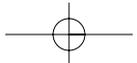
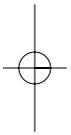
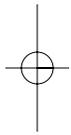


Book One



The  
Gray Slopes





## CHAPTER

## ONE

When the Balbara lookout shouted the alarm, Princess Mena Akaran was up from her campstool in an instant. She broke from the circle where she had been sitting with her officers and climbed the ridge at a run. She drew close to the sharp-eyed young man, sighting down his slim, brown arm and out from his pointing finger across the arid expanse that was central Talay. It took her a moment to see what he did. Even then, it was neither the creature itself she saw nor the party who hunted it. They were too far away. What marked their progress were the billows of smoke from the torches the runners carried—that and a yellow smudge at the rim of the world that must have been dust kicked up by their feet. They seemed to be as far off as the horizon, but the princess knew they would close that distance quickly.

She half slid down the sandy slope and regrouped with her officers. One captain, Melio Sharratt, she assigned to the farthest southern beacon; to the other, Kelis of Umae, went the northern beacon. They already knew what to do, she told them. It was only a matter of seeing it accomplished, timing it perfectly, and having luck on their side. She left it to them to get the others in position and remind them of their instructions, but before she dismissed them she urged them both to act with caution.

“Do you hear me?” she asked, leaning close to the small group. She took Melio by the wrist to remind him of this but did not look in his face. She knew his grin would hold constant, dismissive of the danger moving across the plain toward them. He may have become the head of the Elite, but the role had done nothing to alter him. His longish hair would be cast casually across an eye, often swept aside only to fall in place again. They had wed five years earlier. She had never hidden her love of him from others, but

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neither did she let it distract her at moments like this. She spoke as if her words were meant for all the hunting party, as, in truth, they were.

“I want nobody dead. Only the foulthing dies today,” she said.

“Those words coming from you?” Melio asked. “Will you abide by them yourself, or will this be like last time, with that—”

Mena spoke as if she had not heard him. “Nobody else. That order falls on each of you personally. We’ve lost too many already.”

Her eyes settled on Kelis. The Talayan’s gaze was as calm as ever, his skin dark and smooth, his eyes slow moving. It was a face she had grown to deeply care for. In a strange way this Talayan was a living reminder of her eldest brother. Aliver had grown to manhood with him as his companion. Kelis had known her brother during the years that she had been separated from him. Even now, after all the evenings they had spent talking about what her brother had been like then, she still did not feel they had conversed enough. She hoped they would have many evenings more.

She made a point of not meeting Melio’s eyes as he moved away. If they were together again, whole, at the end of the day, she would show him just how much she felt for him with all her body. That was the way it had been with them lately: distant as they faced danger, enraptured with each other in the short reprieves afterward.

The next half hour was a whirl of preparations. Moving among soldiers, shouting instructions, checking everything personally, Mena was as slim and leanly muscled and sun burnished as she had been during the war with Hanish Mein. She still wore the sword with which she had swum ashore on Vumu as a girl, but she was far from being that girl. Only an unobservant eye could fail to see that her lithe form contained within it a coiled energy hardened by loss, by war, and by an inner struggle with the deadly gifts that seemed to define her. There was love within her, too, but she kept that on a short tether. It was a softness that was difficult to spot within the Maeben fierceness she so often had to rely upon. Had she the time and the quiet, she would have chosen to settle into the kinder aspects of her nature and come to know them again, but the peace that followed the end of the war with Hanish Mein had hardly allowed it. Maybe when this work was done she could lay down her sword and rest.

She caught her breath only when all the preparations that could be made had been. She climbed back upon the ridge and stood where the lookout had. The chapped skin of Talay spread out before her, miles upon miles baking under a flawless blue sky. She watched the creature take on shape

and proportion as it closed the miles, the smoke of its pursuers driving it toward the trap Mena had laid for it.

This was not the first of these foulthings she had faced. Indeed, she had been at the work of hunting them for almost four years now. She had seen eight of them killed, but she'd also lost hundreds of her soldiers in the process. And each time was different. Each creature was its own atrocity and had to be dealt with accordingly. Each trap was an elaborate construction that, if it failed, needed to be abandoned to prepare for some other opportunity.

It began not long after the Santoth had unleashed their twisted magic upon the Mein army. Nobody could say for sure just how the foulthings came to be, but it had something to do with ribbons of the Santoth's song unleashed on the natural creatures of the world, spells that drifted until they lighted upon some living creature. In most cases, the animals were so corrupted by the touch of the Giver's tongue that they died: lamed, malformed, burned or battered or torn one part from another. Many got caught in rips in the fabric of the world that passed through them and left them melded with other objects, joined with trees or stuck fast in rocks or half submerged in the earth. Their carcasses dotted the damaged ground, a feast for vultures.

