

FORGOTTEN REALMS

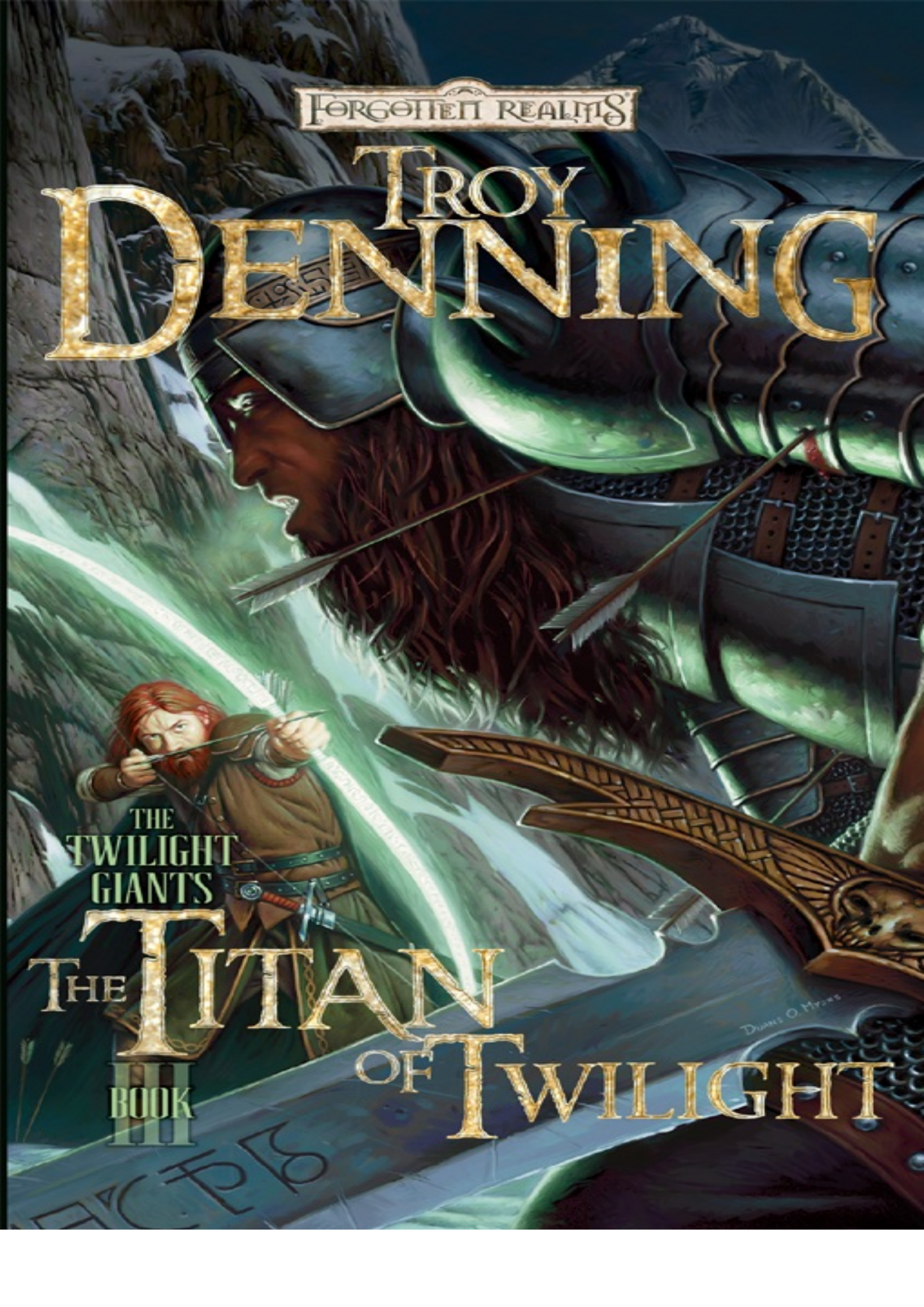
TROY DENNING

THE
TWILIGHT
GIANTS

THE TITAN
OF TWILIGHT

BOOK
III

Duane O. Myers



The high scout shifted his aim to the last fire giant and fired. The enchanted shaft took its target high in the breastbone. Tavis uttered the command word. The brute's head disappeared in a blue flash, then his body collapsed in a clanging heap of steel and flesh.

The high scout turned to face Queen Brianna and found her lying in the bottom of her sleigh, clutching her abdomen. Avner was kneeling by her side holding her head. When he looked up to meet Tavis's gaze, his eyes were wide with alarm.

"I think your baby likes the fighting!" he yelled. "He's coming!"



The Twilight Giants Trilogy
by Troy Denning

The Ogre's Pact
The Giant Among Us
The Titan of Twilight



The Titan of Twilight

Troy Denning



THE TITAN OF TWILIGHT

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Cover art by: Duane O. Myers

eISBN: 978-0-7869-6154-2

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For my mother

Acknowledgments

I would also like to thank the following people for their contributions to the Twilight Giant Trilogy in general and The Titan of Twilight in particular: my editor, Rob, for his forbearance, unwavering support, and many insightful suggestions; my friend Degar and my instructor Lloyd of the AKF Martial Arts Academy in Janesville, WI, for their thoughts on titanic combat; Pat H., for sharing her expertise with difficult deliveries; Jim W., for his early enthusiasm and valuable suggestions; and most especially Andria, just because.

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Prologue

Through the still winds I sweep, silent as death. Below, the Vale: a crooked gorge of rock and snow forever clad in dusk's ashen winter livery. One beat of my umbral wings, and I sail half its immense length. The forlorn halls of Bleak Palace pass beneath my breast, a grim memorial to my ancient hubris. Two beats, and a craggy wall looms ahead. An insufferable yearning as cold as it is deep shudders through my tenebrous body. I long to soar over the cliff top, to fly into blue midnight and let slip this eternal eventide.

