
BLACKDOG

K. V. JOHANSEN

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In memoriam

DAD,

who gave me my first etymological dictionary
and bought me Chaucer,

and **PIPPIN,**

who was always at my side while I wrote this book.



LANDS OF THE WESTERN CARAVAN ROAD
FROM THE KINGDOMS OF THE
NORTH TO MARAKAND

© 2005

Baisirbska

Kingdoms of the North

The Hatched Plains

The Great Grass

The Western Grass

Former Empire of Tigrur

Red Desert

Black Desert

Salt Desert

Stone Desert

Pillars of the Sky

The Malagru Mountains

Marakand

to Nabban & Pirakul

Alorra Hills

River Vairgaa

River Nakhakul

River Shiktenav

River Amunnava

Vamdai / Vairgash

At-Landi

The Five Cataracts

Sayanbarikash

Kimegash

Serakallash

Lissavakul

Narvabarkash

0 100 200 miles

PART ONE

CHAPTER I

Evening prayers took place on the flat-topped bell-tower that rose above the gatehouse. Otokas was not a particularly devout man. Prayer had always seemed a pointless ritual.

The sun, sliding between the peaks at the western end of the lake, turned the Lissavakail's waters to molten copper, while the swallows made their last scrolling passes over the waves. The chief of the priestesses, whose title was simply "Old Lady," swayed back and forth as she chanted the prayer that was chanted every evening. Thanks for the day past, hopes for the day to come. Plentiful fish, millet in the terraced fields, fertile yaks, healthy babies, happy folk—peace and prosperity for the folk of the goddess Attalissa, the folk of Lissavakail, which was both lake and town.

The goddess met his eyes and smiled, a neat, correct figure standing against the west, patience itself in a girl's small body. Attalissa had heard the prayers as many times as he, the same words wearing the same deep grooves in the memory, until one did not hear them at all and could not remember if the ceremony were ending or had only just begun. She wore layers of stiff white silk embroidered in indigo and gold, gold rings in her ears, conical crown of gold filigree and turquoise plaques on her hair, dangling pearls over her brow. The priestesses whose turn it was to attend evening prayer fanned out before her, a flutter of indigo-blue gowns, except for the pair flanking her, who wore wide-legged blue trousers and shirts of scale armour, and carried broad-bladed spears.

Their armed presence was a formality, as so much of life on the holy islet of the temple adjoining the island town was formality; there had been no attack on the temple in generations. Still, the warrior priest-

esses of Lissavakail were more than ceremonial guard for the living goddess; they were sought out by the villages of distant valleys when raiders were troublesome, and they served as mercenaries, guarding wealthy travellers, gem-traders, and the chieftains of the gold-washing villages on the wild mountain tracks.

Otokas was more than ceremonial guard himself; he remembered raiders coming up from the desert, seeking control of the gold-bearing rivers of the mountains. He remembered years when the communities of the high valleys warred among themselves, with the encouragement of their gods and goddesses or in defiance of their pleas. Born forty winters before, he remembered centuries. He was the Blackdog, and the only man permitted on the temple islet.

The words of the prayer ran on. Did they make any difference, and had they ever? Would the snows refuse to melt and fill the streams, or the hot desert winds sweep up from the north to blight the sprouting grain, or the butter fail to come in the churns, if evening and dawn prayers were not said?

Attalissa met his gaze, expressionless, black eyes deep, unreadable, in her round child's face. She had caught, he realized, the shape of that private thought. A year ago she would not have. She grew, slowly, into godhead.

Prayer is for them, dog, not for you and me, she told him, in the silent speech, mind to mind, that they shared. She had seen eight summers, this incarnation of Attalissa. When Otokas first took on the burden of the Blackdog, Attalissa had been an elderly woman, older than his grandmother, older than the grandfather who had served her as Blackdog before him. When Attalissa died herself Otokas had wept as though she were his grandmother. But nine months later a newborn baby had stared up at him, cradled in his arms, and he had seen Attalissa recognize him, ancient familiarity in the infant's startled eyes.

