

BOOK TWO OF THE REBELLION TRILOGY

VENGEANCE

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After Jergle's botched attempt to overthrow the country of Durthia's King, under the ashes, embers still smolder. Restitution must be made on a personal level, and some wrongs can only be paid in one currency: blood. Jhadgar tries to forget about his rivalry with the rebel runner, but visions of Seruke decimating his troops in the swamp haunt his nights. A once-noble woman also discovers she has more than one score to settle herself.

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Chapter 1

Bounty. The price was more than enough to coax anyone into hunting down the monsters. In the smoke filled bar, patrons gathered around the notice, all but drooling over the promised reward. Yet, the drunks filed away as the professionals came around. Six bounty hunters took their places, each one jockeying for the best view of the parchment. But it was all for naught, a single person strode up and read the sign and the six parted and let out a collective groan as the lean figure tore the paper off the wall and walked from the bar with it.

The drunks chuckled at the bounty hunters as they stared at the obviously feminine figure strut out the door and into the muddy and rain pelted street. The woman quickly darted down an alley, and out of sight. Her long tresses bounced along her hips as she made her way out of the town. Her visage was hidden by a wide brimmed hat, decorated with ostrich feathers. All that was visible of her face was the bottom of her nose and lips. The lower half of her face was exquisite, which led many to wonder why she always hid behind the hat.

Her clothes were just as enigmatic as her hat, bright exotic colors; a sign of an affluent past. She stood at the edge of a cliff, high above the sea where the green waves crashed into the shore, pulverizing the jagged rocks and whatever helpless soul found itself lost amid the waters.

Alexa stood at the top of the precipice, eagerly awaiting the hunt for the monstrosities that had wreaked havoc on the coastal cities of the vulnerable country of Veril. Little did she know that her quarry would lead her far to lands that she never thought she'd see again.

Chapter 2

Jhadgar awoke from his dream in a cold sweat, blood pounding in his head. Lately his thoughts had been plagued by a snarky runner and his feral companions. Jhadgar crawled out of the miserable, muddy den that he called his home. His mount, Vedera, part of the once esteemed and powerful cavalry of Cenock greeted him with a low rumble. Her catlike expression followed him as he paced about, the stars barely illuminating his grotesque and twisted features. His face and chest were stained with the blood of his last kills.

“Is something wrong?” A voice called out from the den. Ulmar, a grey creature with sharp claws and lithe body, exited the cave.

“Seruke.” Jhadgar said tersely.

“Ahh,” Ulmar said with understanding, he often heard the stories of Jhadgar’s obsession. “Perhaps you should seek him out.”

“I would never find him. It’s not likely he stayed in Durthia.” Jhadgar said, his anger rising.

“There are rumors of a witch not far to the east that could help us.” The grey creature, who called himself a troll, splayed his hands in a helpful gesture.

“How could she help us?” Jhadgar asked, his curiosity piqued.

“Allegedly she knows how to find people...” Ulmar said, vaguely.

“It’s the only chance I have of finding and killing Seruke...I’m going to take it. How do I find this witch?” Jhadgar asked, his thirst for the runner’s blood once again sparked.

“Tomorrow, I will show you to her. But be warned she is a treacherous old crone, one whose advice often leads to doom.” Ulmar said, already regretting bringing up the witch.

The next day came all too slowly for Jhadgar. His anticipation of a final battle with Seruke raced through his head. No matter the disastrous outcome of his last attempt, he was determined to walk away from this one with Seruke’s head.

The first rays of the suns light filtered into the den and Jhadgar’s feet could be seen from the den’s exit as he waited for the others to

rise. Ulmar was up first, followed by a female, Hurn, the tallest and thinnest of the self-proclaimed trolls; then Desirin, also female, she was incredibly bulky for her long frame; and last to exit the den was Pasiree, once again another female.

They didn't pack anything, other than the loose clothes that they wore and their weapons. Jhadgar nimbly crawled into Vedera's saddle, ignoring the dirty looks that he received from Ulmar and his harem. It wasn't his fault that his mutations hadn't rendered his body too long for mounted travel.

"Try to keep up." Hurn said with a grin. She wasn't modest with her speed, in any foot race she could beat her companions, but she had never competed with Vedera, whose speed fell in right behind the fastest horses. Jhadgar chuckled to himself. One day Hurn's cockiness would be her downfall; Jhadgar only hoped that he was around to see it. He despised his companions, but stayed with them out of necessity. Their deformities were so ugly, and the way their twisted bodies always slunk close to the ground constantly nagged at Jhadgar who was used to graceful bodies and the calculated moves of soldiers. Jhadgar knew that he was just as hideous as them, but he didn't have to see his reflection every day, in fact he avoided it as often as he could.

Ulmar led the way, but Hurn would run up ahead, disappear from sight and return like a faithful puppy. Jhadgar could tell that Hurn was Ulmar's favorite, but the other females were oblivious and constantly vied for his attention. Hurn was by no means quiet when she ran either, she crashed through the bushes and her footfalls were like hammers repeatedly striking the ground. Jhadgar daydreamt of her running blindly into an ambush.

