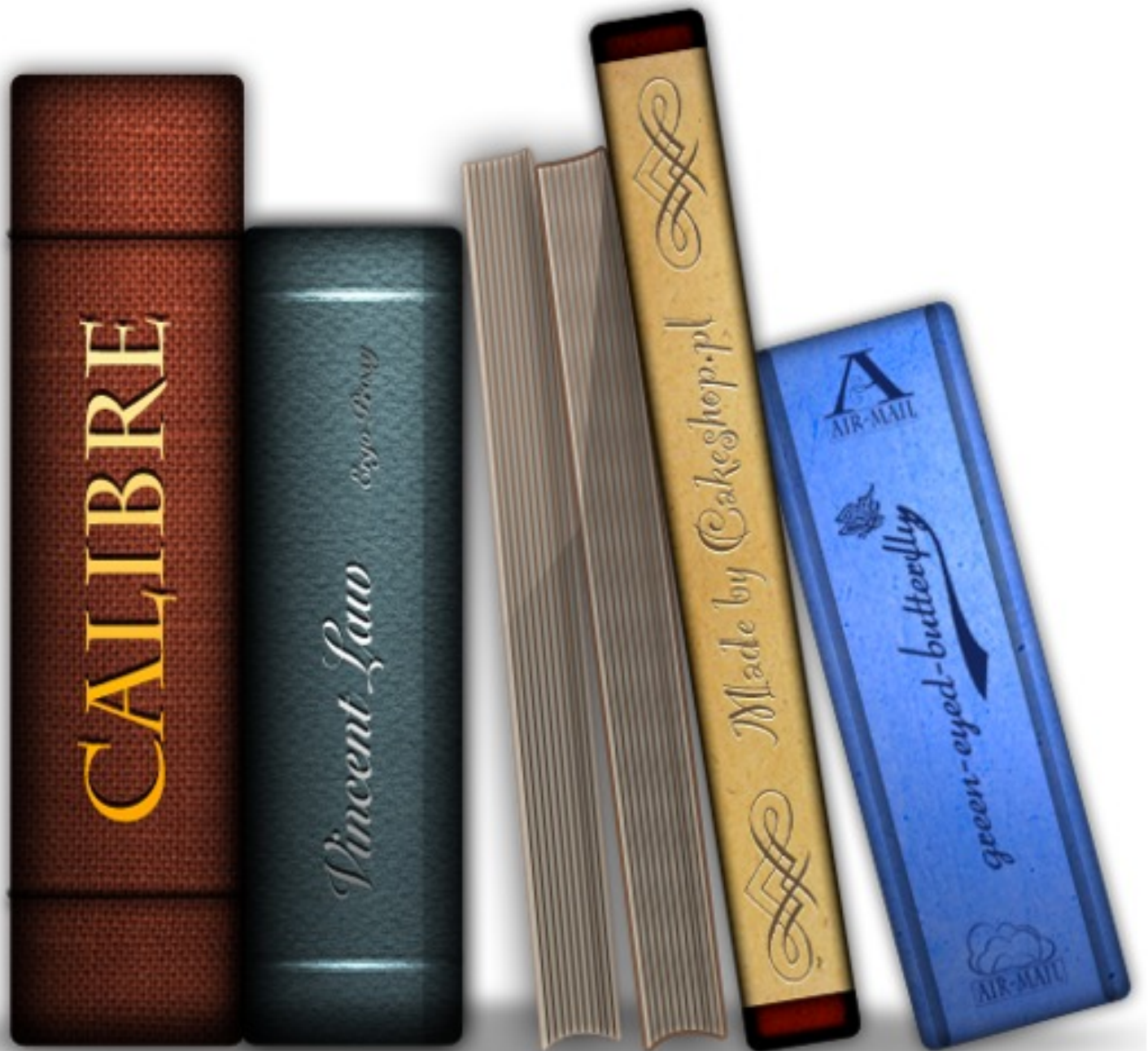


Feist, Raymond E. - Serpentwar 3

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BOOK III The Mad God's Tale

We are the music makers, We are the dreamers of dreams, Wandering by
lone sea-breakers, And sitting by desolate streams; World-losers and world-
forsakers, On whom the pale moon gleams: We are the movers and shakers
Of the world for ever, it seems.

