



THE BARBARIANS • VOLUME TWO

BROTHER *of the* DRAGON

Paul B. Thompson
and
Tonya C. Cook



Chapter 1



Flames roared into the chill blue sky. Jetting from every fissure in the stone wall, they combined in the open air into a great eruption of fire. Loose rocks and a few unfortunate men were hurled skyward, and a loud boom, deeper than thunder, reverberated off the walls of the valley. The fireball blossomed like a monstrous flower and quickly burned out. In its wake came a column of gray smoke, then nothing.

Amero opened his eyes. For a moment he was dazed, seeing blue sky above him instead of the foundry roof. His ears rang. Lifting his head, he saw he lay on the ground six paces from the foundry door. Inside the shattered building, all was smoke and flickering flames. His workmen staggered to and fro, stamping on smoldering embers.

“Arkuden! Your arm!”

Dully Amero looked down and saw his left sleeve was on fire. The little flame was creeping up his arm. Daran, the apprentice who’d warned him, slapped at the burning material, extinguishing the fire.

“Are you well, Arkuden? Say something!” The boy’s eyes were ringed with heavy smudges of black soot.

The pain in his arm brought Amero to his senses. “I’m all right,” he said hoarsely.

“What happened? I was carrying wood for the firebox, but before I could unload it—whuff! And I was out here!”

“Sounds like the journey I made. Go see if anyone else is hurt.” The apprentice got up and headed to the workshop door. Amero pulled himself to his feet and called, “Count heads, Daran! I want to know if anyone’s missing!”

“Aye, Arkuden!”

Dusting soot from his hide treads, Amero followed the boy inside.

The foundry was a shambles. Through the swirling smoke, Amero saw his new fire-feeder was wrecked. The wood-and-leather fan, powered by the legs of six sturdy apprentices, had

been too successful. Too much air had been forced into the firebox, causing it to burst.

He found a man sprawled on the floor, out cold. It was Huru, his shopmaster. Hauling the unconscious man to his feet, Amero draped Huru's arm over his own shoulders. He was heading to the door when the timbers in the roof gave way, sending a shower of burning splinters to the floor.

"Everyone out!" Amero shouted. "Get outside now!"

The stony beach below the foundry quickly filled with coughing, bleeding, smoke-blackened men. The early morning air was cold, and they shivered in the short kilts that were the usual attire inside the sweltering workshop. A few sat on the damp, sandy ground and nursed burns or bruises.

Amero called for water. The first dipper he gave to Huru, and the cold liquid brought the shopmaster's dark eyes fluttering open.

"Arkuden . . . who threw the thunderbolt?" he grunted.

"I guess I did," Amero said ruefully. "The furnace blew back in our faces."

A head count showed everyone had made it out. One of the copper pourers, Unar by name, had the most severe injury. Hit in the eye by a flying stone chip, half his face was bloodied. Amero sent him to a healer with an apprentice to lead him by the hand. The rest of the workers were in reasonably good shape, though shaken by the blast.

Passersby stopped and stared at the sooty crew and the shattered remains of the foundry. The people of Yala-tene were accustomed to their chief's odd ways, but this was a novel sight.

Once he was sure his men were all right, Amero went inside again. The foundry roof was completely wrecked. Sunlight pierced the drifting dust and smoke in a hundred narrow beams. Shards of gray roofing slate littered the floor. Charred wood, still smoking, lay everywhere.

Amero went to the crucible—a great stone pot cut from a single block of granite. Rough ingots of copper and tin were visible inside. Though the heat had fused them in numerous spots, they were not melted together. After all the fire and fury, his dream of making bronze was still unfulfilled.

"It's a wonder we weren't all killed." Amero turned to see

Huru standing in the doorway. The shopmaster added, "What do we do now?"

Amero kicked a still-glowing ember with his bark sandals. "Start again," he said. "Bronze won't make itself. We'll have to fix the workshop first, then build another fire-feeder." He grimaced. "A smaller one, this time."

Back outside, they found the workmen being tended by a dozen young men and women dressed in white doeskin robes. The well-scrubbed youths moved among the sooty men, administering cool water and dabbing their cuts and burns with pads of soft, boiled moss.