Attalissa lived, and died, and was reborn in a girlchild conceived the day of her death. Some goddesses shaped themselves a physical body only when they so desired, remaining for the most part a spirit within the waters or appearing as a mist or a dance of light, but

Attalissa returned, mortal life after mortal life, in a human body. Thus it was said she never grew remote from the concerns and the suffering and the joys of her folk; that was part of the fervent love the people of Lissavakail professed for her.

There were only a handful of the goddess's folk gathered at the western end of the red-lacquered bridge that arched from the temple islet across the channel to the island town. A pair of old women, eyes fixed devoutly on what to them must be only a cluster of blue figures and a tiny, occasionally bobbing, gold crown. A young couple, their minds quite evidently on something other than devotions. A family in their best clothes, indigo and red, the wife wearing her bride-gift circlet of gold coins across a weather-worn brow. They were not from town, by the cut of their clothes; peasants from one of the high villages. The children were paying more attention to the young couple than to the remote figures atop the tower.

They used to pray on the town's end of the bridge, the Blackdog remembered, meeting the townsfolk there. The folk had come to sing hymns for Attalissa, and she had held their babies and blessed them, kissed the foreheads of the brides and the grooms, exchanged stories of the old days with the old folk whom she had kissed as babies.

What Otokas was . . . no tradition of the temple preserved, if it had ever been known. Old, as old as the goddess, or older, perhaps. God, demon, spirit of the wilds—even the Blackdog no longer remembered what it had been, before it became Attalissa's guardian, bound, like her, to human life.

The litany tottered to its end; the women bowed to the goddess, who bowed in return, carefully, to keep the tall headdress from falling. And then she cried out suddenly and dropped to her knees, at the same moment Otokas heard, smelt, felt—a crack like a thunderclap all about them, hot metal, a shock like an avalanche, mowing trees before it . . .

He had his arm around the girl the next moment, kneeling by her, sword drawn, though there was no one to defend her against that he could see. The armed priestesses had moved as he did, barring the stairs, the only obvious entry for threat.

“The road,” Old Lady said. “Sweet Attalissa save us! Look at the road!”

Otokas passed Attalissa to the arms of Kayugh, who was Spear Lady, captain of the warriors, and joined Old Lady at the parapet.

A black, shifting swarm covered the road on the southern shore of the lake, approaching the bridge to the town.

“Sound the bells,” he shouted back to the armed pair by the stairs. “Raiders!”

The dog snarled in his soul, roused by the threat, and dangerous. Nothing the Blackdog could do here to defend the goddess.

Old Lady’s hands shook as she gripped his arm.

“They weren’t there,” she said, and her voice shook as well. “Otokas, they weren’t there, even a few moments ago.”

“Wizardry,” whispered the plump Mistress of Novices. “Or divinity.” She looked at him, making it a question.

“Wizardry,” Otokas confirmed. “I smell it. And—something else. But not a god. Not a goddess.”

A scent to the spirit like old ashes on stone and the hot tang of metal and fire. Not familiar and yet . . . no, that strange hot smell of ash and metal was nothing the Blackdog could ever have smelt before, but it raised the dog’s hackles, roared of danger and death and the need to defend, deafening Otokas to all else for a moment.

It was not the time or the place. He forced the Blackdog quiet, calming it, calming himself.

Whatever the threat was, it could not be mere wizardry. No lone wizard, no group of wizards he had ever heard of except in the oldest tales, could hide an army, certainly not so close to a deity’s holy place—if they had been hidden, and not dropped from some other location. He had felt the air shatter.

He called them raiders; that was what the mind expected. This was an army that poured down towards the island town’s one bridge. They were not even coming from the east, the way around the lake and down to the Red Desert in the north, but from the narrow trail that meandered higher into the southern mountains of the Pillars of the Sky,

branching and branching, connecting Lissavakail with its fields and high summer pastures, and the scatter of remote tributary villages. No way for them to have assembled there without passing Lissavakail.

