



Mel Keegan

The Winds of Chance

The Fall of the Atlantean Empire

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(HIM magazine on DEATH'S HEAD)

"A fine example of this genre"

(Gay Times on FORTUNES OF WAR)

"A powerful futuristic thriller"

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"...the MASTER of gay thrillers ... Mel Keegan's name is a byword for thrilling gay adventure in the past, present and future"

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SCORPIO

STOPOVER

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LEGENDS

The Fall of the Atlantean Empire

Book One
The Winds of Chance

Mel Keegan

DreamCraft

LENGENDS: *The Winds of Chance*

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1

The Wrath of Hurucan

The roll of the deck under Soran's sandal-shod feet was almost enough to pitch him over the side, and he grabbed for a rope. The sea was like molten lead, heaving in a great cauldron, and like any man aboard the *Incari* he knew where the great waves came from. They were born when the earth shook as if a god had taken it in his hands and tossed it like a toy. The gods often shook the outer islands, harder and more frequently every year, since Soran was a boy, as if the ancient homelands were no more than skittles in a game played by Titans. The game had gone too far, and the cities of Nefti and Kush were already scattered into ruins.

The monstrous waves making the *Incari* bob like a cork marched out of the northwest — Soran saw them clearly as the ship rode another mountainous swell into the sky. In the instant before the *Incari* wallowed down like a pig into the next trough, he glimpsed a regiment of such waves, stretching back toward the gray-white cliffs of Zeheft, where the storm sky was heavy as a funeral shroud. —

Fear whitened the faces of the trading galley's crew. She was heavy under cargo, on her way home to Vayal with a prince's ransom in spice and silk, indigo and ivory. They had hoped to race the storm back to safe waters, but the galley was no windracer at the best of times, and the men were muttering, now, that Priolas had overloaded her. She was an old ship, perhaps the oldest in Vayal harbor; but she was also in the keel, broad beamed, and Priolas trusted her.

His face was grave as he swung like monkey in the lines over Soran's head. Big arms flexed, passing him down from the yardarm, where he had perched for minutes, to get his bearings. In the strange, silver-green storm light his face seemed hewn out of marble or malachite, but Soran saw no fear in the man's flint gray eyes.

He dropped to the deck a pace away, agile, sure-footed where even Soran clung tight to the rope. Priolas had been at sea more than twenty years, and these were his waters. Incaria lay just over the horizon to the

south. They could have anchored there, out at the deep-water line where the ship would have safely ridden out the storm, but the captain's decision was to make for Vayal.

For once in his life Priolas had misread the sky, and of all men aboard, he had the greatest cause to fear. He might lose the ship, which was his home and his livelihood ... he might lose Soran to the sea, and the price of this would be his life, if he survived the storm, the wreck, the violent anger of the ocean.

His face was weather beaten already, though he was just thirty years old, five years Soran's elder. He was Soran's height, with sun-streaked hair and teeth that looked very white against his wind-bronzed skin. The lobes of his ears were heavy with rings — amethyst, lapis lazuli, emeralds, obsidian, the sigils of his house, his homeland, his trade. He wore a little kilt of sky blue and white linen, and the sudden chill of the approaching storm prickled his skin.

The man's voice was light and yet rough after the years of bellowing orders over the roar of the sea. "I fear for Zeheft," he said darkly. "We've all seen waves like this, too often. You know where they began." He made the sign of Peseden, the patron god of all mariners.

Zeheft could be shambles, ruins, tonight. The old city could be gone, like Nefti and Kush. Soran looked away into the northwest as the ship rode up the next great wave, but Zeheft was too low on the horizon for him to see, and the storm light was too dim. Clouds like the walls of a fortress of air reared over the coastline, and along the length of the Incari, crewmen had begun to pray even as they sat over their oars. They chanted the singsong invocations to Hurucan, ancient prayers begging for the clemency of an ancient god who had not listened to their fathers and would be just as deaf to them.

The oars were idle and shipped inboard. The sea was too violent, the galley rolling too heavily for the muscles of men to be effective. "How far to Vayal?" Soran wondered. "Did you get a sighting?" He glanced up at the masthead, where for minutes Priolas had stood with his back to the wood and his arms outstretched along the yard, crucified in the wind and intent on the pitching horizon.

"Two hours," Priolas judged, "if we can say one breath ahead of the storm." He gave Soran a wry, sidelong grin which mocked himself. "Your father could skin me alive for this."

"For misjudging the sky?" Soran demanded. The angry air clutched at his words, tore them from his lips almost before they were spoken.

"For taking his precious son into danger's way," Priolas corrected. "One bruise on you, my old friend, one blackened eye or broken finger,

and I'll be stretched on the city walls, laid open from throat to crotch, for the ravens to feast on my innards."