Instead, I dip a wing and bank. I circle back the way I came, as I have done a thousand times more than there are stones upon the land, and I listen to your voices. For an immeasurable eternity, they have poured through my head in an endless, ghastly rain—all the profane things you whisper when no one is listening, no one but me:

"Of course, you don't have to, my dear! But if you like this shiny necklace ..."

"... where the lady stores her jewels—and if you want the key, I need my money...."

"... tonight, my love. Strangle her while she sleeps, and we'll always be ..."

Does it surprise you to know I am listening? It shouldn't. Your sinister whisperings come to me from all the black corners of your dark, distant world; at times they fill my head with such a profane, raucous rustling that I cannot hear my own thoughts.

And even I—I, Lanaxis, the Titan of Twilight; mother-murderer and eternal prisoner of shadow; founder of Ostoria, Empire of Giants—even I cannot silence your voices. The gods have proclaimed that I must listen, and I dare not defy them. They are trying to tell me something—something momentous, I am sure.

Unbalanced? Demented? Will you call me mad?

Listen.

Aren't my words ringing inside your head?

Yes, yes! Now you understand. We're *all* mad, each of us. The voices make us that way—deranged and maniacal, quite possibly dangerous—but you more than me. I am, after all, the Chosen of the gods.

And suddenly I, Lanaxis the Chosen One, am sitting alone upon the crumbling steps of my palace, staring, as is my habit, into the eternal dusk above. Where the moon should hang is an enormous green eye. For a moment I am bewildered; then I realize what has happened: I have slipped free of the moment and settled in the past, sometime during the Time of Troubles, when the gods walked the land and chaos ruled Toril. It is, as always, impossible to know the date more exactly.

And truly, it doesn't matter. Time has lost its meaning. Since long before the first human kingdoms arose in the south lands, twilight has hung in this vale. The dusk is as perpetual and still as the heavens themselves. Never does night fall, nor the sun rise to herald a new dawn. There are no days by which to tally the tenday; no tendays to track the months. In this valley, the season never changes. The years pass without notice; they blur into decades; the decades into centuries; the centuries into decades of centuries. Life has become an endless series of moments that add up to nothing.

It is no wonder that I have slipped the currents of time, that I flit in and out of the eternal

river like a dipping gull.

A bird's shadow appears on the snowy ground ahead. I look up and see a roc, as large as a cloud, soaring across the vale. Well do I remember the flavor of the raptor's meat—lean and wild, with a spicy tang that tickles the roof of the mouth.

I leap up and hurl a splintered pillar at the bird. As swift as a lightning bolt, the shadow flashes across the sky to bury itself in the raptor's breast. The creature screeches and reels. I dive, talons extended to exact revenge, but even a roc is no match for a titan's spear. The life seeps from its wings, and it rolls over to plummet toward me in a limp bundle of feathers.

But the gods would deny me even this simple feast. As the bird's shadow sweeps across my head, the great carcass dissolves into glimmering golden twinkles. A cold, tingling energy seeps into my body. Black, incorporeal feathers sprout along the edges of my arms, and my feet change into the talons of a great, shadowy raptor. Overwhelmed by the urge to launch myself into the sky, I beat the air with my umbral wings and rise into the purple twilight.

Thus is the *shadowroc* born, and still I have not decided whether it is the gift of the gods or their curse. How I long to flee this valley! How I yearn to soar over distant lands and see what has become of the world my brothers and I ruled!

Now I am with them again: Nicias and Masud, dynast of cloud giants and khan of fire giants, and also Vilmos, paramount of storm giants, Ottar, jarl of frost giants, and others too numerous to name. We stand beside the bubbling waters of the Well of Health, in the longest and most majestic colonnade of Bleak Palace, the largest and most exalted of the citadels of the Sons of Annam.

I have slipped far into the past, to that fateful moment I live again and again, to that moment I have already endured a thousand times and am doomed to suffer ten thousand times more. My brothers will not meet my gaze, and I know it falls to me alone to save Ostoria from our mother's faithless treachery. I feel the Mother Queen's rumbling approach, and the poison is quick from my hand to the well.

Othea arrives, her shadow plunging the entire colonnade into twilight. She is as large as a mountain, with hips like hillocks and a bosom of craggy buttresses. Her eyes are black, like caves, and her white hair billows off her head like a plume of snow.

I bid my two-headed servant, the ettin, to carry a chalice of water to Othea, but she will not drink. Her craggy mouth twitches at the corners, and she declares my brothers will drink with her. My mind fills with a white haze, thoughts sailing through it like wind-driven snow. A warning to my brothers would be a warning to Othea. Perhaps she knows what I have done? Is she testing me, to see if I will sacrifice my brothers to poison her?

I must. I will play this game to the end. Othea is the wife who cuckolds her husband, who loves her paramours' bastard races more than she loves us, who would give our empire to the children of her lovers.

I command my servant to bring chalices for my guests, and with my own hand I fill each cup. The tray shakes in the ettin's grasp. The ettin knows what I have poured into the well, but neither head speaks. They carry the goblets to my guests. I watch my brothers drink.

Yes, Othea drank too. I have slipped the moment again. I am once more the shadowroc, flying back and forth in the Vale, a lump of ice where my heart should be. The sensation is very clear to me, even thousands of years later; as my brothers fell dead, the blood in me

veins turned to half-frozen slush. I began to shiver uncontrollably, my skin grew icy and numb, and the tears rolling down my cheeks stung like windblown sleet. I thought I had saved Ostoria.

Of course, I was wrong. Othea had already laid her curse on me, as she told me with her last, rattling breaths: her shadow will lie over Bleak Palace forever, filling me with a cold, sick regret for what I have done. I am free to leave, but when I do—this is the true treachery—when I do, I will become mortal. I will grow old and infirm; eventually I will die. The choice is mine: to spend eternity in cold twilight, or to sacrifice my immortality.

I have endured longer than Mother expected, I am sure.

It has not been easy. I have sat paralyzed for whole centuries, staring at a single stone between my feet, caught in the grip of a despair so profound that I remained in Othea's shadow only because I lacked the will to flee. But I *did* endure, and now I know I was never truly alone. The gods were watching over me; it was they who kept my feet rooted to the stones when I could think of no reason to remain. They have decreed a special destiny for me, and the time is close when I will fulfill their purpose.

