



THE BARBARIANS • VOLUME THREE

SISTER *of the* SWORD

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Chapter 1



The setting sun painted the walled town of Yala-tene in soft colors—golden yellow, warm orange, dusky red. One hue followed another until they were all swallowed by the indigo of twilight. When the day's last glow subsided, stars appeared in the darkening expanse of sky and the early summer evening took on a crisp chill.

Twenty-two pairs of eyes fixed on the scene were blind to the beauty of sky and sunset. The eyes belonged to twenty-two young men lying on their bellies on a low hill that rose from the bank of the Plains River. The sand on which they lay cooled quickly as night fell, but the youths remained completely motionless. They regarded Yala-tene intently, no hint of emotion on their faces.

They looked identical. Their hair was short and slicked down with a mixture of beeswax, nut oil, and plant dye, and their skin was stained dark green.

They were the Jade Men, raised from early childhood to worship the green dragon Sthenn and carry out his wishes without question, without fail. When their master was away, they gave obedience to Nacris, adopted mother of them all.

For three turnings of the moons, a band of seven hundred raiders, led by Nacris's son Zannian, had occupied the Valley of the Falls. They had plundered and murdered their way across the plains without opposition. Yet, in spite of Zannian's leadership, their own determination to plunder and ravage, and their terror of their mighty patron, Sthenn, they had still failed to take the village. Direct assault had not worked, and they'd been unable to terrorize the villagers into surrendering. The raiders'

last resort was to choke the stubborn valley folk into submission, to cut them off from outside aid until their resolve was broken by starvation and despair.

The village, called Yala-tene (“mountain nest”) by its inhabitants, was known to the Jade Men and the raiders as Arku-peli, or “place of the dragon.” It had three sources of strength: the guardianship of the bronze dragon Duranix, the stone wall that encircled the town, and the leadership of the town’s headman, Amero. Sthenn had lured Duranix away on an aerial chase, and no one had seen either beast since before the siege began. The wall had withstood every stratagem Zannian and Nacris devised to overcome it. That left the headman.

Amero, son of Oto, was Zannian’s target. If he could be captured, the village would certainly lose heart. Zannian would achieve his lifelong dream of being chief of all the plains; Nacris would have her revenge upon Amero, brother of Karada, the woman she held responsible for crippling her and killing her first mate; and Sthenn would have destroyed the “pet” humans of his old enemy, Duranix.

That was the Jade Men’s mission tonight: capture Amero.

Nacris had prepared them with a ceremony both simple and mysterious. For two days, the Jade Men had fasted. Though the rest of the raider camp still feasted on the captured bounty of Arku-peli and its lush valley, the Jade Men ate nothing and drank only water. After two days, Nacris broke their fast with a special stew filled with centipedes, cockroaches, and black crickets. Eating these night creatures, she said, would make them likewise silent, stealthy, and unseen.

At a predetermined time, the last Jade Man in line rose up on his knees. He was the leader, differentiated from the rest by a daub of yellow paint on his forehead. He pressed the thumb and forefinger of his left hand to

his lips and blew. The sound he made was a high squeak, like the call of a bat on the wing. The other Jade Men stood. Each was armed with an obsidian knife, sharp as a viper's fang, and a mace whose heavy diorite head could burst a skull with a single blow.

Their leader waved them forward. In a single line, they crept over the hill toward the distant town. In the gathering darkness, against the lush grass of the valley floor, their green coloring rendered them invisible.

They passed through the remnants of previous battles—cracked spears warped from exposure, broken flint blades, the decaying carcasses of horses. The smell of death meant nothing to the Jade Men. Having grown up in the green dragon's forest lair, the rank odor of decay was part of their daily fare.

A few paces beyond the wreckage of battle the killing ground began. Where once the tent camp of wanderers who traded with Yala-tene stood, now there was a barren wasteland. The traders had pulled up stakes and fled the valley in advance of the raiders' arrival. The villagers had set fire to the grass and underbrush that remained, clearing the land to prevent sneak attacks.

