

MERCENARY KINGS: WHOM DO YOU SERVE

Whom Do You Serve?

The Horned Blight stopped, but the clanking of its burden continued, as it reached the edge of the stream. The mass of bone twitched and shifted, as nervous as its rider. The Urugal Knight, Raza Osa Bin Beleem, jumped down to consider the mud. The moment he left his Golem, it lost its spark and became a frozen statue of bones.

Beleem was looking for tracks. A clear trickle of water ran in a thin line through a sea of red mud. There were scattered markings, but they were indecipherable to his eyes. He was not of the Forest Folk.

“All is well, girl,” Beleem whispered to his Golem.

Above him, the trees seemed to lean in close and listen. He noticed the cloud of gnats and flies that were attracted by his Horned Blight and smiled. This Golem was crafted before the Khan came to power. His father gave it to him at his naming ceremony. Ever since, he and the Blight were inseparable, traveling first the Upper Empire and now the Lower.

Somehow he seemed to commune with the beast.

“Zikia raiders? Nonsense! You always did have an overactive imagination.”

Earlier, Beleem crossed the frontier into the Samula lands in the Akka Woods at the dawn, trying to find his way to Zul Basir on the other side of the forest. It was a shortcut which might save him a week, but which could just as easily end with his head on a pike. Within these woods, no law held, though they fell within the borders claimed by the Durani Empire. Here the Emperor was only just another a man.

“Whom do you serve?” a strange voice asked.

The figure had been standing opposite him for some time, it seemed. A Zikia tribeswoman—stout and tall and covered head-to-toe in robes. Her hands were painted with dried red mud. She wore no weapons.

Beleem was foolish, but not foolish enough to believe they were alone.

“Interesting question, that,” Beleem said as he removed a Durani gold cup from his robes. He lifted the cup to his lips, sipped some water and spat it out. “Some say I serve myself. Others, who have bought my service, would say I serve them—Durani,

Gudanna, those with coin. My mother said ‘Beleem, you serve only your stomach!’ I wonder, Zikia lord, what you will say of me?”

“If you babble on like this I shall say, ‘He died slowly,’” the tribeswoman said. Suddenly, the tree behind Beleem took an enormous stride forward. Towering twice as high as his own Golem, the Wildwood Dryad was certainly imposing. Beleem had to crane his neck to take it all in. If this was his end then at least there was some wonder in it.



“Still others say, ‘Beleem holds the secrets of the Ancients,’” the Urugal said, smiling up at the Zikia Dryad. He gestured to a pack on the back of his Horned Blight.

“Why should I trust an Urugal? Your words are bought and sold along with your loyalty.”

“You should know that death is the greatest reward you might give me. But I will say this: there is one thing I love above all others, and that is a good deal!”

The Zikia tribeswoman stepped forward. As she approached Beleem, she left no marks in the mud. “Relics?” she asked, suddenly interested.

“The finest in the southern Empire,” Beleem followed.

“Do you have something that might teach the Durani some respect for our tribelands? The stone lords cross our territory, burn our trees, and insult us at every turn,” the Zikia said. She unwrapped the veil

that covered her face and Beleem noticed that her teeth were stained a deep green. Her eyes were purple, and she wore a curious jewel in her nose.

Beleem produced an amulet from a hidden pocket in his robes. He always kept his valuables out of sight. He was no fool.

“I have just the thing, the Shard of Jahar—the power of the earthquake!”

The Zikia lord grabbed for the trinket. She was fast, but when money was involved, Beleem was faster.

“Since we’ve already established that you Zikia are so much more honorable than we lowly Urugal, I’m sure you’d be willing to discuss a fair price!”