I can tell, for they are speaking to me again. Your voices are ringing in my head, and the message is growing clear:

"Please, whatever you desire—but I beg you, spare them. Save my little ones..."

"... you understand what we want..."

Yes, I understand. The world is full of evil—evil that has arisen from the destruction of Ostoria. The task the gods have set before me is clear: I must save Toril. I must reestablish the Empire of Giants and restore harmony to the world.

But I cannot rule this empire myself. After my mistake—I did not hesitate to poison my brothers, but it *was* a mistake—I am not fit. The king must be someone destined to rule, whose veins flow the divine right of dominion. It is my duty to ensure that he is born.

I know who the mother is to be.

"Bring princess here?" The question comes from Goboka, a foolish ogre who has come to my vale seeking the powers of a shaman. "What princess?"

Goboka stands before me: a tiny, loutish figure lost in the vastness of my audience hall. I sit upon my throne, cloaked in a magic mantle of purple shadow. I have forgotten why I started concealing myself from mortal visitors—perhaps it was shame over my fall—but the habit has served me well. The giants have come to think of me as a sort of sacred spirit, and they do my bidding as if by divine command.

"The princess will ... be born next ... year," I explain, barely forcing the words out. I have managed to slip through time to the exact moment of Goboka's visit, and I must strain to explain what I want. Time builds a certain momentum as it rushes forward, and changing its course—even when the moment is recent—is no easy matter. "You must ... bring her here no later than ... her nineteenth birthday."

Again, your voices:

"Why us? What have we done ...?"

"... she's a beautiful filly, but for that price ..."

"There are plenty of women who would ..."

No! Only her. Only Brianna of Hartwick may bear the child! She is descended of Annam's last son, who was ordained by the All Father to become king of giants and rule Ostoria with

wisdom and justice. True, Othea robbed the child of his birthright—but she did not kill the seed. The seed lives on, awaiting but a wisp of divine breath to bring it to life again.

I will be that wisp.

“I beg your pardon,” says Julien, the ettin’s handsome head.

We are standing together, my servant and I, in the moments before they are to leave Twilight forever. Beside us bubble the black waters that once we called the Well of Health but have since named the Pool of Despair. Goboka has failed—through the eyes of my eager familiar, I have seen Brianna’s bloody axe and watched his headless body sink beneath mountain mire—and I have just told my servant what I expect of them.

“You can’t ask that of us!” Julien insists. “Othea cursed us, too. If we go after the princes we’ll die!”

I nod my head sadly. “Someday—but not until you grow old.” I give the ettin a suit of magical armor I have forged for their misshapen body, and also a vial of powder I have mixed to ensure their success. “The armor will disguise you as a handsome human prince, and the powder will make Brianna fall in love with you.”

“Why we need magic powder for that?” demands Arno, the ettin’s ugly head. “Any woman will love us!”

Love.

Is it not love that licenses treachery? This is so, and for me more than others. Do you think it is for my own sake that I poisoned the Mother Queen? Or for myself that I abide the murky prison? I endure for the sons and daughters of my dead brothers.

The mother-murderer suffers for the good of Toril.

Lanaxis the Chosen perseveres so that the giants may set the world to rights—and the time is nigh when they shall. True, the ettin died, but it would be wrong to say that he failed. He did better than Brianna knows; better, even, than I should have expected.

Now I stand on my palace balcony, my vacant gaze fixed on the icy wastes beyond the balustrade. But it is not the dusk-stained snows I see, nor the wind’s cold hiss to which I listen. In the window of Brianna’s throne room—the princess has become queen, but it would be foolish to ask me when—in the window perches my pet, his keen eyes and sharp ears serving me as his talons never could.

The queen’s belly is swollen with child. Before her looms a milky-eyed firbolg with a mane of flyaway hair and a pelt of white beard.

“I have dreamed your birthing,” he says. “You will bear two sons, one handsome and one ugly. It would be better for the Ice Spires if the ugly one never has a name.”

Brianna’s knuckles whiten. The change is almost imperceptible, but the eyes of my familiar are too keen to miss it “I am to kill my child—on your word?”

“Majesty, I am sorry. If the ugly one grows to manhood, the giants will fill the Clearwhisper with the blood of ’kin and men.”

“I, too, have dreamed.” Brianna’s voice is sharp with anger. Good. “But not of twins and wars. I have dreamed of a land ruled by children—”

“But Majesty, you’re no seer! Your dream has no meaning!”

The queen rises, glaring. “In Hartsvale, my dreams are the *only* ones that have meaning!”

Your dreams and mine, Brianna. Your dreams and mine.

Gorge of the Silver Wyrn

Tavis Burdun felt the detonation before he heard it: a faint quiver in the soles of his feet followed instantly by a feeble shock wave breaking against his back. A muffled *karump* rolled up the gorge from someplace far behind him, sweeping last night's snowfall off the craggy precipices, and he smelled whiffs of some mordant, caustic fume. There was a slight lull, then a deafening crack as an enormous ice curtain broke free of its cliff and crashed down on the far side of Wyrn River.

"Halt the Company of the Royal Snow Bear!" Tavis boomed, addressing the long column of warriors ahead. Even without the roar of shattering ice, he would have had to yell. A fierce boreal wind had been howling down the gorge since dawn, filling the canyon with a whistling keen as eerie and cold as a banshee's wail. "Halt the horse lancers! Halt the footmen and front riders!"

As the company sergeants relayed the commands forward, Tavis turned and looked back down the canyon, raising his hand to halt the elegant sleighs coming toward him. He saw nothing unusual, only the icy, rutted road that the queen's entourage had followed into the dusky Gorge of the Silver Wyrn. To one side of the route lay the broad ribbon of Wyrn River's frozen surface, with a sheer granite cliff looming above the far bank. To the other side rose a steep, craggy slope flecked with the stumps of a felled pine forest. A web of precarious footpaths laced the barren hillside, stringing together the rock heaps that spilled from the mouths of the canyon's fabled silver mines. Atop a few of the mine dumps stood a handful of tiny figures, weary miners who had crawled from their dank holes to watch the queen's procession. If they felt any concern over the muffled blast, their motionless forms did not betray it.

