

CHAPTER ONE: THE BATTLEFIELD OF ROCCHAR

*To the floor of the vale Rocchar they come,
A king, a prince, an army once feared.
To the floor of the vale Rocchar they come,
To die.*

**Final lines of Zandro's epic *Poem of Vurgus*,
written shortly before the ancient
minstrel's own pyre.**

Vurgus the Mighty, king of Veskia, approached the cold hand of death.

No one could deny this; yet few could easily accept the inevitable demise of the vital ruler. Not the many that milled outside the hastily constructed canvas shelter, and surely not the select few who encircled the king's cot, those who cared for him above all the rest. To see him like this, his eyes staring blankly at the ceiling of the tent...oh, far more than any of them could bear! His flesh had turned pallid; his once splendid shock of yellow hair now mirrored the whiteness of the higher snow meadows. Perhaps it is the poor light, some of them thought.

But they knew better.

Swaths of gauze covered the many wounds that Vurgus had sustained during the endless battles of the preceding two months. Similar injuries would have seen lesser men long since dead; but not so Vurgus the Mighty who, in the thirty-five years of his sometimes troubled rule, had been seriously wounded countless times. His mettle was such that it disallowed him the luxury of guiding his fighting forces from afar. Accordingly he had often paid the price for his presence at the heart of so many conflicts that had occurred during his reign, one of the reasons why his Veskian subjects revered him. But now, perhaps this very day, it would all end on the floor of the desolate Rocchar Valley, many miles from their home in Shordona, and this time the great warrior would not don the fabled Red Helm, nor the rest of his armor, to ride at the head of his spiritless army.

Why had he survived so many battles in the past, only to lay thusly now, with the pulse of Veskia weak? What had transpired during recent months to see the once powerful kingdom driven to the rim of oblivion? To learn the answer, to seek some semblance of understanding as to why the previously controllable kingdoms of Hothun and Yurva now overran their land and threatened their existence, the advisors of Vurgus, among them his closest friends and supporters, sought clues in the images of years gone by.

*From Veskia's hinterlands he heard their cries.
The starved, the tortured, victims of unjust tithes.
This young giant heard, and he rallied the anguished
Against Bomor's brief and bloodied reign.
And seeing in his eyes their destiny they followed him
To Shordona.*

From an early portion of Zandro's *Poem of Vurgus*.

Bomor the Fierce, Veskia's brutal tyrant, laughed as word of the ragtag army's approach reached him. But the same malevolent grin remained frozen on his face as his severed head, skewered atop a flagpole, rose high from the parapets of Shordona for all to see. Though armed with little more than crude farm implements the Veskian peasantry, under the inspired, almost fanatical leadership of Vurgus, stormed the city, and those who dwelled within its sphere, this a large majority of Veskia's populace, followed the lead of their

provincial brethren. More than half of Bomor's savage mercenary army was destroyed, while the remainder fled southward like terrified rats across the border of Yurva.

The joyous Veskiens immediately proclaimed Vurgus the Mighty king, and from that day forth they uttered his name reverently, for they believed the erstwhile peasant to be imbued with the limitless power of Daol. Indeed, some even claimed him to be an arm of their Cloud Deity.

Hothun, the kingdom that bordered Veskia to the east, and Yurva, to the south, had both been absorbed under the cruel aegis of Bomor within the first year of his reign. But Vurgus, not wishing to be burdened with governing the two vast provinces, restored autonomy to them. The pair, reverting to the ways they had previously known, displayed their gratitude by immediately initiating forays across Veskia's borders, for they believed this benevolent new ruler to be weak. How wrong they were! Beneath the ancient Veskian pennant the fighting forces of Vurgus, now armed with the finest of forged steel, routed the would-be conquerors.

Initially Vurgus considered revoking the freedom of Hothun and Yurva as punishment for their audacity, but then thought better of it, for he still would have been encumbered with their administration. The greater portions of Hothun and Yurva were little more than bleak tundra, surely not the most desirable of dominions. However, Vurgus knew that some penalty had to be meted out if his two surly neighbors were to respect him, and accordingly he extended Veskia's border eastward for six miles, enough to encompass one of Hothun's principal rivers and a large portion of its arable land. The Hothunians who had occupied the land, thankful to be spared their lives, fled to Thuphia, the capital, and to any of numerous small villages. He did the same in Yurva, though more than fifteen miles was necessary in order to acquire land of any value. Many of the Yurvans who had lived there dispersed to Opithus, the main northern city, or to Lothron, far to the south, toward the steamy jungle lands of Injaga and Jhokko.

