



Songs of Deep Green

Dale B. Mattheis

© Copyright Dale B. Mattheis 2010

CHAPTER ONE

Departures

“Here it comes, Giffer! Run fer it!”

Large hailstones rang his steel helmet like a church bell as the corporal of the guard dashed inside a turret perched high on the stone parapets of Rugen. Leaning his spear against the wall, he cautiously peered out a narrow slit that faced south across farmland. At that moment, a vicious wind gust drove a bucketful of rain through the slit and square in his face.

“Heh, heh. Oh my, ain’t you a sight.”

“Just you shut up, Harky,” Giffer snarled, wiping water from his eyes, “or you’ll be pullin’ night duty ‘til you learns to!”

Laughter faded to a discrete rumble, but Harky and several guards who had also taken sanctuary in the turret exchanged winks. Ambling to a larger lancet window that faced north, one protected from the storm, Harky examined the city far below. Violent squalls lashed thatched-roof buildings that rambled over numerous hills, and bursts of lightning illuminated glistening cobblestone streets decorated with growing windrows of hail. In a flashback, Harky recalled those same streets slippery with blood.

“Thet were some set-to, Giffer,” Harky offered, shaking his head in recollection. “You was stationed here when them there Salchek come piling over the top, es I recall.”

Mollified by the recognition, Giffer stationed himself in the doorway. He pointed at a section of wall some yards to the east.

“Hunnerds of the buggers come screaming up them ladders, ah’ll tell you. Captain Rengeld fought ‘em fer every step, but we was pushed down into the streets and never would a stopped ‘em if Lord Carl hadn’t let loose them ‘bombs’ of his. Gods and demons! Never seen the like, an’ never want to agin! Why, they was bodies flying ever which way, and thet ram o’ theirs was no more than kindling after he tossed the second one.”

“Saved the city, they say.”

“Believe it,” Giffer shot back to one of the guards. “Them two gents done saved our necks fer shore.”

“I seen Lord Jeffrey when he got back from down south on the prairie,” a pimply-faced youth ventured, “an’ ain’t likely to fergit it. Him an’ thet troop o’ northern folk looked fit fer no more than buryin’. Cain’t unnerstand how they got back yere at all.”

“Three hunnerd wains in thet Salchek caravan from what ah here tell, not to mention the packhorses ‘en cavalry, but they flat fought ‘em to a standstill,” Giffer solemnly stated. “Kin you jest think what would’a happened if them buggers had won through to Rugen?”

“Gods save us. We’d shorely be looking down at ‘em right now, or worse.”

Somber quiet settled on the men as they reflected. The spring storm spewed lightning, rain and hail, but it seemed as nothing.

Occasional hailstones rattled off thick windowpanes protecting a room perched high under the eaves of a spacious home. Lightning strobed in dazzling bursts, briefly revealing a canopied bed set in the middle of the room. Mounds of bedding disguised the bed's two occupants, but their heads were visible nestled together on a broad pillow. Spread over the pillow in disorderly grandeur, a wealth of red hair blazed red with each flash. The thunderstorm spit a few more lightening bolts and swept beyond city walls, leaving a residue of gentle rain and the promise of a fresh-scrubbed dawn.

Some hours later, a man swung his legs out of the bed and sat up. Big yawns gave way to convulsive shivers. Shambling over to a window, Jeff Friedrich stooped down so he could look out. Moving his head up and down, he tried to find a distortion-free section of glass.

"Whoa. Is it possible?"

He unlatched the window and heaved the massive window frame free of the stone casement. It grated open only an inch or two, but swung wide with the next push. Leaning far out so he could see, Jeff peered upwards.

"I can't believe it. Blue sky."

Maybe six feet tall, he turned toward the bed.

"Zimma, you've got to see this."

A growl was his only answer. A grin tugging at his lips, Jeff slipped back into bed and snuggled up against Zimma's back. Brushing away locks of red hair from her ear, he whispered, "Time to rise and shine, oh Flower of the North."

Muttering under her breath, she buried her head under the pillow.

"Don' want to get up. Go away!"

"We'll see about that, you gorgeous creature," Jeff murmured.

Easing the covers away, he traced a complicated path along her backbone with lips and hands. By the time he reached her waist she was moving restlessly, but pulled the pillow tighter over her head.

"Going to be that way, are we?"

Jeff moved his hands lower.

In a matter of minutes the pillow went flying as she exploded upright with a gasp. Halfway irritated, she pounced on him. Shortly, Zimma was thoroughly awake and laughing.

Chuckling with satisfaction at her response, Jeff took Zimma's hand and pulled her from the bed.

"Take a look outside, sweetheart. It's a beautiful day."

Her hair a tousled mop, Zimma allowed herself to be led over to the window. She stretched languorously, obediently looked outside, and then threw Jeff a look that set his hormones to humming.

"Now, lover, you may finish what you have started."

Later, reluctant to break the mood, they lingered over a second cup of makla in an alcove of the parlor. While the makla bean produced a drink quite distinct from the terran brew, Jeff persisted in terming it coffee. Sipping reflectively, Jeff admired the effect of bright sunlight on the park-like setting visible through a window. The home belonged to Ethbar, counselor to Imogo, Sovereign of the Northern Kingdom.

While Jeff and Zimma could have easily afforded to purchase their own home, or live on the estate he had been granted by Imogo, they couldn't bear the thought of leaving Ethbar. He had become like a grandfather to them, and had made it quite clear that he wished them to remain as family.

Smiling mischievously, Zimma leaned over to straighten an errant lock of Jeff's reddish-chestnut hair.

"I had expected you to leave early in order to attend another of Rengeld's planning sessions, love, although I am delighted you did not."