The royal sleigh, the first in the procession, continued to come toward Tavis. It was drawn by the queen's favorite horse, Blizzard, a white-flecked mare with a snowy mane and disposition as fierce and unpredictable as her namesake. The beast did not halt until she reached Tavis's side, where she cast an angry glare into his eyes and snorted sour-smelling steam into his face. He grabbed the horse's bridle and pushed her head away, then fixed his attention on the sleigh's fur-swaddled driver. The young man was a lanky border scout with a yellow beard, twinkling gray eyes, and a touch of larceny in his ready smile.

"Avner, keep a taut rein on the Queen's Beast," Tavis advised, calling the petulant mare by his favorite nickname. "I don't like her look."

Before the young scout could reply, a muffled voice sounded behind the fleece curtain that enclosed the sleigh's passenger compartment. "Tavis? What was that horrible crash?"

"Falling ice, milady."

A mittened hand drew the curtain aside, revealing the striking form of Tavis's wife, Queen Brianna. She was a tall, big-boned woman with robust features and a chin as strong as a man's. Even her white fur cloak could not conceal the fact that she was enormously pregnant. She filled three-quarters of the booth, with a belly so swollen she could barely close her coat.

There were dark circles under her eyes, for her condition made sleep difficult, and her cheeks were puffy and red from the bitter cold—but Tavis hardly noticed these flaws. He saw only her maternal radiance, the most ravishing of any beauty.

“Falling ice?” Brianna asked. “It sounded more like a falling mountain, Lord Scout.”

Tavis pointed at the enormous ice blocks scattered along the far bank of Wyrms River. “There was some sort of blast behind us. It shook an ice curtain off the canyon wall.” He nearly had to yell to make himself heard over the wind. “The road’s not blocked, but we shouldn’t go on until I know what happened.”

“In that case, we may continue.” The speaker rode into view and stopped his gray stallion on the far side of Brianna’s sleigh. He was the earl of the Storming Gorge, Radborne Wynn, a stout old man wrapped in a cloak of silver ermine. With a tuft of ice-caked beard and a long mane of gray hair, he looked as august and feral as the mountain goats that roamed the canyons of his wind-blasted barony. “A tunnel wizard’s spell caused the blast”

“You told me there would be no mining magic while Brianna is in the canyon!” Tavis barked. “Didn’t you issue the command?”

Radborne responded with an icy glare. “The wizard responsible will be severely punished, Lord High Scout,” he said. “I assure you, there is no need to speak to me in such tones.”

The high scout clamped his jaw shut and looked away, running his eyes over the craggy slopes as though he had not heard the comment. He had learned not to apologize to nobles—such overtures were interpreted as signs of weakness—but the earl had a point. Tavis had been anxious and short-tempered the entire journey—though with good reason, he thought.

The earl’s miners had struck a rich new vein deep in the gorge, and with the royal reserves depleted dry by three years of war against the giants, the treasury needed the extra silver. Unfortunately, the deposit could not be mined until Brianna blessed it. An ancient tradition held that Skoraeus Stonebones would swallow anyone who took ore from an unconsecrated vein, and tunnel wizards considered their calling dangerous enough without incurring the wrath of the stone giant god. So despite her delicate condition, Brianna had undertaken a difficult winter journey that would bring her within eight leagues of a fire giant stronghold at the canyon’s far end. As the lord high scout of Hartsvale and the first defender of her majesty, the queen, Tavis would have been remiss in his duties if he were not worried.

The high scout tried to steady his nerves by reminding himself that he had taken every possible precaution. The fifteen horse lancers of the Royal Snow Bear Company sat fifty paces up the canyon, in front of a roadside mine portal, their white chargers snorting steam and their pennon flags of their posted lances snapping in the wind. Ahead of the riders stood a hundred pikemen armored in frost-rimed breastplates. In front of the footmen, there was a contingent of swift, lightly armored front riders. A rearguard of six lancers and twenty footmen followed behind the royal entourage, while several bands of border scouts patrolled ahead, behind, and to both sides of the procession.

Tavis could do nothing more to ensure his wife’s safety, but still he was plagued by the incessant sensation that he had overlooked some lurking danger.

Perhaps he was worried about the firbolg seer, Galgadayle. The old prophet had not bothered the queen since last spring, but Tavis doubted that had been the end of the matter. The fellow’s dreams were never wrong, and everyone in the Ice Spires knew it. Twice Galgadayle’s prophecies had saved entire tribes, once when he foresaw a landslide that

engulfed a verbeeg village, and another time when he predicted a flood that deluged fomorian cave. If the seer claimed that one of the queen's twins would grow up to lead the giants against the northlands, there would be no shortage of people trying to put the babe to death. It did not even matter that the queen's own priest had divined the contents of her womb and discovered that she had only one child inside. Given the choice of believing Galgadayne or the imperious Simon of Stronmaus, most people would choose the beloved seer.

Even Tavis had his doubts. Like a knelling bell, Galgadayne's prophecy echoed through his dreams at night, woke him at dawn, and tolled through his mind all day long. Firbolgs could not lie. If the seer claimed to have dreamed ill about the royal offspring, then he had. But why had he seen twins, while the queen's priest divined but a single child?

After a few moments of being ignored, Earl Wynn grew impatient "If we hurry, we can still reach the Silver Citadel before twilight." He cast a nervous eye at the crooked sliver of winter sky hanging over the canyon. Although it was barely two hours past noon, dusk was already beginning to darken the gray clouds. "I'm sure her majesty will appreciate a hot meal and a warm hearth this even—"

An enormous subterranean boom cut the sentence short. The road bucked, and Blizzard whinnied, her voice as shrill as the wind. The big mare reared against her harness rods, lifting the front of the royal sleigh high into the air. Tavis leapt past her slashing hooves and grabbed her bridle. He jerked the startled creature back to all fours, already casting an angry glance in Radborne's direction.

