



FLAMES OF ATTRITION

THE UNREMEMBERED KING: BOOK 2

A PATCHWORK UNIVERSE NOVEL
VANESSA MACLAREN-WRAY

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ATTRITION
THE UNREMEMBERED KING
BOOK TWO

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SAMPLE CHAPTER

5

THANKS TO THOSE self-centered councilors, I missed seeing Arnim off. He'd rounded up sixty or so troopers and bowmen, with the two captains he'd named, and they'd marched off towards HandOverHand before our meeting wrapped up. If I'd looked out the council room windows at the right time, I might have seen them go.

I made my new gang of bodyguards walk out to the fortress gate with me. The watchman there reported that Arnim's partial force had passed through a half-hour ago. They'd be at the bottom of the hill by now.

The useless excursion became a break-in exercise for the men tasked with tramping after me day and night. Magaran had made up a full troop of eight to cover the shifts—we had a running argument as to what constituted a proper troop size. Radeo stayed by my side that first day and lectured them on everything from what I was supposed to eat to how far to stand off from me in public spaces. Bodyguard duty has its unique requirements. Ideally, it's nothing but a lot of standing around waiting. Given that, it helped to have a crew with a sense of humor about it all.

As we retraced our steps back to the king's house, one of the guards took it on himself to make the usual declaration, "Your Majesty, it's proud we all are to serve you."

Another cleared his throat and added, "But we was wondering, sir, who's going to be protecting us from you?"

That remark generated a round of stifled laughter. There wasn't one of them I hadn't pounded over the head with a wooden sword or lit into with my fists when my own weapon flew out of my hand. I couldn't deal with them that way, not anymore. I put out my hand and clasped the jokester's arm when he lifted it in response. "That was a long time ago. We're grown-ups, now." I leaned in close and whispered to him, "You remember that over-the-shoulder move, from hand-to-hand class?" His forearm muscles went tense under my grip. I held for a second, then released him and stepped back. "Trust me, my wife will be back in town soon, and she'll be keeping me busy enough."

That got them laughing. Nothing beats a lie to make people feel at ease. No wonder the shamans are so good at it.

"Commanders' meeting," Radeo reminded me.

"Right." My head filled up again with the plans we'd worked on, with the new ideas that had come to me while boring people were droning during the morning council. I followed Radeo, and my new troop ranged themselves around me. They became invisible, from that moment, belonging to me but not a part of myself, like clothing. They were a weapon I could wield without having to think about it. They could never be like my Six. Useful, trusted, but not family.

• • •

"Sir—I mean, Your Majesty."

Radeo stopped short, and I nearly bumped into him. "What is it?" he said.

"Ah ..."

The tall, broad-shouldered old man in his drab grey shirt and worn pants could have been a servant, but his rock-steady stance and calloused hands reeked of another type of skill. His eyes went from me to Radeo. "Commander Arnim said talk to no one but himself and the other one, and—"

"Arnim's on deployment. You can talk to me," I said. The symbol woven into the sleeve of his shirt held my eye—the hammer-and-tongs of a smith, with gold thread rimming it. I put a hand on Radeo's shoulder and stepped up beside him. "Tell me, Master Smith, what was it Arnim asked of you?"

The smith gave my fake cousin a skeptical look. "I've been dredging through the recipes in that book of his."

"What book? What recipes?" Radeo looked about to lose his temper.

I nudged his shoulder. "Seems it's a secret message, Cousin. You go ahead, get the meeting rolling. I'll be there shortly." We'd reached a junction in the corridors, and I gestured the smith towards my apartment. "This way, Master Smith. I have a few minutes for a private talk." The troopers weren't invisible to my guest, but they stopped outside the door, which seemed to ease his anxious mind. He carried a dark leather satchel, its long strap running across his chest, and kept one hand on it, as if he expected to be robbed at any moment.

I wasn't about to leave myself vulnerable, either. I stayed on my feet, paced to the window, and leaned beside it. "What's so important you couldn't share with my cousin?"

He wasn't listening to me. The old maker was busy wrestling the satchel strap over his head. The object he pulled out came wrapped in cloth, and its edges gleamed in the light from the window.