Some few of the men and women were mounted on stocky Grassland horses; most were afoot. A hundred, two, three . . . more came into sight in the narrow gap where a path scrambled up to the temple's own terraced fields. Nothing beyond that, no way they could have gained that height without climbing the very path they descended. The last of the red light picked out spearheads and helmets, sword-edges and armour. The temple bells rang out, a discordant jangling settling to a clashing peal that shook the floor beneath his feet. The town's bell-tower picked it up, and the few people who had gathered for prayers at the temple bridge hurried away into the spilling confusion of the town.

"The bridge," said Kayugh, and thrust the limp goddess back at Otokas. "We have to get it down!" She snapped orders; sisters followed her, the temple rousing to arms.

The temple was Kayugh's to defend, as the goddess was his and the town was the goddess's.

The goddess was in no state to defend anyone or anything, not even herself. The humanity that was Attalissa's virtue was also her weakness. The goddess grew into her powers slowly, came into full strength and understanding of herself only with womanhood. There was little she could do as she was now. The militia, and what sisters Kayugh would spare from defence of the temple, were all Lissavakail had.

"He comes for me," the goddess said, stirring suddenly. She pushed away from Otokas to find her feet, wild-eyed. "Otokas, he's coming for me. He'll take me and swallow me like a snake, devour me, Otokas, dog, I'm scared, don't let him, the lake will die . . ." Her face was grey and her teeth chattered. As he bent to pick her up, her eyes rolled back white in her head and she collapsed again, limp as a dead rat. Old Lady stood with hands upraised, facing the lake with her back to Attalissa.

Prayer was no use now. If ever it had been.

"Down," Otokas ordered the sisters. "Arm, join your dormitories.

No, two of you, keep watch, and you—” singling out a fleet-footed young sister, his own niece “—Attavaia, you be runner for the watchers. Bring word to Kayugh and me of the raiders’ advance, if we’re not back here when they reach the town bridge.”

Torches flared in the town, men already arming, running to bar the stone bridge that was Lissavakail’s only fixed link to the shore.

Otokas swung the goddess to his shoulder, started down the stairs, the two spearwomen hurrying to keep up. The bells were deafening; the tower shook with them.

“Where to?” the younger of the pair, Meeray, asked. Old Lady left her prayers and came puffing behind them.

“The chapel,” Old Lady said. “We must assemble and pray for guidance.”

“The Old Chapel,” Otokas countered. It was the most defensible part of the fortress-like temple; the islet was nothing more than an upheaval of rock from the lake, cracked and seamed. The widest crack had been quarried, carved into a chapel in the earliest days when the priestesses first came. The temple had grown over the hill, obscuring stone and crevices and human-made cave, consuming much of the original hill for its masonry, but enough remained at the core to make the temple a warren of dead ends and sudden stairs. A few could hold off a horde in the passages around the Old Chapel. But a few could die there, trapped and starving.

There was a second, secret way out, though none but he and the goddess could take it.

Kayugh met them again on the way. She had changed to trousers and armour, had her helmet under her arm and a dozen armed sisters behind her, two dormitories, as they called the six-woman squads which slept and trained together.

“Our bridge?” he asked.

“They’re cutting the beams away at the nearest posts, and taking up the planking,” she reported, falling in beside him. “I sent Lilmass and a dozen archers across first, to help hold the town bridge. They asked to go.”

Fear crawled under Kayugh's voice. Sent them to die in the town, she clearly thought.

"Can Attalissa help?" Kayugh asked. "Break the town's bridge, even? That would buy time. We could send someone across the lake and down to Serakallash, beg help from their militia, even hire mercenaries from the caravan-gangs."

"No," Otokas said, more harshly than he meant to, but the dog was fighting to break free, distracting him, and there was absolutely nothing the Blackdog could do, here.

"What do we do, then—wait behind our walls, hope they get bored and go home?" Kayugh snapped. "You saw them, Oto. Those aren't raiders. It's an invasion!"

"Faith," panted Old Lady. "Have faith. We will be guided. I will go out to speak to the strangers, after I've prayed. I dreamed—the goddess told me change was coming, a time of great change, a renewal of our glory and our might, by the will of the Old Great Gods. Faith will prevail."

"Faith in what?" Kayugh demanded, but under her breath.