Thus remained the well-defined borders of Veskia through the many years of Vurgus's rule—until recently.

*To provinces near and dark kingdoms far
The name and fame of Vurgus was spread,
Borne beyond ken to the shadow land of Spatholm,
To the ears of Blugath the Butcher.*

From Zandro's Poem of Vurgus.

During the third year of Vurgus's reign, as Veskia began to enjoy some degree of prosperity after expunging the ill effects of Bomor's malevolent rule, an incident of note came to pass. A merchants' caravan arrived in Shordona from the southeast, and during their lengthy sojourn they told many tales about Blugath of Spatholm, for they once had plied their wares in the distant, barbaric kingdom. Blugath! To the Veskiens the very name had become synonymous with evil, despite the fact that none had ever set eyes on him. Grim stories of the atrocities carried out by Blugath to keep the uncivilized masses of vast Spatholm under his thumb had been borne to Shordona by other merchants in previous years, and many a Veskian had spent his share of sleepless nights attempting to shake loose from the terrible images conjured by these narratives.

The often-heard tales of Blugath did not trouble Vurgus; he had scoffed at them since the time of his youth. But a new rumor began to spread through the streets of Shordona, one that told of Blugath's sudden interest in far-off Veskia. Glowing stories of the kingdom's deliverer had reached the ears of the devil, and his jealousy and rage were unquenchable. After silencing these bearers of praise for all time he summoned the clans of Spatholm, his goal to traverse the immense distance between his own pestilent city of Sagurr and the splendid Shordona, where he would destroy the object of his anger.

Concerned, Vurgus confronted one of the gaudily dressed merchants, asking, "Is this word from Spatholm to be believed?"

"Most regrettably yes, Sire," the man replied.

"Their numbers, quickly!" the grim-faced monarch snapped.

"It is difficult to be precise, Sire, but I've heard a figure of a quarter million mentioned."

"Daol!" Vurgus hissed. "We would be crushed!"

"Perhaps not, Sire," the merchant said slyly. "The nomadic Spatholm clans are widely spread, and even now are more than likely still gathering. Who knows, but a strike at the *viper* in his own nest..."

Vurgus could not be found the following morning, and his servants reported his sleeping furs unrumpled. It took Bror, then general of Veskia's fighting forces and the king's most trusted friend, little time to piece together what had happened. The king, astride his favored steed, had left the city undetected in the dark hours. His weapons and armor were missing, and also the Red Helm, the splendid headpiece fabricated for him by Shordona's finest artisan shortly after the defeat of Bomor. Only his destination remained a mystery, until a herder from a small village less than three miles away appeared in the city. He told his story to the guards, who hastily ushered him before Bror.

"Well, what is it?" the troubled officer asked.

"I saw something during the night," the herder replied. "While I sat with my animals a lone rider passed close by, his steed racing toward the southeast. I immediately recognized the fine sorrel, which I have seen a few times, but not until I glanced up at the Red Helm did I dare believe—"

"Enough," Bror interrupted. "Go now; you will be rewarded for your information—and for your discretion in keeping it to yourself."

All were dismissed, save Bror's senior officer. For long moments they stared at each other in disbelief, neither daring to utter the fact that now seemed evident. But finally they could deny it no longer: *Vurgus the Mighty journeyed alone toward Spatholm to face Blugath's barbarian horde!*

Choosing not to waste time in questioning the sanity of his ruler and friend, Bror instead ordered the immediate mobilization of the Veskian forces within the sphere of Shordona. By the early part of the afternoon more than fifteen thousand determined warriors had gathered outside the gates of the city. The general sent couriers to the lengthy stretches of Veskia's borders to advise the remainder of the army of their new and pressing commission, and with no more time wasted he set off in the wake of his king.

The Veskians rode hard, seldom pausing for rest. Days later, at the Hothun border, they absorbed another two thousand soldiers, those who could be quickly summoned, and the trek continued. They maintained a grueling pace as they cut across the southernmost portion of Hothun, but in spite of this nearly two weeks passed before they approached the Spatholm border, for the terrain of the desolate province proved far worse than any of them could have imagined. Only a handful lost their lives upon the frozen tundra, across the jagged hills, and through the foul marshes—a miracle. Daol chose to ride with them, and the survivors, some frostbitten, all greatly fatigued, now found themselves upon a dry, dusty plain no more than fifteen miles from their destination, according to a merchants' apprentice that they had employed as an outrider. Bror, despite his anxiety over the king's fate, guided his warriors slowly across the easily negotiable plain, for he did not know what to expect up ahead.

