphere in the chamber. Their attention was fixed on their father as if their only desire was to read his mind, or to guess his needs.

Then Flamora allowed herself a strained sigh. Flourishing her gauzy raiment, she refilled her goblet, drank again. She sounded uncharacteristically subdued as she said, "So the matter is settled, is it not? The threat has substance."

With the grace of the innocent or the oblivious, thought Sirjane Marrow, the daughter who had served Set Ungabwey earlier stood to give her father more wine. When the obese man was satisfied, she wiped his chin with the sleeve of her robe. For a moment, she stroked the crown of his head: a gesture of affection that the librarian had not witnessed from any of the caravan master's daughters before. Yet she looked as unconcerned or unaware as her sisters as

she returned to her seat.

Deliberately or not, she had given the Magister time to gather himself. He was able to say almost calmly, “So, Master Ungabwey. Is the matter settled, as the devotee of Flesh claims? Will you now speak of your task in the mountains? Will you tell me what you have done, or not done?”

If Set Ungabwey’s wagons and men had failed, everything the librarian had just heard was chaff. It confirmed his fears, yes—but he already knew the threat had substance. Its stings were everywhere in his mind. If the master had not succeeded, all of Magister Marrow’s machinations for the past century were blown away like leaves on the wind. And he did not have time to devise a different strategy for the Last Repository’s defense.

Instead of answering, Tchwee translated the librarian’s question for Sirl Hokarth. After a moment, the Quolt replied with a sound like laughter.

Tchwee’s grin showed his amusement. “Forgive me, librarian,” he said as if he were chortling. “Have we not already answered? Why else is Sirl Hokarth here? His presence answers you.”

Before the Magister could swear at him, the interpreter continued, “But yes, and again, yes. Master Ungabwey has done as you asked. Sirl Hokarth will vouch for what I say. The passes are closed, all of them. The Quolt know their mountains with the intimacy of lovers. Their guidance and counsel enabled Master Ungabwey’s engines to seal every eastern approach to the library.

“Mishaps we had, and some were grievous. Rock and ice are capricious. Every avalanche does not fall where it is intended. Wagons and men were lost. But your foes cannot traverse our barricades. Give them hordes of men wielding destructive sorceries of every kind, and still they cannot.”

As he heard this, relief flooded through Sirjane Marrow. For a moment, everything else was washed out of his head. Success! Set Ungabwey had succeeded. The library was safe from the east.

When Flamora reached for an empty goblet and murmured, “I recommend the wine, Magister. It is excellent,” he gaped at it as if he did not know what it was.

Fortunately, he was spared the necessity of a prompt reply. To Sirl Hokarth, Tchwee translated the answer he had given the white-haired old man. Nodding, he listened to the Quolt’s response.

While they spoke to each other, Magister Marrow had time to think. With each thud of his heart, he regained control of himself. He was beginning to understand why the caravan master treated him this way; why Master Ungabwey had arranged a meeting with Hokarth and an audience of counselors while he kept the librarian in suspense.

He was already bargaining.

Turning from the Quolt, Tchwee said, “Here are Sirl Hokarth’s words. When men come from the east again, scouts or armies, they will not be opposed. The Quolt will not make that mistake again. Instead they will hide, hide and watch. If they find the chance, they will drop rocks on the heads of your enemies. But they will not risk themselves. Let the killers learn for themselves that there is no road. The Quolt will laugh when the forces of fire and disease and thirst fail.”

Magister Marrow glowered in his mind, if not with his useless eyes, until the interpreter was done. Then he made a show of appreciation to mask his relentless anxiety; his need for more

than he had just received. “Give Sirl Hokarth my thanks,” he replied. “Give him and all the Quolt the thanks of the Last Repository. Thank them on behalf of every man or woman everywhere who needs or loves knowledge.

“When you have expressed my gratitude”—he turned to Set Ungabwey—“we can begin.”

Tchwee shook his head, smiling. “There is no need, librarian. Sirl Hokarth knows your gratitude. His own is as great. But Master Ungabwey is not ready to ‘begin,’ as you call it. He has more to say.”

Once again, the caravan master nodded: a slight shift of his head, a gentle wobble in his flesh.

Mentally, Sirjane Marrow gritted his teeth. But now he was prepared for what would follow. “Then say it,” he answered. “I will hear you.”

As if in response, the interpreter spoke briefly to Sirl Hokarth. At once, the Quolt nodded, then left his corner again. Without another word, he strode across the chamber to the door, opened it, and was gone. Magister Marrow imagined him running on all fours toward the nearest approach to his mountains.