At first they had believed any creatures touched by the sorcery died because of it. And because many human beings were so touched, many were led mercifully out of this life and on to the next. Nobody wished to see their loved ones live with that sort of corruption on them. The people of Talay, in particular, had always told tales of the lasting damage left by the Santoth during their first angry march into banishment. They took it upon themselves to ensure that their people did not spread any contagion among them.

Most of the burden, however, fell upon the Mein, as they had received the brunt of the sorcerers' fury. As the vanquished enemy, they had little say in their fate. Those who showed signs of contamination were killed, culled just as one might cull sick animals from a herd of livestock. Queen Corinn was firm in her orders on this; and from the first days of her reign few chose to disobey her—not outright, at least.

Dariel might have asserted his rights as a male heir, but he did not. A year after Corinn released their father's ashes and ascended to the throne of Acacia, she gave birth to the nation's heir. Soon after, they began to receive troubling reports. At first Corinn dismissed them as the nightmares of a

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frightened, fatigued populace. The Antoks had stirred all sorts of fears in people's minds, she explained, and the strange appearance of the Santoth had woken old superstitions. Magic had been unleashed upon the world for the first time in twenty-two generations. Of course, the people again trembled at night and concocted stories of beasts that hunted them. Time would heal, Corinn said. The earth would come to rest again and the natural order would sew creation back into its tight weave.

But the reports did not fade as time passed. The sightings, which were sporadic for the first few years, grew more frequent, the witnesses more reliable. What they said differed in the particulars, but all their descriptions had made Mena's skin crawl with growing trepidation. In the hills near Halaly a herd of goatlike creatures cut a swath of devastation. Goatlike, the people said, but in truth only their heads resembled gargantuan likenesses of those animals. Their bodies were squat with numerous, malformed limbs jointed at random places, more like a spider's legs than those of any mammal. They were each as large as an elephant and insatiable. Fortunately, they ate only vegetation and were near as easy to slaughter as domesticated ruminants.

Other creatures had different tastes and were not so easy to kill.

The Bethuni spread stories of many-footed serpents that could both slither and run. At first the people thought them amusing, until they began to grow at a rate that frightened them into action. There was a lion with a row of blue eyes along its back, doglike creatures large enough to send laryx scurrying in fright, vultures so mutated by the bounty they had consumed that many of them could no longer fly. Instead they waddled, following their great beaked noses like bands of the plagued.

The people came to understand that these beings had been warped rather than killed by the Santoth. These they called the foulthings. Once Corinn acknowledged them, she ordered them hunted and destroyed. She charged Mena with this mission, giving her a small army and presenting the task as yet another way that her younger sister might carve her name into the pantheon of the Akaran greats.

Mena suspected that Corinn intentionally wished her to be kept busy and kept away from other affairs of the empire. But she could not put the unease she felt into enough order to decide what to do about it. Instead, Mena had set to the hunt. The beasts were real, after all, and who better than Maeben on earth to face them? She and her army ranged far and wide across Talay, from its shores, across its grasslands and deserts, into its hills and mountain reaches, through marshland and even to the great river that

marked the boundary with the far south. That dry watercourse she did not cross. She had no desire to awaken the Santoth again. Nobody wished for that.

She faced the creatures one at a time as much as possible. She fought with the help of those in whose territory the hunt took her. It was with Bethuni huntsmen that she had set the fires that consumed the writhing, many-legged aggregation of snake creatures that had grown large enough to swallow dogs and sheep and even children whole. Balbara warriors marched beside her as they cleaned the land of vultures so fat their wings were useless. And with Talayan runners she had tracked the blue-eyed lion across the grasslands, running it to exhaustion before she killed it herself with an overhand thrust of a long pike. It was that act Melio had referred to earlier. Even exhausted and panting, the lion had been a fierce thing, its mouth a great cavern of fanged fury when it roared, its claws five scimitars as they slashed out.

Mena had risked her life to plant the killing blow. She had not truly needed to do it herself, but sometimes she could not control the impulse to. Sometimes she needed to offer her life for the one taken, just to see if her bill was due. Somewhere lurking in the back of her mind was the feeling that the many lives she had ended would someday ask for her own to balance the scales. She did not run from this. Indeed, at times she wanted to embrace it and accept whatever reckoning the spirits offered her. So far, they had offered none. Nine years had passed since the new violence that Corinn called peace had begun. So many times Mena could have died, and yet throughout it all she had rarely suffered more than minor cuts and deep bruises and sprained joints. Perhaps the Giver was saving her for something. Perhaps, but if so, why was he so completely silent, ever absent?

This thing they hunted now—this they had put off as long as they could. It was the third to the last of the giants. She knew of only two others, although she did not want to think of them just now. She had her hands more than full. Watching it approach filled her with fear as great as any she had experienced. It was not just the brute force of it; rather, it was the twisting of the natural order, the possibilities it suggested about what monsters could exist or might come into existence to plague the future. And it was the fact that it had been set upon the world by the very same sorcerers who had twice secured her family's throne. Because of that she felt she owed it to the world to see the foulthings extinguished.