The attack of the Jade Men, however, went forward. They slowed their advance to make their movements less detectable and placed their bare feet carefully, so no stray noises would give them away.

The walls bulked higher as the Jade Men drew near. They could see sentinels, long spears poised on their shoulders, walking atop the wall between trios of blazing torches. This was the baffled entrance into the town, where walls were the lowest. The normal openings through the wall had been filled with boulders and rubble. Consequently this vulnerable place was the most brightly lit and best defended.

The leader slanted off to the right, away from the light, and his troop followed. The twenty-two Jade Men

headed for a spot where the wall made one of its three outward jogs. Village masons had to zigzag the wall here to find bedrock on which to anchor the structure. The notches gave natural cover to the Jade Men. Guards on other parts of the wall could not see into the corners.

A dozen paces away, the leader slowed. The high stone curtain darkened the ground here, making it hard to see ahead. In spite of their careful approach, one of their number fell into a prepared pit. The hole was filled with sharpened stakes, and the luckless Jade Man was impaled through his left thigh.

Though he made no outcry, his slide into the trap dislodged gravel and dirt. The resulting cascade seemed loud as a shout to the silent group. They froze, awaiting the blaze of torchlight, the cry of alarm, and the rain of death that would follow when the villagers spotted them.

Nothing happened. The leader crept along on his belly until he reached the pit. He made his way down into the steep-sided hole. At the bottom, his comrade lay grievously wounded, biting his own hand to keep from screaming. Feeling around in the dark, the leader discovered the sharpened stake was thrust all the way through his man's thigh.

It was a crippling injury. There was no chance he could run or climb with such a wound. Nor could he be left behind. There was too much chance he might make a noise.

Nacris had chosen purposely the Jade Men for this mission. The twenty-two green-painted fighters represented the twenty-two years since the founding of the village of Yala-tene—and the twenty-two years since Nacris's ignominious defeat at the hands of her archenemy, Karada. It was a deliberate number, imbued with secret power, yet the leader knew he must now compromise that very power. He plucked the knife from the doomed youth's waist, then reached

out to rest his hand on the fellow's cheek. He felt rather than heard the wounded man sigh and give a nod of acceptance.

With one stroke, the leader cut his comrade's throat from ear to ear.

Burning with deadly resolve, the leader climbed up out of the pit. Though Nacris had ordered them to bring Amero back alive if possible, he vowed now that it would *not* happen. By the sacrifice in the pit, the fate of the village headman had been decided: a life would be exchanged for a life.

On hands and knees, the leader led the rest of the band to the base of the wall. Other pit traps dotted the ground around them. Some were hidden by branches of willow and sprinkled with dirt and ash, but no more Jade Men fell amiss. The group was soon gathered at the inside corner of the wall.

They'd practiced this maneuver many times by scaling the tall stone tower at the ruined river bridge. The two brawniest Jade Men faced each other, each butting one shoulder against the wall. Arms fully extended, they gripped each other's shoulders and settled their feet wide apart. Two of their comrades climbed atop them and repeated their stance, then two more. When the fourth pair began climbing up, the men on the bottom grunted and shifted under the weight. Two more Jade Men joined them, bracing them.

A single man worked his way to the top and leaned both hands against the inward-leaning masonry. Once in place, he was only a single man's height from the top of the wall. The twelfth youth hauled himself up, and his fingers easily reached the rim of the parapet.

The leader, still on the ground, took one last look around. All was still. Putting his slain comrade's knife in his teeth, he started up. It was not an easy ascent. The living ladder was slick with sweat and trembled

under the terrible strain. He ignored everyone beneath him, concentrating on his goal, the top of the hated wall.

At last he slid onto the flat, open ledge. Off to his right three torches burned, their shafts lashed together in a tripod. He saw no sign of a watchman. Leaning over the edge, he signaled for the others to join him.

In short order, eight Jade Men lay atop the wall with him. The twelve who made up the ladder quietly unstacked themselves and huddled in the dark corner of the wall.