*From the swirling mist of the dark world,
From the pit of a million serpents,
From the sea of the barbarian's blood,
Rode forth Vurgus.*

From Zandro's *Poem of Vurgus*.

The army froze as the solitary rider approached; but their instant of doubt was dispelled as the sun's remnants glinted off the crimson headpiece, and lusty cheers rose from their throats as they sped forward to engulf their revered monarch. A camp was hastily established, and a physician tended to the unflinching Vurgus's wounds, most of them superficial. The worst was a deep gash that ran halfway across his forehead. Vurgus would bear the scar from this wound for the rest of his life.

In the midst of the healer's ministrations Bror questioned his friend as to all that had transpired and, despite Vurgus's reluctance to relate his experiences, the stunned general managed to piece together the staggering exploits of the king. The tales, the ballads, even the stanzas of Zandro's *Poem of Vurgus* all originate from Bror's retelling.

Vurgus had arrived at the Spatholm border the previous morning, where he encountered nothing more than a few sentries. After disposing of the annoying obstacles he penetrated the bleak province for nearly ten miles, and from the summit of a knoll he gazed down in silent dread across the floor of a broad vale. One hundred and fifty thousand fur-clad figures, perhaps more, covered the dry earth, and their activities made it clear that their purpose in gathering was something other than social. Two-pronged pikes flew with uncanny

accuracy into makeshift effigies, thrown by scores of swaggering, boisterous barbarians, while many of their brethren engaged in close swordplay with imposing weapons. Vurgus could sense the irritability on the part of most, this brought about by their already long stay in the valley, and their proximity to other clans that had long been their natural enemies. All were anxious to commence with the task for which they had been summoned.

The king easily negotiated the declivity leading to the floor of the valley, his appearance turning countless heads. Recognition registered almost instantly within even the dullest of brains, for Blugath had coached his minions well, and there was not one who could claim ignorance of the Red Helm. But why was the king of Veskia approaching the Spatholm horde alone? Surely a vast fighting force awaited his bidding on the far side of the knoll! With this in mind some of the barbarians quickly scaled the hillock where, to their further amazement, they observed only empty plain as far west as they could see.

Swords and pikes rose menacingly as Vurgus, his cold eyes affixed before him, traversed the now silent vale; but none came close to him, for they perceived this monarch from a far-off land as something more than a man. Not until Blugath advised them otherwise would they attempt to act on their own. Vurgus, wearing a mask of determination, pierced the core of the filthy encampment, finally reining the steed to a halt before the largest hovel. Here he dismounted and, still ignoring the rabble that closed around him, waited silently.

The flap that covered the doorway of the hovel soon parted, and an ear-shattering roar echoed through the vale as Blugath, still engaged in buckling his hauberk, emerged behind two naked pleasure slaves. Vurgus, though initially surprised by the barbarian's appearance, nonetheless maintained a façade of indifference as he studied his adversary. Blugath stood a few inches above seven feet, and little fat was evident in the more than 350 pounds that were distributed evenly over his huge frame. He appeared ape-like, his face, his arms and legs, even his meaty hands covered with coarse black hair. Two bloodshot eyes rolled animatedly at the sight of the unexpected intruder.

Then, with a malevolent grin, the butcher of Spatholm unsheathed a sword the like of which could not be believed, the size of the blade such that Vurgus's own fine weapon appeared as a dagger alongside it. Some of the barbarians converged around the two as closely as they dared, while many scurried toward the slopes for a better vantage point.

Too bad only the wretched inhabitants of Spatholm got to witness the clash of giants, for surely its like had never before been seen. The deftness and agility of Vurgus offset the brute strength of Blugath, and for nearly an hour the standoff continued. Then the king, realizing that the many wounds he suffered had taken him near the limits of his endurance, called upon a last untapped reserve, and with Daol guiding his hand he pierced his huge foe's throat. Amid much grotesque sputtering Blugath fell to the ground, the impact causing the earth to tremble. In an uncharacteristic act of fury Vurgus hacked off the barbarian's head, and after holding it high for all to see he hurled it toward the nearest of the stunned onlookers. He then sank to one knee, far too fatigued to care what next transpired.