I should have known.

He held out Heyliannin's book, the one she'd brought through the thin-patch from the snake-man world. The weight of it settled into my hand. It occurred to me this was the first time I'd held the thing. It had the coolness of a beaten blade. "It's metal, isn't it?" I ran my fingers over the blue and gold design, trying to feel the texture beneath the surface.

"Yes, sir." His eyebrows twitched. "Metal and glass and something in between, resembles hardened wax, or the membrane in honeycomb, but much harder."

"So Arnim asked you to figure out what it's made of?"

"Oh, no, sir. To do that, we'd need to melt it down, watch what melts first and how. That kind of thing." He had a hunger in his eyes that said he wished he could do that.

"I see. No. Don't be destroying it. My wife would kill me."

"Why?" He frowned, disturbed. "Commander Dramin said it wasn't matriarchy business." Makers avoid conflict with the elders.

"It isn't, not the way you're imagining. The book belongs to my wife, Master Smith. We had to make all kinds of promises we wouldn't hurt the thing."

"Oh." His brow furrowed, and he cast wary looks around the room as though he expected a monster to jump from the shadows. "Your wife is one of the snake-people?"

The man had imagination, I grant you that. "No, no, she took it from the snake-men." Should I tell him my wife was technically a shaman? That she'd jumped through thin patches herself? Or that it was mostly my fault she'd gone to that world in the first place?

The smith put on a skeptical face. "That doesn't sound reasonable, Corren."

Since when does a commoner address a royal like a lazy apprentice?

When the commoner is a Master Smith and the king is a cast-off smith's son.

"It's a long story." One I knew too little of. What had she been doing with those weird creatures, in their alien world? Why did she go with them? "I don't have much time here. If you haven't noticed, we're getting all dressed up for a war."

"Yes. I mean, yes, sir, and that's what I've come about. I think at least one of these recipes could serve the war effort."

Finally, a hint of something useful. "You'd better back up and tell me what you're talking about, before I show you what I've learned I can do with those things my father used to make." My favorites hung on a wrought iron rack just within reach.

He didn't miss a beat. "And mighty fine weapons did Orkast fashion, young man. It was a great loss to the profession to see him put down his hammer." He lifted the book from my hand. "See here, young Corren, this book has more in it than those pages of accounts." Flipping the cover open, he expertly wakened the glowing page within. "Once we had those pages copied out by scribes, I was set the task of finding out what else is in here." He smiled into the glow, like a mother gazing into her child's eyes. "It's a wonderful thing, this, all you need is a few tricks, and there's plenty to find."

“So. Show me.”

The only flat surface in the room was the low table. “May I, sir?”

I tipped my head, and he knelt on my favorite cushion to lay the book flat on the age-worn wood. I got down beside him, so the pictures would be right-side-up for both of us. He didn’t even notice he’d stuck his king with sitting on the hard floor.

The surface was now decorated with a series of blobby shapes. I imagined them as snake-man heads, which maybe wasn’t so far off, given the blobs had a variety of colors.

“See here,” the smith said. He tapped one of the blobs, and the page transformed to one with tiny pictures I recognized as images from Heyliannin’s ledger. “These are the ones your wife made, to send to the king, the ones we’ve been focused on.” He did something to the page, and the colorful blobs returned. “Now, most of these are ... I’d say, locked.” He tapped one that swelled a little and glowed, but then settled back down. “These, I guess your wife has done something with, to keep us from opening them.” His voice betrayed interest, not frustration. “I’m working on that. I have a few ideas.”

“Move along. Ideas are for the future.”

“Right, sir. Yes. A few she failed to protect. Or decided not to bother with.” One blob opened to another set of tiny pictures. He tapped to bring to the surface a fairly accurate painting of a north-country scene with trees and flowers in it. “These seem to be art of some kind.”

“I see that. Are we going to beat back the invaders with pretty pictures?”

“No, sir. Of course not, sir. But you seemed unfamiliar with the device ...”

“Jump to the end of the story. You can teach me how it works later.”