Soran made a face. "My father doesn't even know I'm aboard. I was supposed to wait for a warship headed home to Vayal, anything flying Ashtoc's banners. But who in his right mind would tarry long in Ilios this month, with the sickness in the old city and the dread of contagion like a madness even in the palaces." He shook his head. "I was well out of there, Priolas, and I'll take my chances with the sea." He gave the older man a wry smile. "You haven't drowned me yet."

"And won't, if I can help it." Priolas glared at the sky. "Hurucan is furious tonight. What could ancient Zeheft have done to rouse such anger?" He dropped a hand on Soran's bare shoulder. "It's going to be rough between here and Myrmidae. Tie yourself on and hold tight. I'm going to let her run before the wind. It's the only way to climb these waves. Trim sail, and we'll be a great dead whale in the storm surge. If it takes us broadside, we'll be fish food, all of us, before Azhtoc can get his hands around my throat." He squeezed Soran's shoulder. "Go on, now. Up in the bow. Tie on and ride her like a wild horse."

"She'll run before the wind?" Soran turned his face into the gale, felt the salt air smart his eyes. "You trust her, even in this?"

"I know her," Priolas said tersely. "She runs best when she's laden. Under ballast, she's a pig, and in the gale she's a walrus." He waved Soran off. "I've work to do, lad."

The bow was pitching hard. The deck dropped out from under his feet twice before he could clamber up behind the figurehead, and he lashed himself to the cleats used to secure deck cargo. Above and ahead of him, the great gilded dolphin of the figurehead seemed to skip across the wave crests, and behind him, the crew labored to make fast the galley's single sail.

If an old trading galley could transform itself into a flying fish, the *Incari* flew, and Soran's heart was in his mouth. His belly clenched both in dread and in exhilaration as the ship sped a single breath ahead of the wind, the storm, and her own destruction. Priolas had spent most of his life on these very decks. He knew this galley as no other man would ever know her—and still Soran's heart hammered against his ribs, while Vayal seemed a thousand leagues away.

He flung a prayer to Helios into the storm-dark sky—Helios the Sun, whose blazing chariot was gone, invisible in the shroud of silver-green thrown up by Hurucan. The priest-kings of Vayal believed they were descended from Helios, but Soran had never been sure if it were true, or of the great warlords of the New Kingdom simply flattered themselves

while Helios chose not to comment.

A bellow from the masthead caught his ear before the wind would quite tear it away. Horem was there, lashed to the wood. The boy's eyes were the keenest aboard, and Priolas would have been waiting to hear his voice. "The Myrmidae!" He shouted. "I see the shoals of the Myrmidae, to starboard!"

Soran clung to the side, and as the ship rolled he caught a glimpse of frothing white water. The reef always broke surface at low tide, and was marked by a bell which floated in a buoyant cage, tethered to the rocks by a chain longer than a man was tall. Those rocks had killed many a ship, and the bell only served warning to the foolish. The tides ripped and tore around the Myrmidae, and when Hurucan was on the loose, Soran knew no more dangerous waters.

In the stern, Priolas and three of his strongest were leaning their combined weight on the immense steering oar, and the Incari bucked, heaved in protest as they struggled against the force of the current. It was as if the galley longed to drive herself up on the Myrmidae, impale herself there and die at the whim of Hurucan.

The chill which invaded Soran's bone marrow had less to do with the breaking storm than with the breath of the vengeful god which he thought he felt on his neck every moment. The Myrmidae seemed to call to the galley with the roaring voice of the sea and the keening wail of the wind, and the *Incari* fought her master hard in her lust to answer.

"Sweet Helios," Soran muttered into the teeth of the gale, "sweet Helios of the millions of years, spare this poor ship and these poor souls, for we are innocent and bound only for home."

Yet even as he spoke the words, he heard the sound of a lie in his own ears. Innocent Priolas the mariner might be innocent, and most of his crew. But how much blood stained Soran's palms. They were as scarlet as the hands of any warrior, though he had never seen a battlefield and never would. These hands were heavy, burdened with the doom of so many, men and women alike. The amulet on his breast was gold and platinum — the mark of his rank, his warrant to take life, the sanction of Imperial Vayal to go where he would in the Five Lands, without limit or hindrance. Five years, he had worn it, and lately he felt its weight, like a burden that would drag him also to his doom.

If he had not been born to it, he would have cast it into the ocean, let the tides ripping around the Myrmidae take it into Peseden's green depths, where the souls of the Kushoi and the Neftish were said to dwell. And where the Zehefti would dwell this night, he thought. The sky was dark as night, while sunset lay hours away, and the storm had begun to

break, full force, as Priolas and his men struggled to seduce the *Incari* away from the shoals.

