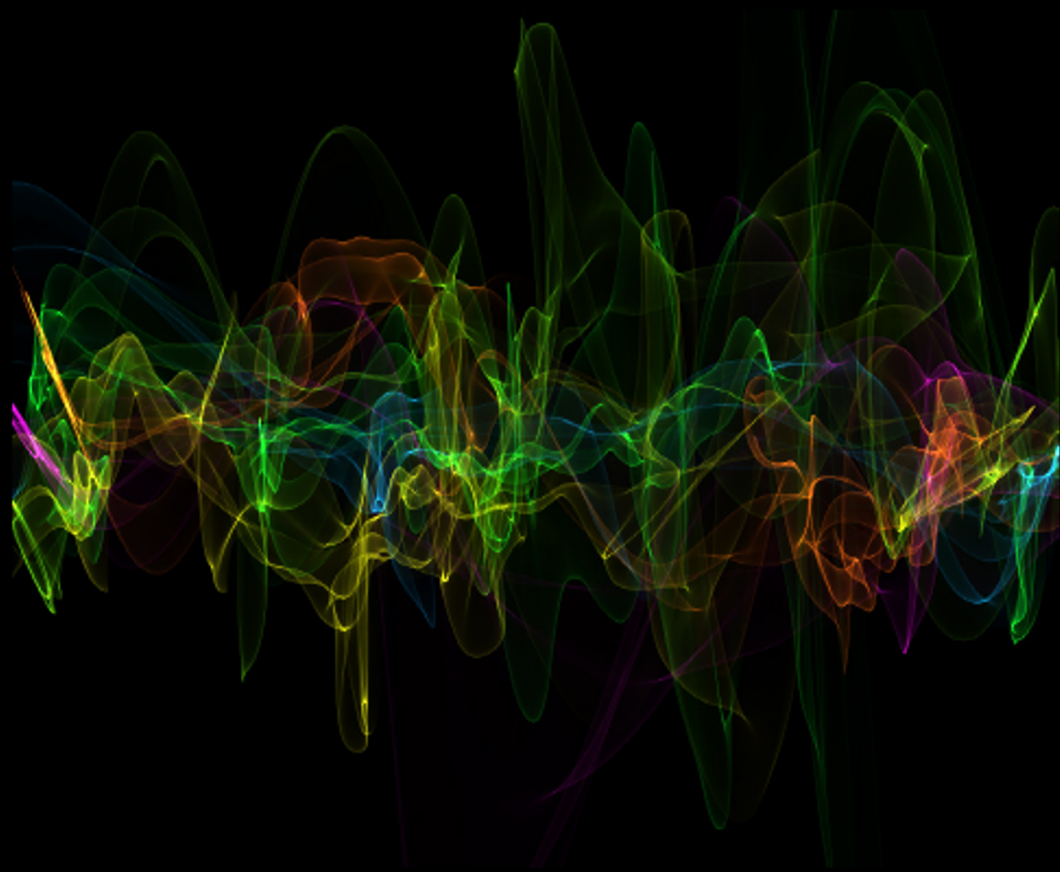


Demon Rebellion



Book III of the Demon Saga

Dave Nicolette

Demon Rebellion

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*To my wife Malu, without whose support and encouragement I
would probably do nothing at all.*

Contents

Demon Rebellion	1
Chapter 1 (excerpt)	2
Chapter 5 (excerpt)	5
Chapter 10 (excerpt)	9
Chapter 12 (excerpt)	13
Chapter 17 (excerpt)	17
Chapter 21 (excerpt)	20
Chapter 27 (excerpt)	22
Chapter 27	23
Chapter 28 (excerpt)	26
Chapter 29 (excerpt)	28

Demon Rebellion

When the wormhole's endpoint suddenly shifts, the event throws everyone's plans into disarray. Both the Bshaak operation and the human resistance are disrupted. The Bshaak boss, Kalr, manipulates matters to her own benefit, and gains status and power on the home world. With her new-found influence, she reestablishes the meat operation with the full support of the Bshaak authorities. The humans are tightly controlled and farmed for their meat.

Nyala and Brön join other renegade humans at a hidden location where they plan and prepare for war against the Bshaak. They seek to fulfill the Prophecy, a Tuk legend that foretells the descendants of Vlagga of the Tuk and Jan of Greenvale are destined to win back the human world from the occupiers.

But the powerful Adept Arun and his son Tell, who is more powerful still, have other plans for the despised Ordinary. Can the resistance overcome both the Magical ones and the Bshaak?

They came, they ate, they conquered.

The Demon Saga follows three generations of a family thrown into the midst of a conflict spanning two worlds.