In his wake, a delicate waft of coolness entered the carriage. But it lasted for only a moment before it faded in the overheated air.

For the first time, Tchwee’s expression was serious, almost somber, as he addressed the librarian.

“Master Ungabwey has not named his price. It will be high. He has counted his losses, and they are grave. He will want recompense, if not for himself, then for the families of the men whose lives are gone. Also he will need wains and wagons to replace those taken by rock- and ice-falls. He will need men to manage them and serve him. That cost, also, will not be small.”

In other words, Magister Marrow muttered to himself, the wealthiest man on the continent wants more wealth.

“But there is more,” said Tchwee, “a larger matter to consider.” His voice seemed to grow deeper, more profound, as if he spoke for the stone that fronted the library. “From the Quolt, Master Ungabwey has learned to understand the peril that drives you. Now he dreads what you will ask of him next.

“Speak of that, librarian. When Master Ungabwey has accepted your task, or refused it, he will name his price.”

Sirjane Marrow did not hesitate. He was done with patience and delay. He did not care what Set Ungabwey’s price might be. He would pay it, whether he could afford it or not. His sole concern was that the caravan and its master, its engines and its men, would continue to serve the Repository’s survival.

“If I must,” he said as if he did not share the caravan master’s dread. “Master Ungabwey, I need”—he paused for emphasis—“the library needs more of what you have already done.”

He heard a small hiss of surprise or disapproval from the devotee of Flesh. Fifth Daughter echoed it in her own way. But the librarian ignored them. Concentrating his senses exclusively on Set Ungabwey, he explained.

“To the southwest of Belleger, there are other mountains. They are not as high as the Wall”—he gestured toward the Quolt homeland—“but they are no less jagged and treacherous. Their western cliffs confront the sea, permitting no approach or harborage. Along their northeastern face, where they are known as the Realm’s Edge, they form the border of Belleger, extending to the edges of the desert. But on the south, they relax into inhabited lands, where there

are harbors aplenty, and warlike people.”

Simply saying the words stung Magister Marrow’s mind. He wanted to shout to convey their urgency. He kept his voice level by clenching his fists.

“Already those people send raiders through the mountains, seeking passage for a great army—and doing what harm they can to Belleger. However, that army in its throng of ships has not been sighted. It is coming, but it has not come yet.

“My request is this. Travel to the Realm’s Edge with your engines and mechanics. Barricade the passes, as you have done here. I will give you what maps I have, but they are unreliable. Belleger’s war with Amika has discouraged exploration. And you will find no people like the Quolt to guide or instruct you. However, I am confident that you will be able to follow the tracks of the raiders. And you will not stop”—there his control slipped—“until every passage from the south into Belleger is closed.”

Just for an instant, the Repository’s primary guardian thought he saw a stricken look in the slits of the caravan master’s eyes. But he did not falter. The stakes were too high.

“Agree to undertake my task, Master Ungabwey, and I will meet any price you name. If it is within my power, I will pay it. If it is not, I will seek it out for you.”

For a long moment, Set Ungabwey gazed at his guest like a man who had lost interest in what he was hearing. Perhaps he had lost interest some time ago. But then, with an effort that made his flesh tremble, he turned his head to Tchwee. At once, the interpreter leaned close to the caravan master; so close that their foreheads almost touched. In that pose, they appeared to confer, although the librarian heard nothing, sensed nothing.

When the master was satisfied, he resumed his former posture. For a while, Tchwee regarded the rugs as if he were unsure of his response. Then he lifted his eyes. In a subdued rumble, he said, “Master Ungabwey will hear the thoughts of his counselors.”

The interpreter was looking at Fifth Daughter.

Goaded by tension or heat, Fifth Daughter yawned: an unseemly display of common humanity that Sirjane Marrow found comforting. He was not alone in his anxiety.

“Mountains?” she ventured. “Mountains again? If the enemy comes that way, the passes must be closed. But surely he has scouts? They will tell him the mountains are impossible. He will come another way.”

“Another way?” prompted the librarian. For her sake, he made his voice gentle.

With an air of desperation, she asked, “Can he not come through Amika? Are there not safe coasts and harbors in the north? Alleman Dancer’s carnival folk speak of them.”

Still gently, the Magister replied, “You have not seen the maps, monk. Yes, there are safe coasts and harbors. The enemy can use them. But they are not in Amika. They are far to the north. And between them and Amika lie the ungiving steppes of the Nuuri. If he chooses that approach, he will be forced to march his entire army and all of his sorcerers and slaves and all of their stores of food and water for themselves and their animals across three hundred leagues before they reach kinder terrain. In addition, the Nuuri are not tolerant of intruders who harm their graze-lands. If their herds of zhecki cannot range widely, unimpeded, the beasts will starve. The enemy will be forced to do battle for three hundred leagues before he encounters the opposition of Amika. And the Nuuri are adept at such warfare.”