“Sweet Helios,” Soran prayed, shouting now into the fangs and claws of a salt-hard gale that seemed to strip the flesh from his face and flay his body, “Helios, if I’m the son of your rage, the heir of your fury, pluck me off this deck and let the rest go free! You know me, Helios — long and long have you known me! Not all the ocean could purge the blood from these hands, so let Hurucan and Peseden have me, let the ship pass by!”

Thunder bellowed across the sea, lightning blinded him, and the salt spray stung in his nose and throat. For a moment he believed his prayer would be answered, and his heart leapt. The old gods were often deaf to the pleas of men, but Soran’s voice was unique among them. Seventh son of the seventh son. The witchfinder of Vayal.

His eyes squeezed shut as the *Incari* turned her high dolphin prow toward the Myrmidae, and he held his breath, in that moment waiting only to be taken.

2

The Sport of Gods and Titans

The ground still trembled beneath Faunos’s bare feet, but the violent shaking had stopped. The earth was not at peace, it was wounded, like a stag that had been hunted to the brink of death and left to expire of exhaustion. The sky was dark as night, though he knew the sun was still up. Helios had turned away from those who prayed for mercy, hidden his face and abandoned the world to Hurucan and Peseden, and perhaps to the Titans who lived deep in the earth. Their fury shook the very foundations of Zeheft, and the old city lost the battle.

Lightning forked from horizon to horizon, chasing the thunder with a second to spare. The storm was directly overhead, and the rain pummeled his back and shoulders. Faunos stood in the open between the tumbled wreckage of the temple of Nut and the edge of the cliff. When the sun rose that morning, the temple had stood on the landward edge of the

marketplace, and now there was no marketplace, no rank of fisherfolk's cottages, no quay.

The sea smashed against the cliff face, as if Peseden were trying to batter his way into the heart of the island. To the west, Kush and Nefti lay so deep beneath the waves, their towers did not even break the surface now. Another storm like this one, another beating by the gods and Titans, and Zeheft would follow.

Like pearls on a broken strand, the outer islands were vanishing. When Faunos was a boy it had seemed they had lived forever and would live on into a future that was without end. In those days, he had thought the whole world was water. From his room above the net maker's workshop, he could see the whole way to the end of the quay, and he would watch the fishing boats make their way out with the rising tide. On hot nights he climbed out of the window and sat on the roof in the breeze, watching the lanterns bob, out in the blue darkness.

It was all gone now. Zeheft was ruins and the fishing fleet had vanished over the horizon, thirty fragile boats fleeing the fury of the storm. Every vessel was dangerously overloaded. The people of Zeheft placed the tattered remnants of their faith in the gods, and fled before the thunder began to shout over the dragon's spine ridge of the mountains.

Rain curtained the ocean, and Faunos turned his back on it. He was cold, naked save for a scrap of linen about his hips that was sodden, and the first priority on his mind was shelter. No place in Zeheft had been safe when the ground shook, but the tremors he still felt through the soles of his feet were mild now, and Galen believed it should be safe. The buildings which were going to fall had already come down; those which had endured this long would stand.

Until the next storm, or the next time the earth heaved like the ocean, Faunos thought bleakly. And then nothing would be left of Zeheft save rubble and tears. The rain was so heavy, it almost seemed that his back was being beaten, and so cold, his limbs had begun to shudder. The narrow little streets that had led up the hillside above the marketplace were a maze of fallen walls and roofs, and waterfalls had begun to gush from every crevice.

Swearing by any god he could recall, he turned away from them too, and cast out along the cliff. If the city was ruined and would soon be flooded, could the contagion be far behind. Mariners had tied up in the harbor of Zeheft just days before, with stories of the sickness in Ilios. It was said that even the warships would not berth there, and that the wells were tainted. All eyes turned, now, to Vayal, as if the people fleeing the islands expected the great priest-king himself to speak some mighty word,

bend Helios to his will, and fetch back the great days of old.

Such hopes were just dreams, Faunos thought, and yet people must cling to dreams when they had no other solace. For himself, he would have fled Zeheft with the others, if there had been space on the boats; but every place was saved for the young, the physicians, teachers, priests, those who would preserve the heart and soul of Zeheft, though the homeland itself was gone.

The cold struck to his marrow, and he began to run, in a vain effort to kindle warmth. He struck out east, away from the shattered bones of the city, and in the dazzling flashes of lightning he picked out the shapes of buildings which still huddled like forlorn sheep or goats to the crags facing the sea.

The animals had fled hours ago. Long before the earth began to shake, not a sheep was to be seen, nor a bird in the trees. The shepherds had recognized the omen and fled with them, and they must be in the high hills, finding shelter where they could.

As Faunos came around the broken headland, he saw the shallow valley where the old city had been — the poor people's houses, clustered around the ancient wells and strung out along the beach. It was all gone. Here and there a rooftop showed above the crashing waves, but under the onslaught of the ocean, nothing would survive for long.