"Yes, well, I was going to," Jeff replied with distasteful grimace, "but when I saw the sun shining I couldn't bear the thought of being cloistered in that dark, gray room. I think planning for war in the south can do without me for a day." With exaggerated solemnity, Jeff bowed low over Zimma's hand. "May I have the honor of escorting the gorgeous Lady Friedrich to the lair of her redoubtable father?"

"You may indeed, sir. Never was a woman so honored."

Donning sweaters they strolled toward Rugen's warehouse district, the sun still not far above city walls. Stone and half-timbered buildings crowded the winding, narrow street, and second floor balconies encroached even farther. Days of incessant rain had scoured the cobblestones of dirt and the central sewage channel was running clean. Rays of sunlight that filtered through to the street lent a leisurely atmosphere to the morning. Numerous citizens were up and about, heading for work, markets, or whatever else gave excuse to take the sun.

Jeff and Zimma wound a serpentine course through bustling pedestrians. By and large, conversation they overheard centered on the recent festival celebrating victory in the North's first confrontation with Salchek forces. As they passed two couples that were deep in conversation, one of the women recognized Jeff and curtsied.

"My lord, I wish to congratulate you and Lady Zimma on your joining. My sister said it was a moving and beautiful ceremony. Best wishes for a happy life together and many children."

"Lady Zimma is a treasure. I am most fortunate to share life with her," Jeff replied gravely. "Thank you for your consideration."

With a small bow Jeff led Zimma on their way, leaving four happy and somewhat flustered people with a new topic to discuss.

Hugging his arm close against her side, Zimma turned a sunny smile on Jeff.

"A treasure, my Lord?"

Stopping, Jeff turned Zimma to face him. His expression was serious.

"You are the center of my life, Zimma. Little of what has happened would have had any real meaning without you." A grin suddenly split his face. "Even though you are an impertinent wench." With that he gently pinched her, eliciting a satisfying squeak.

"Oh, Jeffrey, you are such a trial!"

Jeff dodged away from the elbow aimed at his ribs, and decided he had better change the subject. Zimma had mastered her volcanic temper, but he knew it was there.

"So, how are Belstan's plans proceeding to head west for Hochberg with a caravan? I know you've been working with him to get it organized."

Catching her lower lip with white teeth, Zimma looked worriedly at Jeff, green eyes sparkling in a sunbeam and hair all aflame. The effect was so distracting that Jeff found it hard to pay attention when she spoke.

"Little of import remains to be accomplished. Trade goods are nearly assembled, our new wagons should soon reach completion, and Belstan has employed most of the teamsters required for the journey. I believe he plans on departing within three weeks."

Jeff watched Zimma chew on her lip and waited for the rest of it to come out.

"I have not spoken to you of this, Jeffrey, my mind being in turmoil, but I am most anxious to accompany Belstan."

"That really doesn't come as a surprise," Jeff replied with a reassuring smile. "These last several weeks, you've been casting such dreadfully concerned looks at me. Don't be so worried."

"You do not object?"

“We have been separated far too much, but I know how much effort you put into this venture on the trip west last year. I would have been most surprised had you elected not to go. And who knows? I may well wind up far afield as well. If Malchor is right, we may have a full year free of the Salchek and I will not squander that precious time.”

Zimma grabbed him in a fierce hug.

“I am so happy that you are not upset!”

Other thoughts intruded, and Jeff just shook his head in reply. Some steps farther along the way, he said, “I do hope that one of us will be in Rugen when we learn of Magda, whether it be her presence or word of when we may expect her.”

“And our child.”

Hearing his thoughts expressed in words released a wave of emotion. He recalled the long weeks during his winter march through the Bora Mountains when Magda was the only thing that stood between him and utter spiritual defeat. Her quiet, dedicated loving. It was only after they had been separated for months that Jeff learned Magda was pregnant with his child. The emotion was so powerful that Jeff had to look away or lose it entirely.

Zimma stopped to pull his head down onto her neck, ignoring the stares of interested passersby.

“They will come, my love. My heart informs me they will join us in due time. Before I leave, I will speak at length with father so that our Magda will know a loving reception if she should arrive in our absence.”

When he had regained control of himself, Jeff pulled back but raised her chin and kissed soft lips that trembled with emotion.

“God I love you, Zimma. The only thing that is better than having one child is having two. At this moment all I want is to feel my seed rushing into your body, so...”

Zimma clamped a hand over Jeff's mouth. When he looked into her eyes, he saw whirling sparks of fire accelerating into actinic brightness.

“...so that I may quicken. Yes! Yes! But you must not again speak thusly until we know a secure time! Even now, even here on a public street, my body cries out that it would be freed to embrace your offering and end regret. But to give my body license during a time of war would be sheer folly, and such words as you speak threaten to overwhelm resolve.”

Letting out a shout of frustration, Zimma grabbed Jeff's hand and dragged him into motion. Although he had seen the effect before, Jeff still could not comprehend those brilliant points of light whirling in Zimma's eyes. Their effect was both beautiful and hypnotic. He was also uncertain why Zimma had responded so strongly to what he had said about babies.

“I cannot speak of our wish for children?”

“Yes, of course you might,” Zimma replied, but didn't slow up or loosen her grip on his hand. “What joy there is in the contemplation! But not as you have just done until it is time to conceive. Please show caution in what you say lest I be finally overwhelmed!” She whirled to grip Jeff's arms. “I know you are not of this world, Jeffrey, and how confusing many of our ways must be, but you must trust me in this matter if none other.”

“If I cannot trust you in this matter and all others, then there is no one I will adhere to and our love is ashes. Do you understand this, Lady?”