Amero frowned. He knew he ought to be grateful for the help, but he wasn't. This help came with an unpleasant price.

"Greetings, Arkuden! Praise the dragon you are well," said Mara, one of the white-robed youths.

"Why are you here?" he said. "I didn't ask for help."

"I sent them."

Standing on the gravel path was Tiphán, son of Konza, leader of the *Sensarku*, the Servers of the Dragon. Not yet thirty, Tiphán was tall and sharp-faced, with shoulder-length blond hair and a beardless chin. The young people were his followers. Amero clenched his hands into fists then forced himself to relax.

"Greetings, young Tiphán," he said, brushing stone chips from his short brown beard. "What brings you to my humble workshop?"

"I was on my way to the Offertory when I saw a column of fire in the sky," Tiphán said. Though young, he had a deep, resonant voice. "My first thought was that the Great Protector was paying us a visit."

"Duranix isn't here," Amero said bluntly.

Tiphán looked over the chaotic scene and dusted his hands lightly together. "I see that now. The fire was your doing, Arkuden?"

"An accident," Amero said. "We have a lot of repairs to do, so if you would take your people away . . ."

"As you wish, Arkuden." Tiphán clapped his hands, and the *Sensarku* ceased their ministrations and fell into line behind their leader. Huru cajoled his men to their feet, and the foundry workers filed back to the ruined workshop.

“Your efforts to make bronze have not yielded much success,” Tiphán said. “How long have you been trying, Arkuden? Ten years?”

“Twelve.”

“Perhaps men weren’t meant to make bronze. It is, after all, the hide of our Protector.”

“The elves have been making bronze for generations,” Amero observed.

“Elves are not men,” Tiphán countered.

Amero bit back a sarcastic reply, saying mildly, “You’ll excuse me, Tiphán. I have much to do, and I don’t want to keep you from your own work.”

“The fields, Tosen . . . ?” said Mara, standing close behind Tiphán. *Tosen* was a term of respect meaning “First Servant.”

The young Sensarku leader nodded. “My father and I are going to view the planting of new seedlings in the orchard. The dragon has given us word that winter is over.”

Amero folded his scratched and bruised arms. “Planting, now? It’s too early. The seedlings will perish in the cold.”

“It is the Protector’s word.”

“Duranix is not a weather seer.”

“What the Protector says must be so,” said Mara. Tiphán nodded approvingly.

Amero looked at the proud, serene faces behind Tiphán. How firmly they believed their leader’s words! He envied the haughty Sensarku chief. It must be pleasant to have such unshakable confidence, to inspire such unquestioning loyalty.

Four burly men in hide shirts and fur leggings arrived, bearing Tiphán’s father, Konza, in a litter. Behind them came four more bearers with an empty chair for his son.

“Greetings, Amero!” said Konza with a wave. In his early life, he’d been a tanner, and his arms were stained red-brown up to the elbows from years of working hides. Now he was nearly sixty, and his gray hair hung in limp strands around his deeply lined face.

“Long life and health to you, Konza,” Amero replied. He meant every word. Konza, though a bit foolish, was a good-hearted friend. He was also a valuable check on his son’s ambitions.

For twelve years, Tiphon and his father had taken sole responsibility for feeding the dragon. In the old days, any hunter in the valley could offer up part of his catch to Duranix in gratitude for his protection. Konza had started the practice of choosing only the finest beasts for the dragon's meal. It was only fitting the dragon should get the best, Konza said. It demonstrated how much he was revered by the people he guarded.

Tiphon refined the procedure further. Believing the dragon shouldn't have to snatch his meals off a pile of dirty stones, the young man began scrubbing the dragon's cairn himself. Other young men of the village sought to share the honor of serving the dragon, so he gradually gave over the onerous cleaning duties to them. Younger boys and girls learned to wash the sacrificial animals, and later, the enclosure around the cairn itself.

Father and son received no direct encouragement from Duranix for their efforts. The dragon seldom spoke to anyone but Amero, but where once he'd merely swooped down and carried off a raw carcass, he now perched atop the high wall surrounding the cairn and ate the cooked offering in full view of the reverent youths below. Everyone took this to mean the dragon was pleased by their labors, and over time the Sensarku grew in size and prestige.