What roared toward her, driven into her trap by torch-carrying Talayan runners, was a monstrosity that came with a shrieking entourage of

hundreds of other creatures. Those in the horde were not themselves warped. They were what the Talayans called tentens, primates with long snouts and a carnivore's jaws. They were fierce and dangerous in their own way, but they had long lived on the plains. They ran mostly on all fours and were normally as content to eat groundnuts as they were to hunt smaller monkeys and rodents. No danger to humans as long as they were left alone.

The huge beast they followed ran on two legs in a waddling gait that was fast, humanlike, and more grotesque because of the similarity. Occasionally, it corrected its balance and expressed its outrage by bashing the earth with its knuckled fists. It was woolly-haired with a great brown-red mane about its neck, an ocher and blue snout, and a predator's forward-facing eyes. It stood three times a man's height at the crown of its head. Above this rose two circular horns that added yet another man's height. These horns were the only part of the creature of true beauty, a ridged perfection of form. Beautiful, yes, but not when worn as the headdress on the bellowing thing now closing to within a few hundred yards. Likely, the creature had once been a tenten—explaining why the troop followed it. Some speculated that it had eaten a corrupted corpse of a horned animal and had thus grown horns itself. However it had been created, it was not natural and could not be left alive.

Melio and Kelis had reached their assigned posts. Earlier, they had established a series of piles of brushwood that were spaced in a widemouthed cone shape meant to funnel the foulthing toward a chosen area. As soon as the creature passed between the first of these outposts, the men touched fire to the pyres. Instantly they combusted in audible whooshes of flame and black smoke. The runners pressed on, near enough now that Mena could hear their shouts, bursts of sound peppered throughout the group, meant to further confuse the animals. She knew Melio and Kelis would be joining the runners, taking up their torches, adding their voices to the din. A little closer and another pyre went up, and another after that. Each successive explosion narrowed the pathway the creatures had and directed them toward Mena and the fifty crossbowmen she commanded, each of them with a second who stood just beside him.

"Ready yourselves!" she called, her voice as stern and confident as she could make it.

The crossbowmen began to extend their line, forming a widening U shape. They moved gradually as if they were not watching the animals speeding toward them. The bowmen walked with their weapons strapped

to their bodies over their shoulders and around their waists. The bows were heavy, meant to fire a single, powerful shot. A second shot was unlikely since the bolts had to be loaded and the crossbows cranked slowly back to the ready position. On the bottom end of the U shape, the pairs positioned themselves behind metal rings that had been secured to the earth by long stakes.

It was into this area that the foulthing and its troop arrived in a cloud of snarling, dusty hair and teeth and anger. The giant itself was enraged. It danced about, smacking the ground, tearing up clods of dry earth and tossing them in the air. It bared its teeth, snapping at the sky. Its yellowed eyes shot rage out of them like a physical force. Standing on two legs, it spread its arms wide and thumped its chest. Around it hundreds of the tenten followed its lead. The cacophony of it, the turmoil, the nearness of such animal fury was almost too much to stand calmly facing.

But Mena made sure she did. She held them there for a few minutes, letting them settle into the space, asking her soldiers to be calm before they acted. Now that the animals were inside the U shape, the bowmen at the far ends slowly closed the open portion, making a great circle with the creatures in the center. The men took up positions around the rings nailed in place for them. The runners and the rest of the force spread out around the bowmen's circle, thickening the ranks. Only when all were in position did Mena lift her arm. It was nearly time, and if they all did as they had planned, it would be over in—

It happened before she had any chance to stop it. One of the bowmen shot prematurely. The bolt flew dead straight and with all the released energy of its slowly cranked, twisted cable work. The force of its leaving would have knocked the bowman off his feet, except that a second man clasped him about the waist and stood with his feet planted firmly. The missile trailed a thin rope. It spooled out with a hiss. The bolt slammed into the foulthing's chest, impacting its rib cage, and did not sink far. The force of it tossed the creature back in a sudden, rolling confusion of limbs and horns. When the tumble stopped, the thing was on its feet once more. It stood for a moment, confused and breathless, tenten bodies all around. Most of them still howled and bared their teeth; a few lay crumpled and broken from its rolling over them.

The foulthing grasped the bolt by the protruding shaft and yanked it out. The barbs tore through its flesh, but if it felt that particular pain it gave no sign. It focused on the bolt as if it were a living thing that might still

harm it, and then its eyes played out along the rope that connected it to the cross bowman. With a roar it jerked the two men toward it, yanking them off their feet and dragging them on their bellies into the raging tentens.