“Yes, sir.” He returned to the blobby page and selected one in particular. It opened up to little pictures with words on them. “She wrote notes in these, sir, seems she was copying out information from somewhere else. Maybe somewhere in the locked-up part of the book. Her writing isn’t too good. Her spelling is awful. The file-bin, she’s named it Recipes.”

“File-bin?”

“Eh, it’s a shorthand, for a collection of certain items. Here, this one is for notes and the other one contains pictures.”

Flames of Attrition

"So, great. I had no idea she could cook. She hasn't set foot in a kitchen since I've known her."

He laughed, looked at my face, then closed his mouth and bobbed his head. "Sorry, sir." He tapped the screen. "They're not recipes for food, sir. There are a few herbal concoctions—I gather she worked as an herbalist at one time?"

"Yes, that's right."

"So, she has notes on those. Some of the notes seem to be in another language. But this one, sir, it's plain as day, if you disregard her spelling."

I pulled the thing closer and read the recipe's ingredients. "These are farming supplies. She managed a farm up north. Supposedly." Her village matriarchs might have been leaning on her to do more than peddle fake medicine.

"No, sir. It's a recipe that uses soil improvers, but then adds in a third substance, one that burns."

"So it's a recipe for firestarter."

"You might say so. It's a fire like I never saw before."

"Oh." Why do people hide the big news at the end? "You've made this recipe."

"Yes, sir. It produces a flame that burns fast and hot. Dangerous stuff. Like powdered lightning."

I stood up. "Radeo can take the commanders' meeting. Come on. You're going to show me this stuff at work. What's your name, Master Smith?"

"Goram, sir. Sorry, sir. One gets used to titles, Your Majesty."

Yes. That one I wouldn't have time to get used to.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

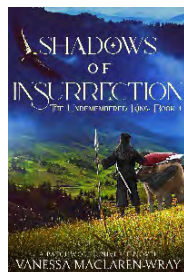
Vanessa MacLaren-Wray writes science fiction and fantasy about people—human and otherwise—trying to communicate and form attachments in a complex universe. She’s the author of the Patchwork Universe series, including *All That Was Asked*, *Shadows of Insurrection*, and *Flames of Attrition*, as well as the prequel story “The True Son.” She’s also a member of the Truck Stop at the Center of the Galaxy consortium, with “Coke Machine” and *The Smugglers*. Her short fiction has appeared with Dragon Gems and in the award-winning anthology *Fault Zone: Reverse*.

As an engineer, she has analyzed electric power systems, studied climate-safe technology, and written extensively on energy issues. She feels lucky to live in farm country, where fields of strawberries and artichokes hold the developers at bay. When not arguing with her cats, she works on new stories and her email journal *Messages from the Oort Cloud*.

ALSO IN THIS SERIES

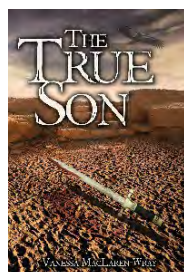
SHADOWS OF INSURRECTION BOOK ONE OF THE UNREMEMBERED KING

Once in a generation, the matriarchs of Jeska choose a new king to manage the government and command the Guard. But this is an unsettled time: rumors of strange incursions, grumbling discontent, and increasing brigandry.



THE TRUE SON A STORY OF THE UNREMEMBERED KING

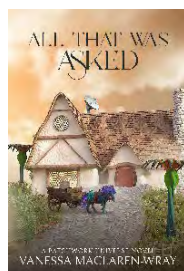
As foster-son to the king, Corren is technically a candidate for the kingship, a position filled only at the discretion of the matriarchs of Jeska, but he doesn't want the job.