Zimma looked up into yellow-green eyes that were so severe she shuddered, but she held his gaze and felt a thrill shoot through her body. She took his hand and raised it to her lips.

“And so I am yours forever, Milord.”

Nodding decisively, Jeff put his arm around Zimma's shoulders and they resumed walking. She encircled his waist and rested her head on his shoulder.

Some time later they crossed a high-arched footbridge that spanned the river Vana as it flowed through the city in sweeping curves. Narrow but long boats loaded with produce for market sculled under the bridge as they crossed. They paused for several minutes just to enjoy the sight of boats rafted up waiting to pass under the bridge in turn. The boats were loaded with pyramids of produce that ran the color spectrum, and gondoliers' white shirts and colorful scarves added cheerful grace notes.

Spirits were high from the sunshine, and good-humored conversations seemed to be the order of the day rather than the usual bickering. Moving on, Zimma and Jeff turned onto a stone causeway that paralleled the river. Shortly they entered a large rambling warehouse.

As they stepped into the building's dim interior, their noses were met with a collage of familiar smells—spices, herbs, the musty aroma of cured leather; it was a heady concoction. Voices echoed in the cavernous room as employees hustled bundles toward a loading dock.

Making their way to the back of the building, Zimma and Jeff entered a suite of offices where they encountered Rogelf. Zimma hugged her father enthusiastically.

"We have discussed my journeying with Belstan, Father, and Jeffrey is in agreement."

Heavy-lidded eyes full of contentment, Zimma threw a look at Jeff that made him want to shout for the joy of it.

Rogelf quickly decided that a more serious topic than caravan trips had been discussed, and dwelled for a moment on thoughts of grandchildren.

"Then we are all in agreement." He smiled affectionately at Jeff. "My Lord, how do you fare this day?"

"Just fine, Rogelf, with one exception. I would much rather you called me Jeeffy. Would you do me this favor?"

"It is my pleasure—Jeeffy. Now, like the times in Khorgan, we are all together and great plans are underway. An exciting time and one of our own making, not thrust upon us by the like of those idiot city counselors."

"Your plans are to return east and continue developing trading stations?"

"Indeed. Belstan will soon leave for Hochberg in the west, and I will depart shortly thereafter. Ostfel has made a good recovery from his arrow wound, but will remain behind to run our affairs and complete his healing. There is so much to be done to the east! The minerals! The furs! I only wish I could have left last week."

With that and a distracted farewell, Rogelf was out the door at a call from one of his men.

"I had better be on my way as well, Zimma. Gaereth, Carl and I are going to meet for breakfast. Will you join us?"

"I would like that very much," Zimma replied with a regretful smile, "but cannot. There are so many small matters that must be concluded that I fear my day will be consumed, as you would say, shuffling papers." Zimma held her lips up to be kissed. "I will anticipate your return."

Jeff gradually shifted mental gears while threading his way through streets that were now crowded. He dodged a hurrying knot of people, and thought, So much still hangs in the balance. Mulling it over, Jeff had to admit he was feeling at loose ends in a big way.

Rengeld, Captain of the City Guard, had the defense force well in hand and was actively recruiting more soldiers in the process of forming an army capable of campaigning in the south. Even though Rengeld frequently sought his opinion, Jeff was under no illusion that his input was indispensable. He had already conveyed what he knew of military organization on Earth, drawing elaborate charts in the process. And Imogo was proving relentless in support of all activity that would improve his kingdom's chances of survival.

The clean streets brought an image of Carl Jorgenson to mind, accompanied by a smile. Carl had been the prime mover in organizing a garbage collection service. They had become best friends after meeting at the university in Seattle, but their experiences on Aketti had bonded them in ways neither could explain. A biologist and chemist, Carl's lighthearted manner often served to counteract Jeff's tendency to brood.

Carl may be easygoing, Jeff thought, but he sure knows how to get a job done. Just cleaning the streets of garbage has boosted morale a hundred percent. And his hospital has saved hundreds of lives. At least Carl has plenty of things to keep him busy, Jeff decided. What about me? What am I going to do?

The northern tribes of nomadic people, which Jeff had welded into a confederation and named the Alemanni, had returned home to see to their affairs. Before leaving they had made their tribal counsel, established during the siege of Rugen, a permanent affair. The Alemanni had taken the first step toward forming a nation. They also had an army to pull together for the southern campaign.

Halric was firmly in charge of the tribal counsel, Jeff mused, and proving to have considerable political skills. Gurthwin, Halric's advisor, and Ethbar had hit it off so well that the latter was planning a trip north to Valholm later in the summer to confer on future strategy. He had decided that Imogo could get along without his counsel just fine. Jeff smiled. Of course, that would also get Ethbar out of Rugen so he could roam a bit.

He could accompany Ethbar, Jeff thought, but the idea left him cold. He would be totally isolated that far north. There were so many unanswered questions concerning the Salchek. He needed information! What were they going to do? Try and mount another siege this summer?

That seemed as unlikely now as it had earlier in the day. The Salchek had lost an entire army during the first siege. Also, information from the south indicated they were having a hard time hanging on to what they already had. Damn it, Jeff thought, it may not be this summer, but they are going to be back. There has to be some way to keep them from mounting another offensive.

Jeff's stream of thought began to firm up as he turned in at their favorite inn, the Golden Bung. As it often did, the sign depicting a tiny bung and massive hammer drew a chuckle. Inside, a brief glance at the patrons revealed he was the first to arrive. Ordering a mug of the Aketti version of coffee, he huddled over it with elbows resting on the heavy trestle table. Sorting ideas, the background rumble of conversation and clinking pottery faded.

Suddenly, someone thumped him on the back.