- Book I: Demon Incursion
- Book II: Demon Dominion
- Book III: Demon Rebellion

Chapter 1 (excerpt)

Eighteen years after the event, Henrik led his horse along the main street of the town. The horse, in turn, pulled a small cart laden with produce, same as every day. As it did every morning, the young sun warmed Henrik's back and threw long shadows out ahead.

Gert passed Henrik going the other way, as he did at the same hour every morning. Gert carried a sack of scarves, which he hawked as he moved along the street. From time to time, someone would approach him, examine his wares, and possibly make a purchase. Every day, the same people bought the same scarves using the same money.

"How are you, Gert?" asked Henrik, unsmiling.

"As ever," Gert replied flatly.

"And otherwise?"

"Ain't no otherwise today."

"Tomorrow, then."

"Tomorrow it is."

Henrik came to the town market, toward the eastern edge of the place. The market was well-stocked with food and goods, as always. Every day was market day. Every day the market contained more than the town could possibly produce, and people bought more than they could possibly use. The same people, every day.

Sellers stood among their goods in small kiosks. Shoppers strolled among the kiosks, examining the goods on offer and making the occasional purchase. No one smiled.

All along the main street, tradesmen worked. Smiths wrought the same tools every day. Coopers made the same barrels. Wainwrights assembled the same wagons. The same horses received the same shoes. All this work took place out in the open.

At the other end of town, folk were preparing for the afternoon's festival. Men erected grandstands. Jugglers practiced their art. Children mounted decorative flags on posts. Whether it was a

harvest festival or a planting festival depended on the time of year; but every day was a festival day nonetheless.

On a low wooden platform in the open air, children sat round a storyteller. They gathered there every day, no matter the weather. Their lessons took place outside, and not in the town's hall or church.

Lachlan told the children tales of the Demon incursion. He taught them the names of the heroes who had resisted. He related the sequence of events, the key battles, the turns of fortune. He gave them what memories he could of the world they had lost. They listened raptly.

Townsfolk strolled up and down the street as if they had not a care in the world. When a certain individual came near to the platform, Lachlan abruptly changed the story. He recited the middle part of an innocuous old children's tale having nothing to do with the Demons, as if he had been telling that tale all along.

The visitor paused briefly and listened. Satisfied, he moved on. Sunlight glinted from a shiny object tucked into a belt beneath his tunic; an object not of local manufacture. When the man had passed out of earshot, Lachlan resumed the tale of the Demons.

Beyond the wooden buildings of the town were cultivated fields. Farmers tended the fields dutifully, as they did every day. The fields were far too limited to supply the needs of the town, and indeed very little true farming took place there.

The town baths were also in the open. The town's water supply was not apparent. The wood to heat the bathwater, or to fire the open-air blacksmith's forge, could not have come from any source within the town's walls.

And yet, the town seemed to be well-supplied with clean water, with wood for fires, and with other needs. The street was clean, and the folk wore good clothing. But nothing was built on the other side of the main street, and there were no side streets.

When viewed from a certain direction, it looked like a bustling, healthy town.

Beyond the fields was a wooden fence. It could have been

a traditional defensive wall for the town, constructed of local materials by local means. Beyond the fence, and not visible to those within its confines, was the true town wall. It was a mettalic lattice structure on which were mounted motion detectors and stunners. Its purpose was *not* to defend the town.

Suspended above the main street, and extending all along the length of the town from east to west, was a walking path enclosed in a climate-controlled cover, transparent on top and on the side facing the town. Within this squarish tube, groups of Bshaak crowded against the transparent side to gaze upon the twolegs settlement while tour guides explained, inaccurately yet colorfully, what the visitors were observing.

The Bshaak called this place The Twolegs Settlement. The residents called it The Pen.

Chapter 5 (excerpt)

Kalr was keen to get the operation going again. Her new association with the magistrate opened up possibilities that would have been out of the question for an underground, criminal organization. Now, they had the backing and the resources necessary to increase profits a hundredfold.

But there were a few short-term challenges. For one, the shift had destroyed important facilities. The meat preparation facility at Ishni was no more. The hunting reserve had been wiped out. More significantly, the mass escape of meat animals from the three villages area, combined with the loss of stock from the hunting reserve, left an imbalance of supply and demand. Provided the imbalance was temporary, it could serve to drive up prices; but Bshaak were Bshaak, after all, and angry customers could pose a physical threat.

With any luck, the shift would have killed certain individuals Kalr could do without. But in view of the stock situation, she found herself unexpectedly pleased to see the untrustworthy oddball Zrrt and her dangerously erratic twolegs pet, Arun, come up the road from Sila herding more than two thousand head of twolegs and a couple dozen fourlegs.