Old Lady talked too often of glory and power as something quite separate from the child they served. They mostly stopped listening, except to head her off, if she seemed likely to start preaching it at the novices. Time she stepped down, they both thought, but that was supposed to be Attalissa's decision, and Old Lady claimed dreams approving her that the goddess could neither confirm nor deny, merely looking a puzzled, nervous child, when asked to do so.

"Oto, if we don't send for help now, before we're besieged—"

Otokas stopped, forced himself to listen, to look Kayugh in the eyes and see her, to shut out the dog's drowning urge to fight, which deafened him to all else. "I'm sorry. I meant, no, 'Lissa can do nothing about the stone bridge. But yes, you're right, send to Serakallash. Beg help, buy it, offer whatever they ask."

Old Lady squawked in protest. "You can't sell Attalissa's treasury to foreigners."

"Neighbours, surely," Kayugh murmured. "With respect, Old Lady, the treasury is worth nothing to dead women. To a dead incarnation. To

the dead of Lissavakail, and if they are not already dying in the town, they will be before long. Your kinsfolk and mine. All of our kin.”

Old Lady huffed and blew out her cheeks. “The senior sisters must vote on any such decision. We can convene them tomorrow, after dawn prayers. We’re safe behind our walls here and defended by the goddess’s lake. As I said, I’ll pray for guidance, and then meet the leader of these raiders. I dreamed . . . one would come whose service to Attalissa would raise her above all other gods. Wise words may turn enmity to fellowship. We can afford to take proper counsel and not let ourselves be panicked into rash acts. And any decision so important as spending the treasury *must* go to the senior sisters.”

“The goddess can make such a decision herself,” Kayugh said, with a worried look at the still unconscious girl. “And in her default, a tribunal, which is the three of us—the Old Lady, the Spear Lady, and the Blackdog. And with respect, Old Lady, you’ve said nothing about such a dream before. Neither has she.”

“The child is but a shadow of the goddess’s will,” Old Lady said, with undue complacency. “A symbol.”

Kayugh hissed. “Attalissa is Attalissa—”

“Offer the Serakallashi whatever you need to,” Otokas said again. “I say so.”

Old Lady squeaked and ducked away from his glare.

“Blackdog.” Kayugh gave him a hasty bow, more for Old Lady’s benefit than his own, he hoped. Followed it with a widening of the eyes, an almost imperceptible nod away from the women who flanked them both, waiting and worried at heated words and open discord.

He transferred Attalissa to Meeray’s arms reluctantly, stroked the goddess’s cool forehead. Shock, he thought. The goddess’s fear was more than the child’s experience could comprehend, rebounding on her.

“Take Attalissa and Old Lady to the Old Chapel and make them comfortable. Try to warm the place up. ’Lissa should be all right, she’s only fainted. When she wakes, tell her I’ll come to her soon, but I need to see what’s happening in the town. Tell her, don’t expect her to know. Remember she’s only a child.”

Attalissa's ability to reach his mind was still limited. She might find him, if he was out of sight, but she might not, and either way, she would still be more than half a panicked little girl, reaching for the only father she had ever known.

Old Lady began a protest about the damp Old Chapel, but fell silent at no more than a glance, took the arm Meeray's partner offered, and hobbled off. Otokas watched Attalissa out of sight and did not know his hands were clenched till Kayugh touched his fist, gently.

"A word?" she said, and to the dormitories with her, "You know your posts. Go. I'll be on the bell-tower."

Kayugh's hair coiled like the tendrils of pea-vines, and Otokas, shoving down the dog's need to follow 'Lissa, folded his arms and ignored the urge he had never once gratified, to comb it back from her face, wind fingers in it. The priestesses were sworn to celibacy, to honour their ever-maiden goddess. The Blackdog was not, but there had been no woman for him since he had realized he wanted only Kayugh.

"How long can we hold out here?" Kayugh asked bluntly. "It's at least two days to Serakallash, and they'll hardly set out the moment a messenger arrives—it'll take them a day or more just to summon their sept-chiefs. We have walls, but the town doesn't. I was thinking . . . if we can get Old Lady to agree, we can let the townsfolk in, as many as we can take."