The primitives of Spatholm, now freed of the sole force that had united them in subservient fear, first destroyed Blugath's disbelieving henchmen. When this was done the individual clans turned against one another, for the ancient animosities again guided their actions. Vurgus observed the mindless carnage for a short time, until his fatigue became unbearable. After stanching the flow of blood from the most serious wounds he reclined on the dry earth within a few yards of Blugath's carcass, where blackness took him.

Not until the next day did Vurgus again awaken. He found himself on an island in the midst of a sea of death, for over seventy thousand bloodied corpses covered the floor of the vale for nearly a quarter mile around. The only sign of life in the king's sphere was his fine sorrel which, despite the bloodletting, had not left his master's side for a moment. Otherwise, no bodies lie within ten yards of him, and even the carcass of Blugath, which many of them would surely have loved to tear apart, remained intact.

Vurgus departed the death-ridden vale as soon as his head cleared, the stench being more than he could bear. That he could withstand it at all could only have been attributable to the knowledge that the Spatholm clans, now dispersed throughout the vast province, were leaderless, and likely more than glad to remain so. The threat to Veskia from this barbaric land had ended, and it would doubtless not arise again for many years, if ever.

*A queen for Veskia.
A flower born of the land,
A jewel carved from the sun's fire.
Her name Clarene.*

From Zandro's *Poem of Vurgus*.

Two years after the destruction of Blugath, Vurgus wed Veskia's new queen. Clarene, of peasant stock, possessed great natural beauty and inner warmth. She did much to temper the surliness of the duty-ridden king, and only in her presence could any recall witnessing him laugh. The Veskians came to worship Clarene, who loved them just as much.

The sole offspring of Vurgus and Clarene, a son, was born during the tenth year of the Veskian monarch's reign. They called him Jarrod, and throughout all his years of growth he proved a constant source of pride to his parents. Those who had known the young Vurgus were stunned by the physical resemblance that his son bore, though this would prove to be only one of their many similarities. By the time he turned eighteen, Jarrod's physical prowess was second only to Vurgus himself, while his understanding and compassion in dealing with the complexities of ruling a kingdom exhibited wisdom far beyond his years. At the age of twenty-two he assumed the generalship of Veskia's fighting forces, a difficult and thankless position that he took on by his own request. Few within Shordona's sphere questioned his ability to rule Veskia, in the event of Vurgus's death. Now, three years later, this untimely and unwanted occurrence had become little more than a few heartbeats from reality, though few on the floor of the Rocchar Valley that day, Jarrod himself included, believed that his reign would be anything more than fleeting.

The earliest seeds of Veskia's apparent demise had been sown many years past. The Hothunians, who had remained still since Veskia's initial victory, launched a surprise border attack during the seventh year of Vurgus's reign. They were repelled without much difficulty, and from then on the Veskian army, unchallenged for so long, remained on the alert. A subsequent raid two months later saw only three of their soldiers fall, compared to ten times the number of Hothunians.

Long dormant Yurva struck at the southern border shortly after Hothun's second attack, and the Veskians knew that nothing had changed, that the inexplicable animosity of its coarse neighbors still existed, and would likely go on for decades to come. Vurgus, angered by their stupidity, considered leading his forces into the heart of each kingdom and putting an end to the matter for all time, but decided against it. He still had no desire to extend Veskia's boundaries, and he reasoned that his army, though unquestionably superior, could find itself at a disadvantage upon unfamiliar ground. It seemed more logical to wear away their numbers at the respective borders, regardless of the length of time involved, for in this way any risk to the Veskians would be minimal. To this the king's advisors agreed wholeheartedly for, after all, what had they to fear from their enemies? Even if they united in a common effort against Veskia they would be crushed, and the chance of such an alliance was hardly feasible, for Hothun and Yurva despised each other as much as they did Veskia. Only the rugged mountain range that marked their narrow border had kept them away from each other's throats through prior decades.