"Earl, do *any* of your tunnel wizards heed your commands? One miscreant is bad enough but two are—"

A deafening roar erupted behind the high scout, drowning out his complaint. The ground trembled beneath his feet, and a blast of hot wind scorched his neck. The same mordant fumes that he had sniffed earlier filled the canyon with a caustic, acrid stench. Tavis spun around and saw an immense tongue of flame lashing from the mine portal beside the road. Inside the inferno he glimpsed the writhing, wraithlike shapes of rearing chargers and flailing riders, then he was half-blinded by the glare and had to look away. Over the horrible crackling of the fire came the squeal of burning horses and the howls of dying men.

Blizzard neighed wildly and shied away from the blast. Only Tavis's grip on her bridle kept the mare from spinning away and toppling the royal sleigh. She reared, jerking the high scout off his feet. He came down hard on the icy road, then lay on his back, struggling to hang on to the bridle as Blizzard whipped her head to and fro. He twisted his hand into the leather and pulled. Although a runt by the standards of his race, Tavis was still a firbolg. His strapping arms were more than strong enough to manhandle a creature as small as a horse.

Tavis pulled Blizzard's nose to within reach of his free hand, then pinched her nostrils shut. The mare's eyes flared, but she quieted instantly. The high scout returned to his feet and looked back toward the sleigh, where Avner sat blanched and wild-eyed, cursing the Queen Beast under his breath. Brianna sat far back in the passenger compartment, gripping the handrails so tightly that her knuckles were white. Her complexion had turned pale, and the shadow of a grimace lingered on her face.

"Milady, are you injured?" Tavis asked. "Did that jolt—"

"I'm pregnant, not feeble." Brianna glanced over the scout's head, then hissed, "Hiatea has"

mercy!”

For the first time, Tavis noticed that the deafening roar behind him had been replaced by the hiss and pop of melting ice. The searing heat had yielded to the flesh-numbing cold of a deep winter, and the acrid stench of the explosion had been swept down the canyon by the fierce boreal gale. A few of the wounded had raised their voices to shriek in eerie harmony with the wailing wind, but most were too stunned to do more than groan.

The three closest horse lancers had already struggled to their feet and were calling to their mounts, which were clambering up the steep hillside as fast their hooves could climb. More riders lay scattered across the road, their flesh as black as their scorched armor. Despite the terrible burns, several men were crawling over the hissing ice to their charred horses, already drawing the daggers that would put the loyal beasts out of misery. A huge plume of yellow smoke was billowing from the mine portal beside the road. The fumes were so thick that Tavis could not see the coughing, confused footmen on the other side of the cloud.

Behind Tavis, Avner gasped, “Milady, no! You’re the queen!”

“I’m also Hiatea’s high priestess.” Tavis turned to see his wife climbing out of her sleigh, her gaze fixed on the groaning soldiers ahead. “And those men are suff—”

Brianna’s eyes rolled back in their sockets, then she groaned sharply. She clenched her teeth and grabbed her abdomen with both hands.

Tavis bolted to her side, catching her in his arms. “The baby!”

He lifted Brianna back into the sleigh, then cast a wary eye toward the yellow smoke boiling out of the mine ahead. He did not relish the thought of his pregnant wife passing through those caustic fumes, but he cared less for the idea of watching her give birth in the open. Turning around was out of the question. It would be dark before they could clear the courtiers’ sleighs off the narrow road behind them.

“Avner, close the curtain,” Tavis ordered. “We’ve got to get the queen to the Silver Citadel now!”

“There’s ... no rush,” Brianna gasped. “It’s nothing ... I’ve had these pains before.”

“What?”

The queen let out a slow breath, then sat up. “They probably don’t mean anything, Tavis. Her face no longer appeared anguished, but her cheeks remained pale, and the pain was slowly fading from her eyes. “I’ve been having them now and again.”

“And you didn’t tell me?” Tavis growled. “When we left Castle Hartwick, you must have known your time was near!”

“I knew no such thing—and I still don’t,” Brianna retorted. “It could be another year before I give birth—we really have no way to tell, do we?”

The high scout could not argue. The queen had been pregnant more than three years already, since just after the war broke out. Tavis had not worried for the first two years since firbolg women carried their offspring that long, but he had grown steadily more concerned over the last year. The blood of Brianna’s divine ancestors still ran strong in her veins, and Tavis secretly feared that the three racial stocks of their progeny had combined in some terrible way to prevent the birth—or to make the infant the hideous monster of Galgadyle’s dream.

A low, grating rumble sounded from someplace inside the mine tunnel, then Radborne’s shocked voice echoed off the canyon wall. “F-Fire giants!”

Tavis looked toward the mine, where the large, boulderlike shape of a giant's head protruded from the smoking portal. The brute's ebony face was surrounded by a halo of orange beard and scarlet hair, but the high scout could see little more through the billowing yellow fumes.

Tavis took his bow off his shoulder. At eight feet long, the weapon was not quite as large as the legendary Bear Driller, which had been destroyed three years earlier in a battle against an ancient ettin. The new bow, however, was easily a match for Bear Driller, as it was strung with woven steel and reinforced with the rune-etched ribs of a glacier bear.

"Be ready, Avner." Tavis pulled an arrow from his quiver. It was thicker than most, with red fletching, a stone tip, and runes carved along the shaft. "I'll clear the way."

The high scout was surprised to hear a nervous edge in his voice. Usually, he felt cold and tranquil at the beginning of a battle, unconcerned about anything except maneuvers and tactics. But today his thoughts were a boiling cataract of fear and doubt. Images of his pregnant wife kept appearing in the churning froth inside his head, like a swimmer being swept downstream.

The fire giant squirmed forward until his lanky shoulders came into view, then he thrust his powerful arms out of the mine and dug his fingers into the tunnel's stone collar. He began to pull his torso out of the hole. The ice hissed and turned to steam beneath his breastplate as though the heat of the forge still lingered within his black armor.