Nine Jade Men were now in Arku-peli. Nacris had chosen these nine (as well as the one who'd been lost to the pit trap) because they were the strongest in spirit. They would do whatever it took to fulfill her orders, down to sacrificing all their comrades.

The leader reviewed the information he'd memorized on the village layout. Tortured from villagers captured in battle, it might not be reliable, but it was all they had. Decisively, he led his men in single file along the wall away from the standing torches. At the inside of the next zigzag, they found, as they expected, a ramp leading to the ground inside.

Halfway down the ramp, they came upon an armed villager relieving himself. The sentinel never had a chance. The Jade Men rolled his corpse into the shadows at the base of the ramp and moved on.

Yala-tene was an alien world to these youths, raised in a forest and on the open plain. The streets were dark, stone-cobbled, and damp. The stone houses seemed to close in on them from all sides. An odor of burnt meat was thick as fog. Though many of Zannian's raiders ate cooked food, Nacris had raised her Jade Men to loathe such softness. They ate flesh in the way of their plainsmen ancestors: raw.

The concentration of peculiar sights and aromas was almost overwhelming, and their pace slowed as they grew

confused and unsettled by the maze of streets. They collected behind their leader in the shelter of a blind alley below the town wall, unsure of their next move.

The leader's senses slowly adjusted, and he studied his surroundings with more care. The highest structures stood out against the light of the stars. One of these structures, their mother had told them, was the White Tower, where the bronze dragon was fed. The headman, it was said, lived in a dwelling four houses east and two north of the White Tower. The door of his house was marked with the sign of the turtle, painted in white.

By hand signals, the leader ordered his men to follow him. They moved down the dark street in absolute silence. Nothing disturbed their single-minded concentration, not distant voices on adjoining streets nor the barking of the villagers' tame dogs. Anything or anyone interfering with their purpose would die swiftly.

The narrow road, closed in on both sides by tall, windowless houses, ended on a much wider avenue. Lit by three large, open fires, the White Tower loomed over them. The area seemed filled with villagers, talking loudly and rattling their weapons.

The leader dropped to the ground and slowly wormed his way around the corner into the wider road. His followers waited. At times villagers walked within ten steps of him, oblivious to his prone form. Using his chin, fingers, and toes, he squirmed across the dangerous open space into the shadows on the other side. He signaled for the rest to follow, one at a time.

They proceeded without incident until the last man. A door in the house behind them opened suddenly, flooding the lane with light. A stoutish woman hefting a basket of food scraps saw the final Jade Man lying motionless in the street.

"Iby!" she called over her shoulder, shifting the basket to her hip. "Some drunkard's passed out in the street!"

A male voice inside the house answered indistinctly. Before the woman could say more, the Jade Men's leader was on her, green hand clamped over her mouth. He pushed her inside, and the rest of his band flowed in behind him.

The man called Iby rose from his hearth, a stone axe in his hand. He raised his weapon, but the Jade Men swept over him. Down he went, and the obsidian knives were put to work. Neither he nor his mate uttered another sound before they died.

Shivering with excitement, the Jade Men crowded around the dead couple's hearth, poking their meager supper with their knives. They were quickly and silently called to order by the leader. He led them out of the house by the rear door, and they moved swiftly down the black, narrow street.

The leader felt a surge of triumph when they found the house of the turtle. Not only did it have the animal totem on the door as they'd been told, but a pair of armed villagers stood guard by the door. This was certainly the headman's dwelling.

Four Jade Men worked their way around to the west side of the house. They would seize the closest guard while their leader and the other four took down the one nearest them. The signal to strike would be the leader's bat-call.

The guards, one female and one male, were not as heedless as the others they'd encountered. The woman scanned the darkness alertly.

"Something moved over there," she said.

The Jade Men froze in place.

"A dog?" the man suggested, lifting his spear.

"I don't know. It doesn't feel right."

"You're too nervous, Lyopi."

The woman's protest was interrupted by the squeaking bat-call. Before the first notes had died, several Jade

Men launched themselves at the male guard. The woman shouted a warning, and the man turned, swinging his spear. He managed an awkward parry of the trio of obsidian knives thrust at his chest, and his arcing spear-shaft connected with the head of one of his attackers.