The four bearers lowered their poles, bringing the empty chair to ground level. As Tiphon climbed in, Konza said to Amero, "We're off to the orchards."

"So your son said. Have a look at the bridge as you cross it, will you? The winter's been hard. I hope the supports aren't stretched or rotted." The vine-and-plank bridge across the river that fed into the lake was one of Amero's early projects. Anyone crossing the river had to use the bridge or pole over on a raft. The current was too swift to swim safely.

"Yes, the bridge," Tiphon said, signaling his bearers to go. "One of your *useful* creations."

Before Amero could retort, the bearers took the two men away, followed by smiling acolytes. More than a little angry, Amero left Huru to supervise the cleanup and stalked away.

He crossed the spray-drenched beach below the waterfall that dominated the valley and gave its name to the Lake

of the Falls. The sheer cliff face had just one visible opening on the north side of the falls. A complicated tower of timber and vines rose from the ground to the hole. Amero went to the base of the log tower and pulled hard on a vine rope. The apparatus squeaked, and a large rattan basket sank slowly toward him. This hoist was another of his early inventions.

He climbed in and started the counterweight down. As he rose, the whole village of Yala-tene was visible, spread out beneath him.

The settlement had grown against the base of the cliffs like a cluster of toadstools on an oak stump. In the twenty-two years since its founding, it had changed from a random collection of tents and lean-tos to a permanent town of eleven hundred souls. Narrow dirt streets snaked between the field-stone houses (some of which had as many as four floors), and smoke curled up from over six hundred chimneys.

Twenty-two years, Amero mused. A lifetime by nomad standards—time enough to grow up, mate, and raise children.

Instead of children, Amero had raised a village under the watchful eye of his friend, the bronze dragon Duranix. The dragon dwelt in a cave hollowed out of the cliff face behind the waterfall, and though he had little to do with the daily lives of the villagers, Duranix remained Amero's mentor.

Though Duranix stood ready to defend the people of Yala-tene from dangers natural and unnatural, he often left the valley for days or weeks at a time, keeping a watchful eye on the land he claimed as his domain. His absence at the time of a nomad attack twelve years earlier had convinced Amero that a more reliable defense for the village was needed. From this was born his notion of a protective wall.

Curving out from the mountain north and south of the village was the great stone wall. The wall didn't look imposing from this height, but at ground level it was a different story. Four-fifths of the wall around Yala-tene had been completed, and the last gap, a fifty-pace stretch facing the lake, would be finished after the next harvest.

Work on the stout barrier was done mainly in the winter, when fields were fallow and the herds were kept shut in their pens. Women, men, and children labored on it, and the work

was hard. The loose stones littering the valley floor, tumbled round by the river, were not stable enough for the wall, so heavy blocks had to be cut from the cliff behind Yala-tene. These were dragged on log sledges by gangs of villagers and piled up. Early sections had collapsed before attaining their full height. The budding masons learned to make the wall wider at the bottom than the top, then the structure stood solid and firm.

Two other structures stood out. One was the Offertory, where Konza and Tiphon served meat to the dragon. This was a square, roofless building, surrounded by a wall six paces high. Konza handpicked the whitest stone in the valley for it, and the Sensarku acolytes kept the place spotless inside and out. The courtyard inside was covered with washed white sand from the lake, regularly raked and cleaned by Tiphon's young adherents. In the center of the Offertory was the altar itself. Once a rude pile of stones, it was now made of dressed blocks laid in sloping courses.

The other major building in Yala-tene was Amero's workshop, lately the scene of the furnace explosion.

The basket bumped to a stop. Amero tied off the counterweight and climbed out.

He was immediately struck by the smell in the cave. For years he'd lived here with Duranix and had become accustomed to the pervasive odor of the dragon. These days he spent most of his time in the village, and the sharp aroma—lizardlike and oddly metallic—was very noticeable.

"As though humans don't stink," boomed a voice from the rear of the cave.