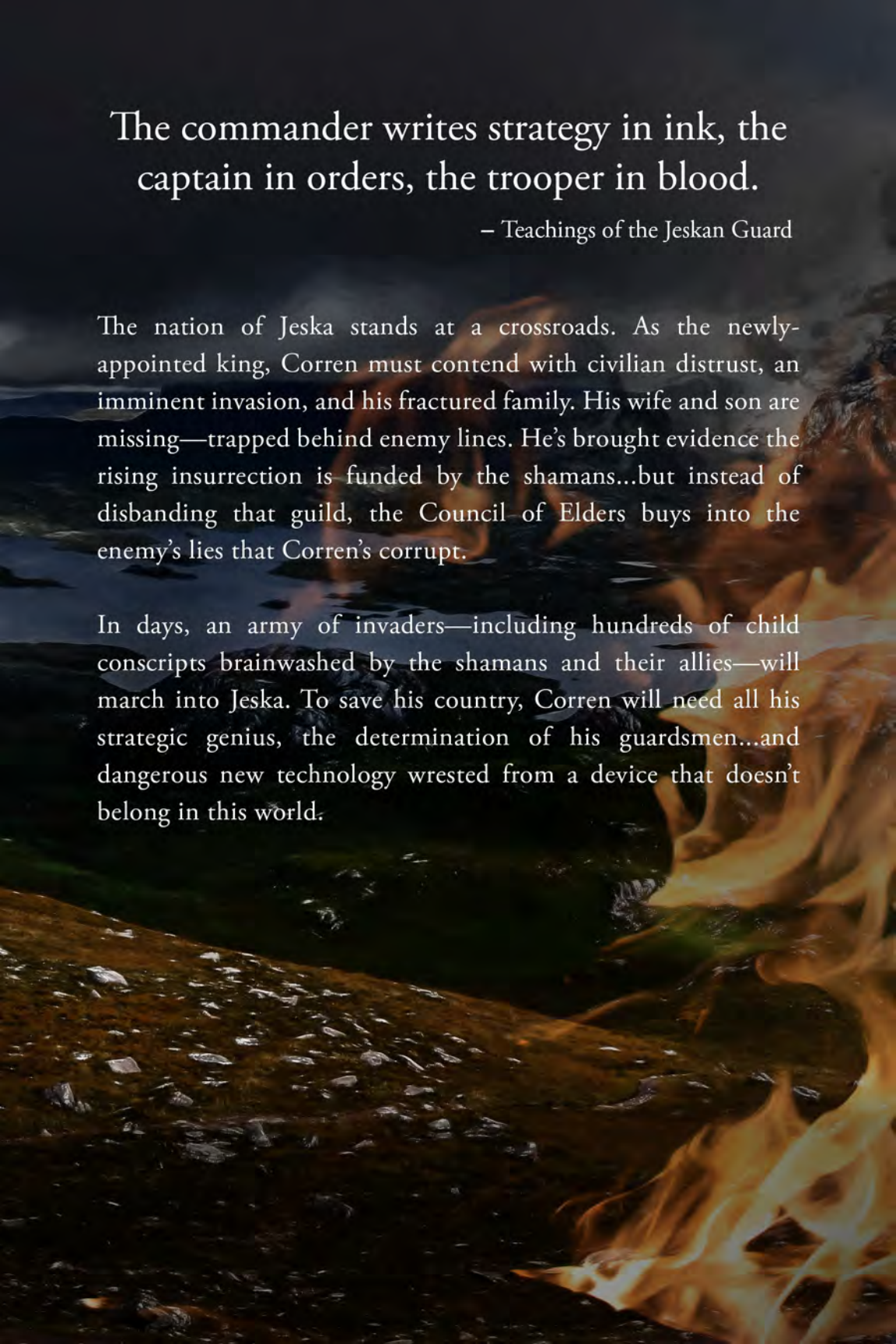
ALL THAT WAS ASKED A PATCHWORK UNIVERSE NOVEL

For the wild beast... freedom, even from compassion. For the person... all that is asked.

– from the Physician's Oath



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The commander writes strategy in ink, the
captain in orders, the trooper in blood.

— Teachings of the Jeskan Guard

The nation of Jeska stands at a crossroads. As the newly-appointed king, Corren must contend with civilian distrust, an imminent invasion, and his fractured family. His wife and son are missing—trapped behind enemy lines. He's brought evidence the rising insurrection is funded by the shamans...but instead of disbanding that guild, the Council of Elders buys into the enemy's lies that Corren's corrupt.

In days, an army of invaders—including hundreds of child conscripts brainwashed by the shamans and their allies—will march into Jeska. To save his country, Corren will need all his strategic genius, the determination of his guardsmen...and dangerous new technology wrested from a device that doesn't belong in this world.