The woman put her back to his. As the rest of the Jade Men, leader to the fore, spilled out of the shadows, she gasped, "More of them coming!"

A diorite mace hit the male guard on the knee. He gave a grunt of pain and toppled. Before he hit the ground, another club connected with his temple, knocking him unconscious. At the same time, a leaping Jade Man struck the woman in the back. The spear flew from her hand, and she went down hard, landing facedown in the lane.

Every moment counted now. There was no time to spare for killing the two unconscious guards, and the leader guided his troop swiftly through the door of the dwelling.

A fire on the hearth had burned down to embers. The interior of the single round room was dim. Nostrils flaring, the leader smelled his prey before he saw him.

The headman lay on his side, his back to the door. The commotion outside had not wakened him. Half his face was swathed in bandages—a wound earned in battle with Zannian's men.

Slaying him as he slept held no satisfaction, so the leader kicked the headman until he stirred. The fellow's single visible eye widened in shock as he rolled over and saw the apparitions surrounding him.

Before the headman could so much as raise a hand, the leader struck, dropping to his knees and using his whole body to increase the force of his blow. He drove the dagger into his victim so far the brittle stone snapped in two. The other Jade Men moved in, ringing their prey and stabbing him again and again. None would leave with an unbloodied knife.

Shouts outside ended the murdering frenzy. Time to depart. The leader gestured at the open doorway.

He was the last to leave. With a final satisfied glance at the dead man, the leader of the Jade Men went out the door. He left his broken blade lodged in his victim's ribs.

Outside, the streets were alive with villagers shouting and brandishing torches and spears. The two guards were gone, either fled or carried off.

There was no need for stealth now, so the Jade Men ran, heading for the ramp they'd used to enter Arkupeli. Near the White Tower they were confronted by a band of villagers. Stones and spears flew at them. One of the latter caught the trailing Jade Man in the back, and he went down, severely injured. He swiftly drew his knife and fell upon it rather than surrender to the outraged townsfolk.

The alleys confused the fleeing youths, fragmenting the band of eight. The leader knew the way out yet did not call to the others. Like his men, he had taken an oath to say nothing until the mission was completed. None of them violated that oath—not even those who, confused and disoriented, blundered into armed search parties and were killed.

The leader was the only survivor to reach the foot of the ramp. After racing up the ramp, he uttered his bat-call from the summit of the wall. The rest of his group hastily quit the shadows to re-form their living ladder.

As he waited for them to be ready, the leader looked back over the village. Twin rivers of fire were converging on his position, two columns of torch-bearing villagers howling for vengeance. When several villagers reached the base of the ramp below him, the leader could wait no longer. He slid feet first down the sloping wall to reach his comrades.

Rough stone tore at his legs. When he hit the uppermost Jade Man, the human ladder shuddered but held.

The leader climbed quickly down his comrades' bodies. As he passed a pair, they would disconnect themselves and follow him down.

From the wall, villagers hurled stones, pots, and torches at the intruders. One pot filled with oil shattered on the wall, and a blazing stick that followed set it alight. The uppermost Jade Men were doused in flames, and the remainder of the ladder simply fell apart, burning.

"Get them! Kill them all! Let none escape!" shouted a villager. Rocks and trash were replaced by lethal spears.

Two Jade Men died in the fire. Three were swiftly impaled. Two more fell into hidden pit traps. It seemed none of them would escape. But when the leader finally threw himself to the ground, he found two of his comrades remained with him. All three lay on the lee side of the hill, panting and listening to the shouts of their furious enemy. Suddenly, one plaintive cry rose above the rest.

"They killed him! They killed the Arkuden!"

The wail was taken up by the rest of the villagers. Lying in the dirt, the searing pain of his scorched arms and back forcing tears from his eyes, the leader of the Jade Men smiled so broadly his parched lips cracked and bled.

Arkuden, meaning "dragon's son," was the villagers' name for their headman. Amero was dead.

Mother and the Master would be very pleased.