"You're hearing my thoughts again," Amero called back.

Duranix's broad brazen head rose from the stone platform on which he slept. "You think so loudly that I can't help it."

"Don't listen, then."

His sharp tone caught the dragon's attention. Duranix's huge green eyes, slit by vertical pupils as long as daggers, followed Amero as he went to the cold firepit and sat down with his back to the dragon.

Duranix crawled off his bed with peculiar serpentine grace. With no more sound than the scrape of a few bronze scales on the rock floor, the huge creature drew up beside Amero.

“What vexes you? Speak,” Duranix ordered, “or take your gloomy spirit to some other cave.”

“I demolished the foundry this morning,” Amero said, smiting his knee with one fist. “The fire-feeder I made forced too much air into the furnace, and it burst.”

“I thought you smelled sootier than usual.”

“I failed again. The foundry is a wreck.”

Duranix shrugged, a gesture picked up from Amero. “Build another. Your devices have failed before.”

“Yes, so Tiphon has reminded me!”

“Ah.” Duranix coiled his tail around Amero, surrounding him with a wall of living bronze. “This is the true cause of your mood.”

“Tiphon wants to be chief of Yala-tene.” Now that the words were out at last, Amero was surprised by how angry they made him feel.

“Time was, you didn’t want to be chief. Now you fear Tiphon will take your place?”

“I only want to do what’s best for the village. Tiphon wants what’s best for Tiphon. And you help him!”

“I?”

“Yes! You eat your meat for all to see, encouraging them to think you honor the Sensarku with your presence. Why don’t you eat in the cave like you used to?”

“They amuse me. All that washing and cleaning! Tiphon’s the funniest of all. His mind’s so narrow I can hardly hear his thoughts, but he’s so obvious in other ways that he makes me laugh.”

Amero stood up and stepped over the dragon’s tail. “Did you tell him that winter was over?”

Duranix blinked. The movement of his eyelids sounded like swords being drawn from scabbards. “The boy asked me if I thought it would snow again this season. I said I didn’t look forward to any more snow.”

Amero shook his head, seeing how Tiphon had misread the dragon’s casual comment. “If he tells the planters to start now, we may lose the year’s fruit crop!”

“I could pluck his dull-witted head from his shoulders,” Duranix suggested. “That would put an end to your troubles.”

“Oh, be serious! It’s not worth Tiphon’s life.”

“Isn’t it? You said the harvest might be ruined.”

If the harvest is ruined, Tiphon will be too.

Amero’s thought carried plainly to the dragon, and Duranix narrowed his eyes. “You’d let folk in the village go hungry to best Tiphon?” he asked, the barbels on his chin twitching in curiosity.

Amero flushed at having his selfishness discerned. “I’ll not let anyone go hungry. Once the foundry is repaired, we’ll have bronze to trade with the wanderers who come through the valley. We can barter metal for food.”

“And if your metal-making fails? You’re gambling with the empty bellies of a lot of people.”

Amero lowered his head. “Maybe the weather will stay mild and the seedlings thrive.”

“And maybe I’ll start eating roots and berries,” said Duranix dryly.

* * * * *

A score of men and women, still clad in winter furs, hunched over their work. With hoes they grubbed small holes in the sandy soil, and into each hole went a tiny fruit tree. By the shore of the lake they planted apple trees, because these needed the most water. At the foot of the mountain the villagers placed walnut trees. Sturdy walnuts could stand the rockier soil and occasional slides of dirt and stones from the higher slopes. In between the apples and walnuts were planted the most valuable trees of all, burltops. A single burltop tree could provide a family with bushels of brown fruit, to be dried, eaten fresh, or pressed to extract the sweet oil inside. Windfall limbs made excellent handles for tools, and sloughed-off bark could be made into shingles, sandals, baskets, or buckets.

Everyone thought it was too early for planting. Snow still lay on the slopes above Yala-tene. A four-day thaw had broken winter’s ponderous grip on the valley floor, but the boggy land held meltwater too well. Yet, as Tiphon had ordered, the planters had come to break ground on the west side of the lake for a new orchard. Seeds held back from last year’s harvest had been planted in small pots and carefully

tended all winter. Exactly when to transplant the green shoots into the ground was a critical decision.