Flatly, Amandis stated, “He will not come that way. He did not become what he is by being a fool.”

Magister Marrow expected the assassin to continue. But instead Tchwee thanked Fifth

Daughter and turned his attention to Flamora. “Most holy devotee of Flesh?”

“Oh, my.” Flamora flapped her hand in a vain effort to fan her face. “All that marching. And mountains. And killing. All that brave blood spilled in the dirt—and for a bad cause. My heart grows weak when I imagine so much slaughter. Master Ungabwey, my thoughts will be of no use to you.”

The interpreter nodded like a bow, but he did not relent. “Still he wishes to hear them.”

The devotee of Flesh raised her chin, straightened her shoulders. Her kohl-rimmed eyes flashed. “Then my thought is this.” Between one word and the next, her manner changed. The Magister had never heard her sound so firm—or so grim. “If Belleger and Amika do not stand together, they will both perish. And the Last Repository will not outlive them.”

To himself, Magister Marrow breathed, Yes. Unless their deaths save it.

Tchwee nodded or bowed again. Then his gaze turned to Amandis. “Most holy devotee of Spirit?”

As her eyes met the black man’s, the librarian sensed a subtle shift in her posture. It seemed to become both more tense and more relaxed, more dangerous, as if she readied herself to face an opponent who might prove fatal. Her tone made him think of a blade carving a block of wood.

“You do not need my counsel, Master Ungabwey,” she replied. “Whether or not you choose to serve the library, the enemy will face Belleger’s strength, and Amika’s. But if you allow him to pass through the Realm’s Edge, he may not meet opposition until he is a hundred leagues closer to the Last Repository. And he will have allies from the south, allies and resupply. In contrast, if you seal those mountains against him, he will be forced to fight his way across the whole of Belleger.”

All of the Magister’s hopes depended on that.

Tchwee made a low musing sound. With questions in his eyes, he observed, “Master Ungabwey has heard that ships cannot land on Belleger’s coast. In the west, the lands of both Belleger and Amika rise against the sea. There are no sheltered coves or bays. The cliffs are both sheer and rugged. And the waters are defended by fangs of rock and tearing reefs. How can the enemy land an army there?”

Removing one hand from her sleeve, Amandis made a dismissive gesture. “The land rises, yes. Its slope forces every watershed in both Belleger and Amika to join the Line River on its way to the sea. For that reason, the outlet of the Line, the Cut, is a deep gorge, a fiord easily defended. Even if the Cut were not defended, ships could not sail against the current far enough to pose a threat.

“But you do not know the enemy. He will make his harbor. With sorcery and siege weapons—with powers we do not know how to anticipate—he will batter the reefs and rocks and cliffs until they welcome him, both him and his great army.”

As if he were arguing against himself, Magister Marrow countered, “I do not know what Master Ungabwey has heard. Or from whom. I have heard that the King of Belleger now fortifies his coast. And the Queen of Amika aids him.”

But Amandis scorned his efforts. “Fortifies it?” she retorted. “With what? Cannon? Rifles? Emplacements? The enemy will sweep them aside. And sorcery will not impede him. The sorcerers of Belleger and Amika are limited. Their numbers are too few, and they cannot fling their Decimates across any considerable distance. The King of Belleger may hope to rely on them when the enemy comes near, but they will not suffice. Then they will be dead.”

Now she sounded more like an axe chopping timber. “Master Ungabwey, if you do not seal those mountains, the enemy will enter Belleger unhindered. Worse, he will be reinforced and supplied by the people in the south, just as my sister foresees. His might will be that much greater. But the choice is not as simple as the librarian suggests. Consider it with care. If you do seal the Realm’s Edge, Belleger will be invaded directly. From coast to desert, the whole land will become a killing-field. The enemy will make carrion of every life he encounters.”

While the assassin’s assertion hung in the stifling air, Flamora tapped Magister Marrow’s arm. “And that, librarian,” she murmured privately, “is what you have desired from the first. It is why you forged peace between Belleger and Amika.”

Sirjane Marrow ignored her. Prince Bifalt had guessed the truth twenty years ago. Even that small piece of premature understanding might be the Last Repository’s undoing.

“Choose, Master Ungabwey,” growled the Magister. “Choose now. And name your price.” The caravan master would need his own resupply. More men. More wagons. More incentive. “Our time grows short.”

