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SUMMONER

BOOK THREE



THE BATTLEMAGE

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SNEAK PEEK

CHAPTER 1

A KALEIDOSCOPE OF VIOLET seared across Fletcher's vision. Then he was in an abyss, dark water flooding his mouth and nose.

Something rubbery knocked against his ankle as he kicked, fighting the inexorable drag down into the black emptiness. His lungs burned ice cold as he choked on the brackish liquid.

Consciousness faded, seeping from him like the warmth from his body. He was numb, weightless.

With each moment, flashes of memory darted across his air-starved brain. Sariel, crushed beneath the shattered masonry of the pyramid. Jeffrey's smirking face as he stepped over the paralyzed bodies of his friends, a blowpipe in his hands. The portal, spinning. His mother.

He hung in the void.

But thick fingers grasped his outstretched wrist and drew him up. He gagged as cool air hit his face, then felt the meaty thump of a fist on his back as he vomited up the liquid he had swallowed.

"That's it, get it all out," Othello murmured as Fletcher blinked the water away and saw the new world around them.

They were on a small, craggy island, shaped like an upturned bowl and coated in a thick layer of green algae.

He could see they were in the middle of a channel of inky water, with submerged, mangrove-like trees forming a thick barrier on either side. The sky above was a dim, sullen blue, like dusk in winter.

Cress, Sylva and his mother were also there, shivering wet and pressed up close to Lysander's side, while Tosk nestled in his master's lap. Ignatius was busy tongue-drying a bedraggled-looking Athena, and Solomon lay facedown, hugging the island for dear life, panting with the herculean effort it must have taken to haul himself and the paralyzed Griffin out of the water.

'It's moving,' Sylva said, pointing at the contracting portal, ten feet from the island. It was half-submerged in the placid water. 'That's why you were all the way over there when you came through from the chamber.' As Fletcher watched, the shrinking portal seemed to get farther away, before disappearing with a faint pop.

'No,' Othello said, nodding at the shifting trees beside them. 'We're the ones that are moving.'

It was true. They were slowly but surely edging down the dark river. It was almost as if the island was . . . floating.

Fletcher crawled to the edge of the rocks. In the murky water below, a reptilian head turned to the side, revealing a gold-flecked iris that blinked up at him.

'It's not an island,' Fletcher whispered, watching as a webbed claw drifted beneath the surface. 'We're on a Zaratan.'

He backed away slowly, careful not to slip on the shell's surface. For that is what it was—a shell. The demon they rode could have been described as a giant amphibious turtle. He guessed this one was an adolescent, for the species could grow many times larger than the specimen they were perched on.

Looking at the sunken trees beside them, Fletcher considered their options. With no land in sight, they were stuck until they found something better.

Blue light flashed on the trees around them, and he turned to see

that the craggy form of Solomon was gone, infused using Othello's sodden summoning leather.

'Solomon would sink like a stone if our ride here decides to dive,' Othello said, eyeing the black water with trepidation.

'Good idea,' Fletcher replied, feeling a pang of fear for Lysander. The Griffin was still paralyzed from the darts Jeffrey had shot him with and would likely have drowned had the Zaratan not been passing by.

As for Ignatius, he had curled around Athena, using his natural heat to warm her, while she in turn settled her wings over him like a blanket. Fletcher let them stay. It would do the two demons good to bond. He needed them to be a team, now more than ever.

The group sat in silence, the only sound being the creaking of trees in the wind. With each gust, the placid surface of the water shivered like a living creature.

'The only question is, what do we do now?' Cress finally asked, squinting at the dim sky above.

'We wait,' Sylva said, resting her head on Cress's shoulder. 'Wait for dry land, or somewhere to hide. Let's just hope the Zaratan gets us out of here quickly.'

'Why do we need to hide?' Othello asked.

'You think the orcs won't guess where we've gone?' Sylva said, gesturing around them. 'They'll see the blood pattern on the floor and know we've escaped through a portal into their part of the ether. Of course the keys don't transport us to a precise location, so they won't know exactly where we are, but they'll know we're in the area.'

'Maybe they'll let us go,' Cress whispered, half to herself.

'We just walked into the heart of their holiest place and destroyed half an army that's taken them years to build,' Sylva replied, shaking her head. 'They won't let us get away that easily. The Wyvern riders will be hunting us in a matter of hours, entering the ether as soon as they're back from chasing the other teams. We're just lucky Fletcher buried so many of the nearby shamans' demons. They will be in disarray, for a while at least.'

‘She’s right,’ Fletcher agreed. ‘We wait for land and the cover of the forest. We’re too exposed out here.’

He shuffled back and pressed himself against his mother. It felt strange, to touch her. He could hardly believe it was real. Was it truly her . . . after all this time?

All those years, searching the faces of the women he met, thinking of the heartless person who could have left him naked in the snow. And now, to know that she had loved him, and had been kept from him all this time.

As he lay his head on her shoulder, Fletcher realized she was shivering—her frame was so emaciated that it provided no protection from the cold, and the filthy rags she wore were soaked through.