A gentle chiming filled the air, a sound like the fall of icicles from the plateau above the town. One by one the diggers raised their heads, the distraction offering them an excuse to ease their aching backs. Morning sun glinted off burnished bronze, flashing in their eyes. The Servers of the Dragon were coming.

Two litters appeared, coming down the path from Amero's bridge. Eight sturdy bearers moved slowly, their feet gripped by the same gritty mud that hampered the planting. The men in the chairs were covered from neck to ankles in heavy robes made from hundreds of small bronze scales, sewn to an underlying doeskin shirt. The scales tinkled as the chairs swayed from side to side.

The planters leaned on their tools, waiting for their visitors. When the bearers arrived, they halted and lowered the litters to the ground. With a distasteful glance at the mud around him, the younger bronze-clad man remained seated, but the elder left his chair to join the workers in the mire.

Jenla, eldest of the planters, raised her hand in greeting. "Welcome, Konza. Welcome, Tiphon, son of Konza."

"Greetings to you all," Konza replied cheerfully. With every step his bark sandals sank into the sodden turf. The hem of his heavy metallic gown dipped into the mud.

"Father," said Tiphon. "You're in the dirt."

"These good people spend their days in the mud," his father replied. "Why shouldn't I dirty my feet to speak to them?"

"We are Sensarku," Tiphon said, his tone indicating the number of times he'd had to remind his father of this. "To be worthy of the great dragon's favor, we must be pleasing to his eye. You won't be if you muddy his scales."

"I'll wash before I return to the Offertory. Don't be so proud, boy! We're all Servers of the Dragon." He gestured to the diggers, waiting patiently in the cold mud. "Aren't we?"

Tiphon sighed. "Yes, father."

Turning back to Jenla and the rest, Konza smiled. "I bring good tidings. We have the dragon's word no more snow is expected this season. You can plant your seedlings knowing the weather will only get warmer."

Jenla's square face brightened. "That's good, Konza. When I dug my first hole, I tell you I was thinking ill of our Protector. The soil is too wet, but so long as there's no snow, the land will dry, and the trees will grow."

"You should always believe the words of our Protector," Tiphon said coldly.

"They believe," Konza said, grasping the old woman's hand fondly. "Jenla remembers how hard life was before Amero and the dragon taught us how to live."

"We must return and prepare the evening's offerings," Tiphon said loudly.

Konza smiled indulgently, his deep-set brown eyes gleaming with gentle tolerance. "My son was very young when we came to the valley," he explained. "He doesn't remember wandering the plains each day, searching for food and shelter."

The old man clasped hands with the diggers he could reach, wishing them all fair sun and dry skies. By the time he resumed his seat in the litter, not only were his feet and hem muddy, so were his hands and sleeves.

Eight pairs of brawny arms hoisted father and son off the ground. Hampered by the soggy earth, the bearers slowly worked their way around until they were facing Yala-tene.

The planters resumed work. Jenla stood idle a bit longer, scanning the sky. Most of it was a clear blue, but heavy gray clouds crowded around the southern peaks, as if ready to slide down into the valley.

Jenla frowned.

* * * * *

Tiphon's bearers were younger and stronger than his father's, and they soon outdistanced their fellows. Even if they'd been close enough to converse, Tiphon would've remained silent. All the way back the younger man fumed.

His father was hopeless. He had no sense of dignity, no feel for the importance of their positions as Sensarku. That he would descend to the ground and soil his robe was bad enough. That he would clasp hands and consort with ordinary diggers was worse. He would have to remind his father yet again of the proper way to comport himself. As Servers

of the Dragon, they were not common people any longer, and they had to be worthy of their place.

When Tiphán's litter reached the outskirts of the settlement, cattle herders tending their beasts greeted him. The older ones hailed him the traditional way, by raising both hands high—a plainsman's greeting meaning, "I'm a friend. I'm unarmed." The rest, villagers of Tiphán's generation and younger, bowed their heads as he passed. No one knew where this custom came from. Some said it was the way elves showed respect to their lords. Whatever the origin of the gesture, Tiphán liked it.