Kalr didn't need to feign joy at the sight of the stock. She strode out to meet Zrrt and Arun, arms outstretched and a huge, frightening smile on her face.

"What a pleasure to see you both!" she exclaimed.

"The feeling is mutual, Kalr," said Arun.

Kalr was a bit more aware of sarcasm than Zrrt, but at the moment she was too relieved to notice. "Your timing couldn't be better!" she said. "We have orders to fill, and no inventory on hand."

Zrrt said, "Shall we just march them straight through, then?"

"No, that wouldn't do," said Kalr. "We need to prep them first. Besides..." she ran her eyes up and down the column of meat animals

“...these aren’t looking so good. We’ll have to fatten them up a bit.”

“Sorry we didn’t take the time to search for premium specimens,” said Arun. “We just couldn’t wait to see you again.”

Kalr sneered. “I had forgotten why I liked you so much, Arun.”

A familiar Bshaak approached. “Hello, Ekh,” said Arun.

“Ekh,” said Zrrt.

“Welcome home,” said Ekh.

“How heartwarming!” declared Kalr. “It’s a school reunion. Who’s missing, then?”

Zrrt scanned the area. “Fal,” she said. “Fal is not here. Has she appeared since the event?”

“No,” said Ekh.

“I hope she has survived,” said Arun.

“Kind of you to say such things about our folk,” said Kalr, “but as for me, I must say I always found Fal a bit intimidating.”

“I would say *staunch*,” said Arun.

“Nothing seemed to get through to her,” Kalr added.

“In other words, she could not be bribed or threatened into betraying me,” said Arun.

“She could observe the most disturbing events with no reaction, and then instantly kill on command without remorse.”

“Yes, she did what was necessary at the appropriate times,” said Arun.

“I suspect that what you didn’t like about Fal was the fact she was loyal to Arun,” Zrrt suggested. “He released her from a trap, and she did not forget it. And she is not the only one. Inconvenient for you, no?”

“Ah, Zrrt, ever the skeptic,” said Kalr with false good cheer. *You are all inconvenient for me, the lot of you*, she thought. “Chatting with old friends is certainly a pleasure, but perhaps we should get these animals penned, cleaned up, fed, and rested so that we can start processing them. Hungry customers await!”

Arun and the Bshaak looked around, but saw no sign of any animal enclosures, or indeed any sort of facilities.

“Penned where?” asked Zrrt. “All I see here is the portal standing out in the open in the middle of a field, and a couple of Bshaak just sort of wandering around.”

Kalr made the gesture equivalent to a shrug. “They can build their own pen out of these hard plants,” she said, gesturing toward the forest that ringed the field on three sides.

“These won’t be building anything today,” said Arun. “They are starved, injured, and exhausted. Perhaps you could ask some of your lazy, overpaid operatives if they would kindly pause their dice game and lift a helpful claw for once.”

Ekh let out one of her characteristic mad laughs. Zrrt smirked. Just like old times.

Kalr dropped the cheerful demeanor, glared at Arun, and growled in a low voice, “Yes, Arun, that is a fine idea. I will ask them if they would kindly do that. Thank you for the suggestion.” She turned and gestured to a subordinate, who hurried off to take care of the matter.

“You are welcome,” said Arun. “And what of Tazh? Has she finally retired, after so many cycles of talking about it, or was she killed in the shift?”

“Neither,” said Kalr, her good cheer returning as abruptly as it had disappeared. “We have big plans for this place. Tazh is even now getting things in motion on the home world.”

“Too bad,” said Arun. “Why is it that deadly natural phenomena never seem to kill the right people?”

“Why don’t you ask the universe that question?” said Kalr. “I have more immediate concerns.”

“I will ask the universe at the first opportunity,” said Arun, “but in the meantime I, too, have an immediate concern.”

“Oh? And what might *that* be?”

“I sustained a serious injury in the shift,” Arun explained.

“I see. Shall we begin the celebration now, or have you more good news?”

“There is more,” he said. “Now that we’re operating in the open as a legitimate business enterprise, it should be possible to have my

injuries treated by a Bshaak doctor.”

Kalr was amused. “Well, my little friend, in the world of criminal enterprises, many transactions take the form of an exchange of favors, but in the world of legitimate enterprises, services must be paid for. How to you propose to pay a doctor?”

“I am a full partner in this enterprise,” said Arun. “My share is equal to your own. I have plenty of Bshaak funds at my disposal.”

“I think not,” said Kalr. “Our agreement was verbal only. Besides, you have no accounts on the home world. You have no access or ability to use our financial system. In the end, you are just another twolegs.”

“A verbal contract is binding, provided there are at least two witnesses to the agreement,” said Zrrt. Ekh laughed again.