Arthur William Edgar O'Shaughnessy Ode, st. 1

PROLOGUE

Breakthrough

The wall shimmered. In what had once been the throne room of Jarwa, last Sha-shahan of the Seven Nations of the Saaur, the thirty-foot- high wall of stones opposite the empty seat of power seemed to waver, then vanish as a black void appeared. Nightmare creatures gathered. things of terrible fangs and *nous claws*. *Some wore the faces of dead animals, while others were humanlike in aspect. Some bore proud wings, antlers, or bull's horns. All were beings of massive muscle and evil intent, dark magic and murderous, nature. Yet all in the hall remained motionless, terrified of that which was appearing on the other side of the newly created gateway. Demons who stood as tall as trees crouched low eying not to be seen. Immense energy was required to open a gate, and for years the demons had been thwarted by the accursed*

priests of the distant city of Ahsart. Only when the mad High Priest unsealed the portal admitting the first demon to deny his city to the conquering host of the Saaur, was the barrier breached. Now the world of Shila lay in tatters, the remaining life reduced to lowly creatures at the sea bottom, lichen clinging to rocks in crevices upon distant mountain peaks, and tiny creatures that scuttled under rocks to avoid detection. Anything larger than the smallest insect had been devoured. Hunger now gripped the demon host, and again they returned to their ancient habit of feeding upon one

another. But internecine conflict was put aside among the elite of the host as a new gate from the Fifth Circle to Shila was completed, opening the way for the supreme ruler of the demon realm to communicate. The demon without a name stood at the edge of those summoned to “s once-grand hall. He peeked out from behind a stone column, lest he call attention to himself. He had captured a unique soul and had been harboring it, using it, becoming cunning and dangerous. For unlike most of his brethren, he had discovered guile worked better than confrontation in gaining valuable life force and intelligence. He still showed the proper mix of fear and danger to those directly above him, enough fear so they judged him under their sway, yet dangerous enough for them to avoid attempting to consume him. It was a perilous pose, and had he made one misstep, calling attention to his uniqueness, those captains nearby would have destroyed him utterly, for his mind was turning alien and was now self-aware enough to be a threat to all of them.

This demon knew he could easily defeat at least four of the demons who presumed superiority and stood before him, but to rise too quickly among the host was to call unwanted attention to oneself. He had, during his short life, seen no fewer than a halfdozen others rise too quickly, only to be destroyed by one of the great captains, either against that day they might themselves be challenged, or to protect a favored servant. Mightiest of these captains was Tugor, First Servant of Great Maarg, who was now making his will known. Tugor fell to his knees, placing his forehead to the floor, and others followed his lead. The demon without a name heard a faint voice and knew it came from the soul he had captured, and he tried to ignore it, but it always said something he knew to be important. ‘Observe,’ he heard in his mind, as if it were a faint whisper in his ear, or a thought of his own. i

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A great rush of energies bathed the room as the shimmering wall seemed to ripple outward, then vanish as a gate to the home realm opened. A wind filled the chamber, from air sucked through the gap between worlds, as if

everything in this hall were being urged to return to its home realm. By their nature, demons instinctively felt an awareness of those far mightier than themselves, and being close to Tugor caused the nameless demon to nearly faint in terror. But the presence that emanated through the rent in the fabric of space nearly reduced him to babbling

incoherence. All those present stayed on their knees, keeping foreheads to the stones, save the nameless demon still hidden behind the column. He watched as Tugor stood to face the void. From within the gap in the wall came a voice that was filled with the echoes of rage and dread. 'Have you found the way?' Tugor said, 'We have, most mighty! We have sent two of our captains through the rift to Midkemia.' 'What do they report?' demanded the voice from beyond, and in it the nameless demon detected a note of something besides anger and power, a hint of desperation, perhaps. 'Dogku and Jakan do not report,' responded Tugor. 'We know nothing. We believe they are unable to hold the portal.' 'Then send another.' ordered Maarg, Ruler of the Fifth Circle. 'I will not cross until that way is clear; you've left nothing upon this world that I may consume. Next time I open the way, I will cross, and if there is naught for me to devour. I will eat your heart, Tugor!' The sound of air being sucked from the room ceased as the rift between the worlds closed. Maarg's voice hung in the air as the shimmering vanished and the wall was as it had been before. Tugor rose up and shouted in rage, venting his frustration. The others stood slowly, for now would not be a

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good time to draw the attention of the second most powerful among their race. Tugor had been known to snap

the heads from the shoulders of those who appeared to be growing too powerful so that no rival would appear who might contest his position. It was even rumored that Tugor harbored his strength against the day when he might challenge Maarg for supremacy among the race. Tugor turned and said, 'Who goes next?' Without quite knowing why, the nameless demon rose and came forward. 'I will go, lord.' Tugor's visage, a horse skull with great horns, was nearly expressionless, but what expression it was capable of reflected puzzlement. 'Who are you, little fool?' 'I have no name yet Master,' said the nameless one. Tugor took two large strides, pushing aside several of his captains, to stand towering over the small demon. 'I have sent captains, who have failed to return. Why should you succeed where they did not?' 'Because I am meek and will hide and observe, Master,' the nameless one said quietly. 'I will gather intelligence, and I will hide, harboring my strength, until I can reopen the portal from the other side.' Tugor paused a moment, as if considering, then drew back his hand and struck the smaller demon driving him across the room into the wall. The demon had small wings, not yet sufficient to fly with, and they felt as if they had been broken by the impact of the stone wall. 'That is for being presumptuous,' said Tugor, his rage just below the killing level. 'I shall send you,' he said to his next more powerful captain. Then he spun and grabbed another, ripping out the hapless demon's throat as he screamed, 'And this is for the rest of you for not showing as much courage.' Some of the demons at the edge of the group turned and fled the hall, while others fell to the stones, throwing

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themselves on the mercy of Tugor's whim. He was satisfied with killing one of his brethren, and drank blood and life energy for a moment, before tossing aside the now-empty husk of flesh.