"She won't allow it."

"Will you?"

Otokas frowned at the challenge in Kayugh's voice. "We don't have the supplies to support ourselves for long, let alone many others. But if they come, yes."

It was so engrained that no one but the vowed women set foot on the island, he doubted many townsfolk would think of it. The holy islet was a place of reverence and awe, not a refuge. And he was not sure it would be a refuge, not from this attack. The edge of the goddess's terror gnawed at him.

"They might be safer in the town."

“Safer! How?”

He shook his head. “There are wizards out there, or a wizard, more powerful than any I’ve ever heard of—probably just one, since Attalissa said *he*. She believes he’s coming here for her. To destroy her.”

“To kill the girl?” More puzzlement in Kayugh’s voice than anything. It seemed too unlikely a thing to evoke anger.

“No. To destroy *Attalissa*, not just her avatar. Devour her, she said.”

That shocked her. “Why? *How?*”

“I don’t know. The dog doesn’t know. But it—I—we, if you like, we believe it. The dog . . . understands things it can’t seem to express. Remembers things. You know the stories say that there were gods who died in the west in a wizards’ war, long ago before ever there were kings in the north? I remember things, like . . . shadows seen out of the corner of the eye. Nothing to seize hold of, but enough to be afraid. Gods can die, and not only by their own will.”

Kayugh drew a deep breath. “Well then. What do we do?”

Otokas didn’t know. Run. Hide. Kill the source of the threat. The Blackdog’s solutions were few, and not necessarily the best. He did not think the Blackdog could overcome unaided whatever had the power to summon an army unseen out of the temple’s own millet fields. And Attalissa was not going to be able to help.

“Send out the novices and lay-sisters, and the old sisters too, not just your messengers to Serakallash. Fill whatever boats we have and get them away. Tell them to scatter to the villages in the high valleys, tell them to hide.”

“Otokas—”

“Do it now, while there’s time. It’s dark enough the boats won’t be seen.”

Her hand on his again, and she had no idea how distracting that was. He hoped she didn’t.

“Are you all right, Oto? Your eyes—”

He laughed. “Aside from being ready to go howling over to town to get myself killed, looking for whatever she thinks is coming for her? Oh yes.”

“Go to her.”

“I’m going back to the tower, now she’s safe for the moment. I want to see what’s out there.”

“I’ll send someone to tell you.”

“I can see more in the dark than you could in broad daylight. I’ll be all right. We’ve—I and all the men before me—we’ve been arguing down our single-minded mongrel for a very long time now. We’re getting good at it.”

“Then go put your armour on, first. Remind your single-minded mongrel she’s a little girl and it’s you she loves, not just the Blackdog.”

Otokas gave Kayugh a mocking bow, fist over his heart. “As you command, Spear Lady.” But she had drawn him a little away from Attalissa’s panic, and that was a moment’s easing of the Blackdog’s own fears. “I’ll join you at the tower.”

The shirt of scale armour was heavy on his shoulders, a weight familiar mostly from drilling with the women, practised and easy and not at all welcome. Otokas slung his sword over his shoulder again, found his helmet, with its wavelike crest and snarling dog facemask. There were dormitories hurrying to the defence of the walls and to guard the water-gate, which was no more than a single narrow door in the eastern wall. It let onto a narrow path and a drop of smooth, curving rock so precipitous he doubted any attack in force could come that way—which was why the water-gate was in so inconvenient and even dangerous a location. Most people going to or from the landing-stage preferred to take the broader path along the water’s edge, which circled to the front gates facing the red bridge in the west. The priestesses might be able to come at any besiegers that way, circle around to their rear while they attacked the front gates.

Not a tactic to use against an army, though, not if there were twice the number of sisters to send against them.

Otokas, where are you? I’m afraid. Attalissa’s mind’s voice, soul’s voice, was faint, coloured with her fear, wavering. But she was awake, and that lessened the dog’s anxiety a little more. Otokas stood where

he was to answer, so she did not lose the contact with him. It felt to him like two people who stand at arms' utter stretch, fingertip to fingertip, where the slightest movement might separate them. But it was not so long since the girl had to see him to find his mind.