Tavis nocked his arrow and pointed the stone tip into the fuming portal, not even bothering to search for a gap in the giant's black armor. The high scout drew his bow, at the same time hissing, "taergsilisaB!" A ruby gleam flared from one of the runes etched into his weapon, then flashed out of existence. He released the bowstring. A sharp clap echoed off the canyon walls, and the arrow flashed away, leaving a blinding streak of crimson between the bow and the tunnel mouth. The shaft flew into the mine, then pierced its target's thick armor with a muffled clang.

The fire giant did not drop dead, for even an arrow driven by the lord high scout's magic bow was not powerful enough to fell such a foe in a single strike. The mighty warrior merely grunted in surprise, then instinctively reached for his wound.

"esiwsilisaB!" Tavis cried, speaking the command word that would activate the runearrow magic.

From inside the mine came a glimmering blue flash and a mighty boom. The fire giant's torso shot out of the portal and plummeted over the steep bank of Wyrms River, trailing a spray of crimson blood from the truncated waist. Blizzard whinnied in alarm, and Tavis grabbed her reins. A muffled crack reverberated deep within the mountain.

There was no opportunity to cry out or to cringe in fear, and even the queen's mare did not have time to rear. The hillside simply folded inward over the tunnel. At the top of the ravine a frozen buttress of stone lost its hold on the canyon wall and came rumbling down the slope. Tavis and Blizzard barely managed to retreat half a dozen steps before the avalanche roared over the mine portal and swallowed the fallen lancers of the Royal Snow Bear Company. The churning mass spread up the road, then spilled over Wyrms River's steep bank and rumbled across the broad ribbon of ice, engulfing the fire giant's truncated corpse and finally crashing against the far side of the canyon.

For a moment, Tavis could do nothing except stare at the mountainous jumble before him.

listening to the dying thunder of the avalanche echo down the crooked gorge. He felt himself shivering in the cold wind and realized that he had broken into a nervous sweat. The landslide had come so close to swallowing his wife's sleigh, and him with it, that he could have reached out with his bow and touched a frost-rimed boulder as large as himself. Even Blizzard seemed stunned by the close call. She stood stiff and motionless at his side, the muscles of her powerful shoulders trembling with fear.

Brianna was the first to speak. "It seems we finally have a name for your new bow, Tavis," she said. "I hereby dub it Mountain Crusher."

"Hear, hear! The giants will need Surtr's own help to dig out of there." Radborne's eyes were fixed on the hillock of stone and ice ahead. The heap rose thirty feet above the mine portal, and the choking yellow plume that had been pouring from the tunnel a moment earlier had now been reduced to a few scattered wisps. "Well done!"

From the other side of the rubble heap came a sergeant's terrified voice: "Your Majesty, Lord Scout?"

"The queen is well!" Tavis yelled back. "What of the footmen?"

"Mostly able. The slide buried a dozen of us," he replied. "What would you have us do?"

"Climb over here," Tavis called. "We're going to need you to carry the queen's sleigh over the avalanche."

The high scout did not even consider abandoning the sleighs to retreat up the canyon. Even if Brianna had been in any condition to ride, they would only find more fire giants coming down the road. The fumes he had sniffed after the first, distant explosion smelled the same as the mordant smoke that had been pouring from the mine ahead. Unless the magic of Radborne's tunnel wizards bore the same odor as fire giant alchemy, it seemed likely that their ambushers had planned to trap the queen between two war parties.

The footmen began to cross the landslide, their armor clanging loudly as they clambered and slipped over the ice-rimed boulders. Tavis relayed orders to the front riders to dismount and wait on the other side of the avalanche in case the queen's party needed to borrow their mounts. While the high scout arranged his wife's escape, Avner unhitched Blizzard and set her free. The trails that laced the canyon walls were too narrow and precarious for sleighs, but the stubborn mare had followed her beloved mistress over paths far more perilous.

Tavis was about to send word for the courtiers to abandon their sleighs when a familiar sharp odor came to him on the wind. He heard a soft crackling, as of a distant fire, then a cry of alarm rose from the back of the column. The high scout turned to see the first of his enemies rounding a bend, about three hundred yards beyond the entourage's rearguard.

The fire giant was a lanky, dark figure that loomed thrice the height of a man. Like the one Tavis had killed a few moments earlier, this brute was armored in steaming black plate. He also wore a massive helmet upon his head and a buckler as large as a table strapped to one forearm. In his other hand, he carried a flaming sword longer than Tavis was tall.

The high scout drew another runearrow from his quiver, but did not nock it. Over the long line of courtier sleighs, he could see that the rearguard's six lancers were already charging the brute. If he used the arrow now, he would catch them in the blast.

The fire giant bellowed his war cry and stomped forward to meet the attack, lowering his buckler to protect his groin from his foes' upturned lances. Behind him, another giant was already stepping around the bend.

The first giant's fiery sword descended on the leading pair of horsemen. The huge black sword struck with a blinding white flare. When the flash faded, the cleaved bodies of horses and riders were tumbling toward their killer's feet in a tangled ball of smoke and blood. The wind grew heavy with the stench of charred flesh.

The surviving riders leapt their horses over the mess, angling their weapons at the enemy's hips. The leading pair splintered their lances against the giant's steel shield, then crashed into his thick legs with a clamorous boom. Even a fire giant could not stand against two chargers at full gallop. The impact knocked the brute's legs from beneath him, and he dropped to the road face first, crushing the horsemen and their mounts beneath his heavy body.

Before the fire giant could recover, the last pair of riders arrived, their weapons pointed at the soft, unarmored flesh at the base of his neck. The momentum of the charge drove the lances deep into the giant's torso, eliciting a scream as thunderous as it was brief, then the mounts crashed into his shoulders. The horsemen flew from their saddles and tumbled down the length of their foe's spine, their armor chiming against his until they skidded off his flanks.

As they struggled to their knees, the next fire giant stepped around the bend and carefully crushed each man beneath his foot. Behind the brute, Tavis could see at least two more giants, and he suspected there was a long line behind them.

The high scout nocked his runearrow.