Kalr knew she was looking at those witnesses even now. And several disinterested Bshaak had just heard the conversation. A disadvantage of legitimacy was that she could not simply kill people who happened to overhear inconvenient things.

“Well, then, Arun,” said Kalr. “There is the portal. Good luck.”

“I will act as his proxy,” said Zrrt.

“There are no attorneys present,” said Kalr.

“Arun can verbally assign me as his proxy, provided there are at least two witnesses,” said Zrrt.

Before Kalr could protest, Arun said, “Zrrt, I hereby assign you as my proxy for legal and financial matters on the Bshaak home world.”

“I accept the assignment, Arun,” said Zrrt. Ekh and you, yourself, Kalr, are the witnesses.

Ekh laughed.

Kalr fumed. *So be it...for now*, she thought.

Chapter 10 (excerpt)

“Folk have come trickling in here from up north lately,” said Kelwyn. He was a Hill man of about thirty years, with red hair and a red-brown beard, hazel eyes set in a field of freckles. “They say there was a big event happened at the Demon place. Lot of people got out. Now they gotta round them all up again.”

“An event like what?” said Anford. He, too, was a Hill man, and they spoke together in the Hill tongue. Anford was twenty-eight, had fair skin, brown hair, and piercing blue eyes.

“Like an attack.”

“By who? Ain’t nobody up that way, as far as I know.”

“As far as *you* know, yeah.”

“Well, whoever they are, I reckon they’re bringing the Demons after them.”

“According to them, ain’t nobody after them. They got away clean.”

“Maybe. Hard to imagine they’d just let them go like that.”

“Like I said, it was an attack. Maybe they *can’t* follow.”

“Sounds too good to be true.”

“And so what if they *are* after them? We’re ready. We got True weapons. We got Magical folk. We got sheer numbers, man.”

“Yeah, I know. We been training. And then training some more. And after that, training again. But except for a few of the leaders, none of us have seen battle before. That makes a difference, you know. They call it getting blooded. We got an army, but it ain’t been blooded. Who knows what they’ll do when they see a Demon.”

“They see Demons every day.”

“I mean a Demon that’s pissed at them.”

“I hear Nyala, that Tuk woman, she’s been killing Demons since she was a kid. Some say she cut her own way out of the womb with one of those Tuk swords, screaming a war-cry.”

"Yeah, she's a tough one, all right. You seen her use a bow? A sword? Never seen nothing like it. She's killed more Demons that you've got red hairs."

"Well, I don't know about that. You ain't seen all my red hairs, you know."

"Wouldn't want to, friend. Wouldn't want to. I'll wager some of that territory is best left unseen."

They laughed. Kelwyn continued, "Maybe we need to look for a small war somewhere, to get blooded."

"Be careful what you wish for, boy-o."

"Yeah? What do *you* wish for, An?"

"I could do with a beer."

"That's a wish that can come true, and double!"

Having finished their own training for the day, they had been watching the eastern sky darken as the sun set on the other side of the hills. Now there was only a fading sky-glow and reflected cloud-light, and it would soon be too dark to find their way to beer.

With a renewed sense of urgency, they headed over a small rise toward the Forge. The valley next to the town came into view. In it they saw some four hundred fighters practicing with wooden Djonda spears and wooden short swords; no metal points on them. They were being drilled by the Bshaak named Fal—the big one—with help from Busetu to translate. They'd have to wind it up pretty soon, now that the sun was down.

"Can you believe a Demon is training our folk to fight other Demons?" said Kelwyn.

"Gotta believe it, man. There it is, right there."

"What a world!"

"Yeah. And another one of them helped old N'Dagan bond that True stuff to steel. What do they call it?"

"Ceramic. Good friends to have, but I don't know why they want to help us. Too bad we ain't got no more of that ceramic, though. Not enough to go around."

In a separate area, another two hundred were practicing Tuk two-handed swordsmanship under the direction of Nyala, the Tuk

warrior princess, and her daughter Marena.

"Now, *there's* a prize," said Anford.

"Where?"

"Down there. That Marena. Smart. Pretty, in an exotic way, you know? And Magical, too. Quite a package!"

"Yeah. And she can take your head with a single stroke of that sword of hers, if her boyfriend don't do it first."

As they approached the town, they passed another practice area. There, Brön and Elana were drilling the Adept.

"Shame about the boy, that little Timo, eh?" said Kelwyn.

"Yeah. Must be hard on the parents."

"There's the one you should be looking at, if you have to be looking, I mean," said Kelwyn.

"Who?"

"Rana. Elana's daughter. You got smart, pretty, and Magical. Just your type, right?"

"Maybe."

"*Maybe*? Did I mention she ain't got no boyfriend? And she's of age, same as Marena. A little older, actually. You plan on being a single man forever?"