I know you're afraid. It's all right. Be strong, 'Lissa, love.

People are dying in the town. I can feel them. It hurts, dog.

I know.

I can't help them. The waters can't bear me yet.

It's all right, love. We're here to look after you.

But them . . . dog, dog, I should be helping them. They shouldn't die for me. And it's not the town he wants, it's me, just me!

They're your people. They want to protect you. They ought to, at least. 'Lissa, who is he? Do you know him? Is he their leader? A wizard? A god?

I don't know. I don't know what he is, dog. Something wrong. Evil. Strong. You felt it, what he did. Tearing the world like that.

I felt something, he admitted.

I want you here.

I need to see what's happening. I'll come soon.

Soon. You promise.

I promise.

Old Lady wouldn't stay with me. She went to the New Chapel to pray.

You said prayer is for them. If it helps her, let her pray, so long as she doesn't take sisters from the walls to do it.

It isn't even the lake she prays to. It's something she makes up in her own head, to fill the emptiness she won't let me into. She wants me to be more than even the Old Great Gods ever were. Attalissa fell into the child again, her thoughts growing fainter. She doesn't really like me very much. She doesn't like children.

Either she lost the strength to touch him, or she had said all she needed to. Either way, Otokas hoped Meeray or some of the others would find her something to do to distract her. He resumed his course through the labyrinthine interconnection of rooms and passages at a near run.

His niece Attavaia, still in her blue gown, ran into him, pelting around a corner, and bounced off into the wall.

“They’re on the town bridge, Uncle,” she gasped, wide-eyed, as he steadied her. “Spear Lady sent me to tell you. I heard it, when they met . . . I never thought . . . it was so loud. They just kept coming, arrows didn’t even slow them down, there were so many. The militia’s stopped them at the north end of the bridge but they’re fighting hand to hand there, and . . . there’s just so many. Rideen’s in the militia. He’ll be there. In that.”

Rideen was her older brother.

“Everyone’ll be there,” Otokas said. She was shaking in his grasp. Attavaia, just out of her novitiate, had not yet served a turn as a mercenary. “Go arm yourself and join your dormitory at your post, unless Spear Lady had any other orders after you found me?”

“No.”

Being with her friends would steady her, let her pull the discipline of the practice courts back.

“Where are you supposed to be?”

“We assemble in the lower east court. We’re to bring arrows from the armoury to the sisters in the tower by the water-gate, and act as a reserve.”

“Good.” He hugged her close and kissed her forehead. “Go on, then.”

She gave him a fleeting, forced smile, turned, and ran again, her bare feet flashing beneath her skirt, showing an anklet of turquoise.

“Attavaia!”

She skidded to a stop. “Uncle?”

He caught up with her, gripped her by the shoulders. “If things go badly—if the temple’s lost—”

“Lost!”

“If. At the end. Go into the mountains.”

She gave him a wary look. “Why?”

“She’ll need you again someday.”

“I’m scared, but I’m no coward! I’m not breaking my vows and running away.”

“I’m not telling you to, child. But if we have to run, we will. The temple is not the goddess. Remember that, ‘Vaia.”

“Ah.” Attavaia swallowed. “I will. Uncle . . .” She stood on tiptoe, kissed his cheek. “I’ll see you later, Uncle. Blackdog.”

A self-conscious salute, fist over heart, and then she was gone again, feet slapping.

He hoped he hadn’t just set a panic in her dormitory, hoped she would have the sense not to repeat his unconsidered advice until the moment came. The Blackdog’s fears unbalanced judgement, made it hard to understand the true shape of the threat. And she was his favourite sister’s only daughter.

Night had come down on them. From the tower, Otokas watched, with the Blackdog’s owl-sharp vision in the darkness, the defenders of Lissavakail’s bridge fall, overwhelmed. Lilmass was dead, and her dozen with her, he thought. There were no indigo-trousered women among the townsmen who broke and bolted away, a handful, a knot unravelling into the alleys and steep twisting lanes, no order to them, every man running to his own household, to bar his own door.