The palace courtiers began to leap from their sleighs and scurry down the road. Swaddled as they were in thick cloaks of combed fur, they looked like a herd of frightened wolf pups fleeing the slaver's jaws of a snow dragon. Their abandoned draft horses also panicked, turning the road into a churning mass of hysterical beast and man. Sleighs began to plummet over the riverbank and topple along the edge of the road, and such a tumult of terrified shrieking filled the air that it was impossible to separate the human voices from those of the horses.

Tavis aimed at the chest of the leading fire giant, more than three hundred yards away, and hissed the command word that would trigger his bow's magic. A rune flared red and vanished from sight. The high scout released Mountain Crusher's bowstring, and the arrow streaked away, leaving a trail of crimson light above the jumble of abandoned sleighs.

The runearrow pierced the black armor as though it were leather instead of steel. The giant peered down at the fletching that had sprouted in his breastplate, and Tavis could imagine the brute's face scowling in fear and confusion. Fire giant armor was as thick as a dungeon door, hammered from special steel forged only in the fires of their volcano homes. For anything less than a storm giant's spear to pierce it was unthinkable—at least without magic. The fellow reached up to pinch the arrow between his thumb and finger.

"Blast him now!" urged Radborne. "Say the word!"

Tavis remained silent. When the giant tried to extract the runearrow, the butt of the shaft broke off. The warrior's face paled to an ashy charcoal. He turned to face his comrade, pointing at the pinhole in his armor. The second giant in line leaned down to inspect the wound, with a third peering over his shoulder.

"esiwsilisaB!" Tavis cried.

A sapphire light reflected off the slope beside the three giants, then a thunderous boom

shook the canyon. The wounded brute dropped where he was, a smoking hole in his chest. The second giant's head simply vanished in a ball of blue flame. The third survived long enough to cover his mangled face and turn away, then fell over the riverbank and crashed through the ice.

Four more giants stomped around the bend. The footmen of the rearguard formed two wedges and started down the road.

The palace courtiers began to gather around the queen's sleigh, assaulting both Brianna and Tavis with a din of questions and suggestions. The scout quickly found himself trying to keep the frightened crowd at bay as well as watch the giants ahead. He did not notice the arrival of the rest of the Royal Snow Bear Company until a sergeant clanged to a stop at his side.

Tavis turned to the man, a grizzled veteran with a gray beard and bushy black eyebrows. "Get these worthy gentlemen and ladies out of the way," the high scout ordered. "Send the rest of your footmen to reinforce the rearguard."

As the sergeant and his men began to herd courtiers toward the landslide, Tavis took an inventory of his quiver and bow. He had plenty of black-feathered runearrows left, and four runes still remained on Mountain Crusher's lower limb. Unfortunately, those sigils were of little use at the moment. The runes on the upper limb were the ones that made his shafts pierce the fire giants' thick armor, and only two of those remained.

The high scout looked up the canyon. The four fire giants were scuttling down the narrow road, hunched over so that he could barely see their heads and shoulders above the abandoned sleighs. The brutes were hiding behind their bucklers, with the surfaces angled to deflect arrows. They had been careful to space themselves so that Tavis's blasts could not kill more than one at a time.

The rearguard was still a hundred yards from the leader.

Tavis nocked another runearrow. As the main body of the Royal Snow Bear Company pushed through the tangle of abandoned sleighs, the high scout fired at the second of the approaching giants. The magic shaft streaked away, penetrating both buckler and armor with a single loud clang. The high scout spoke his second command word. The blast sent the huge warrior's buckler twirling high into the air, with the arm that had been holding it still attached.

The leading giant cast a nervous glance over his shoulder. He grimaced at the sight of his comrade's mangled carcass, then rose to his full height and charged. Tavis nocked another runearrow, but held his fire. The rearguard's first wedge was already rushing to meet the attack. The three point men brandished battle-axes, and everyone else held long pikes.

The giant closed the distance in three crashing steps. The men in the middle row angled their pikes toward his midsection. He brought his buckler down instantly, sweeping the sharp points aside, and swung his fiery sword into the wedge. A chorus of agonized screams echoed off the cliffs, and the wind was suddenly heavy with the stench of charred flesh. Four severed bodies dropped in midstride.

The wedge continued its charge, the weapons of the rear echelon now rising toward the fire giant's vulnerable loins. Too late, the brute realized his mistake and stepped away, trying in vain to bring his shield back into position. The pikes struck home, and a loud crackle echoed off the walls as several shafts snapped against his steel armor. The giant bellowed in pain and stumbled back, the splintered ends of two wooden poles protruding from the seams in his

armor. The axemen went to work, hacking at his ankles as though felling a tree. The huge warrior toppled to the icy road, crushing three more humans before the survivors swarmed him.

The rearguard's second wedge began its charge, rushing forward to meet the last pair of fire giants. Hoping to spare them the trouble of felling both brutes, Tavis pulled another runearrow and turned Mountain Crusher back down the canyon. The pair had wisely decided not to hide behind their bucklers and were rushing up the road at a full sprint. The high scout drew his bowstring back and aimed at the one in front.

Before he could fire, a bolt of lightning arced away from the queen's sleigh. It struck the leading fire giant with a thunderous bang, burning a terrific hole through his breastplate and the chest it protected. The bolt blasted through the brute's backplate and crackled halfway to the next giant before finally fading.

The high scout shifted his aim to the last fire giant and fired. The shaft took its target high in the breastbone. Tavis uttered the command word. The brute's head disappeared in a blue flash, then his body collapsed in a clanging heap of steel and flesh.

"Well done!" exclaimed Radborne. "You saved my mines!"

"That's a good thing, I suppose," Tavis allowed. "But I was more concerned with the queen's safety."

The high scout turned to face Brianna and found her lying in the bottom of her sleigh clutching her abdomen. Avner was kneeling by her side holding her head. When he looked up to meet Tavis's gaze, his eyes were wide with alarm.

"I think your baby likes the fighting!" he yelled. "He's coming!"

