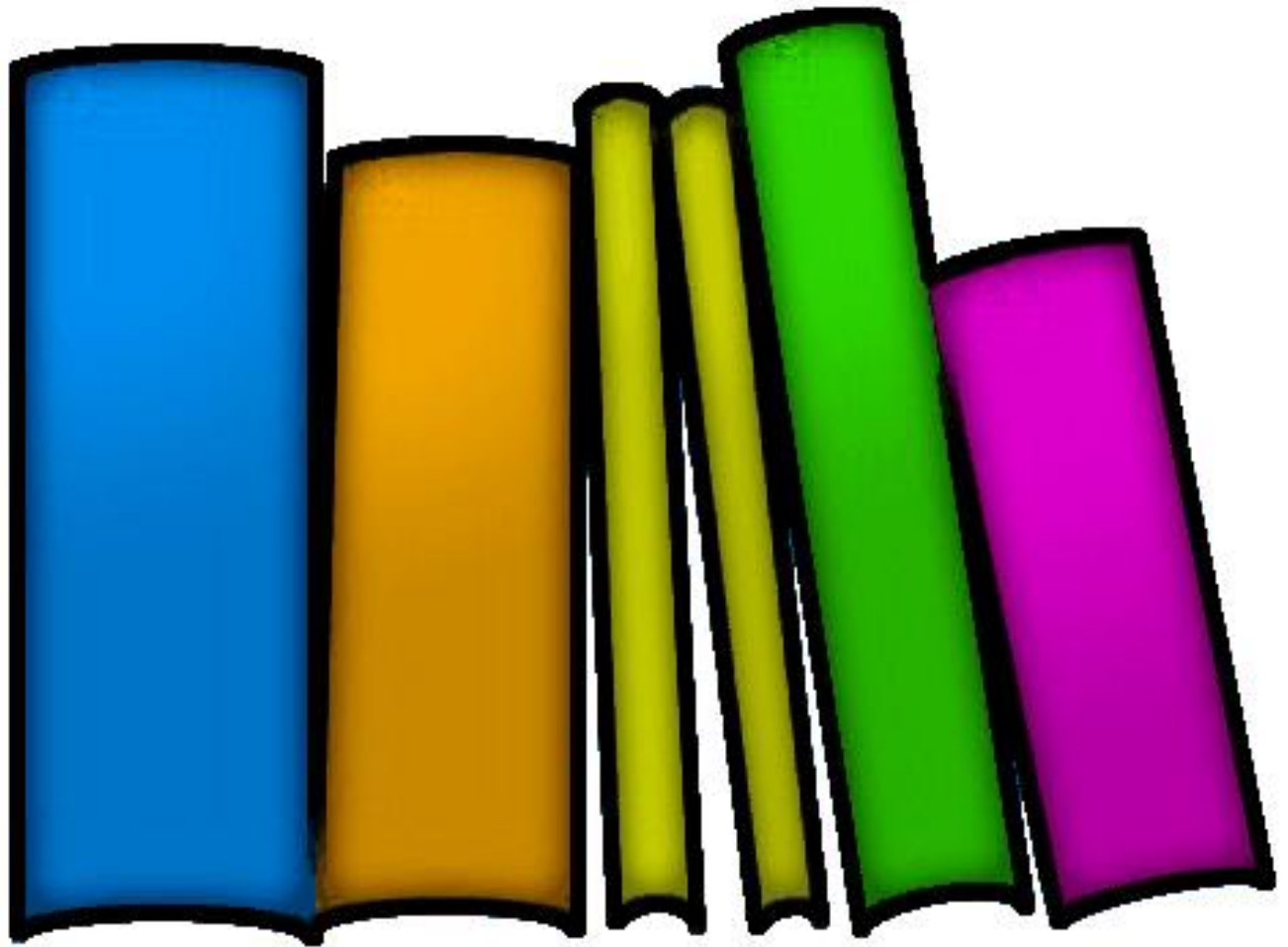


02 Servant Of The Empire

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SERVANT of the EMPIRE

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Dedicated to the memory of Ron Faust, always a friend

The breeze died.

Dust swirled in little eddies, settling grit over the palisade that surrounded the slave market. Despite the wayward currents, the air was hot and thick, reeking of confined and ullwashed humanity mingled with the smell of river sewage and rotting garbage from the dump behind the market.