The raiders poured over the bridge, their own order breaking, becoming no more than that, raiders, every man and woman pursuing their own path. The discipline they had shown taking the bridge, where they had climbed over their own dead to take their places, was forgotten. They swarmed over bodies lying like barricades on the near end of the bridge, some pausing even there to loot and rummage among the dead. Horses snorted and finicked at the uncertain, death-reeking footing. Those mounted carried torches, trailing flames and bands of foot soldiers up amid the terraced houses of the steep-sided island.

The dog stretched its awareness out, followed sound and scent of shattered spirits. The raiders stormed through the narrow alleys between the rubble-and-clay buildings of the town, hacking down doors, looting, killing those who resisted, setting fires that burned the furnishings and the beams of the flat-roofed houses. Roofs fell in and people died, trapped in their homes. Townsfolk and raiders alike ran mindless, shouting. Geese and hens screeched, goats bleated frantically, as some among the raiders butchered for the cookfires, making

camp amid the madness. They settled in to enjoy themselves, quarrelling over the spoils of the town's wine shop and the household jars of thin beer, while on higher terraces townsfolk still fought, and died.

The sisters watched the fires. Some prayed.

Not a single boat from the town had fled to the holy islet for shelter. Why corner themselves? Any who had chosen to flee, or had taken warning soon enough to do so, would have headed for shore and the chance to escape deeper into the mountains.

There was order among the invaders, despite the looting. The Blackdog saw it in the concentration of torchlight, the tramp of feet not running, a snaking file that made straight along Lissavakail's main road of packed shale from the town bridge to the ruins of the temple bridge. Otokas saw with his own eyes, then, not the dog's: movement and bustle, duck and flare of torchlight, heard orders shouted in some alien tongue. These were the ones who had let the others die on the bridge to clear the way for them.

"What are they doing?" Kayugh asked softly.

"The town's overrun. It looks as though most of them have broken off to loot, but a core of them are still under control. Those are coming for us." After a moment he added, "They're bringing boats along the shore."

Madness, to fight on into the night. He might have expected them to establish themselves in the town, confident in holding the only near approach to the temple islet. He might have expected a conquering warlord to attempt to come to terms with Old Lady, to offer Attalissa some degree of service and respect, seeking her good graces once the town was taken. He did not, and would rather have been wrong, in not expecting anything but this.

"We stay here," Kayugh ordered, in response to the rising murmur among the women as Otokas's words spread. "We're too few to keep them from landing. If we get scattered out along the shore, they'll just push through us and find the walls unguarded."

Otokas watched their progress. The warriors at the bridgehead took little interest in the broken bridge, as though they in turn had expected it. They merely awaited the arrival of the town's fishing

boats, rowed from the nearby landing beach. If they meant to ferry attackers across the channel, they would need more than those to land in enough force to pose a threat.

“What are they doing?” Kayugh asked, as the torchlight showed figures bending, scrambling over boats, figures milling on shore.

They were lashing the boats together, broadside on, alongside the broken spans of the temple bridge.

“Making a bridge,” Otokas said.

“Why the hurry?” she muttered. “Why not wait until dawn, at least? I don’t like this, Oto. You should get back to Attalissa.”

“Not till I know what he wants.”

“If what you believe is true,” she said guardedly, “he must not want to give us time to send her away. Though where around the lake she’d be out of his reach, I don’t know . . .”

He didn’t know either.

Someone loosed an arrow at the warriors building the bridge. It fell harmlessly in the garden of artfully dwarfed pines and rhododendrons just breaking bud, which covered the sloping ground between the main gates and the channel. Kayugh turned on that sister, roaring.

“Save your arrows, curse you. You think we have any to spare?”

“Sorry, Spear Lady,” the young woman muttered, eyes downcast. “Sorry.” Kayugh turned back to watching the channel. “Young fools.”

“Nerves,” Otokas said.

“They can have nerves later.” Kayugh eyed him. “How are you?”

He grinned, and saw her flinch away from his eyes, the Blackdog looking out, the world a moment hazed with its fury. “Holding on.”

“Do. I don’t want you loose in here. You should be with her.”