In subsequent years hardly a month would pass without either Yurva or Hothun sending some force, however small, against their capable neighbor. Repelling the half-hearted attacks evolved into a routine for the Veskians, and they had little, if any bearing on Vurgus's designs for the well-being of his people. The Veskians enjoyed years of prosperity, though these were occasionally tempered by periods of hardship and deprivation, the latter brought about by the unpredictable whims of nature. Savage ice storms, ravenous insect hordes, searing droughts, all left their mark upon the land, and once Shordona itself was nearly razed by an earthquake of incredible magnitude, a disaster that saw hundreds killed. But the Veskians, under the strong leadership of Vurgus, always managed to recover from these bad times, and most conceded that the rule of this erstwhile peasant was among the most effective in the kingdom's long history.

One year prior to the fateful day on the fields of Rocchar, the incursions of both Hothun and Yurva suddenly and inexplicably stopped. Months passed, but the puzzled Veskians saw no sign of their foes, and this concerned them more than the routine confrontations. Prince Jarrod took it upon himself to journey into the heart of Yurva on a mission of espionage, while Arik, his first officer and best friend, pierced Hothun's boundaries. Not until three months later did the pair again see each other, this meeting taking place in the

private chamber of Vurgus. There, the king and his advisors listened in silent horror as the two men revealed the ominous facts.

A shrewd minor official named Keddrum, after garnering a loyalist following, had fought his way to the throne of Yurva, where his initial act was the execution of the oftentimes bickering Council of Five that had guided the destinies of the kingdom so poorly. Then, utilizing the heretofore ignored tactic of diplomacy, Keddrum had won an alliance with Hothun, their mutual goal the destruction of Vurgus and the absorption of Veskia's rich lands. The Hothunians, upon Keddrum's advice, began drawing forth great quantities of silver from their long untouched mines in the central part of the province, and with this wealth they employed the fierce, highly skilled mercenary armies of Okel, Hothun's eastern neighbor. Keddrum, in the meantime, carried favor with the headmen of the savage mountain tribes of Calthess, until they too soon desired to see Veskia crushed. It would only be a matter of months before these unified forces would gather along Veskia's borders, according to the reports of Jarrod and his first officer.

The mobilization of Veskia's army commenced in earnest. Men and boys were summoned from even the most remote of villages, the only prerequisite for their service being their ability to handle a weapon. But in the midst of this purposeful activity Daol puzzled even the most ardent of believers, for the Cloud Deity chose this inopportune time to bring great tragedy upon the Veskiens. Vurgus's beloved Clarene, seldom ill during her lifetime, died in agony from a sudden malady, leaving the already troubled kingdom in mourning. The king, crushed by the loss, was as a wounded beast for two days, with only Jarrod and a few of his advisors even able to approach him. Then, following the queen's pyre, Vurgus took hold of himself, for he knew that his responsibilities lay with the safety of his people. He resumed the overseeing of Veskia's preparations with a fierce intensity, and his outward appearance lent no clues as to his emotions, though all who revered him knew that his insides were slowly being eaten away.

An ominous change took place in Vurgus a week later, and thereafter the powerful ruler was seldom the same. He would pause at the most unexpected of times, even in the midst of issuing orders to his officers, and stare blankly at a wall or toward the clouds. This worsened with each succeeding day, until the bulk of supervising the mobilization, of necessity, fell upon the shoulders of Jarrod and the advisors. Many believed that the loss of Clarene, coupled with the onus of Veskia's salvation, had driven the mighty one to such a state. Some even wondered if there were other, more sinister forces at work.

On the night preceding the first signs of Vurgus's affliction, some of the king's retinue heard him cry out in his sleep repeatedly. This greatly concerned them, for in all the years they had never known their monarch to fall within the grasp of any nocturnal vision. They immediately summoned Jarrod, but by the time he reached the king's bedchamber the outbursts had subsided. The prince, after dismissing the retainers, remained in the room and gazed sadly at his father's tormented face, one that, even in slumber, depicted the agonizing knowledge of a deep and malevolent secret. Vurgus had sensed something—surely of evil portent. Thereafter, in his moments of coherency, he denied any cognizance of such a bleak vision; but Jarrod knew, as did Bror and a few others. They believed that this enigma, above all else, drove Vurgus the Mighty toward his deathbed.

Word soon arrived in Shordona that the formidable minions of the enemy approached the respective borders, and accordingly the soldiers remaining in the sphere of the city, a small number, went forth in one direction or the other. Vurgus, seemingly imbued with a new strength upon donning the Red Helm, cast aside his lapses and took command of the legions that would meet the Hothunians and the mercenaries of Okel. Jarrod, while relieved by his father's action, nonetheless made certain that both Arik and Bror rode at his side. The prince himself rode at the head of the southern contingent, which would do battle with the Yurvan forces of Keddrum, as well as the mountain tribes of Calthess.