"Hey, pip-squeak! Wake up!"

Jeff jerked upright, spilled coffee onto the table, and nearly tipped his chair over backward.

"Dammit, Carl, don't do that!"

Gratified by Jeff's response, Carl chortled, "Someone's got to keep you in the present tense, boyo." Carl turned to Gaereth, who was grinning ear to ear. "What'd I tell you?"

"Will you dickwads sit down and shut up for a minute so we can get some food going here?"

Once hunger was satisfied, they pushed wooden platters back and ordered another round of coffee. Jeff eventually broke the contented silence.

"Gaereth, we haven't had a lot of time to talk recently. How do things stand with your plans to attend the Alarai conference on Skene, then head for Earth?"

"Moving along faster than I would like. I've enjoyed these last weeks more than I can tell you. I'm not really sure why the meeting was called, but it promises to be serious."

“Maybe a strategy meeting about the mess on Earth?”

“That's what I hope,” Gaereth replied, turning a troubled look toward Carl, “That's what should be expected, but there's something else going on that no one is willing to talk to me about.”

“It doesn't take a genius to see it has you worried.”

“I'm more than worried, Jeff. When our people refuse to open their minds while speaking telepathically, something is seriously wrong.”

Jeff glanced at Carl before returning his attention to Gaereth.

“Something to do with the fact that you're the only Alarai that's shown up around here?”

“Yeah,” Gaereth muttered, “Something like that.”

Jeff examined his grandfather's face closely. It was rare to see such a troubled expression. However, Gaereth's features quickly cleared.

“Okay, you fellows know my plans. Jeff, what about yours?”

“All our bases in Rugen and farther north are well covered. I could help, but I'm not really needed. Zimma's going to be gone with Belstan, Rogelf will be out east, you'll be God knows where, and even Ethbar is heading north. Everyone is on the move, but I couldn't come to grips with what I needed to do until this morning.”

“And that is?”

“There has to be a way to keep things stirred up down south and the Salchek so busy they can't possibly free up an army to send north. It all came together while I was walking over here.” Jeff took a deep breath. “I'm going to head west with Belstan and Zimma, then charter something capable of sailing to Zomar.”

Gaereth sat back in astonishment.

“Zomar? Why Zomar?”

An excited gleam leaped into Carl's eyes, and he leaned forward as Jeff continued his train of thought.

“From what Belstan and Ethbar have said, Zomarians despise the Salchek and didn't give up an inch of ground during the last invasion. If I could work out an alliance, or in some way get them to mount an offensive, think about the hell they could raise with the Salchek. We will probably get our army group organized in time to march south next spring, but what if we don't? If Zomar enters the war, that would buy plenty of time. Shoot, just the threat of Zomar going on the offensive would lock the Salchek in place.”

“The Alarai haven't gotten down that way for several centuries, Jeff,” Gaereth said doubtfully, “but everything I know about Zomarians indicates they are totally disinterested in the rest of the world. What sort of leverage can you apply?”

“I really don't know at this point. There's a lot of research to do before I can even approach that problem. Right now I have the same sort of feeling that drove me south to Rugen—it's an itch that can be scratched in only one way, and that's by sailing to Zomar.”

Carl suddenly slapped his palm on the table hard enough to make the food platters jump.

“And this time, by God, I'm going along!”

Jeff and Gaereth were startled, and looked at each other quizzically. Gaereth said, “Won't that derail your projects in Rugen?”

“Slow them down, possibly. Really mess them up? No. You may not know it, but the cadre of people I've trained at the hospital during the last six months run most of the day-to-day operations. If I'm back within a year or so to pick up loose ends, they'll do fine.

“A year is a long time, buddy. A lot can go wrong.”

“It might, but I don't think so. Whatever the case, I have never felt so strongly as I do about this. I believe your plan is right on the money, Jeff, and I'm going along.”

There was no way Jeff or Gaereth could miss the huge unspoken 'period!' at the end of Carl's statement. Bemused by the strength of Carl's reaction, Jeff scratched his head.

"You won't hear me saying no, bucko. Just sort of took me by surprise."

"I know the worth of what I've done, guys. That's why I've stuck to it through thick and thin. But now I have to hit the road, to see more of this world, to be in the middle of events as they develop. I won't be able to live with myself if I don't."

"Well, sounds like you guys had better get cracking and hit the library," Gaereth commented while standing up. "If I was any more envious, I don't think I could stand it."

They separated shortly after leaving the tavern. Jeff and Carl went in search of Ethbar, while Gaereth headed deeper into town to do some shopping for his journey.

"I know I sounded a bit strident back there," Carl said as they neared the palace, "but this thing has been building in me for quite a while now. I think I know how you must have felt in Valholm before deciding to leave for Rugen. It's as if some force beyond my control is leading me around by the nose. What a relief to get it out in the open!"

"I don't have a clue as to what were going to find in Zomar, Carl, but let me tell you how glad I am to have you along. I think it's going to be one interesting and tough trip."

Carl laughed gleefully.

"Yeah, ain't it though!"

Ethbar was tied up in a meeting with Imogo, but a scribe helped pull the appropriate scrolls and charts. Finding an empty table in the library, the men dug in for some serious study.

Some hours later, on his way out of the palace to meet Zimma, Jeff ran into Ethbar. After briefly filling him in on their plans, Jeff arranged a meeting later that evening. The sun was below city walls when he entered the warehouse. Belstan was walking backwards while carrying on a parting conversation with his new assistant, Malchor. Jeff grabbed him to avoid a collision.

"We've got to stop meeting like this, Belstan. Haven't seen you in a while. What's new?"

Caught unawares, Belstan sputtered for a moment or two while collecting himself.