Ulmar jogged easily next to Vedera, her loping gait was more of a walk for the crack though; her long arms gave her a huge advantage over the slinking trolls. Desirin tailed carefully, while Pasiree lagged behind, her endurance was far greater than any of the others and when they tired she would pass them up easily.

The forest grew darker around them and only the occasional ray of sunlight could penetrate the thick canopy of pine needles. Vines scaled up the trunks and disappeared into a tangle of branches. Moss and

ferns concealed the muddy uneven ground, yet the quintet still made their way hastily through the forest ignoring the bird calls and chatter of wildlife. The witch was several days away, but Jhadgar needed to find her now. He couldn't wait to take vengeance on Seruke. It was a mistake to leave the country while his nemesis remained alive.

Alexa surveyed the entrance to the den; obviously it was not currently occupied. But a fresh trail led into the rain-soaked forest heading east. Her bright green eyes had barely caught the trail before she was sprinting down it, closing in on her prey.

Desirin suddenly stopped and cocked her head to the side. Ulmar stopped the group and looked at one of his many female counterparts with concern.

“What is it?”

“Something's behind us. Whatever it is it's moving quietly and quickly. It will catch us before nightfall.” Desirin said in a whisper, still searching the forest for more noises.

“Then we need to get moving.” Pasiree said impatiently. “How many do you hear?”

“One.” Desirin said still not moving.

“There are five of us and we are afraid of one person?” Jhadgar asked in disbelief. “There is no way it could kill all of us.”

“I'm only worried about one of us dying.” Ulmar said in disgust and Jhadgar rolled his eyes.

“Then are we going to carry on, or stand here talking about it?” Jhadgar said in annoyance. Ulmar said nothing, but waved on the group. He was beginning to realize that Jhadgar was a natural leader, despite his surly mood. He would have to tread carefully around the ex-soldier if he wanted to keep control of his harem. He debated killing Jhadgar, but it was a very short internal debate. Sure Ulmar was a good fighter, but Jhadgar was trained, he and Vadera could probably decimate the trolls in a matter of seconds. Unless they ambushed Jhadgar with their bows, yet the odds still didn't seem good.

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If they had stayed for only a split second longer, they would have seen a shock of red hair barely visible, slipping among the shadows.

Alexa swore, she had been too confident, she couldn't take out five monsters and an erack after a pursuit like that. She would have to be more cautious and take out the creatures more tactically. She quickly changed her pace to a brisk walk, almost a jog.

She reassessed her plan, but didn't stray from the trail she was following. If she hadn't been so intent on her thoughts, she might have noticed how the forest had fallen silent. The skin prickled on the back of her neck and she shuddered. Then she noticed the gleam of watchful eyes among the bushes. She realized her mistake a moment too late.

Jhadgar watched as the woman walked directly in front of him. For a moment he became paranoid that his breathing was too loud and then he remembered that he faced only one foe. He gripped his spear tighter in anticipation. He began to creep slowly from the bushes directly behind the woman. He saw her shoulders tense, and her head swiveled almost imperceptibly, but Jhadgar saw an ear slip out from behind the waves of crimson, and he knew that she was aware of him. Silently he cursed his luck, in less than a second Alexa had turned around, thrown three daggers, two of them nicked Jhadgar's left arm and the other one embedded itself in his shoulder. She took off into the ferns, with Hurn right behind her.

Alexa could hear the beast gaining on her, its loud footfalls and heavy breathing removing Alexa's already tentative sense of ease after her narrow escape. She laughed inwardly at how easily the hunted become the hunters. Alexa spied a sapling struggling to grow among its towering predecessors. Despite its diminutive size, it would work for what Alexa needed. She threw out her left hand, caught the tree and used her momentum to take her around the tree and right behind Hurn. Alexa's feet slammed into Hurn's long trailing legs. Alexa heard

more of the creatures coming and knew that she didn't have time to finish off the prone beast in front of her. Alexa stooped down and drew a dagger from her belt. She deftly cut off three of Hurn's fingers, as the creature pitifully lifted her hands up in a defensive gesture.

"I'm not easily deterred. I will be back, and I'm coming for you first." Alexa smirked and then disappeared into the forest. Her red hair bouncing easily as she ran out of sight.

Ulmar slowly came to a stop as he approached Hurn. Pasiree and Desirin fell in behind Jhadgar and tried to keep the smug looks off their faces when they noticed the blood pouring from Hurn's forearm. Jhadgar craned his neck and eyed the two women.

"I thought you liked her?" He asked curiously.

"I don't recall saying I didn't." Pasiree said flatly, eying Jhadgar. Desirin blinked coyly and leaned in close to Jhadgar.

"Don't ask questions." The inviting look in her eyes was gone.

Jhadgar was not daunted in the slightest. "Why not?"

"Just don't." Desirin growled. "It'll be best for you this way."