Five weeks after the first ringing of steel echoed along the respective borders the decimated remains of the Veskian forces, less than fourteen thousand weary men, gathered in a field some six miles west of Shordona, which had recently been claimed by the Yurvans. The foul gods of their enemies had ridden with those who embraced them, and the Veskiens, despite their valiant defense, were driven backward steadily, many thousands falling each day. Vurgus the Mighty still lived, and Bror, though anguished, was proud to advise Jarrod that his sire had handled himself more than admirably at the head of his men, that his inspirational presence was doubtless the reason for any of them remaining alive at all. But this proved little consolation, for the unified forces of the enemy pushed the helpless army westward, and within weeks their

numbers had dwindled to less than six thousand. Now, on the floor of the lifeless Rocchar Valley, the remnants of Veskia gasped for air, of which there was precious little. The enemy, fifty thousand strong, choked them from three directions, while to the west, less than two miles away, was the foreboding, jagged coastline that separated the land from the churning sea.

Veskia had no place left to run.

*To the floor of the vale Rocchar they come,
To die.*

From Zandro's *Poem of Vurgus*.

The old physician hovered intently above the still body of Vurgus, and he wrung his hands together in frustration, for in spite of his skills he could do nothing, and he felt useless. Jarrod, who stood at the foot of the makeshift cot, addressed the healer, and the words jarred all in the tent from their thoughts, for it shattered a deathly silence that had dominated for many minutes.

"Can he hear us?" the prince asked. "Is he aware of our presence?"

The healer shrugged. "It is possible, though unlikely. Yet how can I say for certain, for never in my years of experience have I encountered this."

"What of his pulse?" Bror said.

"It has not changed since this morning. If anything, it is...a bit fainter." He glanced at Jarrod. "I'm sorry, my prince, but—"

"It is senseless to apologize," Jarrod snapped. "Only Daol can wrest the king from whatever accursed malady holds him, and it seems as though the faceless one deserted us a long time ago. My sole hope is that some of us remain alive long enough to afford him a proper pyre." He turned toward Arik. "What are the most recent reports regarding the position of the enemy?"

"All of their legions have neared to within five miles," the officer replied.

"They are stationary?"

"Yes, for the moment."

Jarrod nodded and returned his attention to Vurgus, and once again the interior of the canvas structure became still. But this time the oppressive silence lasted for only a couple of minutes. The tent flap parted, and a young officer, his face ashen, hurried in. He nodded curtly to his assembled superiors then faced the prince.

"Sire, they come!" he cried.

"All of them?" Jarrod asked.

"Yes. Our scouts, who arrived in camp simultaneously only moments ago, confirm this!"

Jarrod nodded grimly. "Then it is time. Hurry, to the steeds!"

The Veskians left the tent, though not before Bror, in a hasty ceremony, presented Jarrod with the Red Helm, a gesture that met with the approval of all. The prince, after reverently donning the splendid headpiece, knelt at his father's side, where he whispered his farewells. He then followed the others.

It was an unseasonable Vesikian day, for the sun glowed brightly high above the few fleecy clouds in evidence, and the soldiers perspired freely beneath their heavy mail. As he strode toward his beleaguered men, Jarrod pondered on the irony of the fact that Veskia would meet its end on such a rare day, with nature at its kindest.

"Prince Jarrod, I would speak with you!"

The voice, unfamiliar to the Vesikian, was strong, resonant, and it commanded attention. Jarrod glanced to his left, where he observed a lone figure standing less than ten yards away on the rock-strewn valley floor. The elder, as his matted gray hair and bent back indicated him to be, wore a wretched brown robe, a filthy, tattered garment. In his gnarled hands he hefted an equally ragged canvas sack, its contents likely his total possessions. It seemed inconceivable that such a voice had emanated from the likes of this, but it was a fact nonetheless, there being no one else near the old man. How he had penetrated the camp was equally puzzling.

"What is the meaning of this, old fool?" Jarrod exclaimed. "Why do you beg an audience at so inopportune a time?"

"I *beg* nothing of you, or of anyone!" the old man replied testily. "You *will* hear me, Jarrod, for in my hands may lie the future of your precious Veskia."

"Sire, you must listen to no more of this!" Arik implored. "He is mad! Come quickly, for the men—!"