"Jeffrey, you do have a way of showing up when least expected. What is new, you ask? What is not? Let us converse."

Regaining his aplomb, Belstan took Jeff by the arm and escorted him to the office. Neither Zimma nor Rogelf were present.

"I wonder where she is?" Jeff murmured. "It's getting late."

"Zimma? She and Rogelf are over in the trade quarter inspecting the freight wagons we are having constructed. Now, Zimma tells me you are considering doing some traveling yourself. Have you decided where?"

"Yes. Carl and I will be heading west with your caravan. As soon as we arrive at the coast, we plan to arrange passage south to Zomar."

Belstan had been walking toward the coffeepot, but spun around and stared at Jeff in shocked amazement.

"Zomar! Zimma thought you might be up to something, but Zomar! Jeffrey, do you know what you are suggesting?"

The genuine shock and deep concern on Belstan's face startled Jeff.

"N-o-o, not yet. That's one of the things I need to talk with you about."

"I should think so!" Belstan's agitation was barely contained while he poured a cup of coffee. "I was no more than a youth when first I traveled to Al Harad. Green, impetuous, over-confident, and set on making a fortune. By the time I left that desert land, I was simply glad to be a free man and alive. They are a fierce people, Jeffrey.

Proud! They do not suffer intrusion, and consider all who are not of the clans to be little better than vermin.” Belstan paused to shake his head in admiration.

“Yet, what honor. They are not a vicious, cruel and deceptive people such as the Arzak. No, they are a dangerous people because of their sense of honor and pride. The land, except perhaps the far-western aspect, is quite harsh and unforgiving. That is the word I was searching for—unforgiving. They are not acquainted with mercy, for their land is largely without it. If they kill you, it will be without malice or deception. If you kill them in open combat, families do not seek revenge. It is their way.”

“Are you telling me there is no intrigue?” Jeff asked with an incredulous expression. “Not even in a city such as Al Harad must be? That’s hard to believe!”

Belstan erupted in a spasm of laughter.

“Jeffrey, Jeffrey! You have learned much since first we met! Yes, of course there is intrigue, and especially in Al Harad. There, clan leaders gather their wealth to trade with each other and foreign merchants. How could Zomarians possibly deal successfully with the outside world if they were unable to interpret deceit? They can smell a crooked deal almost at once, and react harshly. At the same time, they do enjoy hard bargaining. So, is all this dangerous and complicated enough for you?”

“How about contradictory?” Jeff mentally re-sorted what Belstan had said. “If I hear you right, everything seems to be driven by the land they live in; what they have had to become in order to survive. The land is harsh and gives no quarter, but holds no grudges. It must be met on its own terms. If you do not understand it, you are going to die. Thus the people.”

“I probably would not have said it in just that way, but yes, I think that is a good way of understanding Zomarians.”

Zimma walked in to be greeted with a hug and kiss. Rogelf, who had been waylaid out in the warehouse by an employee, was not far behind.

Belstan turned to the newcomers with an expression of dismay that was only partially facetious.

“My young friend here has informed me that he plans to put his head in a noose, then request assistance in tightening it. Perhaps we ought to spend this evening together in serious conversation.”

Once Jeff had outlined his plan to Zimma and Rogelf, there was wholehearted agreement with Belstan’s suggestion. Following a hurried meal, they walked to the palace through the cool air of late dusk. When they entered the building, efficient oil lamps introduced by Belstan and Rogelf were being lighted. They found Carl in the library surrounded by an impressive pile of charts and documents. Ethbar was sitting across the large oval table similarly involved, Rengeld peering over his shoulder with hands clasped behind his back.

Carl examined the new arrivals with red-rimmed eyes and a tired but satisfied smile.

“Hail, hail, the gangs all here. Grab a chart or map, folks—more than enough to go around.”

A tall woman with long blond hair walked in with her arms full of more documents and set them on the table.

“Long time no see, Helwin,” Jeff called out with a warm smile. “Got your troop whipped into line yet?”

Standing behind Carl’s chair, Helwin threw a rueful smile at Jeff.

“Don’t I wish. What a bunch of three-legged ditch diggers.”

Helwin’s use of English slang set Jeff and Carl to chuckling. Although a warrior from the far north, she had taken to English with gusto while campaigning with Jeff. They had not been together as a group since the Telling three or four weeks earlier, and called a time out in order to trade news. Ethbar eventually held his hands up for silence.

“Carl and I have discussed what is proposed, but only superficially since we did not have Jeffrey's full thoughts and designs.”

Ethbar indicated that Jeff take the floor with a sweep of his arm. Zimma tried to release his hand, but Jeff wouldn't let go and remained seated.

“We are all agreed that Rugen must become the trading center for the northern part of Arvalia. To accomplish that will require at least five years of hard, uninterrupted work. It's clear that if Rugen has to withstand a siege every summer during the peak trading season, this will not come to pass in five years or ten. What trader will wish to expose his livelihood to Salchek raiders? Should even one fall prey to them, I believe it fair to say we will see no more calling at our gates.”

“That is a certainty,” Rogelf stated with heart-felt emphasis.

“Yes. Now, according to Malchor and other merchants we've talked to, the Salchek are currently in disarray and struggling to consolidate their hold on southern lands. That will buy us a year, but likely no more. Will our armies be ready to head south in that time frame? Hopefully, but why not provide some insurance in case they aren't? And even if our armies are ready to march a year from now, a powerful ally would be most welcome.”

“Zomar would certainly prove a powerful ally, if they could be persuaded to join the war.”