"I don't know, Kel. She's a scary one."

"Is she?"

"I remember her when she was growing up. Always smiling and happy and all. But in the last year or so, she's darkened up. There's something smoldering in there, and I wouldn't want to be too close when it comes out."

"Well, as long as it comes out when we're up against the enemy, I'm fine with a bit of smoldering. She's got one hell of a talent for Magic. We're gonna need that when the time comes. There are some things all the swords and spears in the world won't stop."

"Yeah, I reckon they won't stop a particle beam."

"Well, there's *that*, yeah, but I was thinking about Magic."

"When I see all these folk practicing, it seems like we've *got* all the swords and spears in the world right here."

"Yeah, well, we ain't. You know what else we ain't got? Beer."

“You got a one-track stomach, Kel, you know that?”

“Everyone should have a specialty. Wouldn’t do to spread yourself too thin.”

“Last thing *you* gotta worry about is *thin*, boy-o.”

Chapter 12 (excerpt)

“Mother, some of the people who came from the north have been talking about the Adept master, Arun.”

“I know, Rana. He has been helping the Bshaak control us and harvest us. He is one of the leaders of their meat business.”

Mother and daughter were in the small house they shared at the Forge, finishing their supper.

“It’s hard to believe anyone would help the Bshaak do this.”

“Yes. But Arun has a deep hatred of the Ordinary. He has always desired that they suffer.”

“Adept also oppose him.”

“It is so. I believe Arun hates those Adept even more than he hates the Ordinary. He feels they have betrayed him by siding with the Ordinary.”

“Does he hate you, then? Does he hate me?”

“Surely he must.”

Rana was silent for a few moments. Then she said, “Mother, that is not all I have heard of Arun.”

“Oh? What else have you heard?”

“They say his wife left him and took their baby daughter with her.”

“I can’t blame her for that.”

“They say this happened nineteen years ago.”

“That’s quite a long time.”

“They say the woman was an Adept of average power.”

“That is not surprising, as he would have little interest in an Ordinary woman, and would feel threatened by an Adept of significant power. He prefers to be surrounded by weaker folk.”

Lana ignored the psycholanalysis and continued with the line of inquiry she had begun. “They say her name was Elana.”

Elana flushed momentarily. “Not an uncommon name among the Northern folk.”

"You are an Adept of average power."

"Yes, as are most Adept...by definition, one might say."

"Your name is Elana."

"Well, as I said, not an—"

"I am nineteen years old."

"I know you are. I have been with you all your life."

"Tell me again how my father died fighting the Demons, mother. Or, if you can't recall the tale, then tell me the truth instead."

Elana paused. "Rana, when you were small I thought it best you not know the truth."

"And when I was less small?"

"It was just...just easier to say nothing of it. We had moved on with our lives."

Growing angry, Rana said, "You mean, *you* had moved on with *your* life."

Elana looked away.

Rana took a deep breath and brought herself under control. "I have asked Brön to instruct me about Magical techniques and spells."

"Yes. He is a strong one. One of the strongest. You can learn much from him."

"I agree. He told me of one technique. It's called Contact. Funny thing, you've taught me many spells and techniques, but somehow never mentioned Contact to me."

"Contact is for communication across distances. We are all here together, so there has been no need of Contact."

"The voices in my head these past couple of years...it's father, isn't it? It's Arun. He's been trying to Contact me, but I didn't know what was happening and I didn't complete the connection."

"I can't say what you may or may not hear in your own head, dear."

"Don't play dumb, Mother. That game is over."

Elana sighed. "It's *possible* Arun has tried to Contact you."

"Then he misses me. He misses his daughter. I would know him, Mother. I know you and he had problems, but that's between the two of you. It isn't my problem. He's my father. I had a right to know. How could you do this to me?"

"Rana, you must understand that Contact is not simply communication. When Contact is established, each party immediately knows the location of the other. If you accept Contact with him, he will learn the location of the Forge. You would place all these people in danger."

"I understand. I have no wish to bring harm to our people. But separately from the question of Contact, all these years you allowed me to believe my father was dead. How do you suppose I feel now?"

"I suppose you feel confused. Hurt."

"Betrayed."

"I am sorry. I thought it best—"

"Yes, you said that already. There is another Adept people speak of. They call him Tell. He is Arun's son, isn't he?"

"Yes," said Elana quietly.

"Is he your son, as well?"

Elana was silent.

"Tell me, Mother. The time for lies is past."

"Yes," she replied in a whisper.

"Then he is my brother."

"He is your brother," Elana replied almost inaudibly.

Rana stood, went to her sleeping area, and began to gather her things in a rucksack.

"What are you doing, Rana?" asked Elana.