"Go on ahead," Jarrod ordered. "I will follow in a moment."

Arik left reluctantly, while Jarrod, his face an alternating mask of ire and bewilderment, strode toward the old man. He paused less than a yard in front of him, where for a moment he gazed into a pair of deep-set, piercing eyes.

"Within minutes my men will ride to their deaths, and I will accompany them," he said coldly. "You have but the least fraction of this time to state the reason for your interference."

"An agreement must be struck between us," the elder stated. "I will see you and your men through the pending conflict, but thereafter a toll must be exacted for my services."

Jarrod shook his head "As Arik said, old fool, you are indeed mad! A handful of fatigued, starving men against many times the number of well rested warriors, and you would...! Ah, but I waste even more precious seconds in so absurd a discussion!"

He spun on his heel and began to storm away, but the unflappable elder called after him, "You drive a hard bargain, my shrewd prince. But I am not an unreasonable man, so I will alter my original proposal to better suit you. This confrontation is yours, and I will not press for a fee. It is only one battle, however, and many more victories will be necessary if you are to regain all that you have lost. Assuming that you find my effort satisfactory, my services will again be at your disposal—but next time you *will* pay the price!"

Jarrod, despite his torment, found himself fascinated by the audacity and self-assuredness of the strange elder, though he still believed him to be quite mad. "I have nothing to lose, do I, old man?" he stated with a grim smile. "Very well then; save us from the onrushing horde, and later, when we again stand before each other, we shall consummate an agreement to our mutual satisfaction. Until then..."

The prince continued on toward his steed, while the grinning elder, choosing to overlook Jarrod's derisive tone, again addressed him. "My prince, I would make one last request."

Jarrod glanced over his shoulder. "What now?"

"A place of privacy. It will be necessary—"

"There!" Jarrod roared, indicating his own small tent a few yards from that of Vurgus. "Now trouble me no more, or by Daol...!"

The old man turned and shuffled off toward the canvas shelter, while Jarrod joined his men, the odd encounter quickly forgotten in light of the imminent conflict. Few noticed him enter the tent, and none heard the bizarre incantations that emanated from within only moments later.

Ten minutes passed before they heard distant pounding of hooves. The enemy then began to appear atop the rim of the valley some three hundred yards in front of the Veskians, and the hearts of the fatigued army sank as the mammoth wave took shape before them. Yurvans and Hothunians, armor-clad mercenaries from Okel, coarsely garbed warriors from the snow-capped peaks of Calthess, spread out along the slope for a quarter-mile and gazed disdainfully at the ragged remnants of the once mighty Veskia on the floor of the Rocchar Valley, all that stood before themselves and total victory. The knuckles of many Veskians whitened around the hilts of their longswords as the thunder from an immense drum, indicating the initiation of the onslaught, resounded across the vale.

None of the combatants at first noticed the sky darken, for the eyes of all remained on their foes. Only when the ice pellets began to fall before the enemy horde had advanced more than fifty yards did anyone chance to gaze up. The azure firmament that had ruled over the morning and the early part of the afternoon was blotted by black, swirling clouds, which cast an ominous pall over the valley. Jets of flame crackled in the now chilled air as the icy missiles, many as large as a man's fist, rained down upon the land. A few dropped harmlessly amid the astonished Veskians, but the bulk of the deadly hail pelted the hillside relentlessly, causing considerable damage. Horses and riders fell, and many of the latter were dispatched by the slashing hooves of the animals as they fled in terror after regaining their balance. Some, these perhaps more fortunate than their brethren in avoiding so painful an ending, were dead before they struck the ground, their skulls crushed instantly by the descending pellets.

The strange hailstorm, which lasted for many minutes, left devastation and chaos in its wake. Fifteen thousand men lay either dead or mortally wounded, while the majority of the survivors staggered about, all

seeking vainly to comprehend what had transpired. But their respite, if one could call it such, would be short-lived, for the Rocchar Valley suddenly experienced a violent earth tremor, and once again the terrified shrieks of many rose in the still frigid air. The Veskiens, struggling to maintain their positions astride their steeds, watched in awe as the ground split open along the hillside to create a chasm nearly half a mile long and thirty to forty feet across. Many were hurled downward immediately, while the continuing upheaval on the slope forced both men and beasts into the abyss. The crack then began to narrow, and when the trembling finally ceased not long after there remained only a hairline fissure to mark the gravesite of the tens of thousands who had plummeted into the bowels of the earth.