“Exactly, Rengeld. I feel it imperative that we do everything in our power to keep the Salchek off-balance, to so involve their armies that none can be spared for a northern campaign. By all accounts, Zomar is a dedicated enemy of the Salchek. I propose to nourish and expand that enmity. At this point there isn't much more to be said.”

“Earlier I was determined to dissuade Jeffrey from his purpose,” Belstan thoughtfully commented, standing up. “A dangerous people, I said—fierce, independent and merciless. All true. Yet, as I continued to consider the possibilities, the attributes of such a venture began to recommend themselves to me with increasing vigor. Engaging Zomar's full zeal in this war would, indeed, effectively stop all Salchek progress to the north. Beyond that, the trade potential is tremendous.”

Belstan's expression became animated, leading Carl and Jeff to exchange covert smiles. Belstan would trade cobblestones, and make a profit, if nothing else was at hand.

“While the interior of Zomar is desert, persistent rumor has it that an extremely fruitful section of land lies between the western ocean and the Jabal Takush Mountains. Rumor, I say, for no outsider has been allowed to explore any part of Zomar except Al Harad to the east. However, I have become convinced over the years that these particular rumors have substance. By combining a trade mission with an effort to establish political ties, this trip, in my opinion, becomes highly desirable.”

“Am I correct in assuming that your thoughts center on an ocean route, one that would, with time, include other cities along the coast? Such a route with multiple ports would certainly increase profitability.”

Rogelf and Belstan had been trading partners for years, and Zimma was truly her father's daughter in that respect.

“Just so, Zimma,” Belstan replied with a quick nod. “Sporadic coastal trade now exists between Borstel and Shahreez, but to my knowledge there is no true, oceangoing trade route on the entire west coast.”

Ethbar unrolled a map on the table. It was quite large, and everyone crowded around to get a good look.

“While this map is quite old and suspect, it does give some evidence of the distances involved. Carl has diligently applied himself to this particular problem. Carl?”

“The distance by sea between Hochberg on the Sea of Tingel and Al Harad must be at least four thousand miles. Unfortunately, that is no more than a raw guess. I have uncovered virtually no information of value concerning the west coast. The same goes for Zomar. I must say, however, that I think Belstan is right about the area surrounding the city of Bahern on Zomar’s west coast. The comments I did run across concerning its productivity were mythical in proportion—fruit, grain crops, horses and so on. Certainly worth checking out. As I already said to Jeff, this is a trip that must be undertaken.”

“If we can get there, that is.”

“You got it, Jeff. Without doubt, just finding our way to Zomar is likely to prove the largest challenge. We don’t have a single chart of the west coast, or even a map that could pass as a chart. It’s possible that we may find better quality maps in Hochberg or Trunstad, but from what Ethbar said about these cities that seems doubtful.”

Ethbar nodded his thanks to Carl.

“Jeffrey and Carl have made their intentions clear. They will go on this voyage. Belstan’s suggestions strike me as having great merit, but who will see to the trading mission while Jeffrey and Carl are otherwise occupied? This is a matter of some importance, and must be given careful consideration. Belstan?”

“Both Malchor and Zimma have a good foundation in business, and I thought at first that one or the other should accompany the expedition south,” Belstan replied, stroking his chin. “Given our considerations this evening, however, I have concluded that neither has sufficient stature or experience to manage the trade mission. I shall plan to go on this voyage, and have them see the caravan safely back to Rugen.”

Belstan sat down and yawned, drawing a confirming nod from Ethbar.

“The hour grows late. I believe we have achieved initial consensus. Of needs, I must convey this information to Imogo. His blessing, cooperation and, perhaps, financial support are essential. I believe he will see the advantages of such a venture.”

Contemplating the long separation that loomed only months away, Zimma and Jeff held hands on the way home but said little. Zimma was grave as they prepared for bed.

“I fear for your safety on this voyage to Zomar. The peril will be extreme. While I am no mariner, I understand the trip will take many months and be replete with dangerous uncertainty.”

There was nothing to be said in reply to an honest statement of fact, so Jeff sat down in a chair and took her onto his lap. They sat together in that warm embrace for some time and later slept very close, wrapped up in each other’s arms and dreams.

Next morning, after a noisy but cheerful breakfast at the Golden Bung with Carl and Helwin, they adjourned to the warehouse to confer with Rogelf and Belstan. The final assembly of trade goods destined for the West Coast was to begin. They were mildly surprised to see Rengeld talking with Belstan when they walked in. Standing at Rengeld’s side was a complete stranger.

Curiosity humming its familiar tune, they walked over to see what was up. Rengeld came to meet them, stranger in tow.

“Jeffrey, I believe you will be interested in meeting this gentleman. Saffik has served as a lieutenant in the city guard for five years, and before that campaigned in the south with several mercenary groups. He has a large fund of knowledge concerning Zomar, and practical experience with their military. I believe he would add much to your undertaking.”

Saffik was around five seven, somewhere in his thirties, and lean as a whip. Narrow of face, his nose was like a blade, his skin dark, and black irises glittered as if speckled with mica. Projecting casual self-possession, he met Jeff’s gaze evenly and bowed gracefully with extended leg.

“Milord.”

Feeling like a social simpleton, Jeff's discomfiture was not aided by Carl's big grin. Scowling in Carl's direction, Jeff returned the courtesy with a simple nod.

"Saffik. It's going to be a difficult trip with an uncertain outcome. Trouble will certainly find us along the way. Still want to sign on?"

Eyes dancing with suppressed humor at the exchange between Jeff and Carl, Saffik replied in the same cultured voice.

"Milord, when the Colonel related the goal of your proposed trip, I was most eager to volunteer. I spent my youth near Al Harad, and have wished to feel the sun's deeper warmth for several years. As for trouble, life would be commonplace without it."