Silence held the chamber. The lanterns blazed as if they had been lit to scorch the air. No slight breeze made breathing easier. If the sorcerer had bothered to concentrate, he would have heard every lung in the room straining. But he had no attention to spare for anyone or anything around him, except the caravan master.

Then Set Ungabwey braced his hands on his knees. He leaned forward. Fighting his weight with every muscle, he struggled to stand.

The effort made his whole body quiver. Sweat beaded and ran on his forehead. A pallor like a failure of heart swept the color from his face. He would have failed; but Tchwee rose to help him. With his arms wrapped around the great mass of flesh, Tchwee heaved the Master to his feet.

Magister Marrow stood as well. Whatever Set Ungabwey might intend, the librarian meant to face it upright.

Panting heavily, Master Ungabwey spoke.

“Sanctuary.” His high voice had a chilling edge. It was a gasp of ice in the heated chamber. “For my daughters. Absolute sanctuary.”

On the faces of his four women were identical expressions of shock.

Shocked himself, the Magister babbled. “For them? Yes. Of course. Certainly. Why not?”

But then he caught himself. Surely he was a better man than this? Surely he could afford to be more honest with his host? More generous? Instead of accepting the obese man’s terms, he countered unsteadily, “Master Ungabwey, that is not a price. It is a gesture of friendship.” He was pleading. “And it is yours. While the library stands, your daughters are welcome among us.

“But you must understand me. There is no absolute sanctuary on this continent. The enemy wields indescribable might, and his hunger for the Last Repository’s destruction cannot be sated. If the worst comes to us, I will contrive to deliver your daughters to the Quolt. That is the best I can do. Sirl Hokarth’s people threaten no one. They have no sorcery. No one covets their homeland. Your daughters will be safe among them. As safe as this life permits.

“My word stands. Name another price. I will pay it.”

Set Ungabwey could not answer: he was collapsing. Without the support of Tchwee’s prodigious strength, he would have toppled. Only his interpreter’s help enabled him to sink back down onto his pillows and resume his former posture. He struggled for breath until, one gasp at a time, his pallor receded.

At once, his daughters rushed to him. Tchwee moved aside, then knelt again while one woman brought a filled goblet and held it ready at her father's lips. Another stroked the sweat from his brow. The third arranged the pillows to brace him in place, while the fourth dashed through a doorway into a back room, returning with a damp cloth and a flask of water. These she used to cool his face and pendulous cheeks, his neck, his flaccid hands.

When the Master finally felt able to drink, the skin of his face regained its normal hue.

His daughters did not return to their places. Kneeling like Tchwee, they clustered around Set Ungabwey. Until now, none of them had made a sound. Now one of them asked softly, "Why, Father? How can we leave you?"

In a low murmur, the interpreter answered, "Because he loves you. His life is forfeit in this war. He and his train cannot hide among the Quolt. You can. Therefore you must remain here. Then he will have good cause to risk himself and his men and all his wealth for the library's sake."

Still standing, Magister Marrow asked with as much care as he could muster, "Will he do it? Will he seal the Realm's Edge?"

Tchwee gave the sorcerer a glance that would have withered a less stubborn defender. Brusquely, he answered, "Yes."

"And the price?"

The black man sighed. "The gift is the price. There is no other."

"Then you have my word." The old man could hardly contain his relief—or his disgust at the use he was making of the caravan master. "I speak for the Last Repository. His daughters will be made welcome. Send them to us when they are ready. While it can be done, they will be kept safe."

Goaded by an unwelcome shame, Magister Marrow turned to the door, opened it, and stepped out of the carriage into the blessed cool of early evening, leaving Amandis, Flamora, and Fifth Daughter to depart and join him when they saw fit. As he strode toward the gap between the keep's heavy gates, he cursed his fate, and the library's, and his own desperation.

He had won an important victory; but that was just one more reason to swear at himself. Set Ungabwey deserved better. His life was indeed forfeit, as Tchwee had said. That was his, Magister Marrow's, doing. If he had made no more demands, the caravan master could have protected himself and his daughters for decades at the farthest edges of the continent. In effect, the librarian had urged the master to sacrifice himself.

Sirjane Marrow regretted that. It was necessary, but he regretted it. In a less personal way, he even regretted the way he had manipulated Prince Bifalt twenty years ago. He regretted sacrificing Belleger—and, if his hopes and ploys did not fail him, Amika as well. Regrets he had in abundance.

But not scruples. The needs of the library were too strict to tolerate scruples.