Thunder boomed around him, as if he were in the bosom of the storm itself. He felt the hair rise on his nape, and along his arms. Weird sparkles danced around him like fireflies in response to the shock. Galen would have been furious to see them — Faunos was supposed to have learned greater control. But fear, shock, pain and even great pleasure made control slither from his grasp and defy him to recapture it.

And there was no one to see, Faunos told himself. The old city was underwater while the newer parts of the city — built on the higher slopes and in the hills—had tumbled town, and the people were gone. Many were dead. He saw limbs protruding from the wreckage in odd places, but nothing moved, and he heard no voices calling out for help.

Lightning forked once more as clambered up a boulder-strewn slope, and instinctively he ducked into the lee of a wall. The bellow of thunder came almost at once—he felt it in his chest and bones, and flung both arms over his head. Again, the sparklets of gold and white danced around him, casting tiny rainbows in the rain, and he swore at them, glared at them.

In the gray-green twilight of the storm, he felt along the wall, found a corner and looked up. The eaves were still sound above his head, and an arm's length from the corner was an open doorway, facing opposite the driving angle of the rain. Inside was only utter darkness, which told him

the roof was sound.

He shuffled in, blinked until his eyes had adjusted to the gloom, and saw the bar on the shutters. It slipped free with a squeal of dry wood, and a crack of light shafted into the cottage. He smelt sheep, goats, and knew it for a shepherd's hut.

The floor was scattered with straw, the walls were grubby, the door hung from only one hinge, but the building was sound — Faunos did not care to look past this. The inside was dry, he saw firewood stacked in the corner, and a bundle of old sheepskins and hides.

It was shelter Galen needed, and quickly. He was too old, too frail, to last long in the storm. With grim determination, Faunos drove the bar back into place, locking the shutter closed, and stepped back out into the rain. It was a mile back to the cave where Galen was huddling, watching the seawater rise with the tide and the battering of the ocean. Hurucan and Peseden were so furious, only blood would appease them — and of that, there had been plenty. They had no need to take Galen's too.

The ruins were full of the dead. In a few days, when the storm had passed over and the summer heat returned, it would be dangerous to remain here. Zeheft was not merely dead, it would soon be rotten with the contagion that had bedevilled Ilios since the earth shook there, not a month past.

Old or not, frail or not, Galen must get up on his feet and *move*. Faunos's belly tightened as he grappled with the future. In these latter years the old man did not move so easily, and even if he did, where would they go. There was only Vayal, on the other side of the long, dolphin-shaped island, and for Faunos, the city of Vayal would surely mean death.

Obdurate, too stubborn for his own good, he butted into the rain, one arm up to shield his eyes from its stinging needles, and hurried his pace.

Thus Spake Iridan

Harken thou to the pale whisper of Iridan, the Seer, the Oracle ... Iridan who was once the man, living and breathing, even as thou—but no longer. For long and long have I been air and sorrow, the wisp of smoke, the whisper of the wind, neither captive nor free.

Then, harken thou, for Iridan sees all things as he has known all men, since

the glory days of the Old Kingdom ... and the days of Ruin which haunt the steps of living men.

Long ago, do I recall that great kings dwelt in the Outer Capital. But Zeheft is gone now, lost to the sea, where the porpoise and the crab shall hold dominion. Vayal will follow—soon, so very soon—but Iridan shall grieve but little for the line of its sovereigns. For a hundred generations have I watched the evil of Vayal grow and prosper, until the light of hope has flickered almost out, like the candle too long neglected.

Shall I tell thee of the great days of Diomedas, King of Zeheft, the seventh son of Aeson, and of the sons of Diomedas. Astonished wouldst thou be, if I were to tell thee that the blood of Diomedas lives on even now, while Zeheft lies sunk beneath the ocean. Royal Zeheft, that was the birthright of Diomedas's sons ... Zeheft that should have been their right of inheritance, and my own, but now gives lease to the turtle and the shark.

Yet Iridan knows the secrets of Zeheft as surely as does the last fair son of the line of Diomedas. Tall has he grown, and beautiful as the dawn light of Helios. Filled with health and the strength of youth, is this boy—and with the power that comes to him from the line of ancient kings whose names have been expunged.

Not even the evil of Imperial Vayal can strip the power from him, though men would try, if only they could lay hands on him.

He also knows the secrets of Zeheft, and would die before he told one word of them. So he runs and hides, as his old teacher insists. He has lived all his life in the shadows, growing to young manhood while all of Vayal would wish him cold and dead for what he is.

They fear him, and well they should. But Iridan watches him still, as I have watched over him since he came into the world. Seventh son of the seventh son, of the ancient line of Nepher and Amon. Oh, he lives, and Vayal should sweat in dread.

I see Ruin. I see the fragmented kaos of the heavens themselves raining down upon the broken heads of men ... and I see such love as legends are made of.