Sheltered behind the curtains of her brightly lacquered litter, Lady Mara wafted air across her face with a scented fan. If the stench troubled her, she showed no sign. The Ruling Lady of the Acoma motioned for her escort to stop. Soldiers in green enamelled armour came to a halt, and the sweating bearers set the litter down.

An officer in a Strike Leader's plumed helm gave his hand to Mara and she emerged from her litter. The colour in her cheeks was high; Lujan could not tell if she was flushed from the heat or still angered from the argument prior to leaving her estate. Jican, the estate hadonra, had spent most of the morning vigorously objecting to her plan to purchase what he insisted would be worthless slaves. The debate had ended only when she ordered him to silence.

Mara addressed her First Strike Leader. 'Lujan, attend me, and have the others wait here.' Her acerbity caused Lujan to forgo the banter that, on occasion, strained the limits of acceptable protocol; besides, his first task was to protect her - and the slave markets were far too public for his liking - so his attention turned quickly from wit to security. As he watched for any sign of trouble, he reasoned that when Mara busied herself in her newest plan she would forget Jican's dissension. Until then she would not

7

appreciate hearing objections she had already dismissed in her own mind.

Lujan understood that everything his mistress undertook was to further her position in the Game of the Council, the political striving that was the heart of Tsurani politics. Her invariable goal was the survival and strengthening of House Acoma. Rivals and friends alike had learned that a once untried young girl had matured into a gifted player of the deadly game. Mara had eluded the trap set by her father's old enemy, Jingu of the Minwanabi, and had succeeded with her own plot - forcing Jingu to take his own life in disgrace.

Yet if Mara's triumphs were the current topic of discussion among the Empire's many nobles, she herself had barely paused to enjoy the satisfaction of her ascendancy. Her father's and brother's deaths had taken

her family to the brink of extinction. Mara concentrated on anticipating future trouble as she manoeuvred to ensure her survival. What was done was behind, and to dwell on it was to risk being taken unawares.

While the man who had ordered the death of her father and brother was finally himself dead, her attention remained focused on the blood feud between House Acoma and House Minwanabi. Mara remembered the unvarnished look of hatred on the face of Desio of the Minwanabi as she and the other guests passed his father's death ceremony. While not as clever as his sire, Desio would be no less a danger; grief and hatred now turned his motives personal: Mara had destroyed his father at the height of his power, while he hosted the Warlord's birthday celebration, in his own home. Then she had savoured that victory in the presence of the most influential and powerful nobles in the Empire as she hosted the Warlord's relocated celebration upon her own estates.

No sooner had the Warlord and his guests departed Acoma lands than Mara had embarked on a new plan to strengthen her house; She had closeted herself with Jican, to discuss the need for new slaves to clear additional meadowlands from the scrub forests north of the estate house. Pastures, pens, and sheds must be completed well before calving season in spring, so the grass would be well grown for the young needra and their mothers to graze.

As Acoma second-in-command, Lujan had learned that Acoma power did not rest upon her soldiers' loyalty and bravery, nor upon the far-held trading concessions and investments, but upon the prosaic and dull six-legged needra. They formed the foundation upon which all her wealth rested. For Acoma power to grow, Mara's first task was to increase her breeding herd.

Lujan's attention returned to his mistress as Mara lifted her robe clear of the dust. Pale green in colour, the otherwise plain cloth was meticulously embroidered at the hem and sleeves with the outline of the shatra bird, the crest of House Acoma. The Lady wore sandals with raised pegged soles, to keep her slippers clear of the filth that littered the common roadways. Her footfalls raised a booming, hollow sound as she mounted the wooden stair to the galleries that ran the length of the palisade. A faded canvas awning roofed the structure, shading Tsurani lords and their factors from the

merciless sunlight. They could rest well removed from the dust and dirt, and refreshed by whatever breeze blew in off the river as they viewed the slaves available for sale.

To Lujan, the gallery with its deep shade and rows of wooden benches was less a refuge than a place of concealing darkness. He lightly touched his mistress on the shoulder as she reached the first landing. She turned, and flashed a bothered look of inquiry.

'Lady,' said Lujan tactfully, 'if an enemy is waiting, best we show them my sword before your beautiful face.'

Mara's mouth turned upward at the corners, almost but not quite managing a smile. 'Flatterer,' she accused. 'Of course you are right.' Her formality with Lujan became gentled by humour. 'Though among Jican's protests was the belief I would come to harm from the barbarian slaves, not another Ruling Lord.'