"I am going north, to find my father and brother."

"That would be most dangerous."

"Why?"

"Arun and Tell are not like normal folk. They are filled with hate and rage. I fear for your life, if you go to them."

"And why should I believe you?"

"Rana, this is a very bad idea. I can't let you go."

"Let me? What makes you think you can *stop* me?"

"I must try."

"Very well, then. Try." She shrugged the rucksack over one shoulder, picked up her staff, and strode toward the front door.

Elana stood in front of the door. When Rana reached her, she placed her hands on the girl's shoulders and said, "Rana, please."

Rana swept her mother's hands away roughly and demanded, "Stand aside."

"I cannot," said Elana. "There is too much at stake. Not least, your own safety." She called her staff to her hand and angled it toward her daughter. Rana anticipated the move. Rana's power far exceeded her mother's. She easily parried the spell and countered it strongly.

Elana rose into the air and flew away from the door and across the room. She struck the far wall and two shelves collapsed, spilling their contents onto Elana and the floor. She lost hold of her staff and it fell somewhere beneath the scattered items.

Enraged, Rana turned her power toward the front door. Instead of opening the door, she blew it off its hinges magically and sent it spinning away from the house. She strode through the opening and turned north.

Chapter 17 (excerpt)

Eight Bshaak soldiers stood watch over the supply depot at the southeastern corner of the facility. Ever since the incident in which supplies were stolen and the quartermistress murdered, the owners were taking no chances. To that day, no one had found the perpetrators or the missing supplies.

They saw a lone twolegs emerge from the vegetation to the southeast and stroll casually across the open field toward their position. It carried a pole of some sort approximately the same length as its body, similar to the one the Arun creature carried. It used the pole as a walking stick, touching the ground with it every few steps, although it did not appear to require the pole for support.

The unit commander and her second looked at one another, then gazed back out across the field. This could be the individual they had been told to expect.

“The creature appears unafraid,” commented the second.

“If it is the one Arun is waiting for, then what reason would it have to fear us?” said the commander rhetorically. Arun had emphasized that the one he expected was a most powerful Adept, and not someone to be trifled with.

One of the soldiers murmured to her comrades, “It’s a Magical one.”

“So what?” sneered another. Most of the Bshaak on assignment here had never seen Magic used to any great effect. They had only witnessed tricks designed to amaze tourists.

The first said, “This one is said to be another spawn of Arun, like Tell. It could be most dangerous indeed.”

A third remarked, “We have emitters, and there are eight of us. Any one of us is three times the size of that one. What are you so nervous about?”

Ever since the operation became legitimized, Arun had not needed to coerce the cooperation of Bshaak by demonstrating his

capabilities. Tell used his talent mainly to torment Bshaak with whom he gambled, or to frighten the other twolegs into doing things for him. None of these Bshaak had ever seen a Demon trap or witnessed an Adept launch a fire-blast. They suspected most of the things people said about the Magical ones were exaggerations.

But they were not certain, and none of this lot wanted to be the first to find out the hard way just how dangerous the Magical one might be.

“Don’t underestimate them!” said the first soldier. “I have heard they can bend the path of a particle beam.”

A fourth added, “That’s nothing! I’ve heard they can capture a particle beam and direct it to a new target.”

The first said, “And they can suck the life right out of one’s body, or set one aflame, just by wishing it!”

“Ten or more people at a time!”

“Keep quiet back there!” snapped the unit commander, and the chatter subsided.

The small creature approached them as if it were the most natural thing in the world. They had never seen a twolegs approach a group of armed Bshaak without fear. It unnerved them.

The twolegs twisted its soft little face into an unreadable expression and said pleasantly, in perfect, although slightly squeaky Bshaak, “Hello. I am Rana. I seek Arun. It is expecting me.” She could not say *he* in the Bshaak tongue without it sounding odd.

“Umm...hello,” rumbled the unit commander, unsure just what to say in this unthinkable situation.

After a moment of silence, Rana asked, “Is Arun in that building?” inclining her staff toward the warehouse. When she moved the staff, the Bshaak shrank back a bit, then straightened up again.

The unit commander collected her wits and replied, “No. That is a warehouse. Arun may be found in the main part of the facility, west of here.”

“Can you point the way?” asked Rana politely.

With some trepidation, the unit commander raised an arm and pointed.

Rana nodded to her and said, "Thank you." Then she proceeded to walk in the indicated direction, with no apparent worry about the armed Bshaak behind her.

"Not a hint of fear!" said the second, in awe.

"And it can *speak*," said the unit commander.

"I, for one, am relieved it did not roast us on the spot," said the second.

"I as well, but now there are *three* of the damned things here."

"There are more than three."