The survivors of the erstwhile horde, a fraction of those who had stood brazenly on the hillside only minutes earlier, began fleeing eastward in terror. But the Veskiens, again in control of their mounts, found themselves charged with new strength, unquestionably a result of the overwhelming turnabout. Upon a command from Jarrod they sped up the slope and waded in among the disoriented foe who, save for the skilled men of Okel, could offer little more than meager defense. The prince, an engine of destruction after the months of anguish, dispatched nearly fifty by himself, and so blinded was he by the blood of his enemies that it soon became imperative to check him. This Arik accomplished with harsh admonishments, though not before nearly losing his head.

Less than three hundred of the would-be conquerors, disbelieving, pathetic shells of what they had been less than an hour earlier, escaped the carnage on the eastern slope of the Rocchar Valley. The victorious men of Veskia, their blades drenched in the gore of the despised enemy, regrouped on the floor of the vale, where a hasty tally revealed that only a small number of their own had fallen. Lusty cheers rose from the throats of all as they savored the ecstasy of their inconceivable victory, and even the normally impassive Jarrod, again in command of his senses, added his voice to the din, which did not subside for many minutes.

The headiness of success had briefly blinded the prince from a most urgent responsibility; but now, as he glanced in the direction of the large tent, the image of his fallen sire became clear. Vurgus must be apprised of the victory, and quickly! thought Jarrod. This knowledge, if anything, might free him from his rendezvous with death!

Jarrod hastened toward his sire's tent, his approach such that he passed within yards of his own seldom-used shelter. A sidelong glance revealed the old man, whom the prince had cast from his mind until that instant, standing outside the portal, his tattered sack still clutched tightly to his chest. His legs were shaky, and he appeared even more withered than before, if such were possible. But his cold, piercing eyes had not been affected by the cryptic force that had drained him, and their hypnotic power brought Jarrod to a halt. For long moments the prince stared at the wizened face, and not until the elder knew that the last shred of doubt regarding his role in the inexplicable occurrences of the afternoon had been wrested from the young man's mind did he choose to release him. He proffered a smile, one devoid of warmth, or any other emotion.

"Go to your father," he ordered. "We will talk—later."

Jarrod, after shaking loose from the brief lethargy, strode toward the tent of Vurgus, though before entering he chanced a backward glance at the slight, enigmatic figure, to whom he now knew was owed Veskia's temporary reprieve. The healer, after advising the prince that his father's condition remained the same, discreetly quit the canvas shelter. Jarrod peeled off the Red Helm and knelt alongside the ashen form, clutching one arm firmly in his trembling hand.

"Father, I bear welcome news!" he announced in a strong voice. He then advised Vurgus of all that had transpired and, despite the brevity of his narrative, he omitted few details. Nor did he minimize the role of the strange old man, whom he now spoke of almost reverently. But the king's eyelids did not flutter, nor did the smallest muscle twitch, and Jarrod, while continuing the account, feared that he had come too late.

"Think of it. Father!" the prince stated as his narrative neared an end. "Before long Shordona will again be ours. Home! Who would have ever believed it? The old man, be he charlatan or otherwise, has performed miracles this day, and with his continued aid we will surely regain our homeland. I intend to accept his offer—with your approval, of course."

Thirty seconds passed in tomblike silence, while Jarrod awaited some response from his ailing sire. The king's body then began to tremble, at first slightly, but soon with a force that threatened to collapse the flimsy cot upon which he lay. With excruciating effort he raised himself up and turned his head so that he might face his son, and Jarrod noted that the scar on his forehead, inflicted so many years past by Blugath, now

flared a brilliant crimson against his pasty white flesh. Vurgus's steel-like fingers dug into Jarrod's wrist, but the prince did not feel the pain as he stared in disbelief at his father. The almost serene mask of death was gone, in its stead an expression of stark, mindless terror, the eyes ablaze with the unquenchable fires of fear, the mouth agape. Words emanated haltingly, further stunning Jarrod, for the voice was not that of his sire, but one that seemed detached, spectral.

"You...must...not...!"

The effort proved more than Vurgus could withstand. He sank down on his cot, the mask of horror still frozen on his face, and his grasping fingers fell away after one final, convulsive shudder.

Vurgus the Mighty, king of Veskia, was dead.