For they are men now—Faunos and Soran, grown to young manhood in a land where fear snaps upon the heels of happiness, and joy is a fleeting moment wrested out of the maw of dread. Love alone is worth the struggle of life. Iridan knows this, and Faunos suspects, though Soran has yet to savor the sweetness of wild honey, feel the sting of the locust, and yearn for what he cannot have.

Oh, I see love, though they have never met. I watch them both, though they have no inkling that a guardian spirit rides their shoulder. The old man knows, but he will not tell, and the young have no ears for such as Iridan. Not yet. Not until the Zeheft is engulfed and Imperial Vayal itself is lapped by green waters where the dolphin flies and the albatross sleeps on the wing...

Soon. Too soon.

But harken thee now to Iridan, Oracle. Eat of the fruit of patience, rest a while, and wait.

3

The Heart of Imperial Vayal

He was Soranchele Izamal-xiu Ulkan, the seventh son of the priest-king Uxmal Mahanmec Azhtoc, and he strode through the outer galleries of his father's palace on the night of his coming of age.

The last scarlet and purple tones of sunset brooded over the western ocean, but the storm had passed on. Its tail still lashed, but its fury was almost spent. Vayal had battened down, and as Soran walked up from the quay where the *Incari* had tied up, he watched the boards and ropes that had safeguarded roofing and walls being taken down. Hammers beat a tattoo across the city, and in the morning the work gangs would come in to demolish the few buildings that had been damaged beyond repair.

Like a great golden spire, the temple of Helios had withstood the onslaught of wind and ocean. The quays of Vayal were safe, and high above the city, where the view of the harbor was without compare, the palace itself smelt of sea and joss, ocean and spice. Lamps fluttered in the evening wind as Soran made his way in from the white marble courtyards. The coolness prickled his skin, reminding him for a moment of the gale into which he had stared from the bow of the galley. Death had never seemed so close as the minutes when the *Incari* ran the gauntlet of the Myrmidae, yet Soran had rarely felt so alive.

And then, as the galley turned toward Vayal, he saw a line of sails on the horizon. The Zehefti were fleeing, and no one would blame them. The only question in Soran's mind was, where were they fleeing to. With Kush and Nefti already lost to the sea, and Ilios rank with contagion, they should have come to Vayal.

But the people of Zeheft had never been welcome in this city, and even now, when they faced the extinction of their kind, Vayal would grant them little succor. All Soran's life, this had been the way, and if a voice were raised in protest it would soon be answered with wrath.

Wisely, the men of Vayal remained silent, but the dread they would never utter was written in their faces.

The outer lands had been gone for years, and not all the prayers of all the priests in Vayal had kept the earth and sky at peace. If Zeheft were destroyed, how long would it be before Hurucan and Peseden come for Vayal

The question itself was treason, and no one was about to speak it aloud, but it simmered in the mind of everyone in the city tonight. Soran saw it in the dark eyes of Azhtoc's people, in the instant before they prostrated before the priest-king's tall seventh son, upon whose dark head the double crown of the Old and New Kingdoms would one day rest.

If the kingdoms existed when the time came, Soran thought sourly. Uxman Mahanmec Azhtoc was far from elderly. Many years of rule stretched on before him, before Soran could expect to stand beside of the funeral pyre, speak the grand words and light the taper that sent his father's soul to join their ancestors.

Long before Azhtoc expired, the empire would be gone, and every man in Vayal knew it—save possibly Mahanmec Azhtoc himself. He was blinded by the glorious radiance of Helios, Soran was sure. Prophecies made timeworn by the ages spoke clearly to him, while the pleas of his people, even his own sons, were easy to ignore.

Two score priests of Helios knelt as they saw Soran approaching. The more lowly priests and acolytes prostrated, and two temple lay brothers doing penance for some fancied sin went down in his path, so he would tread on their raw, flogged backs, and bestow the blessing that could only be gleaned from royal touch. Soran had no idea what the brothers had done, and he walked over them with an expression of disdain. Their faith was less simple than witless, and in the sight of Azhtoc they were as worthless as the captives who labored in chains in the palace gardens.

Shadows wreathed him as he left the priests behind. The green eyes of leashed jaguars and leopards blinked sleepily at him. A pall of joss smoke shifted on the heavy air, and his pupils widened as he stepped into a realm of fat gold candles and slender eunuchs, billowing gauze and doe-eyed courtesans who ambushed him with smiles and obeisance.

The night of his coming of age was reason for all of Vayal to celebrate, and the palace was dressed in scarlet and blue. A pair of macaws shrieked from their perches in the audience chamber, where slaves from Nefti and Kush were sluicing the green marble floors with rosewater. Soran glanced at them and passed on into the private chambers.