"I'm not afraid of you." Jhadgar said in an agreeable voice. "Vedera or I could kill you both. And so could that red-head. It's you who should be watching your words."

"Ulmar, we should leave before the harlot returns. She's obviously more equipped than we thought. We should try to get some ground between us." He looked over to his left, and his companions' eyes followed his.

In the tree nearest to Jhadgar, a knife had been stuck in the tree. It was an obvious gesture, not a failed attempt, but rather a mockery. Alexa was looking for an entertaining hunt, and these four weren't offering it. The sign was obvious to Jhadgar.

"What? Was she just here?" Ulmar asked, fear evident in his eyes. "Did anyone see her?"

"She was obviously just here, we would have noticed the dagger if it was in the tree when we arrived. She's looking for a chase; she's trying to scare us into running." Jhadgar growled.

"She's awful cocky. Perhaps we should hunt her down, we are trolls." Desirin said angrily.

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Jhadgar chuckled darkly, “Go then, chase her down and see what happens, she’s crafty; I can guarantee that you will spring a trap on yourself.”

Desirin fumed and spun on her heel, “Let’s run, as you suggested. For an ex-soldier...a captain even, you are a disappointment.”

Jhadgar stared after her; no words were worth the time. As soon as Seruke was killed he’d make sure that no creatures would ever make the mistake of naming themselves trolls. He would kill Ulmar, Hurn, Pasiree and Desirin as soon as Seruke’s head left his shoulders.

The group continued after the sun had disappeared, their eyes were adapted to see in the dark, giving them an edge against their tracker. Ulmar led them, since he was the only one who knew of the witch’s whereabouts. He predicted that they would reach the witch’s home in another day or so, but he wasn’t making any promises.

Chapter 3

A creature, humanoid except its head and its freakish size crouched in the bushes, while a party of humans passed by holding torches. The creature went by the name of Seruke, his towering ten foot body was concealed uncomfortably in the bushes. His bronze skin blended with the woody branches naturally, but his thick mane of dark brown hair that raced down his back was harder to hide, but luckily his pursuers hadn't noticed. His long face was definitely not human, but more wolfish, a thick muzzle showed off razor sharp teeth. His sharp blue eyes, scanned lazily over a crowd of easily thirty men, all trained soldiers. Every last one of them was searching for him.

His companions were hidden in the shrubbery around him, so well that he couldn't even see them in the darkness. The trolls were trying to avoid a fight, they could slaughter the humans without a struggle, but they had morals that prevented them from committing such an atrocity. Well, most of them weren't suited for such cold-blooded killing.

Seruke hadn't told his fellow trolls yet, but he had discovered that he had a taste for human flesh. On his last trip back to his hometown of Benaer, he had killed two of the king's soldiers that were patrolling the skirt of the Shadow Cappe Mountains. And now, Keldron had sent many of his troops into the swamps fringes, none of them were bold enough to delve deeper into the legendary bog. But on the last mission, two monsters had accompanied the men. They had long insectoid bodies, numerous clattering legs, and a sinister sneer that exposed their pearlescent incisors. Seruke watched carefully to make sure that the beasts weren't in tow on this mission. He breathed a sigh of relief when it registered that there were only humans. He cast one glance over his shoulder, before sneaking off behind the soldiers.

Seruke watched patiently as the men started a fire. It took hours before one of them gathered the courage to wander off into the woods by himself, probably in search of fire wood for the dwindling flame. Seruke followed him maybe fifteen feet into the trees before he made

his move. He stepped forward and clamped his hand over the man's mouth, reveling from the pure fear the soldier was emanating. Seruke carried his prey deeper into the trees before he threw the man down and swiftly killed the soldier before he could scream. He began feeding, fearful that his companions would find him in the brutal act. By now they would have noticed his absence, he had to be quick. He had finished his meal, when he heard a soft voice purr.

"It happens to the best of us." The cat-creature, Yvonne, slipped from the trees, followed by her male counterpart, Olirach.

"It does happen." Seruke said suspiciously. "But not to you?"

"We've eaten our fair share of human flesh. You can't maintain your humanity for very long if you indulge every time you are tempted." Olirach said sagaciously, and for a moment Seruke reviled the words of the creature in front of him.

"There's no point of pretending to be something I'm not." Seruke countered, his voice had taken a more guttural edge to it.

"You take many things for granted." Olirach stated blandly. "What would your friends think if they saw this?"

"They won't." Seruke said confidently.

"I wouldn't be too sure." Yvonne purred coyly. "They are coming on your left."

Without another word, Seruke took off into the trees.

He didn't stop until he had returned to his abode, a flat of sorts built high up into the trees, he stopped before he began his ascent to pat Phera on the head; her pups sat on their haunches around her. They had grown large in the past few months, the male was already as big as Phera, and the females were maybe a foot less in the shoulders. Out of the four adolescent raghasargs, one of them was male. Seruke began his ascent and muttered to Phera:

"Sometimes I think that only you understand me."



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