She referred to the inexpensive Midkemian prisoners of war. Mara lacked the funds to buy enough common slaves to clear her pastures. So, seeing no other alternative, she chose to buy barbarians. They were reputed to be intractable, rebellious, and utterly lacking in humility toward their masters. Lujan regarded his Lady, who was barely as high as his shoulder, but who possessed a nature that could burn the man - Lord or slave or servant- who challenged her indomitable will. He recognized the purposeful set of her dark eyes. 'Still, in you the barbarians will have met their match, I wager.'

'If not, they will all suffer under the whip,' Mare said with resolve. 'Not only would we forfeit the use of the lands we need cleared before spring, we would lose the price of the slaves. I will have done Desio's work for him.' Her rare admission of doubt was allowed to pass without comment.

Lujan preceded his mistress into the gallery, silently checking his weapons. The Minwanabi might be licking their wounds, but Mara had additional enemies now, lords jealous of her sudden rise, men who knew that the Acoma name rested upon the shoulders of this slender woman and her infant heir. She was not yet twenty-one, their advisers would whisper. Against Jingu of the Minwanabi she had been cunning, but mostly lucky; in

the fullness of time her youth and inexperience would cause her to misstep. Then would rival houses arise like a pack of jaguna, ready to tear at the wealth and the power of her house and bury the Acoma natami - the stone inscribed with the family crest that embodied its soul and its honour - face down in the dirt, forever away from sunlight.

Her robe neatly held above her ankles, Mara followed Lujan around the first landing. They passed the entrance to the lower tier of galleries, which by unwritten but rigid custom was reserved for merchants or house factors, and climbed to the next level, used only by the nobility.

But with Midkemians up for auction, the crowds were absent. Mara saw only a few bored-looking merchants who seemed more interested in the common gossip of the city than in buying. The upper tier of galleries would probably stand empty. Most Tsurani nobles were far more concerned by the war on the world beyond the rift, or in curbing the Warlord Almecho's ever growing power in the council, than with purchasing intractable slaves. The earliest lots of Midkemian captives had sold for premium prices, as curiosities. But the novelty lost attraction with numbers. Now grown Midkemian males brought the lowest prices of all; only women with rare red-gold hair or unusual beauty still commanded a thousand centuries. But since the Tsurani most often captured warriors, females from the barbarian world were seldom available.

A breeze off the river tugged at the plumes on Lujan's helm. It fluttered the feathered ends of Mara's perfumed fan and set her beaded earrings swinging. Over the palisade drifted the voices of the barge teams as they poled their craft up and down the river Gagalin. Nearer at hand, from the dusty pens inside the high plank walls came the shouts of the slave merchants, and the occasional snap of a needra hide switch as they hustled their charges through their paces for interested customers in the galleries. The pen holding the Midkemians held about two dozen men. No buyers offered inquiry, for only one overseer stood indifferent watch. With him was a factor apparently in charge of issuing clothing, and a tally keeper with a much chipped slate. Mara glanced curiously at the slaves. All were very tall, larger by a head than the tallest Tsurani. One in particular towered over the chubby factor, and his red-gold hair blazed in the noonday sun of

Kelewan as he attempted to communicate in an unfamiliar language. Mara had no chance to study the barbarian further, as Lujan stopped sharply in her path. His hand touched her wrist in warning.

'Someone's here,' he whispered, and covered his check in stride by bending as if a stone had lodged in his sandal. His hand settled unobtrusively on his sword, and over his muscled shoulder Mara glimpsed a figure seated in the shadow to the rear of the gallery. He might be a spy, or worse: an assassin. With Midkemians scheduled for sale, a bold Lord might chance on the fact that the upper level would be deserted. But for a rival house to know that Mara had chosen to go personally to the slave market bespoke the presence of an informant very highly placed in Acoma ranks. The Lady paused, her stomach turned cold by the thought that if she was struck down here, her year-old son, Ayaki, would be the last obstacle to the obliteration of the Acoma name.

Then the figure in the shadows moved, and sunlight through a tear in the awning revealed a face that was handsome and young, and showing a smile of surprised pleasure.

Mara lightly patted Lujan's wrist, gentling his grip on the sword. 'It's all right,' she said softly. 'I know this noble.'