The light there was gold, the air heavy with the scents of seduction. Houris lounged in the inner courtyards, waiting to serve the royal

household and the temple, and several seemed to be watching for his return. One was more beautiful than the other, and he knew them all. They were from Ilios and Incaria, Aegyptos and Kriti, Keltoi in the east and Jaymaca in the west; and a few were from the distant lands where the Jaguar Kings claimed descent from darker gods than any who had ever held dominion over Vayal or Zeheft.

The women were sumptuous, the boys ripe and luscious, the eunuchs tall, slender and gorgeous. Soran graced them with a smile—they were waiting to see which one he would choose for the night of his coming of age, but he passed on once more. Every houri in the palace was his father's hireling. Each was carefully selected—this one for the lean perfection of his muscles, that one for the great roundness of her breasts, the next for the length of his legs, or the ripe pout of her mouth, or the lustrous cape of his hair. Not one among them was less than perfect in his own her own way, and tonight Soran wanted none of them.

Tonight, *he* would choose. He was of age, and he had the right. He would have passed by them all, continued to his own chambers, but a voice called him back. A thin, brittle voice which sought to ingratiate and only aggravated him.

"My lord prince." It was Druyus, the priest. The candlelight shone on the man's gleaming bald head, as if he had polished his scalp. He wore the short white robe of Helios, sandals, and too much jewelry on every finger, wrist, earlobe and ankle. He was on his knees as Soran turned toward him, and he continued into the full prostration, though it was unnecessary for one of his rank. He was making a great show of loyalty and respect, as if he hoped it would earn him favor.

Soran had no love for the man. He could have given him leave to rise, but he was annoyed enough to leave him where he was. "What do you want, priest. I have better things to do tonight than listen to the business of the inquisitor."

"Yet, this remains my business," Druyus said, against the black marble floor.

"All right. But be brief," Soran said tersely. The priest was too good in his work, and much too keen. He worked with the captives who refused to speak, and he had become an expert in the trade.

"The man remains silent," Druyus said breathlessly, no doubt feeling the press of the floor against his ribs. "I fear my lord Azhtoc will be angered by my worthless efforts. I thought, if you were to speak to the man, my lord—the prince of Vayal—he would see reason."

"I doubt it," Soran growled. "I'll give you one moment, Druyus, one moment only. I'm thick with the salt of the sea. I want to bathe and eat, but

my father will be waiting for me by now, and I remind you that this is my evening, not his and not yours."

"Your coming of age," Druyus purred against the marble.

"Oh, get up, for the love of heaven," Soran snapped, and stepped back to give the man space to scramble inelegantly back to his feet. He would think twice about making a great display in future. "I do my own work, Druyus. I hunt the creatures, bring them down and haul them here. You want me to do your work also?"

The priest knew he was unwelcome, and bowed back-snappingly low. "Come this way, my lord. I have him secure, in the lower vaults."

The city of Vayal was honeycombed with vaults. Below palace and marketplace, temple and artisans's shops, the chambers were two and three deep, hewn out of the rock by Zehefti slaves long before Mahanmec Azhtoc's time. When the Old Kingdom fell, those who did not bend their stiff necks to the new priest-king found themselves swiftly shackled. Their labor built the new city of Vayal. It was said that the mortar of its stones had been mixed with their blood, and Soran believed it.

It was months since he had ventured into the lower vaults, and given the choice he would never be there. Too much pain, too much anguish, made the air sodden, made the rock itself ache, as if it could recall the lives and deaths of all the Zeheftimen who entered in here, but did not leave. When Soran was very young, the hunters brought the creatures in every month, but lately there were fewer, always fewer. In a single generation they had grown scarce, and in another generation, Soran thought, there would be none at all.

The darkness was thick, suffocating. Druyus went ahead, down the stairs which coiled about one massive pillar in the foundations of the palace. Two levels down, he plucked a torch out of a sconce to light the way, and the dense darkness took on a subtle reek. Soran had never known what it was. It might have been bitter herbs and embalming salts and blood, but he fancied it was fear, so heavy on the air that one could smell it.

The lower chambers were all but deserted. A single cell was occupied, at the end of the long, wide passage that bisected the palace's ancient foundations. A guard's face turned toward Druyus, and as the man saw Soran he went to his knees. "Up," Soran told him, before he could begin to prostrate. "Up on your feet, man. Just open the door."

The keys were as ancient as the locks. A pivot turned with rat-like squeals of protest, and Druyus stepped aside to let Soran go ahead. The cell was bright in the light of several lamps, and he recognized the prisoner.

The last creature he had brought in was a man of thirty years or so, virile and healthy—or so Soran remembered him. He was naked, strapped to a chair in the middle of the cell; and at first glance, Soran was sure he was dead.

He looked old, after six weeks in this pit. His head lolled on his chest, his hair was unkempt, and he wore the scars of too many hours spent at Druyus's tender mercies. Soran lifted the young Zeheftiman's chin and looked into the dull eyes. No pulse beat in the throat or temples. With a curious gentleness, Soran let the man's head fall back to his chest, and swung on Druyus.