The stock pens were full of long-horned oxen, lean from subsisting on dry hay all winter. When the outer valleys thawed, the herds could be turned loose to graze on the fresh green grass growing there. Their flesh would sweeten and be all the more pleasing to the Great Protector.

Behind the ox pens were long, narrow horse corrals. Some of the mares had foaled early and were trailed by leggy offspring. Tiphán frowned. He did not approve of horses. They reminded him of the savage nomads who had chosen not to live under the wings of the dragon. The nomads roved the plains outside the valley, many on horseback. Filthy, lawless barbarians, they stole cattle, kidnapped women and children, and did not respect the Sensarku.

Tiphán forgot his dislike of horses and the people who rode them when the village wall came into view. Where finished, it was eight paces high and three paces thick, and even the haughty Sensarku chief thought it a grand project, worthy of the dragon's people.

Under the wall were clustered an ever-changing forest of tents and ragged lean-tos. Wanderers of every stripe came to the valley to trade. Born in the open, some folk could not adapt to the close streets and roofed dwellings of the village. They pitched their tents and remained for one day or a hundred, trading game, labor, or objects for food and handicrafts.

Something in the muddle of scruffy tents caught Tiphán's eye. He leaned forward, saying, "Leave me at the wall." The lead bearer grunted acknowledgment and steered his comrades to the open defile.

To prevent enemies from simply storming the necessary openings in the wall, Amero's builders created a low, extra wall in front of each opening. Those entering Yala-tene by these baffles had to zigzag around the short wall before they could enter. In times of trouble, heavy timbers or boulders could be set in the baffles to block them completely.

The bearers lowered Tiphán's chair to the ground. He rose with a musical clatter of bronze scales and stepped down. Moments later, his father's litter arrived.

"Why have you stopped, son?" Konza called.

"I want to check the progress of the wall. You go ahead. Preparation of the offering must commence by midday. Will you see to it?"

The old man blinked. "Gladly." He sat back, plainly puzzled. "But I thought you were in a hurry to get back."

"I was." To Konza's bearers, Tiphán said, "Take my father to the Offertory."

With a concerted shout, they set off, giving Konza no chance to countermand his son's command.

Tiphán sent his own bearers away as well. He strolled along the outside of the wall, admiring the evenness of the stonework, the precision of the seams between the blocks. Amero's masons had learned a great deal about laying stone in twelve years. This newest section of wall was their finest effort yet.

Turning away from the wall, Tiphán walked down to the wanderers' camp. Eyes watched him from scores of open tents, yet for all the roughness of the encampment, he had nothing to fear. The inhabitants might call their town Yala-tene, meaning "Mountain Nest," but to outsiders such as these, it was known as Arku-peli, or "Place of the Dragon." No one dared interfere with Tiphán. His dragonscale robe made it plain he had access to the powerful Duranix.

Tiphán spied a tall, conical tent near the center of the camp. Bark walls meant the owner was too poor to have a tent made of deerskin. A flap of woven ivy hung over the entrance, reinforcing the image of poverty, yet on the leafy doorflap hung a bronze disk two handspans wide, embossed with an image of the sun. Bronze was rare and valuable, quite

out of place on such a lowly shelter. It was this artifact that had caught Tiphán's eye.

The Sensarku swept back the flap with one hand. The interior was dark and smelled of sour mold and raw meat. He saw crossed feet, clad in bark sandals. They retreated from the shaft of light Tiphán let in.

"May I enter?"

"As you choose, but close the flap." The speaker—his name was Bek—had an edge in his voice, the sharpness of danger and guile.

Tiphán stepped in and let the mat of vines fall shut behind him. Darkness closed around him. Tiny points of sunlight pierced the interior through chinks in the bark shell. By these Tiphán could see Bek sitting on the far side of the tent. A few rough stones piled in the center of the floor served as a firepit. The rest of the tent was crowded with rattan baskets and bags of moldering leather.

"What do you have for me this time?"

"What you asked for," Bek said.

Tiphán's eyes widened. "Show me."

"It wasn't easy to come by and won't be cheap."