Lujan straightened, expressionless, as the young man arose from his bench. The man moved with a swordsman's balance. His clothing was well made, from sandals of blue-dyed leather to a tunic of embroidered silk. He wore his hair in a warrior's cut, and his only ornament was a pendant of polished obsidian hanging around his neck.

'Hokanu,' Mara said, and at the name her bodyguard relaxed. Lujan had not been present during the political bloodbath at the Minwanabi estate, but from talk in the barracks he knew that Hokanu and his father, Lord Kamatsu of the Shinzawai, had been almost alone in supporting the Acoma. This, at a time when most Lords accepted that Mara's death was a foregone conclusion.

Lujan stood deferentially aside and, from beneath the brim of his helm, regarded the noble who approached. Mara had received many petitions for

marriage since the death of her husband, but none of the suitors was as handsome or as well disposed as the second son of Kamatsu of the Shinzawai. Lujan maintained correct bearing to the finest detail, but like any in the Acoma household, he had a personal interest in Hokanu. And so had Mara, if the flush in her cheeks gave any indication.

After the subtle flattery of recent suitors, Hokanu's honest yearning for Mara's approval was refreshing. 'Lady, what a perfect surprise! I had no expectation of finding so lovely a flower in this most unpleasant of surroundings.' He paused, bowed neatly, and smiled. 'Although of late we have all seen this delicate blossom show thorns. Your victory over Jingu of the Minwanabi is still the talk of Silmani,' he said, naming the city closest to his father's estates.

Mara returned his bow with sincerity. 'I did not see any Shinzawai colours among the retainers waiting on the street. Otherwise I should have brought a servant with jomach ice and cold herb tea. Or perhaps you do not wish your interest in these slaves to be noticed?' She let that question hang a moment, then brightly asked, 'Is your father well?'

Hokanu nodded politely and seated Mara on a bench. His grip was strong but pleasant; nothing like the rough grasp she had known from her husband of two years. Mara met the Shinzawai son's eyes and saw there a quiet intelligence, overlaid by amusement at the apparent innocence of her question.

'You are very perceptive.' He laughed in sudden delight. 'Yes, I am interested in Midkemians, and at my most healthy father's request, I am trying not to advertise the fact.' His expression turned more serious. 'I would like to be frank with you, Mara, even as my father was with Lord Sezu - our fathers served together in their youth, and trusted one another.'

Though intrigued by the young man's charm, Mara repressed her desire to be open lest she reveal too much. Hokanu she trusted; but her family name was too recently snatched from oblivion for her to reveal her intentions. Shinzawai servants might have loose tongues, and young men away from home sometimes celebrated their first freedom and responsibility with

drink. Hokanu seemed as canny as his father, but she did not know him well enough to be certain.

'I fear the Acoma interest in the barbarians is purely a financial one.' Mara waved her fan in resignation. 'The cho-ja hive we gained three years ago left our needra short of pasture. Slaves who clear forest in the wet season fall ill, my hadonra says. If we are to have enough grazing to support our herds at calving, we must allow for losses.' She gave Hokanu a rueful look. 'Though I expected no competition at this auction. I am glad to see you, but nettled by the thought of bidding against so dear a friend.'

Hokanu regarded his hands for a moment, his brow untroubled, and a smile bending the corners of his mouth. 'If I relieve my Lady of her dilemma, she will owe the Shinzawai her favour. Say, entertaining a poor second son at dinner soon?'

Mara unexpectedly laughed. 'You're a devil for flattery, Hokanu. Very well; you know that I need no bribes to allow you to visit my estates. Your company is ... always welcome.'

Hokanu stared in mock suffering at Lujan. 'She says that very prettily for one who refused me the last time I was in Sulan-Qu.'

'That's not fair,' Mara protested, then blushed as she realized how quickly she had spoken in her own defence. With better decorum she added, 'Your request came at an awkward moment, Master Hokanu.' And her face darkened as she recalled a Minwanabi spy, and a pretty, importunate boy who had suffered as a result of the intrigue and ambition that underlay every aspect of life in the Empire of Tsuranuanni.

Hokanu noted the strain that shadowed her face. His heart went out to this young woman, who had been so serious as a child, and who had against the greatest odds found the courage and intelligence to secure her house from ruin. 'I will cede to you the Midkemians,' he said firmly, 'for whatever price you can bargain with the factor.'

'But I wish not to inconvenience you,' Mara protested. Her fan trembled between clenched fingers. She was tense; Hokanu must not be permitted to