“Not yet.”

“Spear Lady?” One of the women drew their attention back to the raiders’ makeshift bridge. Seen with human eyes, it was a copper shimmer of torchlight on water, an orange flare of torches catching the glint of armour, a helm, a spearpoint, a drawn sword. Shadows that ducked and leapt and rocked across the light. “There’s someone coming there, beyond, Spear Lady. Look. Their warlord?”

Something. He came in the darkness, riding, flanked close by other riders, preceded by more torches.

Otokas . . . snarled. Some of the women gave him wary looks.

“Oto?”

“The warlord’s a wizard,” he said hoarsely.

Wizards, even the least, carried the scent of their magic with them: earthy, cool, damp, like water on stone, spiced with the tang of fire and frost. Wizards’ magic was neither good nor bad; it simply was, though it raised the dog’s hackles. But this was overlain, entwined with what he had first sensed when the army appeared: the reek of burning metal, a poisonous breath in the air, ashes on stone.

“Something worse.” The words were hard to shape, coherent thought suddenly very far away.

“What do you mean?” Kayugh peered into the night. “Where is he? There in the centre?”

Otokas watched that tight formation of torchlight draw closer at an unhurried and dignified walk. He swayed, dizzy, feeling eyes on him. “Kill him.”

“He’s out of arrowshot yet.” Kayugh seized his elbow, steadied him. “Oto, what’s wrong? Get back to the goddess.”

“No.” He forced the word out through clenched teeth.

Ab. The Blackdog. The voice that spoke in his head was amused, satisfied. It was male, and carried the accents of the man’s speech, fluent in the desert tongue that was the common language of the trade road, but with a foreign overtone, syllables too precisely chopped. *And where is your maiden goddess? Bring her out to me now, and you shall continue to serve her once she is my bride.*

The wizard lied. He smelt it. The dog fought him to break free into the world. Lies, lies. The wizard hungered for Attalissa like a snow-leopard with the taste of sheep’s blood on its tongue.

Fight me and I will kill you, man, and take the Blackdog spirit into myself. And it will be I who sits in the saddle, never imagine otherwise, not that poor mad animal that rides you and has forgotten all it once was.

He saw it, a moment, the shape of the wizard’s hunger, a shadow

the dog's fear made clear. The goddess bound in snares of flesh and blood and chains of power such as wizards only dreamed of, drawn into the soul of this . . . *thing* that sat its horse across the narrow channel.

Go. Announce me to my bride, Blackdog. Before any more of her women have to die.

Otokas snatched arrow and bow from the sister to his left, bent it near to breaking, and shot, unaimed. There was no hope of the shaft reaching the wizard. Amid the warriors building the bridge of boats, though, one shrieked and splashed, sank. There was an uneasy stir among those around the wizard, an edging back from the lakeshore.

"I said, don't waste arrows." Kayugh's voice was gentle and very, very far away. She prised the bow from his grip. "Blackdog: look at me. Stay sane, or go to Attalissa."

Otokas sighed and folded a hand around Kayugh's shaking fingers. Bad, if he was frightening even her. He forced the dog to settle and found words again. "He'll have to cross the bridge to get to her. We have to kill him then."

"We will." As though she soothed a child. Or a half-wild beast.

Kayugh freed her hand from his, still gently, but rested it on his shoulder, an anchoring touch. Or a readiness to seize him if he flung himself over the parapet.

But the other sisters edged away. From the corner of his vision he could see the dog's shadow lying over him, black form on the edge of existence, a breath from taking shape. The yellow-green peridot light of the Blackdog's eyes would be burning in his own.

There is a storyteller's cycle of tales, and they begin like this:

Long ago, in the days of the first kings in the north—who were Viga Forkbeard, and Red Geir, and Hrafnmod the Wise, as all but fools should know—there were seven devils, and their names were Honeytongued Ogada, Vartu Kingsbane, Jasberek Fireborn, Twice-Betrayed Ghatai, Dotemon the Dreamshaper, Tu'usha the Restless, and Jobbiz Stonebreaker. If other tellers tell you different, they are ignorant singers not worthy of their hire.