"I meant three like Arun and Tell."

"That one did not seem as ill-tempered as the other two."

"A ruse to put our guard down, I'll wager," said the unit commander. "That younger one, Tell, has a playful streak. This one may well be the same. Especially if both are the spawn of Arun."

"Interesting times ahead, then," said the second.

"One could say so."

Chapter 21 (excerpt)

Tell came strolling back to the facility with a mere seven surviving Bshaak straggling behind him. He seemed quite pleased with himself and unconcerned with the results of the mission.

Despite the risk, Tazh confronted Tell. "What the hell happened out there?" she demanded.

Tell replied, "It was great! The most fun I've had in ages."

Tazh said, "Where is the meat? The mission was to collect meat. I see no meat here."

"That was a secondary objective," said Tell. "The *mission* was to destroy the renegades. *That* objective was achieved."

But Tazh wasn't finished. "What sort of commander loses all her troops and then describes the day as 'the most fun in ages?' Where's the *fun* in that?"

"I enjoyed watching them fight," he replied.

"Your enjoyment was not the purpose of the mission."

"It was *my* purpose."

"*Your* purpose. Listen, we don't have our own individual purpose here. This is a business."

"It's *your* business, not mine."

"The meat business is the only function of this facility. If you are not part of it, then why are you here? Why do you not go and live somewhere else? Do whatever twolegs do with themselves?"

"*This* twolegs makes unpleasant Bshaak disappear. Are you an unpleasant Bshaak, Tazh? You are beginning to sound rather unpleasant to me. Which do you want: To retire, or to disappear?"

"There will be no retirement without profit. There will be no profit without revenue. There will be no revenue without sales. There will be no sales without meat. If you want me to go away and retire, as you often say, then stop acting like an immature Bshaakrigh and help us collect the meat."

Tell gripped Tazh in a Magical embrace. She could neither move

nor speak. The Adept said, "I'm trying to decide whether to stop your heart or your lung. Or maybe I should just burst an artery in your brain, or drain your life force. Oh, how inconsiderate of me, I've neglected your wishes. Do you have a preference, or shall I just go ahead and choose?"

Chapter 27 (excerpt)

Chapter 27

To Regh, the scene before her seemed positively surreal. Notwithstanding the heated battle taking place just beyond the perimeter and the active assault on the processing center, the facility was open to the public and bustling with tourists. The partners would not let a day pass without selling tickets.

Visitors had no idea they were in any danger. They came through the portal and viewed the holographic introduction. They crowded into the viewing platform to see the Twolegs Settlement. They milled about the souvenir shop without a care. They enjoyed the cuisine at the restaurant.

There was no hiding the thunderous reports of the military-grade emitters being fired a few points from the tourist area. The Bshaak explained it away as a local weather phenomenon. The tourists remained under control, but the operatives were nervous.

Visiting academics, researchers, and students studied the geology, meteorology, and biology of the meat world, or awaited the arrival of the dazzling star-filled night sky, oblivious to the carnage taking place a few points away. The races went on, with humans riding for their lives before standing room only crowds.

The money kept rolling in, and customers were unaware just how close to empty the shelves really were.

Just north of the portal, quite near to the tourist area, the meat preparation facility was in flames, having been bombed by renegade humans who had escaped following a gunfight with Bshaak operatives.

Although Tazh's little army had managed to rout the attacking humans to the south, her command center had been struck in a commando raid and the monitoring equipment had been destroyed. Word was that their last remaining piloted flyer was down. To coordinate the action in the east, Tazh had to rely on her personal communication unit. It was like watching the faraway battle

through a small hole in a fence.

Operatives at the perimeter had reported a large group of humans to the north, and sporadic attacks on the guards there. Whether this was Sira's group or some other, Regh could not know. In any case, the Bshaak were severely short-clawed, and could spare no one to investigate. It was an unknown threat.

Regh was surprised at her own feelings about all this. She had long tried to help the humans regain control of their world, and now it seemed possible they could do so. Yet, she was uneasy. If the humans closed in suddenly from multiple directions, they would not know her. She would be nothing more to them than one more Bshaak; one more target. They would have no reason to spare her.

She considered slipping back through the portal to the home world. Kalr and Tazh were too busy to notice her movements. Viak was far away, probably relaxing in a plush office in a place no human could reach. Arun had gone east to meet the Magical renegades approaching from the Forge, and Zrrt was with him. Ekh and the soldiers were collecting meat from the field. Tell was...Tell; probably drunk, and almost certainly uninterested.

Chances were good that Regh could get away clean if she acted quickly. But then what? She had been away from the home world for so long she had no job, no home, and no identity that she could prove. On the other claw, she would not arrive with an empty purse, and there were ways around inconvenient administrative details.