"What experience have you with Zomarians?"

"Largely attempting to stay alive, Milord. Both mercenary groups I rode with were destroyed in brushes with Hasak units during raids into Zomar."

"Hasak?"

"Their cavalry, Milord. Hand picked warriors reared in the desert and mounted on horses of great stamina. We were hired by a lordling in Lugsburg to raid across the Asmira River into Zomar. He had reports of poorly defended gold mines. While I cannot attest to the gold mines' presence, I can assure you that whatever we were searching for was not lightly defended."

Jeff was won over by the small man's sense of humor as he described what must have been a desperate situation. Well, he thought, I think Saffik will fit right in with the rest of these clowns. Jeff reached out his hand to grasp Saffik's.

"Welcome. The caravan will be ready to depart in about what, Belstan, three weeks?"

"That is a good figure for the moment, Jeffrey. Sooner if possible."

"And trade goods bound for Zomar must be assembled. I believe you might be of real service here in the warehouse, Saffik. Am I correct, Belstan, in assuming that it may prove a difficult task to select trade goods destined to be sold in a country that we know very little about?"

"That is an understatement. It has been at least 30 years since I last visited Al Harad. Saffik's knowledge will likely save us from ill-advised choices."

During following weeks, the pace never slackened. Slowly but surely, order began to emerge from chaos. Saffik proved his worth many times over, winnowing out items that were unlikely to sell in Zomar and making up new lists to be filled.

With the departure date less than a week away, Ethbar summoned Jeff and Carl to a conference. Once in his office, they gratefully set down several bundles apiece acquired during a shopping expedition.

What on earth? Jeff thought with growing alarm as he took a seat and examined the grim but determined face of his old friend. Whatever this is about, it doesn't seem likely to be good.

"I know of no easy way to tell you what I must, so let me waste no time on the trivial. Imogo has decided it is time Torget learned about the outside world. He has informed me in no uncertain terms that his son will accompany the caravan to Hochberg where he will take ship for Zomar with the diplomatic and trading mission."

Ethbar had prepared himself for the storm of protest that was about to burst from Jeff and Carl. To stem the tide, he hurried on.

"Please believe that I have argued long and strenuously against this decision; have in fact exceeded prudence. On the brighter side, Imogo is no fool and does not wish to cripple this venture. Torget will have no official capacity. He is simply to be listed as an employee of the trading mission."

"Damn it, Ethbar, this is crazy! This is the heir we're talking about! What is Imogo thinking of?"

"Many things, Jeffrey, and in summation with much foresight. He understands that the North must stand on its own feet, knows that we must generate trade instead

of depending solely on what is left over by the time outside traders arrive. He also knows that Torget must come to understand the world that we would trade with if he is to rule wisely when his time comes.

“I did not argue against his reasoning, which is sound. I argued that a less grueling and dangerous setting for Torget's education be found so that the kingdom, as you point out, not risk losing the heir. As I already stated, he was unmoved. I fear his faith in you and Carl is unbounded.”

Jeff grudgingly accepted the inevitable. When Imogo made up his mind, that was it. In addition, bucking one of his decisions beyond a certain point was akin to suicide. It sounded like Ethbar had already pushed somewhere beyond that point.

“Okay, he goes. However, in spite of whatever confidence Imogo might have in Carl and me, this mission is potentially deadly. He must understand that his son may not return. If necessary and you deem it wise, I will speak with him on this matter.”

“All that can be said has been, Jeffrey. Imogo knows his son's risk.”

“Well, that's it, then. If Torget would report to the warehouse in the morning, we'll put him to work—see what he's made of. By the way, you were quite neatly trapped in the middle of this fray, Ethbar. Thank you for taking our part.”

The following morning, Jeff and Carl were conversing with Belstan when Torget strode into the warehouse. They carefully sized him up as he approached. Above medium height, eighteen or so, he was stocky and had a shock of dark brown hair that was already thinning at the temples. A roundish face hosted a wide mouth that was set in an excited smile. Loose clothing made it hard to assess his weight, but he seemed to be carrying extra pounds.

Before Jeff could address him, Torget said, “Lord Jeffrey, please excuse my abruptness, but I wish to dispel any uncertainty that may remain as to my status. I would be deeply appreciative if I were addressed simply as Torget and treated no differently than any new employee.” A broad smile suddenly appeared. “If the need is great and I am slow to grasp what is necessary, the 'dumb shit' that I have heard you and Lord Carl employ would not be taken amiss.”

Jeff was caught off guard by Torget's humorous candor, but in a positive fashion. Maybe the young man had some gumption as well. It was time to find out.

“Torget, by the end of this day I am sure you will have no doubt that you are an employee. There is much to learn in a short time span and you will have to spend long hours to accomplish that task. It isn't going to be easy.”

“I am prepared, Milord.”

“That we shall see. I also think it important to restate what I know you have already been informed of. Belstan has the final say on all matters having to do with the caravan, and after leaving port will continue to lead the trade mission. What your role at that later date amounts to will be determined solely by how we assess your progress and contribution.”

Torget held Jeff's eyes and silently nodded.

“One last thing before you find a smock and go to work: I am known simply as Jeff or Jeffrey to my friends. Welcome aboard.”

Jeff extended his hand in greeting and turned Torget over to Belstan. In a matter of minutes the shop straw boss had Torget stacking bales of fur.

When Torget was out of earshot, Carl turned to Jeff with a low whistle of appreciation.

“Brother, you really socked it to him.”

“I really want him to survive this trip,” Jeff said in serious tone of voice. “Torget is a likeable young man, but he is also overweight and soft. He must be toughened up as quickly as possible. I think the term 'sweat equity' fits nicely in this case. If he can't handle physical work and accept direction, I will not take him.”