The fools! Mena thought. They had forgotten what they were supposed to do. Who were these two? What she did then she did with instinctual quickness. She ran forward, drawing her Marah sword, yelling as she did so, hoping to draw the beast's attention. As she neared the first of the tentens she swung her sword in wide arcs that cut clean through fur and skin and bone. The animals jumped back from her, all teeth and snarls. She hacked her way at a dead run toward the fallen men. She found them writhing and screaming, entangled together beneath a biting, scratching mound of tentens. The animals did not notice her until she had hacked the heads from two, limbs from even more, split another down through the skull, and spilled the guts of another in a gush that coated the two men.

A wave of soldiers rushed to help her. She stopped them all with a slash of her palm. "No!" she yelled. She knew that if they continued it would break the formation. There would be no order and they would not be able to carry out the rest of the plan. It would be chaos and many more than just she would die in it. "No!"

They stopped, tripped over each other, stood stunned and unsure until she motioned them back. She had barely managed to do so before another tenten leaped at her. She ducked beneath it and sliced its leg clean off.

"Come on!" she hissed. "Get loose of it!" She smacked the bowman with the palm of her free hand and then stood upright. With the same hand she drew her short sword.

The foulthing was some thirty or so strides away. It had paused to watch her. For a moment it was a statue amid a whirlwind of motion. Mena saw something like intelligent curiosity on its face. Its eyebrows seemed to lift slightly; the corners of its mouth twitched. She had not noticed how human its hands were, long-fingered and delicate as they caressed the rope. She experienced the moment as one of shared silence. She almost felt the creature was going to say something, do something. But the moment was short-lived, and the foulthing spoke no words. It seemed to grow tired of studying her. Those humanlike hands yanked on the cord again.

When the line went taut, Mena caught it between her two blades and sliced through the rope. The beast was thrown off balance and went down again. Mena turned and pushed, dragged, and shouted the two men to their feet and back to the safety of the circle.

“Remember your rings!” she shouted. “Every second, tie the ropes down!”

With that, the princess raised her arm, then immediately let it drop. Before it even reached her side, her generals had shouted in answer. In the next instant a confusion of bolts and ropes flew at the foulthing from all directions. Many hit it—in the chest and groin, deep in its calf and punching right through its other ankle, in its lower back and just above, in the muscled flesh of its upper torso, in the neck. Several passed through the curve of its horns, the ropes tangling in them as the creature spun. A few took out the lesser apes, skewering three or four at a time before losing momentum. And the bolts that missed sped straight toward the opposing bowmen and troops. This was when the seconds came into play again. They shifted from pressing forward on the bowmen to pulling back against them. The ropes snapped taut before reaching the other side, and the crossbows, even if yanked out of their wielders’ hands, were held fast by the sling straps.

Once the ropes were secured, archers stepped between them and lofted ropes attached to blunted arrows over the creature. Others retrieved them on the opposite side and anchored each end, further tightening a web of bonds on the foulthing, catching many tentens in the process. Mena watched until the injured and bound foulthing was pressed tight to the dry ground. She turned away as Halaly spearmen began to move into the circle, their long, narrow pikes able to impale the tentens at a distance. The auditory chaos was no less than before, but she knew the difficult task was over.

Melio found her walking slowly back toward the rock outcropping from which she wished to take in the horizon again, to see the largeness of the world and marvel at it. “You really must let others risk their necks on occasion,” he said, grinning. “You’re lucky your men fear you as much as they fear your death. If they didn’t, they might have stormed in and messed everything up. But you know that. You managed to pull it off, and it still gives you no joy.”

“How are the two?” she asked.

“The two you rescued?” He tossed his hair out of his face and studied her. “I believe they are injured but will both live to tell of it.”

“Any others?”

“Nothing but minor injuries, some bites.” Melio touched her arm, turned her toward him, and pulled her close. “Mena, this went well. You should be pleased. Let’s dance tonight as the Halaly do and be glad that there’s one less foulthing walking the world. Think of it that way.”

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Mena accepted his embrace, welcomed it, and wanted to be folded into it for much longer than she allowed herself in public. But she did not think as he suggested. Not completely, at least. She would never forget the look in the beast's eyes.



That night, after the celebrations, she dreamed of the creature's stare. She woke unsure where waking events ended and dreaming began. She told herself that it was the dream that made her so uneasy, not the reality. It was not possible that she had seen intelligence in the creature's eyes. She had not heard its thoughts, not with her waking mind. It had not expressed a hatred for her and her kind that, in its reasoned, simmering potency, went far beyond that of any simple beast. That had been only in her dreams. Of course. Only in her dreams. Strange, though, that so soon after the event she could not easily separate the truth of it from her imaginings.

She decided to send a letter to the queen, declaring that they had one less foulthing to worry about. That's all she would say. She would keep moving. Keep believing.