"Show me!"

The shadowy figure stood. Bek was little taller standing than sitting. As he slipped past, Tiphán caught only glimpses of his strange host: tattoos scrolling down his neck, a blue stone fixed in a pierced earlobe, a reddish pigtail hanging down his back. And what was hanging from the back of his belt? A panther's tail?

Bek knelt by a tall basket and pushed off the lid. The rattan container was crowded with cylinders of stiff white parchment. The tattooed man drew out one scroll, checked the glyphs on the butt of the wooden rod, and handed it to Tiphán.

"*Kinsheesus Talikanathor* is its name, more or less. In the argot of Silvanesti priests it means 'The Way to Bind the Sun.'"

Tiphán parted the scroll. It was filled from side to side and top to bottom with Elvish script. Glosses on the black text were scribed in red. He was still learning the language, and the poor light did not make deciphering the ornate, feathery writing any easier.

Tiphan let go of one side, allowing the scroll to roll itself shut. “What do you want for it?”

For the first time the little man looked his customer in the face. Both his eyes glowed in the dark, and in different colors. His right eye was cool, greenish blue, like the belly of a carrion fly. The left eye was yellow, like the stars in the constellation of Matat, the dragon.

“Give me your robe,” Bek said.

Tiphan laughed. “This robe is worth more than your life!”

“This book is worth more than both our lives.” Bek removed the scroll from the Sensarku’s hand and carefully returned it to the basket with the others. “You can’t walk into a scribe’s shop in Silvanost and ask for these tomes, you know. They’re forbidden! I took many chances getting it.” He drew a stubby finger across his throat. Tiphan ignored the ugly gesture. Bek continued, “This book has commentaries by Vedvedsica himself. Did you see the passages in red ink? His hand, his wisdom.”

Tiphan knew the fame of the elf priest Vedvedsica. For many years he’d been the first sage of Silvanos’s realm. Then, a few years ago, rumors had reached Yala-tene of his downfall. It was said the wily Vedvedsica had been exiled to an island far away in the southern sea.

“I’ll give you four pounds of bronze,” Tiphan told him. “Or six pounds of copper. I also have some gemstones.”

Bek shook his head. His eyelids closed for the space of two heartbeats, and when they opened again, his irises had switched colors—now the right one was yellow, and the left blue.

“I want the robe off your back, nothing less,” Bek said, grinning. His teeth were uncommonly long and pointed.

“There’s ten pounds of bronze in this robe!”

“With this book you can command the elements!” The little man held the lid poised over the basket. “Last chance. What say you?”

Tiphan’s hands positively ached to hold the manuscript again. Jaw clenched, he unclasped the buckle of his belt and let it fall to the dirt. Dropping his arms, he shrugged the heavy robe off. It piled around his feet like musical, golden snow.

The little man handed Tiphhan the scroll. “Wise choice, my friend. Knowledge is much more valuable than bronze,” he said. To Tiphhan’s amazement, the panther tail attached to the back of the man’s belt moved, lashing once from side to side.

“You seem to crave bronze well enough,” Tiphhan said, slipping the parchment roll inside his white doeskin shirt.

“A fella’s got to eat. While you’re here, can I interest you in another book? It’s also from Silvanost, very rare, suppressed by five priesthoods.” In answer to Tiphhan’s questioning look, Bek elaborated. “*Girthas Laka Morokiti*, ‘Dialogue of the Courtesans.’ It tells of the amorous doings of highborn Silvanesti ladies.”

Tiphhan sneered. “Keep it. I seek wisdom, not lechery.” He picked up his belt, raised the door flap, and added, “But if you find more like this, contact me in the usual way.”

“Good fortune to you, excellent Tiphhan!” Bek called cheerfully. “Always a delight to serve you.”

The Sensarku walked away. He glanced back once and regretted it. The bookseller stood partially concealed in the door of his tent. Where sunlight fell on him, the illusion of humanity failed utterly. One leg, one arm, and his shoulder were covered by charcoal fur. A single yellow fang protruded from his whiskered upper lip. The supposed panther’s tail curled around Bek’s ankle, twitching with feline amusement.