"You've killed him, priest." As Druyus had killed so many before. Soran's voice shook with a mix of rage and contempt.

"He was alive when I left him to seek you, my lord," the priest blustered. He knew he was balanced on a knife's edge. A word from Soran, and it could be Druyus feeding the city's ravens in the morning. "I swear—"

"I've no desire to hear it." Soran straightened and snatched up a lamp. "You can make your excuses to Mahanmec Azhtoc, not to me, and if he decrees that the vultures will have your testicles for supper, I believe I'll hand feed them. It's time you were punished. Past time. Get out of my way."

It would be far less than Druyus deserved, and Soran still shook with anger as he took the stairs two at a time, climbing back to the inner courtyards, where the last steel-blue twilight and the first white-gold stars were a canopy over palace, temple and city.

The Zeheftimen *had* to be brought in. It was the law, laid down by Helios himself, out of the mouth of the oracle Leto. They *must* be questioned for what they knew, for the safety of Vayal, the future of the empire. But nowhere in Helios's law did it state that the creatures of Zeheft must die; and nowhere did Helios say they should be murdered.

But Druyus enjoyed the work, and Azhtoc let him have it, though there were other methods, much gentler ways to get the truth, before the creatures were taken west into exile, where the terrible magic of the Zehefti witchkind could do no more harm.

Shuffling sounds and panting on the steps behind and below told him the priest was behind him, and on a whim Soran rasped over her shoulder, "Come with me, priest. You'll tell Azhtoc what you've done, and let the priest-king of Vayal, my father, decide what will become of you."

4

The Heritage of Zeheft

Sunset had been scarlet, purple and charcoal, violent colors filled with the wrath of the gods, and yet as the storm front passed on into the west, the fury of Hurucan seemed to abate with it. The night was soft, cool, suddenly calm. Faunos was grateful for the respite. In the grudging shelter of the cave above the sea, he stood by the fire till he was dry, wrapped his hips in fresh linen, wrapped on a silk cloak, and swung Galen's bags over both shoulders.

The old man was exhausted, and though he denied it, Faunos was sure he was sickening. He had been soaked and cold to the bone for too long. One of his years was too frail to shrug off the rigors of such a day without cost. Galen had been old when Faunos was born; he told stories of Faunos's grandparents as well as his parents—of Phaia, whose hair was red-gold, whose eyes were green and bright with the witchfires of her Keltoi blood, and of Mykenos, whose hair was raven black, and whose skin was bronze, like the generations of his forefathers.

And Faunos was a true child of them both. They knew the magicks, ancient and strange. Phaia bore eight children, two by two, and only the last twins were daughters. Of the many sons of Mykenos, Faunos was the seventh born, just two hours before the last of his brothers. He knew all their names, but he had never seen them, and he believed he never would.

The eldest had already passed over out of life. They had made the Last Journey, into the west where Elysios had opened her gates to welcome them. They joined so many of the young men of Zeheft who had perished in the storms, and in the vaults below Vayal. All those who had even a spark of the power had been hunted without pause or mercy, until one remained.

The seventh son of Mykenos—who was the seventh son of Parhys, and so back down the line to Diomedas himself—gave his arm to Galen to help him up the path that scaled the cliff. The way was better suited to goats than to men, and Galen had not been agile in years. His eyes were

dark, lately, with the foreshadow of doom, but when Faunos asked what he knew, what he saw in the flickering embers of the fire, he would not speak.

Instead, he brought out the old books, so ancient and precious that he would have given his life to protect them, and the lessons began again. Everything Faunos knew about the Old Kingdom came from those books, and from Galen's teaching. For hours they sat by the hearth in the evenings, and Galen would talk—rambling with an old man's wilful memory—of the last great days of Zeheft, which he remembered from the very first seasons of his own life.

The fighting was over by then, but the city had not been touched. Battles were kept well away from Great Mother Zeheft, as if the priest-king of Vayal feared the older gods of the Zeheftimen. The hills along the spine of the long, dolphin-shaped island were blood soaked, haunted by the souls of men and women who had died there in the ten generations of struggle.

Vayal had always envied Zeheft, for its wisdom, its wealth and its power. In days gone by, Zehefti lawmakers had wrought the foundations on which the empire stood; Zehefti priests communed with Helios and Bast, Horus and Artemis, in temples that were older than time. And Zehefti kings, imbued with the power of lost ages, sat on the Jaguar Throne, from which the empire had always been ruled.

All gone. Those times lived on only in the memories of people like Galen, who clung tenaciously to life, too stubborn to let it go. Galen had one last charge, before he was free to pass through the great, shimmering gates of Elysios. He would shepherd Faunos to manhood, fetch him to the eve when he came of age, when his education was complete, his body was mature, and the power of his forefathers was fully under his command.