The high scout slung his bow over his shoulder and went to his wife. "Sergeant! I want me here!" he bellowed. "We must carry the queen's sleigh over that landslide!"

The sergeant arrived almost instantly. "Begging your pardon, Lord Scout," he said. "But don't think we'll be having time for that."

Tavis looked up and saw the sergeant pointing down the canyon. Another fire giant was peering around the bend.

Winter Battle

The crushing agony receded as it had come, smoothly and swiftly, and Brianna felt like a door was being lifted off her abdomen. Her broken waters were already growing cool again on her thighs, but the effort of breathing still sent torrents of liquid fire tumbling through her body. Something was wrong. The royal midwife had said there would be no pain when the womb unleashed its flood, yet the queen had not suffered such pain since the ogre Gobok had punched her in the stomach. She felt herself flush with fear, tiny pearls of sweat popping out on her brow and lip. In the bitter cold, the beads froze almost as quickly as they formed.

“Brianna?”

The queen opened her eyes to find Tavis peering at her. His rugged firbolg features were tense with concern, and his eyes were fixed on her lap, where her cloak had opened to reveal a half-frozen stain of thin, milky fluid. Blizzard, now free of her harness, had hooked her chin over the edge of the sleigh to stare at her mistress. Only Radborne, still sitting on his silver stallion, had averted his gaze.

Brianna tugged her coat closed, then, with Avner’s help, pulled herself onto her seat. “The baby’s coming.”

Tavis cringed. “He has a bad sense of timing.”

“*She*,” the queen quipped, hoping the banter would relax her husband. She had never seen Tavis panic, but he looked nervous today—and today, of all days, she needed him calm. “The child is a girl—by royal decree.”

Tavis grinned, but the smile quickly vanished as a fire giant’s angry bellow dropped out of the wind. The death screams of several men echoed off the canyon wall, and the reek of charred flesh filled Brianna’s nose: a sick, rancid odor that made her jaws ache with the urge to vomit. Then came the clatter of snapping pikes, more yelling, and the booming crash of a collapsing giant. The Royal Snow Bear Company had felled its next foe.

Blizzard snorted anxiously and stomped her foot, no doubt urging the queen to take flight before it was too late. Tavis stepped onto the sleigh’s running board, his ruddy complexion now as white as Brianna’s cloak, and reached for her.

“No. See to the battle.” It was the hardest command the queen had ever given. All her maternal instincts howled for her to find a quiet and safe place to give birth—but there was no safe place, not with the fire giants’ attacking. She pushed Tavis away. “Go and stop our enemies.”

“I’m the first defender,” Tavis objected. “My duty is to see you to safety, if I can.”

“Then you mean to abandon my mines?” Radborne’s voice was indignant.

Tavis gave the earl a cold glare. “Your silver mines mean nothing to me.”

“But they mean everything to Hartsvale—and I want you to save them,” Brianna said. She switched her gaze to Radborne. “Earl, you will fetch my midwife, then assemble an escort in case I must flee the battle.”

Radborne scowled. “These *are* my mines,” he objected. “My place is—”

“Gentlemen, I am not asking your opinions.” Brianna cast admonishing glances at both Radborne and Tavis. “I am issuing commands.”

Tavis raised his brow, then set his jaw and took a runearrow from his quiver. To Avner, he said, “Promise me this, Scout: no matter what happens to me, you won’t let the giants have Brianna or the baby.”

Avner nodded grimly. “On my honor.”

“Tavis, nothing’s going to happen to you.” Brianna tried to sound confident. “That is my promise.”

“In battle, even a queen cannot guarantee such a thing,” Tavis replied. He kissed Brianna, then turned to face Radborne. “Earl, we have our orders.”

With that, the high scout turned away and rushed off. He crossed the road and angled up the mountainside, then traversed the slope above the main body of the Royal Snow Bear Company. Now that Brianna had persuaded him to concentrate on the battle at hand, the firbolg seemed completely in his element. He ran along the frost-rimed slope with bow in hand, vaulting ice-draped boulders and sidestepping snow-capped stumps without taking his eyes off the fire giants. Tavis was known as the Lion of Hartwick for his great size and hunting prowess, but Brianna thought of him more as a sleek, noble bighorn ram. He was powerful, swift, and agile without being bloodthirsty or cruel, and he possessed a certain feral dignity rare in human men. If something happened to her husband today—the queen stopped herself, for there was no use even considering that possibility. Tavis Burdun would never fall, not in this battle, nor any other.

As the high scout moved up the canyon, a steady war din started to build: screaming footmen, bellowing giants, the crackle of flaming swords and snapping pikes, steel clanging against steel. Other smells merged with the sick stench of burning warriors: coppery blood, throat-scorching brimstone, the fetor of spilled entrails. Brianna’s stomach grew hollow and queasy. She forced herself to breathe through her mouth. She climbed out of her sleigh, holding on to Blizzard’s snowy mane while she peered up the canyon.

Two hundred yards away, the road was becoming a river of pain and death as a long line of fire giants waded into a swirling current of knee-high soldiers. The queen could see hundreds of footmen swarming around the first three foes, hacking with gleaming battle-axes at their ankles, or jabbing pikes into the seams between thick plates of ebony armor. The giants were fighting back viciously, clearing broad swaths of road with every swing of their fiery swords. Brianna counted a dozen more brutes coming down the canyon to join the battle, and she could not even see the end of their line.

Tavis was already a hundred yards up the canyon, above a jumble of courtier sleighs lying abandoned along the roadside. He was less than twenty paces from the leading fire giant, easily within bow range; from that distance, he could sink an arrow into each of a giant’s eyes before the dead body hit the ground. Nevertheless, the high scout continued forward, traversing the slope well above the reach of his enemies. The queen saw one giant try to climb after him, but a thicket of pikes instantly drove up beneath the warrior’s loin apron. The brute thundered in pain and collapsed into the battle swarm.

Brianna felt her hand drifting toward her sleigh, where the satchel containing her special components lay on the bench. She allowed herself to pick up the bag, but restrained the urge to reach inside. Through long experience, the queen had learned the wisdom of saving her

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