‘Cress, where are the satchels?’ Fletcher asked.

‘Um . . . about that,’ Cress murmured, twisting her hands in her lap. ‘We landed in the water. I needed my hands to stay afloat. I only managed to keep hold of two satchels and one of the petal bags. Yours and Jeffrey’s. Here.’

She pushed Fletcher’s sodden bag over. At the loss of their precious petals, a pulse of fear spread across Fletcher’s chest—they were their only source of immunity from the ether atmosphere’s natural poison—but he pushed that worry aside for the moment. Instead, he opened the satchel and was relieved to find the tight leather casing had kept most of the water out. Rummaging at the very bottom, he dug out the jacket Berdon had given him for his birthday and wrapped it tightly around his mother’s shoulders, pulling the hood over her head. She rubbed her cheek against the soft down of the rabbit fur.

For the first time, he met his mother’s eyes. The swamp water had washed most of the dirt from her face, and Fletcher marveled at the striking resemblance to her twin, the woman he had seen by Zacharias Forsyth’s side at his trial. However, she was by no means identical, not in her current state. Her eyes were sunken, staring blankly past him. He brushed a stray hair from her cheek, which was so gaunt that it bordered on skeletal. Who knew what she had suffered in the seventeen years of her captivity?

‘Alice, can you hear me?’ Fletcher said. He tried to meet her gaze, but there was no light behind her stare. ‘Mother?’

‘Mother?’ Othello repeated gently. ‘Fletcher . . . are you okay? This is Lady Cavendish.’

‘No,’ Fletcher replied, helping the woman get her skinny arms into the jacket. ‘Lady Cavendish died in her fall; the prisoner was never her. This woman had been there for far longer . . . my whole life. She recognized Athena, and called for her baby, and I remember her face from my dream. This is my mother. The orcs took her when I was a child.’

Othello creased his brow, then understanding dawned upon him. But, even as he opened his mouth to speak, his eyes flicked to the murky waters behind them.

‘Get back!’ Othello yelled, diving across the shell. Fletcher was tackled to the ground, even as he heard the hollow snap of jaws above his head. Fetid, fish-laden breath washed over him and then the creature was gone, slipping back into the dark pools around them with barely a sound.

Fletcher caught a glimpse of a reptilian head, and for a panicked moment he thought the Wyverns had caught up with them. But then he saw the humped, log-like shapes in the water around them, and his lessons at Vocans flashed unbidden to his mind.

Sobeks. Great bipedal crocodile-like creatures that used their claws and jaws to tear apart their opponents, if their large tails didn’t batter them to the ground first. Hunched over at five feet tall, the Sobek was a level-nine demon.

And now they were surrounded by dozens of them.

CHAPTER 2

FLETCHER SCRAMBLED BACK, dragging his mother with him. They pressed against Lysander's side with the others, but they were still no more than a few feet from the water—and the humped shapes lurking beneath the surface.

'Where did they come from?' Cress gasped, drawing her seax from its scabbard.

'They must have sensed the Zaratan,' Sylva said. 'Sobeks prey on juveniles like ours.'

The shell shook beneath them, and Fletcher saw that they had stopped their slow passage down the waterway. There was a splash as the nearest Sobek thrashed its tail with excitement. They had their prey cornered.

'Our ride's going to dive,' Othello warned, struggling onto his knees. 'Has Lysander recovered? He'll drown!'

Another tremor rocked them, but they didn't sink. Instead the Zaratan held its ground, even as the Sobeks began to circle, their ridged, leathery backs barely breaking the surface.

'Why isn't it diving?' Fletcher murmured. He peered into the water, and the golden eyes of the Zaratan stared back at him.

‘It’s . . . protecting us,’ he whispered. ‘It knows we’d die in the water.’

‘Well, it’ll just die with us if we don’t do something,’ Sylva snarled, tugging her bow from her shoulders. She reached over her shoulder for an arrow, but her quiver was empty, its contents lost to the swamp.

A Sobek lunged at the Zaratan. The turtle demon jerked, dipping his shell to one side, and Lysander slid down the surface. He struggled weakly to climb back up, but as he clawed at the gentle incline, the nearest Sobeks saw their chance. The water foamed white as two separated from the pack, their thick tails lashing back and forth as they homed in on the powerless Griffin. The others hung back: They were more patient than their siblings.

‘No!’ Fletcher yelled, drawing his khopesh and leaping over Lysander’s inert body. Sylva followed, her curved falx held high as the two monsters sped toward them. Yellow-green eyes flashed, then the first leaped from the water. It crouched low on its two legs and scraped its claws along the shell, leaving furrows in the algae coating. The long snout opened, revealing a cavernous yellow mouth filled with jagged teeth.

It lashed out, so fast that Fletcher barely had time to parry it, meeting the five sickle-shaped claws in the curve of his khopesh. The power in the Sobek’s arms was immense, and Fletcher could barely keep the needle points from hooking into his face. He heaved his sword with both hands, in desperation.

The demon’s second arm swung up, and only a frantic swipe from Sylva’s falx deflected the blow. Even as she did so, the other Sobek sprang from the water, and she had to turn and meet it.