'Go, said Tugor to the captain. 'The rift is in the distant hills, to the east. Those who guard it will tell you what you must know to return ... if you are able. Return, and I will reward you.' The captain hurried from the hall. The small demon hesitated, then followed, ignoring the fiery pain in his back. With food and rest, the wings would heal. As he left the palace he was challenged twice by other demons driven by hunger. He quickly killed them. Drinking their life energies caused the pain in his wings to fade, and as before, new thoughts and ideas manifested themselves. He suddenly knew why he was following the captain sent to reopen the rift. The voice that had once come from the vial he wore around his neck, but that was now inside his head, said, 'We shall endure, then thrive, then we shall do what must be done.' The little demon hurried to the rift site, the location of the fissure between worlds where the last of the Saaur horde had fled. The little demon had learned things and knew that somehow an ally had betrayed the demons, that this gate was to have remained open, but instead had been closed. Twice it had been forced open, but closed again quickly, for those on the other side used counterspells to keep the portal sealed. At least a dozen powerful demons had died at Tugor's hands because of the host's inability

to cross. The captain reached the portal site as a dozen other demons surrounded him. Unnoticed, the little demon followed the larger as if accompanying him. The rift site was unremarkable, a large patch of muddy earth, the grass crushed by the passing of thousands of

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Saaur horses and riders, their wives and children accompanying them. Most of the grass surrounding the rift was withered and blackened by the tread of demons, but tiny patches of green could be seen here and there. Should the rift remain closed much longer, even those tiny sources of life energy would be sought out and devoured. Squinting his eyes, the tiny demon saw the strange twist in the energy that hung in the air, difficult to notice unless one specifically looked for it. What the Saaur and other mortal races called magic was but a shifting of life energies to the demons, and some of these might die in opening the rift. Until the wards on the other side were removed, it would be impossible to keep the rift open for more than a few seconds at a time, and many demons would die to achieve even two or three such passages. No demon gave his life willingly - it was not in their nature - but all feared Tugor and Maarg, and harbored the hope it would be the others in their company who paid the ultimate price, while they survived to gain reward.

The captain commanded, 'Open the way!' The demons given the task glanced at one another, knowing that some would die in the attempt, but at last they opened their minds and let the energies flow. The little demon studied the air and saw the shimmering as the opening appeared, and the captain crouched, timing his jump to the brief opening. As he launched himself, while demons around the site screamed and fell, the little demon leaped upon his back. Taken totally by surprise, the captain bellowed his shock and outrage as they fell into the rift. The urgency of the little demon's purpose helped him ignore the disorientation, while it only added to the captain's surprise. As they emerged into a dark and vast hall, the little demon bit as hard as he could into the base of the captain's skull, where it met the neck, the weakest point on his body instantly an electric pulse flowed into the little demon as the captain's outrage turned to terror and pain. He flailed

about in the darkness, desperately seeking to dislodge the assassin. The little demon clung viciously to his victim's back. Then the captain flung himself back, attempting to crush the smaller demon against the rock face of the cavern, but his own powerful wings conspired to prevent that. Then the captain collapsed to his knees, and at that moment the smaller demon knew he was victorious., Energy flowed into him until he felt as if he might literally explode from it; he had feasted to insensibility before on those he had taken, but never in one feast had he consumed so much energy. He was now more powerful than the one he fed upon. His legs, longer and more muscular than they had been only a moment before, stood upon hard stone as he lifted his diminishing victim, who now could only mew weakly as his life force was drained. Soon it was over and the newly victorious demon stood

in the hall, almost drunk from the infusion of power. No food of flesh or fruit, no drink of ale or wine could bring one of his kind to this state. He wished for a Saaur looking glass, for he knew he was now at least a head taller than a moment before. And upon his back he felt the wings that would carry him through the sky one day begin to grow again. But something distracted him, and he again felt alien thoughts entering his mind. 'Observe and beware!' He turned and altered his perceptions to pierce the darkness. t*

The vast hall was littered with the bodies of mortal creatures. He saw both Saaur and those called Pantathians, and a third type of creature, one unknown to him, smaller than the Saaur and larger than the Pantathians. There was nothing left of their life energies and so he quickly dismissed them. The wards were still in place, the barriers that caused