She made her way to the main tourist structure as she mulled over her options. Once inside, operatives approached her in ones and twos. She tried to placate them with the answers the bosses had made up.

"Why are we locked down?" *Routine operational matters. It's temporary.* "What's happening outside?" *Nothing unusual.* "Should we allow customers through?" *Of course. Perfectly safe.* "We can hear heavy weapons fire and explosions outside." *Not weapons, just local weather phenomena. Nothing to worry about.*

The operatives were experienced enough to know better than to ask too many questions, but Regh could plainly see they were not

satisfied with these explanations.

Regh gradually worked her way upstream through the densely-packed tourists until she came within sight of the portal. Something about it captured her attention. She stared intently at the edges of the thing.

“You see it, too?” Regh turned. An operative had approached her. “I’m a greeter,” she said. “I look at the portal all day, every day.”

“And?”

“And something’s happening to it.”

Chapter 28 (excerpt)

Brön had allowed his horse to fall back gradually as the group moved north. He knew the Adept were capable, and he had seen with his own eyes that the Joining could, indeed, enable them to overpower Arun. But he did not wish to put his wife and daughter at risk.

He knew Arun could detect them and identify each of them from a distance. He knew Arun held a deep hatred for Brön's parents, Anton and Tanú, and that his intention had been to kill them all that day back at the farm. He decided to play on Arun's hatred and overconfidence, and draw him away from his family and friends. He would have to deal with Arun alone. Perhaps Arun would be unable to resist the temptation to break with the Bshaak's plans and pursue Brön, for hate's sake.

And so Brön fell back, and when he reached the rear of the group he cut away and headed west.

Brön was uncertain how to make Arun notice him. He tried to make himself...*available*...as he rode west and north. Before long, he got his wish: Arun initiated Contact.

You seem to have lost your way, came Arun's thought.

So now the game begins. Brön wanted to make Arun believe he was out for revenge. He wanted Arun to focus on him, and forget about his family and friends. Now each could feel the location of the other, and they turned their horses accordingly.

One of us is lost, Arun, but it is not I.

Bold thoughts for one who is overmatched.

Let us call it determination rather than boldness. You murdered my parents. You intended to murder me that day, as well. Now you will pay.

You have had opportunities for that, and you stayed your hand. Why the change of heart now?

I stayed my hand before because I was uncertain of the right

course. I am uncertain no longer. I am coming for you.

Brön could feel Arun's amusement.

I could ask you the same question, Arun. You could have murdered me back at the stone house, or on other occasions since. Why did you stay your hand?

To Brön's surprise, Arun paused. He could feel the uncertainty in the older man's mind.

It makes no difference in any case, Brön continued. I will not stay my hand this day.

And so it ends, thought Arun. It will be interesting.

Interesting? That is all you can say?

You are strong. Talented. But untrained. Unpracticed. And your nature is not violent. I, on the other hand, have reached a level of Magic you cannot comprehend. And my nature is...well, let us say I have the advantage of you.

Your nature is evil, thought Brön, and you are well-practiced in doing harm. But you are also old and infirm, and thus I have the advantage of you.

Brön felt Arun's uncertainty fall away to be replaced, once and for all, by amusement.

Chapter 29 (excerpt)

Zrrt observed the fight with little understanding of what was happening. The twolegs often appeared to be doing nothing at all. At times, a visible energy field formed between the combatants. It changed in shape, color, and intensity before winking out. At other times, there was no effect Zrrt could perceive.

The Bshaak could sense the flow of Magical energy, but could not perceive the nuances of the combatants' exchange. Yet, there was evidence that the twolegs were affecting one another in some way. Their soft little faces shifted into various unreadable expressions that may have indicated effort, fear, stress, or pain. Occasionally they gestured with their tiny hands, or inclined their small round heads, as if conjuring up Magical effects. Rarely, one or both vocalized briefly.

On the whole it was difficult for Zrrt to judge how the fight was progressing. Had this been a calling-forth between Bshaak, there would have been considerably more noise, action, and blood. It would have been possible to see the dance of the males, and thus the emotional state of the combatants. This scene was entirely too placid to be any sort of battle, as far as Zrrt could tell.

But Brön and Arun perceived the situation quite differently. To them, the world was on fire. They launched and parried direct attacks on bone and flesh, induced and repelled hallucinations, injected and countered debilitating emotional responses, and attempted to Transfer lifeforce. Their powers were roughly equal, and they were exhausting themselves in the ongoing attempt to gain an advantage. They were in a reality very different from that of the quiet plain on which they stood.

The magestones in the heads of their staffs grew physically hot—an effect that could only occur when significant levels of Magical energy were manipulated.