Teeth snapped over Fletcher’s blade, forcing him to lean back, teetering on the slippery surface of the shell. Then the Sobek broke and spun low. Its heavy tail whipped around, knocking Fletcher’s feet from under him. His head cracked against the shell beneath, and his vision bruised. The khopesh fell from his nerveless fingers.

The yellow jaws of the Sobek flashed down, but even as its hot breath

wafted over him, a ball of flame blasted the demon into the water, leaving the scent of scorched flesh in Fletcher's nostrils.

Ignatius had come to the rescue.

In his concussed haze, Fletcher scrambled to his knees and saw Othello, Cress and Sylva advance together, hacking and parrying the remaining Sobek. Seeing its partner defeated, it dove back in with an angry bellow, leaving the trio panting by the water's edge.

'We can't fight them all,' Fletcher gasped, snatching back his khopesh as Ignatius scampered onto his shoulder. Athena remained with his mother, keeping the confused woman from leaving the relative safety of the center of the shell.

The burned Sobek seemed none the worse from Ignatius's attack, but it slipped away into the network of trees opposite them. Its retreat did not deter the others—already they were circling closer, perhaps encouraged by the pitiful resistance from the stranded team. It would not be long now.

'Fire won't work, not in the water anyway,' Othello wheezed. 'Kinetic blasts won't do it either.'

'Lightning,' Cress said, and suddenly Tosk was on her shoulder, his furry tail crackling with electric sparks.

'No,' Fletcher shouted, holding up his hand. 'The spell would fan out in the water and hit the Zaratan too. We'll sink.'

'We can cross that bridge when we come to it,' Cress replied. 'It's the only spell that'll work.'

'Don't waste your mana,' Sylva said, gesturing at the circling Sobeks. 'It won't be powerful enough to kill them all.'

Lysander groaned behind them, fighting the vestiges of the paralytic poison. A level-ten Griffin battling beside them might help even the odds, but Lysander was barely able to crawl up the gentle incline of the shell.

Another Sobek broke from the pack, gliding closer to test their defenses. There was a splash as a webbed foot erupted from the river, sending the reptile tumbling in the air. It splashed back down in a deluge,

floundering, half-stunned among its brethren. The Zaratan was fighting back.

‘*Think,*’ Fletcher muttered to himself. He ran through the spells he knew. Shield spells were useless against demons; the demonic energy tore through them like rice paper. There were spells to numb pain, open and close locks, pull moisture from the air. Spells that amplified and deadened sound, spells that allowed the caster to detect nearby life. All useless.

But then, as he stared out at the marshes around him, he remembered another swamp, back in the orc jungles. And Malik, testing Jeffrey’s ice spell on its inky pools, turning the black water into solid ice. Sobeks would freeze just the same.

He etched in the air, trying to remember the pattern that Jeffrey had shown them. It was a complex glyph, in the shape of a snowflake.

‘Wait . . . ,’ Othello said, his eyes widening. ‘That might just work.’

The pattern sizzled, but Fletcher’s year of training in Pelt’s dungeons came to the fore, his mind easily maintaining the pulses of mana both to and through his finger. As if galvanized by the symbol’s blue light, a pack broke off from the circling Sobeks. Three of them, powering through the water in a V-shaped formation.

A bead of sweat trickled down Fletcher’s brow. His finger darted back and forth, its pad burning and freezing as the last line was formed in the air. The Sobeks were so close, he could see their slitted pupils focused on him with malevolent intent. A bolt from Cress’s crossbow whipped past his shoulder, but it missed, disappearing into the dark water with barely a ripple.

‘Fletcher, hurry!’ Sylva cried, and the Zaratan shuddered beneath them.

Then, as the first Sobek hurled itself out of the river, a long streak of white gusted from Fletcher’s fingers, blasting ice crystals into the water. He could feel the mana draining from him, but he redoubled his efforts, sending pulse after pulse at the approaching demons until the air was filled with a blizzard of snowflakes. It was only when half of his mana

had been expended that he stopped, collapsing to his knees and panting with exertion.

Slowly, the flakes settled on the water, revealing the full extent of Fletcher's efforts.

The Sobek hung motionless in a jagged lump of crystal, its jaws half-open, claws outstretched for Fletcher's throat. Only its tail and back legs remained uncovered, hanging limply from the back of the floating iceberg. The other two demons could be seen half-submerged in the water, their bodies frozen solid, while a sheet of ice crackled and snapped around them on the swamp's surface.

'Bloody hell,' Cress murmured. 'That worked like a charm.'

'Is the Zaratan okay?' Fletcher asked, worried at how close he had blasted the ice spell.

As if in answer, the shell beneath them shuddered as the Zaratan began to swim. Fletcher kept the ice symbol fixed in the air, but already the Sobeks were breaking away at the sight of their stricken companions, one by one at first, but soon in twos and threes as the Zaratan neared the edge of the circling pack.

Soon they were alone once again in the swamps, the silence disturbed only by the gentle rattle of tree branches as a chill wind wafted over them. They had survived.

For now.