Even now, the power commanded Faunos—and the boy was the first to admit it. Great fear, pain, dread, shock, and great pleasure, all stirred the power into an inferno beyond his control. He was twenty years old now, and he had just begun to glimpse how the power could be made to do as he desired. Five more years of Galen's training, and he would have mastered its secrets.

Five years. As they clambered up to the path along the cliff top, Faunos frowned worriedly at the old man. Galen was wheezing as if he would not live another five *minutes*. He sank down on the sodden grass there to catch his breath, and peered out into the steel-gray twilight. The ocean was still leaden, heaving, like the contents of a cauldron. The wind was cool, but the stars were bright and the air smelt so fresh, sharp, as it never did when the wind was idle.

No more rain would fall. Faunos was in no great hurry to get to the shepherd's hut on that account, but the sooner he could get Galen settled and fed, the better he would like it. Galen must rest, sleep, get warm and recover. He *must* recover.

The bags over his shoulders were heavy with books, but Faunos had only managed to bring out the dozen most valuable. These were the books that described the magicks, the prophecies and the secrets of his forefathers' power. He had left behind the histories of Zeheft, the poems and stories of his ancestors, which had been suppressed since Vayal's last great victory, and was burdened with the knowledge that he must go back for them—soon, before the sea destroyed everything.

The Zeheftimen who had fled with the overburdened fishing fleet were the children of these latter years, and Galen was rightly scornful of them. They had no concept of who they were, who their ancestors had ever been, what was their birthright, and of what they were capable. Worse yet, the youngest had ceased to care.

Time, ignorance and hardship had reduced the to simple fishermen and shepherds who bowed politely when the soldiers of Vayal passed by. They walked to the great new city by the hundreds to watch the games, and prostrated in the temple of Helios there, when the high priests of the Vayal called them to devotions as dawn, noon and sundown. Their young men and women were flattered to be chosen when the priest king passed by.

His litter would stop; a jewelled hand would extend through the gauzy curtains, a gold-taloned finger would point out a boy or a girl who had caught the eye of the great one, and he or she would step up into the litter. Mahanmec Azhtoc could have any body he desired, and he desired so many. His progeny were scattered like autumn leaves across the island—bastards, worthless in Vayal, nameless, and yet the young people of Zeheft greatly admired them. Galen was scathing.

The young of Zeheft were no more than traitors, he said. They had forgotten their heritage, and when one like himself sought to remind them of who they were, they laughed in his face, or they swiftly grew angry, as if Galen were lying to them, maligning them—or worse, enjoying a jest at their expense.

Every word he said to them was true, but they were furious to hear his thoughts, and it was decades since the common people had lost the ability to read the few old books what had survived the burning.

The future was unclear to Faunos. He could read, and for fifteen years Galen had taught him everything he should know, as the seventh son of Mykenos, in whose body was born the terrible power that had possessed,

elevated and ruined the kings of old.

Faunos had never told Galen the truth, and never would. It was an inheritance he did not want. To be the custodian of the power of forgotten ages was a burden he would have set down, if he could.

But the power was in him whether he wanted it or not. It flowed like the blood in his veins, the passions in his heart, even the thoughts in his head. As he grew older, he could not move or breathe without feeling it, and when he was twelve years old the lessons began in earnest, lest the power command him.

It was dangerous. Lethal. Faunos knew it could so easily be the death of him, and if it were, then Zeheft was really gone. This was Galen's first and greatest lesson, and he made sure Faunos learned it well.

"Can you walk again?" Faunos asked quietly. "Take my arm. Let me help you. It's getting very dark, and we'll be climbing over a lot of rubble. It'll be difficult without the light." Just enough twilight remained for them to get around the ruins, if Galen could move, and Faunos heard the urgency in his own voice.

"I can walk," Galen told him, short tempered because he was angry with himself, annoyed at his own infirmity.

At the time when he needed to be strongest, his body was failing, and he knew it. He hauled himself to his feet and stood breathing deeply, one hand on Faunos's arm for balance. The sea stretched away like a silver-green carpet and the brightest stars were already glittering. Galen was not as tall as Faunos now; his back was stooped lately, and his hips were stiff. His hair was white like his beard, and cropped short about his skull. Even now, even here, he wore an old brown robe, like the cassocks worn by the most lowly of the lay brothers at the temple.

"It's not so far," Faunos promised. He shifted the weight of the goatskin bags over his shoulders and took Galen's arm. "I know the easiest way through. I'll build a fire and get you some food, and then ..."

And then Faunos breathed a sigh, and as Galen began a determined shuffle, he put himself between the old man and the cliff top which had lately been the middle of the marketplace. Careful, patient, he guided him around the tumbled wreckage of Zeheft.

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