“Let us only hope it doesn’t come to that, my friend. Imogo is one tough customer, and just happens to be king.”

“Better it all falls apart now rather than putting everyone at risk out on the trail, Carl. I think we both know what it’s going to be like.”

“Amen.”

Following days passed in a rush as preparations were completed and personal business sorted out. Much to Jeff’s relief, he heard nothing but positive comments about Torget from Belstan and Rogelf. Bracing a king who had hanged his own cousins was very low on Jeff’s list of things he wanted to do.

The evening before the caravan was scheduled to leave, Jeff and Zimma sat down to a private farewell dinner with Gaereth. They had a lot to talk about, and were facing a separation not measured in miles but in unknown light years. Gaereth would be leaving in the near future on his long trek to Skene, and from thence to distant Earth. The span of time and space that would soon open between them was beyond comprehension.

Ethbar wanted them to use the main dining area in his home, but Zimma felt the cavernous room was too large for three people. They settled on a smaller, more informal room located near the kitchen.

The racket and smells were congenial, and the courses flowed in smooth progression from an exquisite salad to made dishes and a venison roast that defied comparison. The dinner’s intimacy, the sheer joy of being together, heightened the sense of what would be lost the following day. Yet the meal also highlighted the love that bound them together. The setting leant a poignancy that found expression while loitering over dessert.

“Be careful, Gaereth,” Jeff said, sipping on a cordial that resembled peach brandy. “We’re going to have danger enough on our way to Zomar, but I suspect Earth will pose just as many risks. And if anarchy has a real foothold. ...”

“Then it’s all over until the dust settles and there’s no more blood to be spilled,” Gaereth replied with an expressive shrug. “If it’s come to that already, I’ll turn around and head back. I think we still have a year or two, though.”

“Where are you going to start?”

“I may look in on Seattle, but most carefully. It was close to social chaos during my last visit, and may have taken the last steps in spite of martial law. After that, I’ll make my way to Iowa. I am most concerned with the well-being of your, our, family, and will spend considerable time there. The Midwest has always been conservative and didn’t experience an earthquake. Perhaps it will endure longest. Any suggestions regarding books that might be of value?”

“That’s a tough one, my friend.”

“Yeah, ain’t it though. There are so many, where do you start?”

“I tell you what. If you can find something on the manufacture of simpler, older antibiotics, it would really be helpful to Carl. We also desperately need books on chemistry and metallurgy. We don’t have a lot of ammunition for our sidearms, and more cleaning solvent would come in handy.” Jeff laughed and shook his head. “Of course, there’s always medical books not to mention such treasures as toothpaste. Shoot. What a dilemma.”

“Good suggestions. I’ll add them to the list. Now it’s my turn: Zomar may as well be in Oz for all that’s known about it. Do not go in with stars in your eyes. Always deal with Zomarians straight up and out front. One thing for sure—avoid confrontation if at all possible, but don’t give an inch if you can’t. If they push, you have to push back.”

“Or be considered weak.”

“Yes. Thinking of Oz, though, maybe the comparison isn’t too far off. You can always hope for Glenda the Good.”

More likely the Wicked Witch, Jeff thought. Feeling something tugging at his sleeve, he found Zimma's eyes fastened on him with a silent plea. He leaned over to touch lips before turning back to Gaereth.

“One book that would be greatly appreciated slipped my mind. If it's possible to bring it without endangering yourself, that is. Heaven knows, the list is long enough as it stands.”

Uncertain how the request would be received, Jeff paused to find the right words. They didn't happen to be lying about, so he rubbed his chin to help things along.

“If you can find a compilation of Tolkien's work, we'd be deeply indebted.”

Gaereth's mind went blank. The sidewise looks from Jeff had been intriguing, but his request was astonishing. He was making some headway on getting his thoughts back together, rubbing his own chin, when he noted the excitement shining in Zimma's eyes. Jeffrey, Jeffrey, he thought, however did this come about?

“Yes. I think I see,” Gaereth slowly said. “I can think of no work that so fits this land and its people. May I ask how Tolkien came to be introduced?”

Zimma couldn't stand it anymore and burst into the conversation.

“I must read the full tale of Luthien and Beren, Gaereth. Jeffrey has related what he can remember, and I do love it so. And the love between Arwen Evenstar and Aragorn! Oh, Gaereth, please?”

Gaereth had already planned to say yes, but Zimma's unaffected enthusiasm made his heart melt. Standing, he bowed to Zimma.

“I will search high and low, Milady, leaving no moldy secondhand bookstore unturned.”

Zimma leaped out of her chair and rushed into his arms. Holding her close, Gaereth thought, If you both only knew how hard it is to leave, how near the mark Tolkien's books are. Perhaps some day I'll tell you.

While escorting Gaereth to the door, a last thought occurred to Jeff that demanded attention.

“If you do stop by Seattle, will you check up on someone for me?”

“Certainly. Who are you thinking of?”

“His name is Charles Hildebrand. Man of about sixty or so. Chairman of the Department of Anthropology at the university—my old boss. Really a fine man. He and his wife are pretty much on their own.”

“I'll do it if at all possible. Sounds like a man I would enjoy talking to.”

Gaereth took his leave after a lingering round of hugs and handshakes. Walking along through the crisp night, his mind retreated back in time so far that anyone looking into his eyes would have sworn that newborn stars shone from them.



And so begins Volume II of **The Alarai Chronicles series, Songs of Deep Green**. There are no oceans on Earth that compare to those of Aketti. You cannot sail on them without being changed. The question remains: once changed can you ever return to life as it was?